

# Lectures and Taking Notes

## Making the most of your lectures and handouts

(Adapted from Race, P (2003) "How to Study" Oxford, Blackwell).

The notes you make in lectures (and other learning situations) are among the most important of the resources you build up during your studies. However, many people just *take* notes, and this is not nearly as valuable as *making* notes. The suggestions below will help you to tell the difference, and then decide how to build *note-making* into your overall study strategy.

1. **Take the view that you're only really learning if you're doing something with a pen or pencil.** Of course, if the lecture is just for entertainment, and you're not intended to be remembering anything from it, you don't need pen and paper! But most lectures *are* for learning from – at least that's what your lecturers are expecting. So use that pen to get your brain working, but don't just use it busily, use it *wisely*. Read on...
2. **Don't just copy things down, even if everyone else is doing just that!** Don't just write down what you see on the screen or board, or word-for-word what the lecturer says. It's very very easy to copy things down without even thinking about them. Copying things down is just note *taking* and may not even involve your brain!
3. **Put things into your own words.** This is note *making*, and necessarily involves you in thinking about what you're writing. Just sometimes you'll need to *take* notes, however, for example if you're expected to write down an exact definition or quotation. But for most of the time, what you should try to do is to capture for yourself the *essence* of what's being said and shown in lectures.
4. **Go *meaning-hunting*.** Don't write long sentences word for word. Instead, *summarise* what's being said or shown in a few well-chosen words of your own. Think about what is really *meant* by what you see and hear, and capture the meaning. This keeps you alert, and helps to stop you becoming bored, even when the topic (and/or the lecturer) seem quite boring!
5. **Keep asking yourself: "what am I expected to become able to do with this?"** This is one of the most important tips! When you're asking this, you can deliberately and consciously make your notes so that they remind you of what seems to be expected of you. Keep adding to your notes little pointers (perhaps in a different colour) to alert you to what *you* may need to be able to show of what you've learned from the lecture.



6. **Go clue-detecting. What is really, really important?** Lecturers give all sorts away during any lecture by tone of voice, emphasis, body language and repetition. Sometimes they give these clues deliberately. Even more often, they do it subconsciously. Either way, *you* are the person who needs to know what is really important, so that you can make sure you have a firm grip on such things.
7. **Make important things stand out in your notes.** Aim to make each page such that you can later tell at a glance what the main ideas or concepts are. Use colour, boxes, highlighters, patterns, and any other pet tricks you can think of to make the important stuff stand out on the page from the background stuff. Most of the marks in your assessments and exams will be linked to the important stuff. Deciding which is which can only be done well *during* the lecture, when you've got tone-of-voice and so on to help you. You can't go back weeks later over your notes and decide what's important nearly so precisely.
8. **Write down your own questions.** Every time there's something you can't quite understand, turn it into a short question and write it down (maybe in a special colour just for such questions). When you've captured these questions, you can find out the answers in your own time, looking them up or asking other people, or asking the lecturer. If you hadn't written down your questions, a few hours later you wouldn't even remember what the questions were, and then there's no chance at all of getting them answered.

