Script for Note-Taking Video

Welcome to this video on note-taking. In it I will be focusing on note-taking strategies specifically during lecture rather than other kinds of note-taking such as taking notes while reading.

I want to begin by discussing some of the major note-taking challenges students typically face. A couple of the challenges I have come across as a teacher of college skills courses are, first, knowing exactly which of the statements made by a professor during lecture are important ones that should be written down. A second, related problem students often have in taking notes involves keeping up with the lecture while attempting to take notes. Students sometimes couch this problem as one in which “the professor talks too fast” but, in fact, it may be that a given student who’s having trouble keeping up just has yet to learn how to take notes in a way that enables him or her to do so. The tips I am about to discuss should address both of these challenges as well as others students face in taking good notes.

Before I discuss these tips let me say a word about the major ways professors structure lectures. First, some professors use PowerPoint slides to lecture from, others use lecture notes of varying degrees of completeness and organization. (Still others may lecture entirely extemporaneously but this is probably not very common.) They may or may not write out on the board, overhead projector or other surface some or all of the key points they are discussing. In either of these two cases you can simply ask your professor for a copy of the PowerPoint or lecture notes. This would enable you to largely avoid the challenges you face in note-taking. Some professors make copies of PowerPoint presentations available for students as handouts or as documents posted on a website which students may download and
print. If your professor does not already do either of these things, try asking if he or she would be willing to do them or to otherwise make the presentations available.

When professors don’t use PowerPoint presentations they generally use some kind of outline or lecture notes around which to structure the lecture. As noted above, you can ask your professor for these notes but you should recognize that not all professors will be willing to share them. There are numerous reasons why professors may be less than willing to do so. One involves a legitimate concern some professors and even some students have about students becoming too lazy if “too much” of a lecture is provided in written form. Some fear that if a certain amount of material is already given to students, they will not pay as much attention to the lecture as they would if they had to actively listen for key points to write down themselves. Both you and your professor have a decision to make about whether and how much of the material should be provided to you prior to the lecture in order for you to get the most out of it.

Personally, I tend to err on the side of giving my students the lecture outline—in this case in the form of PowerPoint slides—ahead of time. This is so that students do not have to write down every word of every slide and can pay attention to my elaboration on the content of each slide instead. I provide my students with a lined notes area off to the side of each PowerPoint slide in the presentation. Students have formal definitions and the like on the slide itself and a section on which to take notes on lecture over and above what is on that particular slide. Often the statements I make about a given slide are more important and helpful to students in grasping concepts than the formal definitions themselves and it is this material to which I want students to listen. Providing slides also enables discussion of
their content which further enhances understanding. For the reasons mentioned here, having an outline of a lecture in hand before it is given can be very helpful but only if students avoid the temptation of thinking that all the information they need is contained in the outline. Students must still be active listeners and participants in class lecture and discussion.

Most of what I’m going to discuss from this point on is from the textbook *Becoming a Master Student* by Dave Ellis. I will discuss some of Ellis’s recommendations from his chapter on Note-Taking. Copies of this text will be made available for students to consult in both of Kirkwood’s libraries. You can look up the chapter yourselves if you want to learn more or have clarified anything in this video (DVD) that is of interest to you.

Okay, let’s begin. Ellis breaks down note-taking into these three areas:

- **Observing**
- **Recording**
- **Reviewing**

In the **observing** phase of note-taking, Ellis recommends the following:

- **First, complete outside assignments.** If you come to class having read the material that’s going to be covered in a lecture, for example, chances are it will make more sense to you. You will know where the professor is in the discussion that he or she is presenting.

- **Next, bring the right materials.** Make sure you have the right kinds of things that you need for note-taking. Now we can talk about what some of those things might be. It can go beyond just a pencil or pen and paper. For example, one of the recommendations I will discuss later involves color-coding notes which would require you to have a whole set of writing utensils of different colors. What materials you
need are up to you, just make sure you have all of them each day of lecture.

- **Sit front and center.** You are more likely to catch what is being said if you do so.

- **Conduct a short pre-class review** of the material that you’ve read.
  
  It’s the same kind of idea as completing the outside assignments and doing the readings.

