

# Notetaking

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## **INTRODUCTION**

During your studies at Bournemouth University you will find it necessary to take notes from a variety of sources. Notes may be taken from texts, such as books and journals, at lectures and seminars or from audio or visual media. Whilst note making is an important part of your learning process at University it is likely that you will be asked to collect and retain information later in your career. This means that the note making skills you establish and develop now are 'transferrable' or 'life skills' which you will use beyond your studies at Bournemouth University. Therefore the aim of this booklet is not only to help you with note making at University but also to prepare you for the workplace.

'Notetaking' is part of a range of student managed learning materials designed to help you to improve your skills by learning actively. The booklet is divided into units and further subdivided into numbered sections. You will notice that the format of the booklet is not continuous text. At regular intervals you will be asked to complete exercises and answer self-assessment questions. These tasks are designed to assist your learning, so if you do not complete the exercises or answer the questions you will not gain fully from the experience. You will also find activities, offering you an opportunity to apply the techniques to your own situation, and suggestions for further reading.

# UNIT 1: MAKING NOTES

Use this unit to help you:

- decide why you need notes
- identify ways of using your notes
- compare different styles of making notes
- evaluate different ways to store notes
- identify ways of ordering information

## Introduction

We often make notes in our daily lives, usually to use as lists or reminders. At University you will be taking notes from a variety of sources, for example books, journals, lectures and seminars. Although your own notes are private and personal, and therefore differ from other's notes, an analysis of the techniques involved in notemaking will be useful to you.

### 1.1 Why make notes?

Making notes is an important part of the learning process because you are actively involved. Note down here one or two ways in which making notes can help with your learning.

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Notes can help in a number of ways. See how the following suggestions compare with yours:

- **concentrating** - the process of thinking and writing can help you to focus your attention and so learn more effectively.
- **remembering** - just writing something down can help you remember it, and you can also refer back to it to check your memory.
- **keeping a record** - this may be important when you are shown how to do something, when you read a book from the library that you will not have access to later, or when you listen to a talk

or lecture

- **summarising** - you may wish to use notes to summarise a chapter in a book or to note down the key points of a procedure you are learning
  - **reordering or reorganising material** - in a way that suits your learning, or which separates out the things you need to learn
  - **highlighting key points** - so you can easily refer to them later
  - **planning** - you may find notes a helpful way of putting down your initial ideas when you are planning an assignment, essay, report or presentation.
- 
- Notes taken from any source are usually intended for future use. It is therefore important to make sure they are legible. Immediately after you have made your notes you may wish to:
    - read them again to check that you have understood the main points and to check whether you have missed anything
    - revise them, particularly if you have had to write them in a hurry
    - add them to a folder of work for your next assignment
    - store them for future reference, revision etc
    - discard them - if you feel they will not be useful in the future, don't clog up your systems

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## 1.2 Making use of your notes

When are you likely to find your notes useful in the future? Try to suggest two ways you might make use of notes later in your learning.

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## **Response**

You may have suggested:

- when revising for exams etc.
- to practise a procedure or skills you have outlined
- when preparing for a task such as a piece of writing
- to draw on for a presentation at a tutorial or group session
- when thinking back to an earlier topic
- when moving on to related areas of your learning
- when discussing your learning with your tutor, supervisor or colleagues.

### **1.3 What styles of notes can you use?**

We have suggested that you will take notes on different occasions for different reasons. It follows that you may well need to adopt different styles of notes in different situations.

There is no one best method for making notes, although an outline of your reading or lecture is probably easier to create than a summary. Summaries are written in continuous prose and simply condense the original material. However outlines focus on the essential points. Outlines also look different to summaries, as you will see in the following examples which show two distinct styles of outline notes.

#### **Example 1: Listed notes**

##### **Why make notes?**

1. Notes help:

- (a) remember (d) reorganise
- (b) summarise (e) highlight
- (c) plan (f) concentrate

2. Use when:

- (a) watching demonstrations (d) listening to radio
- (b) listening to talks (e) watching TV programmes
- (c) reading books, papers etc. (f) discussing with others

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## Response

Here are some possible advantages and disadvantages:

### Listed notes

#### Advantages Disadvantages

- Can be very clear Can be boring to look at and Divided well, they can be added to at will hard to read
- Can help to emphasise points to keep clear Risk of repeating what is said
- Useful when there is a clear structure

### Spray notes

#### Advantages Disadvantages

- Fun to do May be hard to decide what
- Easy and quick to make and add to order they are in
- Visual impression - can be very easy to What if you run out of space?
- understand and remember Hard to expand once space is
- Not fixed in any order filled
- Links are made obvious
- Less likely to write too much
- Interesting to look at
- Link new and existing knowledge
- Most people find that each style has its own advantages in particular circumstances. You could use spray notes when planning writing, but sequential ones if taking notes from reading. You should choose the style or styles that you feel happy with.

