

The Blueprinting Approach to Note-making

There are many methods of “notemaking” that can be effective. The way you write down your notes is less important than your intellectual preparation for making notes, being mentally active (e.g. the kinds of questions you have in mind) during lecture, and the way you use your notes to study and learn. Consequently, The Blueprinting Approach to notemaking accounts for all three phases (before, during, and after) of the process. During class (and afterwards) you should not merely be TAKING down what your professor said, but also recording or MAKING note of your own thinking and understanding.

What happens in lectures and class discussions is often the most important aspect of a course. Lectures are “texts” that are composed by your professor. They reflect most closely the way that your professor conceptualizes the field and the subject matter of the class, so you can get a sense of how they think by carefully analyzing the form and content of lectures. You can think of lectures as answers to questions—posed explicitly or not—map the answer (lecture) onto the key question(s). Lectures are also, in many cases, demonstrations of the thinking, analysis or problem-solving methods your professor expects you to master. So, by closely observing and studying what your instructor DOES (not just what they say) in class you can learn how they set up and solve a problem, do an analysis, etc. If they do these things in class, they are likely to ask you do them on the exams, so pay attention to technique as much or more than the specific example or problem.

BEFORE

- Know the main concepts, themes, topics of the course, and the relations among them. Get the big picture by blueprinting the course, this will help you know what to focus on and make notes on during class.
- Prior to each class, find out the topic for that day or week to orient your selection and prioritization of material in class, and if you haven't read the assigned readings, at least skim them. Take a few minutes to predict (i.e. guess) what your professor is likely to say about the topic, and what is most important for you to pay attention to.
- Set a purpose or objective for yourself in terms of what you want to **get out of the lecture**. This includes both what kind of product or “study tool” you want to create (i.e. what you want to include in your notes) and what kind of knowledge you want to take away.
- Identify your main purpose for lecture and focus on getting the most out of it.

DURING

- Staying attentive and keeping your purpose in mind can be hard to do during some lectures—that goes for “boring” ones and “entertaining” ones alike. A lecture that is entertaining, filled with great stories, humor etc. may distract you from creating notes that are most useful later on when you study. A fun lecture can leave you with poor notes as easily as a dry one where you zone out.
- How you **MAKE** notes should be determined to a significant extent by how you will **USE** them. If you are going to review your notes an hour after class and fill them in with details etc. you don't need to worry so much about getting “everything” down in your notes, you only need to get enough down to remind you an hour later when you return to your lecture notes of what you want elaborate upon.

Cited and adapted from materials from the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning (Princeton University)

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- You should always be asking yourself: *Will this be enough detail to do what I need to do X hours, days, weeks, or whatever, from now when I look at it again?* If you simply can't get that level of detail and context down during class, you will need to return to your notes and augment them with what you remember soon after class.
- Make notes, using the two-column (Cornell) method or something similar, that helps you remain active and tuned-in as well as makes your studying and learning in the future more efficient.
- Pay attention not just to WHAT your instructors say, but HOW they say it and what they DO. What concepts, terms, etc. do they use repeatedly? How do they set up, analyze and solve the problems/questions they are posing? Note patterns in the ways they lecture, what they talk about, etc. For instance, does your professor start by offering an abbreviated proof of a theorem, provide some motivation for types of problems, solve a basic or template version of the problem, discuss variations and then link to a new concept or follow some similar sequence with each new topic? If so, you can use that knowledge not only to organize your notes on the page, but to direct and focus your attention and anticipate what will be important to attend to. It also helps you focus within each section or segment of the pattern.
- Ask yourself WHY the instructor is addressing a particular topic and why they are doing so at that juncture (e.g. in relation to what comes before and after). Look for ways of thinking, types of questions, methods and techniques of analysis and problem solving that seem unique to the subject (discipline) and to the instructor. If this is too much to do during class, some of these things can be done before (or more likely after lecture) when you re-visit your notes.
- Just writing down what your instructor puts on the board is not likely to be enough. You need to supplement that with what the instructor says, and YOUR OWN THOUGHTS. As you take notes, think ahead to the next steps in the process, how you will add to them and use them to study.

AFTER

- Review your notes periodically if possible. If you return to your notes on the same day you take them, you can often fill in things you missed, make them more clear, see connections that weren't obvious, identify deeper patterns and connections, etc. Comparing notes with a classmate can be a great way to do this. Use your lecture notes in conjunction with your reading and vice versa. Seek out and make note of connections between texts and lectures, don't simply count on the fact you will remember them later.
- Look at the previous day's notes in preparation for the current lecture. As you get closer to exams, papers, etc., use the two-column system to test yourself: try to answer the questions you posed for yourself, cover up the big column and test yourself on the key terms you listed in the smaller column. Turn your notes into study tools by reducing them down into study sheets, diagrams, grids, etc.
- Use your notes to review readings, or to prepare yourself to read a text for the first time to give you ideas of what to focus on, why the professor has assigned it, and how you might make connections to other texts.