Ellis also recommends **accepting your wandering mind**. What he is saying there is, during those times you realize that a minute or two or five have gone by and you have drifted away, which will happen even to the strongest students, don’t panic about it. It’s perfectly natural. It is bound to happen and there are ways around it that I am going to talk about later.

He also counsels us to **postpone debate**. When an instructor is speaking, he or she may say something that just really pushes your buttons. Even if the professor says something that is clearly wrong in your eyes—up is down, black is white, night is day—and you are just furious with these statements, the point is you shouldn’t let that distract you too much. No professor at Kirkwood wants you to passively accept whatever he or she says but, in order to keep up with lecture, you may have to hold off on the internal debate that you would normally engage in when someone says something that seems wrong. Now, postponing debate doesn’t mean don’t debate at all. It doesn’t mean accept everything uncritically, because that would make you a passive listener and that works against good note-taking. I will show you what I mean in a little bit.

- Another recommendation for the observing phase of note-taking is to **let go of judgments about lecture styles.** This goes with what I just said about postponing debate. You are going to have different
instructors who have very different lecture styles and you might as well be aware that not everyone is going to lecture in a way that you find engaging. This is one area where the statement “just deal with it” may be appropriate and remember: you can learn a lot from every professor whether his or her lecture style is to your liking or not.

A couple of other recommendations are as follows:

- **Participate in class activities.** This goes along with the whole be-prepared-for-class kind of thing. If you are participating in class activities and if you are participating in out-of-class activities, you are going to be more prepared and therefore better at note-taking.

- **Think critically about what you hear.** This sounds like a contradiction of the point I made earlier about postponing debate but it really isn’t.

  Let me make a suggestion here. Assume you are taking notes and your professor says something you feel is really “out there,” it could be something that to your mind is really wacko but while, on the one hand, you want to think critically about what the professor is saying, at the same time, you don’t want to get so caught up in mental debate with your professor that a whole bunch of material has been covered and your mind has been out in left field during that whole time and you’ve missed key points from the lecture.

  At the point where the controversial statement occurs in your notes try making some kind of mark, anything that works for you, some kind of mark that says this is something I am going to come back to later, perhaps an exclamation point or a star. A mark that says, “when I have the time later this is my little permission symbol to
come back and debate this with myself mentally then.” You may also wish to bring up such an item with your professor in person during his or her office hours. Most instructors would be more than happy to discuss such concerns with students. (This assumes that the item is not something you can ask about in class, stopping the professor to debate or discuss the item in question right then and there. Doing this is sometimes possible and appropriate but not always.)

The key thing is by doing what I’ve just suggested you’re not allowing the mental debate with the professor to prevent you from keeping up with the lecture but you’re not just being passive either. You’re merely waiting for a more convenient time to carry on the debate you wish to have either mentally and within yourself or literally when you discuss the item with your professor.

Continuing on with the observing portion,

- **Watch for clues and be alert for repetition.** When the professor repeats something, it is probably pretty important. **Listen for introductory and transition words and phrases.** In introducing a topic the professor might be setting you up like a teammate in volleyball, when he says, “we are now going to talk about ‘blank.’” So pay special attention to this.

Other phrases might indicate where your professor has already been. She may say, for example, “We’ve just discussed the five causes of the French Revolution.” You can look back and say, hey, did I get five of those? So let the professor’s clues do what they are intended to do, which is to help you out. You may find that you are going along and realize you’ve only written down four of the five causes your
professor listed. So you might want to make some kind of symbol that tells you, “I need to go back and talk to the professor about one of the points I missed.” I can’t say enough about how helpful developing some kind of symbol system can be. The challenge is, it will take time. Initially you may be making symbols that you yourself don’t understand. When reviewing your notes you might say, “what the heck did I mean by that symbol?” But over time you can learn to abbreviate things in a way that is clear and that is where an item like this can come in handy:

This page contains examples of symbols others have developed to help them take notes quickly. The symbols work as a kind of shorthand. Remember that the book from which this page comes is on reserve in the library so you can look up this page yourself and memorize the symbols. These are just suggested symbols you might use in note-taking during lecture and they can also be used in the margin of a page while you’re reading a book. I will discuss some other ideas for how to memorize a symbol system later.