## Remember

Whichever method you adopt, a good idea is to use coloured pens, highlighters or pictures to help you organise and remember your notes.

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## 1.4 Storing notes

Before you store your notes label them to allow easy access in the future. You can do this by:

- giving a clear heading
- noting the date
- describing where you took the notes from.

How do you store your notes now? Write down one thing you like about this way.

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.....

Here are some storage ideas, with possible advantages, shown below.

Loose leaf folder or sheets Can subdivide at will, and add extra material or binder  
Cardboard or plastic folder Can re-use. Good for pamphlets and cuttings.

Filing card system Can shuffle. Ideal for brief references, eg an essay

Notebook Convenient to carry. Page per idea, heading at top.

Scraps of paper Can rearrange. Psychologically easier to discard.

Concertina file Can re-use. Good for pamphlets and cuttings.

Personal computer Well worth using if you have one as it is easy to edit material

Tape recorder Useful if you find it easier to say things than to write them down

You may find it helpful to try out different methods to see how they work for you. Bear in mind that any method will work best if it is:

- clearly ordered
- clearly labelled
- kept in an easily accessible place



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## 1.5 How do you order notes?

Everyone has their own way of arranging or ordering notes. The commonest methods are:

- chronological ordering - by the date on which you make the notes
- alphabetical ordering - A - Z
- numerical - using some system of reference numbers (for example you might number your main topics or units 1 - 6, and number your notes within each topic 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 etc)
- conceptual - by topic or subject

Look at your notes. What method do you use? Have you arranged them in a way that makes it easy for you to find what you want?

Many people find it most useful to combine ways of classifying notes. Whatever method of ordering you use, the important questions are:

- Is it easy to decide where to put new notes in your system? If not, you may need to think about using different categories.
- Is it easy to work out where you put your notes at a later stage? If some of your categories are not clear, then you may find you filed something in an unexpected place.
- Can you find things quickly within each category? There is sometimes a risk that each category can get too bulky to be manageable. If this happens, you can always split a category into a number of smaller ones.
- Is your system flexible enough for you to be able to update it? You may find that the initial categories you choose are not the best, in which case you can always change.

# UNIT 2: NOTES FROM TEXT

Use this unit to help you:

- decide when you need to take notes from text
- evaluate notes you take from text
- ensure that your notes from text contain the key points
- take notes for maths and science courses

## Introduction

If you own your own textbooks or journals you may prefer to 'mark' these texts by underlining and writing in the margins. However students often wish to resell books or rely on the library for supplementary material. In these cases efficient and effective note-making skills are essential.

### 2.1 When do you need to take notes from the text?

During your learning you may well read a wide range of texts, such as

- textbooks • reports
- handouts • tables
- journals • encyclopaedias
- manuals • syllabuses

Make sure the text you select contains the appropriate material for your notes. For example textbooks can be 'surveyed' by following this six step method:

1. Read the title
2. Read the table of contents
3. Skim over the introductory material chapters
4. Look at the first and last chapters
5. Read the first paragraph of the other
6. Look for an index or glossary

You may even like to make a brief review of any text you think might be useful for future notes.

When might it be useful for you to take notes from what you read? Note down one or two reasons here:

.....

.....

## **Response**

Notes from text can help you:

- when you have borrowed the book from the library and so won't have easy access to it later
- when you are reading, to help you concentrate more carefully and learn better
- when the material needs reordering and reorganising in a way that suits your learning
- when you record a sequence for later use; for instance, how to follow a procedure

**BUT** you may not need to take notes from everything you read because:

- you may find that the material is not relevant or helpful
- the material is already in a concise form you can use again later in your learning
- your notes should only contain what you wish to remember

## **Remember**

To capture the essentials of the author's argument or discussion don't try to make notes until you've finished reading a section.

## **2.2 How should you take notes from text?**

One specific point that may be important when taking notes from text is this: when should you use your own words for your notes? On which occasions should you take a direct quotation? Write down one example of each:

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.....

.....

.....

## **Response**

You may have said you should use your own words when:

- using your own words will help you learn the material
- you want to organise the material in your own way
- you want to include only what is relevant to your needs.

You may wish to write down direct quotations if you:

- would like to use the quotation later, say in an essay
- find the wording particularly helpful

On balance, it is often better to use your words whenever possible, as this involves you in thinking through the topic and will help you to remember it better. If you copy a quote always put it in quotation marks and record the page number it appears on.

### **2.3 What should notes from text include?**

When you take notes from the text always:

1. Check the text is relevant
2. Make a note about what you will use the notes for
3. Write down the reference for the text, including:
  - title • publisher
  - author • place and date of publication

If you borrowed it from a library, write the classification number and name of the library in case you want it again.

