**Note Taking --What to Write Down (from Lifehack.org)**

When taking notes, ask yourself **what’s relevant?** What information is most likely to be of use later, whether on a test, in an essay, or in completing a project? Focus on points that directly relate to or illustrate your reading (which means you’ll have to have actually *done* the reading…). The kinds of information to pay special attention to are:

* **Dates of events:** Dates allow you to a) create a chronology, putting things in order according to when they happened, and b) understand the context of an event. For instance, knowing Isaac Newton was born in 1643 allows you to situate his work in relation to that of other physicists who came before and after him, as well as in relation to other trends of the 17th century.
* **Names of people:** Being able to associate names with key ideas also helps remember ideas better and, when names come up again, to recognize ties between different ideas whether proposed by the same individuals or by people related in some way.
* **Theories:** Any statement of a theory should be recorded — theories are the main points of most [classes](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/advice-for-students-taking-notes-that-work.html).
* **Definitions:** Like theories, these are the main points and, unless you are positive you already know the definition of a term, should be written down. Keep in mind that many fields use everyday words in ways that are unfamiliar to us.
* **Arguments and debates:** Any list of pros and cons, any critique of a key idea, both sides of any debate related in class or your reading should be recorded. This is the stuff that advancement in every discipline emerges from, and will help you understand both how ideas have changed (and why) but also the process of thought and development within the particular discipline you are studying.
* **Images and exercises:** Whenever an image is used to illustrate a point, or when an in-class exercise is performed, a few words are in order to record the experience. Obviously it’s overkill to describe every tiny detail, but a short description of a painting or a short statement about what the class did should be enough to remind you and help reconstruct the experience.
* **Other items:** Just about anything a professor writes on a board should probably be written down, unless it’s either self-evident or something you already know. Titles of books, movies, TV series, and other media are usually useful, though they may be irrelevant to the topic at hand; I usually put this sort of stuff in the margin to look up later (it’s often useful for research papers, for example). Pay attention to other student’s comments, too — try to capture at least the gist of comments that add to your understanding.
* **Your own questions:** Make sure to record your own questions about the material as they occur to you. This will help you remember to ask the professor or look something up later, as well as prompt you to think through the gaps in your understanding.

**Note-Taking Techniques**

You don’t have to be super-fancy in your note-taking to be effective, but there are a few techniques that seem to work best for most people.

* **Outlining:** Whether you use Roman numerals or bullet points, outlining is an effective way to capture the hierarchical relationships between ideas and data. In a history class, you might write the name of an important leader, and under it the key events that he or she was involved in. Under each of them, a short description. And so on. Outlining is a great way to take notes from books, because the author has usually organized the material in a fairly effective way, and you can go from start to end of a chapter and simply reproduce that structure in your notes.

For lectures, however, outlining has limitations. The relationship between ideas isn’t always hierarchical, and the instructor might jump around a lot. A point later in the lecture might relate better to information earlier in the lecture, leaving you to either a) flip back and forth to find where the information goes best (and hope there’s still room to write it in) or b) risk losing the relationship between what the professor just said and what she said before.

* **Mind-mapping:** For lectures, a mind-map might be a more appropriate way of keeping track of the relationships between ideas. Here’s the idea: in the center of a blank sheet of paper, you write the lecture’s main topic. As new sub-topics are introduced (the kind of thing you’d create a new heading for in an outline), you draw a branch outward from the center and write the sub-topic along the branch. Then each point under that heading gets its own, smaller branch off the main one. When another new sub-topic is mentioned, you draw a new main branch from the center. And so on. The thing is, if a point should go under the first heading but you’re on the fourth heading, you can easily just draw it in on the first branch. Likewise, if a point connects to two different ideas, you can connect it to two different branches. If you want to neaten things up later, you can re-draw the map or type it up using a program like [FreeMind](http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page), a free mind-mapping program (some wikis even have plug-ins for FreeMind mind-maps, in case you’re [using a wiki to keep track of your notes](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/technology/advice-for-students-use-a-wiki-for-better-note-taking.html)).
* **The Cornell System:** The Cornell System is a simple but powerful system for increasing your recall and the usefulness of your notes. About a quarter of the way from the bottom of a sheet of paper, draw a line across the width of the page. Draw another line from that line to the top, about 2 inches (5 cm) from the right-hand edge of the sheet. You’ve divided your page into three sections. In the largest section, you take notes normally — you can outline or mind-map or whatever. After the lecture, write a series of “cues” into the skinny column on the right, questions about the material you’ve just taken notes on. This will help you process the information from the lecture or reading, as well as providing a handy [study](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/advice-for-students-taking-notes-that-work.html) tool when exams come along: simply cover the main section and try to answer the questions. In the bottom section, you write a short, 2-3 line summary in your own words of the material you’ve covered. Again, this helps you process the information by forcing you to use it in a new way; it also provides a useful reference when you’re trying to find something in your notes later. You can download instructions and templates from [American Digest](http://americandigest.org/mt-archives/004983.php), though the beauty of the system is you can dash off a template “on the fly”.