A couple of other important things relative to the observation phase of note-taking include:

- **Watch the board or overhead projector.** This one is pretty obvious, I think. Anything that is being written down on the board or shown on the projector screen is there for a reason.

- **Notice the instructor’s interest level.** When the professor seems to be getting more interested in something, and that might be evident through a change in the pitch or volume of her voice, when she is
really excited about something, make note of that. It might be because a really important point is being made.

Now we are ready to move on to the **record** part of the note-taking process. Once again, the old axiom, there is more than one way to do something, comes into play here. I will begin this section by discussing a number of note-taking styles you can employ and their strengths and weaknesses.

- First, there is the **Cornell format**. Here you do in essence a kind of an outline—and it could be a Roman-numeral outline or some other kind—on the right hand side of the page in the six inches that make up that side of the page. Then in the 2 ½ inches on the left side—which you will separate by drawing a line down the page 2 ½ inches from the left edge—you place keywords and dates. It may be that you have key terms that you have to memorize and one of the problems is, when we are taking notes, we embed our definitions into our notes and it’s then often hard to find where those are. By using the Cornell method we are separating the definitions from the narrative the professor is presenting while he or she lectures and putting them out where they can be seen more easily. Dates or key events in a history class can be placed there as well.

- Next, there is the traditional **Roman-numeral type of outline**, where the major points are preceded by Roman numerals, the supporting detail by capital letters, the minor points by Arabic numerals and so on. There is a way to use Microsoft Word or other word processing software, by the way, to convert or format text automatically into such an outline format. Even if you don’t take notes initially using this
style, you can type your notes later—a good idea in any case—and use a Roman-numeral style outline when you do so.

- We can also create mind maps. Now again, there is more than one way to represent material. The Roman-numeral outline is just a linear way of doing so—a method of taking notes in a line that goes down the page.

Now the mind map is just another way of outlining but with some additional benefits. What is the advantage of the mind map? What does the mind map have that the linear outline does not? First, consider how much of a page the mind map takes up. You can see that it is all on one page. Let’s see an example of a mind map that can be done in a history class. When your professor talks about the major parties to World War II, you could list Germany, the US, Japan, and other powers on your mind map and then the factors that lead each into the war. So you could write down high reparations payments that the Allies had imposed on Germany after World War I as one factor influencing Germany. And it is conceivable that you could get everything from a lecture on a single piece of paper.

So using a mind map as an adjunct to traditional notes has two major benefits: first, you could rewrite the notes that you have already in a linear form into the new form of a mind map. This alone can be helpful because merely rewriting notes can help you to retain the material. But it has the additional benefit, discussed above, of putting everything on a single page so that you can see all the factors behind World War II, in this case, at a glance.
A potential drawback of the mind map is its brevity. While the mind map may be brief and employ only one-word “triggers” for the factors that led each country into WWII in our example, however, as you become more adept as a student you won’t need as many words or as much detail in your notes in order for them to be useful. In other words, a few symbols will trigger the memory of the missing words. So here you may start out having to write, “high reparations payments” and later you will develop some kind of an abbreviation scheme that will help you with it, for example, the letters “HRP,” and eventually those letters will trigger that longer phrase. It will take time, it will come though some people want to give up early. That is where patience comes in. Be patient with yourself in learning and implementing these techniques.

Remember: you can consult the Ellis textbook to learn more about mind maps and anything else in this presentation.

- Next, there is **writing notes in paragraphs**. This can be helpful if you don’t feel you can structure your notes into a Roman-numeral or mind-map format on the fly. You might want to rewrite such notes and, in the process, reformat them into one of the other styles, however, so they’re more logically organized and helpful as a study aid.

- This last style of note-taking is to **use keywords**. If you have a lot of trouble keeping up, that could be caused by a couple of different things. It could be that your professor is talking too fast. It could also be that you are trying to write more than you need to. If you focus
only on keywords, admittedly you might me missing some stuff. But at least you are getting those. And keywords are often vital.