4. Write in a way you will find easy to use and understand later. You could include:
  - chapter heading • page reference
5. Arrange your notes in a logical order for your use, eg on cards with topic and possible use at the top.

Perhaps the most common problem with note-taking is deciding what to include and what to leave out. Although it is easier to take notes from a book rather than a lecture, because you have more time, there is a danger that you will take too many notes. Therefore keep to the essentials, which may include:

- important points
- key ideas
- *relevant* supporting detail
- author's line of argument
- quotations, in inverted commas
- your interpretation of what the author has said
- your reaction to the authors ideas

You may find that writing your notes after you have closed the book lets you know whether you have grasped the main elements of the material. Also, to help your understanding, note definitions of concepts or common words in your subject area; perhaps compile your own glossary.

## **2.4 Notes from maths and science texts**

It is likely that you will take more notes from maths and science text books than for other subjects. Your notes in these areas should include:

- definitions of symbols and vocabulary used in your subject area
- rules, laws and theorems
- problem solving strategies

You can keep all of these details on index cards so you can refer back to them. You may also want to keep notes of examples of the problems you find in the text and the steps you took in order to solve them. Mathematical and scientific notes should be well ordered, for example = signs should be directly below each other to avoid confusion.

# UNIT 3: NOTES FROM SPEECH

Use this unit to help you:

- decide when you should take notes from speech
- examine the effectiveness of what you do at present
- recognise ways to get the most out of lectures and talks

## Introduction

Because your time is limited when you take notes from speech it is important to cultivate a note-taking style that helps you to recognise the key points and get down the main ideas.

### 3.1 When do you need to take notes from speech?

Begin by noting down here two examples of occasions when you learn by listening

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...

## Response

Your list will obviously depend on your own circumstances. The range of possible occasions is enormous; common examples include:

- briefings or discussions with a tutor or trainer
- discussions with other learners or colleagues
- listening to talks or lectures
- having something demonstrated to you

The depth of the material delivered to you may vary. You may be taken through a lecture or demonstration slowly, step by step or it may be assumed you are familiar with the basics and the background of the subject. In time you will get used to the different styles of your tutors.

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## 3.2 Why do you need to take notes from speech?

You will have your own reasons for wanting to take notes, perhaps:

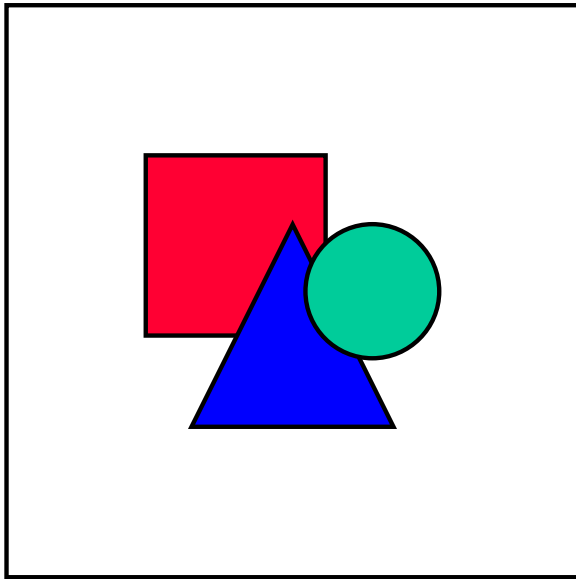
- the topic is particularly important to you
- specific instructions for a task are being given
- you want to remember questions to raise
- your attention is wandering and noting things down might help you concentrate
- Notes may be less important when:
  - you know there is good reading on the same topic - or possibly even a handout
  - a discussion is stimulating and making notes would stop you getting involved
- Notes from speech are most likely to be helpful for the following reasons:
  - to help you remember what was said and done - as a memory aid
  - to help you to concentrate and understand

### Notes as a memory aid

Few people realise how difficult it is to listen to someone speaking. You can never retain and remember everything that has been said. At the time you often think you can, but very soon after the speaker has finished, much of what they have said will be lost.

### Notes as an aid to concentration

Even the most motivated learner can switch off or become distracted when someone is speaking. Taking notes makes you actively involved with what is being said, which makes you try to understand and extract meaning as you go along. This also helps you to retain and retrieve the information, as does the physical act of writing, which helps to embed information into your memory.



### 3.3 What are your notes like?

Assess your note taking skills. Look through an example of notes you took recently from speech and check whether they are:

- brief - to remind you, not a blow-by-blow account
- clear - you need to be able to look for a specific point if necessary
- easy to read
- easy to understand
- organised in the way you learn
- relevant - it is no good making a note of all the anecdotes and trivia, but not knowing what the main points were.

Note down here any things you need to improve:

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.....  
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### 3.4 Getting the most out of lectures and talks

Here are some suggestions that might help you to get more out of lectures and talks. Add any other ideas you have or any methods you have found successful in the past:

#### A. You can prepare yourself before the lecture or talk:

- Be familiar with the topic. Read as much as you can in advance. This will make the

lecture easier to understand and help you to recognise the main points.

