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Why Take Notes

You've got the PowerPoint slides for your lecture, and you know where to find the other information in your textbook. Do you need to take notes as well?

Despite the vast amount of information available in electronic formats, taking notes is an important learning strategy. In addition, the way that you take notes matters, and not all notetaking strategies lead to equal results. By considering your notetaking strategies carefully, you will be able to create a set of notes that will help retain the most important concepts from lectures and tests, and that will assist you in your exam preparation.

Two Purposes for Taking Notes

You (and others) take notes for two main reasons:
1. to keep a record of the information you heard. This is also called the *external storage* function of notetaking, and
2. to facilitate learning material you are currently studying.

The availability of information on the internet may reduce the importance of the *external storage* function of notetaking. When the information is available online, it may seem logical to stop taking notes. However, by neglecting to take notes, you lose the benefits of notetaking as a learning and therefore remembering tool.

How Notetaking Supports Learning

Taking notes during class supports your learning in several important ways:
1. Taking notes helps you to focus your attention and avoid distractions.
2. As you take notes in class, you are engaging your mind in identifying and organizing the main ideas. Rather than passively listening, you are doing the work of active learning while in class, making the most of your time.
3. By creating good notes, you have a record for later review. Reviewing a set of condensed and well-organized notes is more efficient than re-reading longer texts and articles.

Effective Notetaking Strategies

While taking notes is helpful, not all notetaking strategies are equally beneficial. Many students try to write down everything the instructor is saying – this is especially true for students who take notes on a computer. Unfortunately, this strategy may not help you to engage in critical thinking and to identify important concepts.

It is most effective to focus on writing down key concepts, rather than recording all of the instructor's words. For many students, this may be a good reason to take notes by hand, rather than with a laptop. In some studies, students who have taken notes by hand have outperformed those taking notes with a laptop on tests. Taking notes by hand also allows you to avoid distracting yourself and others with websites, e-mail, or online chatting during class time.

Rather than trying to take verbatim notes, consider capturing an outline of the lecture's most important points and how they fit together. Additionally, watch for other information that your instructor emphasizes, either verbally or with gestures, and add these key concepts to your notes. Leave a wide margin on one side of the page to write down key words and questions after the lecture. At the bottom of each page of notes, leave room to write a short summary of the information on that page. Spend time after class reviewing your notes.

By using effective notetaking strategies, you will think and learn more effectively in class. In addition, you will have created a tool to help you review for tests and exams.

Reference: Oppenheimer, D. (2017, January). *On Noteworthy Notes: Not All Note Taking is Created Equal*. Webinar presented at the Learning Specialists Association of Canada. Retrieved from https://lsac.wildapricot.org/page-18154