I know that in my Sociology classes, definitions are a huge part of each quiz and exam. Now in the case of my classes I give students the PowerPoints from which I lecture. Often times such aids will have the definitions on them; if they don’t or your professor does not provide them, you can write out definitions during lecture and you may not need to worry about writing down anything more than that. Again, keywords and their definitions may not be everything you need to retain in all your classes but, for beginning note-takers who are struggling, at least it’s a start. And keywords may, in fact, be most of what you really need to get from the lecture in certain classes.

An important thing to realize is that you probably can’t, shouldn’t and don’t need to write down every word of a definition. Indeed learning how to kind of shorthand things, actually learning shorthand or using symbols like I have already mentioned as a way to make it easier to take notes, is a key skill. Writing down a symbol is a lot faster than writing down a long word. Writing down and drawing an arrow for example. You could use an up or down arrow in front of the word “conflict” to reflect increased or decreased conflict. Or use an up arrow in front of the word “tax” with a horizontal arrow in front of the abbreviation “BTP” to say that excessive taxation led to the Boston Tea Party. Instead of writing the words thus-and-such “led to,” just use the horizontal arrow. I just can’t say enough about graphic signals, using your own personal kind of shorthand, to speed up note-taking.
Aside from different *styles* of notes the following are some other recommendations Ellis makes for the record part of note-taking. They are to:

1. **Use a 3–ring binder.**
2. **Use only one side of the paper.**
3. **Use 3 x 5 cards** and
4. **Keep your own thoughts separate.**

First, **use of a three–ring binder** and **use of only one side of the paper.**

The problem with using both sides of your paper can be illustrated with a simple example: if your professor is lecturing on three causes of the French Revolution and you only have room for two of three on the first sheet then you will have to put the third on the back of that sheet. Then when it comes time to review those three causes for the exam, you’re turning your page over and over again to make sure you have all three memorized rather than being able to see all three at a glance. You would avoid this problem if all your pages were one sided and in a three-ring binder and you could, therefore, remove your pages and have them laid out *next* to each other for review.

Using one side of a piece of paper may seem wasteful but when you get to the end of a certain number of pages you could then use the other sides and have *those* side by side. Using a 3-ring binder while you’re actually writing the notes during lecture is a bit cumbersome, so what you could do, instead, is take the notes on a legal pad and then later punch holes in the paper and put it into the binder.

Regarding the topic of **keeping your own thoughts separate** during note-taking, use a style like the Cornell method. In this case you might make notes off in the margin containing brief statements of your own opinions on
what’s being discussed. It’s not unlike what I was suggesting earlier—you might come back to debate a given point later on.

Regarding **use of 3 x 5 cards**, that can be done if you want to write out a term and write the definition on the back and do that as a way of kind of drilling yourself or maybe a study partner. This method is probably something you want to use after you’ve already taken notes on a full sheet of paper; you can transfer the terms and definitions or other material from your notes to the note cards at a later point to use in drilling.

Returning to the topic of the using a three-ring binder, I want to talk about the need to **label, number and date your notes**. If you do not do this, after you remove your pages from the binder for studying, your notes may get separated and you won’t be able to put them back in the correct order. Label, number and date *all* of your notes.

Next, **employ a “lost” signal**. If you happen to space out during lecture while your professor is talking about the causes of the Civil War—and again this happens to everyone—and all of a sudden you come back to consciousness and now he is on the *aftermath* of the Civil War, you can simply use some kind of a symbol to indicate that you’ve missed that material. On a related note, Ellis suggests **using blank space**. Don’t feel bad about leaving a page or half a page empty. Put the “lost” symbol—maybe a question mark, for example—next to that space and resume taking notes on what the professor is currently discussing. Don’t spend time worrying about the missing material but, instead, approach the professor after class about what it was you missed. Just be honest and most often the professor will so appreciate and be impressed with your honesty and desire to know what you missed that he or she will have no problem filling in your blanks.
Alternatively, you might approach a fellow student about what you missed, preferably someone you trust to be a good note-taker.

Sometimes you can say, “Hey Prof., I’m sorry, I missed that,” during the actual lecture. Other times it wouldn’t be appropriate, it would slow things down too much. Know your professor and appropriate classroom decorum well enough to judge that for yourself (as well as whether you can get away with saying, “Hey, prof.,” to a given professor). But, if you don’t, approaching someone after class is the safer way to go.

