

Note Taking to Promote Learning

Note taking is one of those writing skills often taken for granted by both teachers and students. It shouldn't be. Note taking is a type of writing that promotes learning because it actively involves students in the lecture, reading, or viewing experience.

Addressing note taking in subject area classes need not disrupt course curricula; for example, teachers might choose to incorporate note taking strategies that meet course goals while, at the same time, teaching effective note taking processes. The following note taking assignments suggest some of these strategies:

For complicated lecture material, develop note packets that consist of reproductions at the top of the page of readable reductions (say, 75%) of your lecture overhead transparencies. The remainder of the page becomes note taking space. Students will have no need to copy the transparencies verbatim, and the blank space signals that you expect notes to be taken. A side benefit of this approach is that you can easily run a periodic check on the effectiveness of your lecturing by calling in a few of the day's note sheets from student volunteers.

To help students manage parallel or contrastive information, assign a chart. Ask students to develop a grid that highlights similarities and differences across the topics being covered. That grid may be used for review or as preliminary writing for a paper.

To teach the nature of the scholarship in your field, assign students to photocopy an exemplary but accessible scholarly article. Demonstrate glossing as you critique the article. Follow up with an assignment that asks students to gloss another article prior to writing a brief summary or critique of it.

Assign a double-entry journal. The left hand side can be designated for notes on readings completed in preparation for class. The right hand side can be used for notes generated by class discussion or lecture. Or, the left-hand column can be a commercially produced skeletal outline, while the wide right margin provides room for glossing or note taking in lecture.

Rationale

Students list two purposes for note taking, according to the research of Hartley and Davies: to help later recall and to provide a product for later review (cited in Wilbert J. McKeachie et al. *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1994). Note taking can serve these purposes because note takers are involved in a multi-sensory activity; hands and eyes as

well as ears are engaged. Moreover, note taking helps students comprehend and control material because they have to make choices as they decide whether to copy information verbatim or reword it. In this decision-making process, they are selecting an organizational principle that will enhance retention of the information. Moreover, because the notes are in a system of their preference, students may be more likely to review with them. (See Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith. *The Practical Tutor*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987, 240-41.)

Many students, however, have had little training in this very effective study strategy. Consequently, students may end up with notes so disorganized that they are useless. Inexperienced note takers also run the risk of taking overly brief or overly detailed notes, typically because they are not certain how to judge the importance of the material.

Sometimes learning how to take effective notes involves reshaping old habits. Past training may have promoted note taking as simply listening and writing. However, *Writers, Inc.* (Patrick Sebranek et al. *Writers Inc.* Burlington, WI: Write Source Ed. Pub. House, 1992), a popular high school and college writing guide, suggests that students need to think of note taking as "listening, thinking, reacting, questioning, summarizing, organizing, listing, labeling, illustrating--and writing." Other past practices may also need adaptation. For instance, many students have to overcome high school bans on note taking in texts. Many entering freshmen have never glossed texts, even though this strategy promotes effective and reflective reading. Outlining is another skill that needs cultivation at the college level. Students have typically been taught to build a structural outline, following the author's or lecturer's argument. They can benefit, however, by also learning to outline thematically, that is, by working from the thesis to reconstruct the reading's or lecture's argument.

Even if students know how to organize notes and review with them, they need to know organizational principles of the discipline they are studying as manifested in its texts as well as in its research. Subject area specialists are the best sources for this information. Commercially-prepared notes are used by some instructors, in part because of their apprehension about student note taking skills. McKeachie points out, however, that the nature of such notes will determine the benefit to the student. For those preferring commercially-prepared notes, he recommends skeletal outlines that require substantial student engagement. His contention is supported by research suggesting that detailed notes promote student passivity (See Annis 1981; Kiewra 1989 cited in McKeachie).

Reference:

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