

# Taking Notes

-Susan Kruger

**Note-taking may be the quintessential study skill.** Even people without a real concept of “study skills” know that students are *supposed* to take notes. Teachers like to say, “If I’m talking, you should be writing.” But how many students listen?

**Students struggle with note-taking because they are overwhelmed by the content covered in class.** They don’t know where to start. They don’t know what to write down because they don’t know the content well enough to identify main ideas and key points.



## No One Is Born Knowing How to Take Notes

Note-taking is a developmental skill and must be taught to students explicitly!

**Note-taking is a skill, but it’s easy to forget that skills need to be taught.** It doesn’t come naturally to students. Of all the strategies that fall under the heading of “study skills,” note-taking is the most dependent on students’ cognitive and emotional maturity. Even with specific instruction in note-taking, most students aren’t developmentally ready to take

notes *independently* until 10<sup>th</sup> or even 11<sup>th</sup> grade. (See my “Study Skills Continuum” of age-appropriate skills [here](#).) If no one takes the time to teach students these skills, they will struggle with the process well into college.

**It’s important to give students guidelines and a system for taking notes.** Ideally this would be taught in school, but most teachers are so overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them that it’s hard for them to squeeze note-taking skills in. Quite frankly, *teaching* note-taking is just as daunting to teachers as *learning* to take notes is to students; teachers don’t know where to begin either.

## Note-Taking Skills Are Essential

**Note-taking skills have been found to be the greatest predictor of success in school.** Good note-taking skills help students retain what they hear in lectures and read in their textbooks, which prepares them for tests. The right system should produce classroom notes that make effective study guides.

**Whether you’re a parent or a teacher, you can help teenagers get a handle on taking notes and then watch their grades go up as they apply the skill.**

## What to Write?

**First, note-taking is infinitely easier if you have read the textbook before class.** If you do some background reading before listening to the teacher’s lecture, you’ll have an easier time picking out the main ideas.

**Having some background information about the subject** also makes it easier to make connections. Learning is all about connecting new information with things you already know. If you go into a class with a little knowledge to connect to the lesson, you'll learn a lot more than if you go in completely blank. Your class textbook is the best place to get that information. (I might add that SOAR®'s study skills curriculum includes strategies for reading textbooks faster and with better comprehension.)

**Second, pay attention to the teacher—not just what they say, but how they say it.** If your teacher gets loud or animated about a concept, or they repeat it more than once, that's a big clue that you should write it down! If your teacher takes the time to write something on the board, you should write it down too. If your teacher says, "This will be on the test," well, you had better write that down—and put a star next to it to make sure you remember to study it.

**Add visuals to your notes whenever possible.** Create your own pictures, graphs, or diagrams. Recreate visuals that your teacher shares in class or related pictures from the textbook. This will give you more than one way to think about the content, so you'll have an easier time remembering it.

**Also remember that you don't have to take your notes from the top down.** You aren't just transcribing what your teacher is saying, so **you don't have to write things on the page in the exact order that the teacher says them.**

**Instead, make a "mind-map" by drawing lines connecting related concepts.** If there's room, write related ideas next to each other. Draw boxes around each concept and draw connections across the page if you have to. This can get messy, but it's a great process for *learning* the material.

## A Common Roadblock: Writing Too Much

**Students usually try to write down everything their teacher says—which is practically impossible.** Or they try to summarize what their teacher says in complete, grammatical sentences—which isn't much easier.

**The most essential rule of taking notes is to keep it short and simple.** Only write down key words and main ideas. Skip as many unnecessary and "helping" words as possible.

## A Little Help From Technology

**It's actually easier to explain the concept of "shorthand" to students today than it used to be.** I used to have to *force* my students to use abbreviations and shorthand in their notes; it didn't come naturally to them at all! Now, thanks to technology, I can give students some tips that they understand perfectly.

**"Take notes like you are texting," I will tell them.** Texting has taught them all about abbreviating and leaving out all but the most important words in sentences. We might wish they would use proper spelling and grammar the rest of the time, but they're on the right track for taking notes. It's much faster for them to write "Xndr Gr8 kng mcdnia" in their notes than "Alexander the Great was the king of Macedonia."

**Google and internet searches in general have also helped students understand "key words" and "main ideas."** Try explaining it in those terms: when you're taking notes, write key words and phrases as if you were entering search terms. The right key words should summon related information from your memory.

## Conclusion

**Note-taking is an important study skill, but parents and teachers can forget to teach students how to do it.** Students need a system. They should prepare for class by reading ahead to get a handle on the information they're going to learn. They should try drawing connections between ideas to make a "mind-map." They should know to use shorthand and to only write down key phrases and ideas. And, of course, they should watch their teachers for cues about what facts and concepts are the most important.

Note-taking is a skill that takes some practice, but it makes a tremendous difference in grades and—more importantly—improves students' ability to learn and feel successful in school.

Watch the first two in class.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAhRf3U50IM> How to take notes. Cool 5 minute video with solid advice.  
(Asks to print a page, so do that for students)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU2dHLoBbh0> Short , clear 3 minute video on note taking related to learning styles

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/grades-6-8-activities-teach-note-taking> Short lessons for teachers but students can just see what to do (T-Charts, Key Words, Special fonts etc, Idea Sort, Personalizing)

<http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/improving-your-note-taking-skills-strategies-for-mapping-a-speech.html#lesson> This is good video but you have to be a member to finish seeing it. The first part is worth a look though.