- Make sure you understand and can define the common terms and specialised vocabulary of your subject

- Devise a system of abbreviations, these can be:

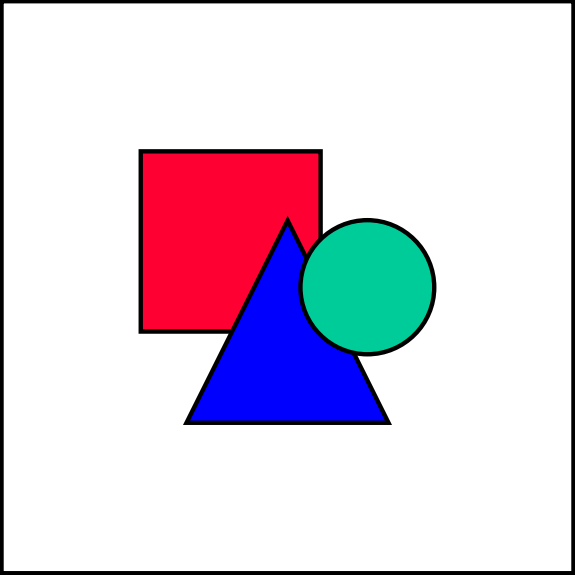
**Standard:**

greater than  $<$  because equals  $=$

less than  $>$  therefore compare cf

and  $\&$  or  $+$  that is ie for example eg

does not equal  $\neq$ , is different from  $\neq$  and the rest etc



remember NB

## Your own creation

You can create your own abbreviations for terms in your subject area. However remember to be consistent and make sure the abbreviation is obvious enough for you to remember what it means when you go back to your notes at a later date.

- Sit where you can see and hear the speaker
- Make a note of:
  - the subject/title of the talk/lecture
  - the lecturer or speaker's name
  - the date

Your

Ideas.....  
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## B. During the lecture or talk

- Listen for the structure and purpose of the lecture during the introduction
- Try to work out a plan. Some speakers are very good at giving you a structure, telling you how many points there are, etc. Some will give you an outline, perhaps on an overhead projector or handout, that you can add your own notes to.
- If you are not given a clear structure listen for clues during the lecture, for example pauses, changes of tone in the speaker's voice or signpost phrases

such as:

"Today I want to talk about....."

"I'm going to point out three....."

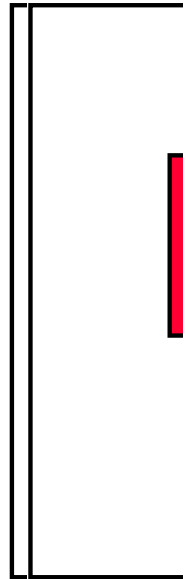
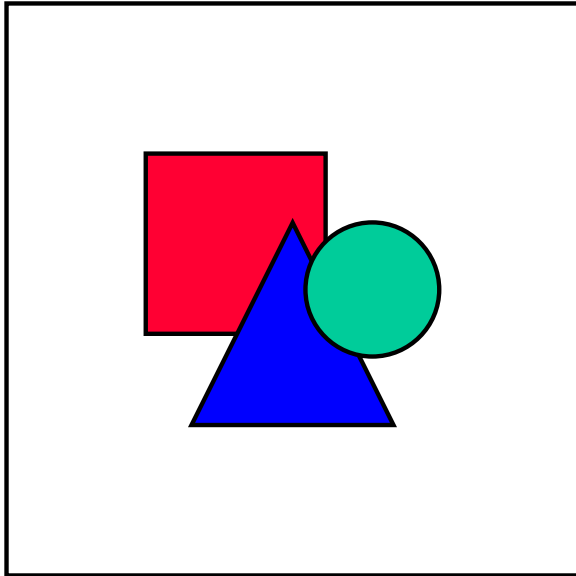
"Another example is....."

"Now we'll move on to....."

- Number all the different points in your notes
- Differentiate fact from fiction
- Note your own questions and contradictions **but** indicate they are

**YOURS**

and not the speaker's



- If you lose concentration make a note so you can fill in the gap afterwards
- Don't be afraid to ask questions
- Make a note of any further reading that is recommended

Ideas.....

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### C. After the lecture

- Read and revise note within 24 hours - psychologists have discovered you keep it in your mind longer and it is easier to relearn later.
- If you do not understand part of what you have written clarify it with other students
- If none of you have understood, check with the speaker!
- Re-read your notes from time to time, to aid your learning.

Your ideas.....

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Finally, if you have taken down about a third of what you hear you will have plenty of material to work from. However the quality, in terms of selecting appropriate material, is more important than the amount.

## **Further Reading**

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