Next, **use standard abbreviations.** The more you use standardized abbreviations, the less you have to develop and memorize a personal shorthand. You can learn more about standardized abbreviations by going online [citation needed] or by looking at college writing handbooks such as Diane Hacker’s “Writer’s Reference” and others.

Another idea for better note-taking is to tape record or digitally record lectures. Like receiving lecture notes or PowerPoint presentations ahead of time, this strategy has both strengths and potential dangers. It can be especially helpful when an instructor has a fast lecturing style. Other suggestions for how to handle such a lecturing style can be found in the Ellis textbook on reserve in the library on a page from the note-taking chapter titled “When Instructors Talk Fast.” While recording lecture can be helpful, Ellis cautions us to **use recorders effectively.** Specifically it is important that you don’t let having the recording become a substitute for listening to the lecture. Students sometimes make that mistake. They will bring in a recorder and they figure, “it is all there on the recorder so I can just zone out and relax.” Then it becomes a substitute rather than an aid to your listening to the lecture and note-taking. Avoid this tendency by reminding yourself that the recording is just such an aid and remember, the recording may not
pick up everything that the instructor or other students say. I’d recommend taking notes in spite of having the recorder present and use the recorder only to fill in material you missed in your own note-taking.

You can also take notes in different colors. For example, you could put terms in red and the other things in blue, something like that. Color-coding might help you do a better job at taking notes and being able to understand and more easily locate the types of notes you have once they are written.

I’ll conclude this section of note-taking with a recommendation of Ellis’s that I have already referred to numerous times already—that of using graphic signals. I am really just restating what I’ve already said here but it’s so important, it bears repeating. Use of symbols and abbreviations instead of writing out entire words and phrases really helps save space and time and helps you take notes in a much more efficient way.

Regarding the review part of the note-taking process there are these recommendations:

- Review notes within 24 hours
- Edit notes
- Fill in key words in the left-hand column
- Use key words as cues to recite
- Conduct short weekly review periods
- Consider typing your notes and
- Create mind map summaries

Reviewing notes within 24 hours of the lecture is one of the most effective ways you can assure maximum retention of the material. Studies indicate that reviewing notes within this time period increases retention of the material by an amount that is much greater than waiting to review till later.
Editing your notes can be a good way to do this reviewing as well as making your notes more comprehensible for later review. One good way to edit is to do so by typing your notes. By doing this you can “neaten up” the notes, again making them easier to grasp when you review them later, and have the advantage of spell checking and grammar checking features of a PC if you type using a computer. You can also use the outline formatting features of a PC that I alluded to earlier if you type your notes with the aid of a computer. You can thus convert your notes to a more organized format as you type.

If you place key words in the left hand column of your notes, as some note-taking styles call for, you have them there separated from the other material where they can be easily seen and reviewed. If you have embedded key words in the body of your notes, you can separate them out later as you review and get the same advantage. You can use these key words as cues to recite—in other words use them in a drill exercise with their definitions to help your retention for a quiz or exam.

Conducting short weekly review periods builds on the 24-hour reviews and keeps you revisiting the material frequently which is the most effective way to ensure retention. Creating mind map summaries, as we’ve already seen, is advantageous for several reasons. First, creating a mind map is another way to review your notes (anything that gets you back into your notes, especially if done promptly, is helpful); second, like converting notes to an outline, doing a mind map helps you organize material that may be somewhat unorganized the first time you write it down, i.e., during lecture; finally, mind maps enable you to get a lot of material into a relatively small space and to see relationships between concepts, events and so on at a glance.
This has been a discussion of the process of note-taking divided up into **observation**, **recording** and **reviewing** phases. Any questions about any of the items discussed in this presentation can likely be addressed by referring to Dave Ellis’s book *Becoming a Master Student* on reserve in the library. There are other valuable resources to be found in the library as aids to developing skills including other DVDs on specific kinds of skills needed in college-level classes. It is also important to establish relationships with other students with which to share and compare notes, perhaps as part of a study group or on a one-to-one basis. And, finally, do not be a stranger to your professors. Kirkwood’s faculty are willing and eager to help you outside of class and have office hours to accommodate you.