Note-taking is (*mostly*) about remembering

Why do I say that **note-taking** is a 'survival skill'? Essentially, **note-taking** (aka *note taking, or notetaking*) helps us to remember things:

- firstly, because our short-term (or working) memory has only limited capacity, we do not need to '*hold that thought*' once we have made a note [See **Memory mysteries unlocked – with help from Google**]

- secondly, some of us (*yours truly included*) are Read/Write Learners, so **note-taking** is a part of our learning strategy for committing things to memory [See **Improve your learning skills – here's how**]

- thirdly, when we review our notes from an event, especially when it is done within the next 24-hours, we strengthen our memories and improve our recall

Note-taking has other purposes

We are likely to take notes when we:

- are studying or researching something,
- need a record from a discussion or meeting, or
- are collecting information about something.

Apart from helping us to remember things and to keep records, **note-taking** also allows us to maintain our focus on a topic, develop our ideas, and improve our understanding of something.

In a business or work situation, notes taken from a meeting or interview can be essential for decision-making. In such cases, the need for accuracy can be absolutely critical to the eventual outcome (e.g. a contract negotiation, or selecting candidates at a job interview).

Note-taking is a race against time

Now, who amongst us lays claim to being really good at **note-taking**? My personal observation is that this is a rather rare skill indeed!

When we are taking notes while someone is speaking, the biggest problem we face is that we are racing against time (unless we are a 'shorthand' exponent). Most people speak at around 150 words per minute; an average writing speed is around 20-30 words per minute. No wonder it is hard to keep up!

At the same time, our attention is being split between what we are hearing, and what we trying to compose in the way of our notes. While our brains might be able to 'think' at around 500-600 words per minute, operating in this 'multi-channel' mode can be quite a test [See **Effective Listening - the secret to successful communication**].

3 Steps for *Effective* Note-Taking
1. Preparation >> 2. Position >> 3. Process

1. Preparation
review previous event/s
read background material
frame questions to ask
prepare:
• note-taking equipment
• tablet/notebook pc
• mobile/cell phone

2. Position
able to hear & see clearly
lighting & space for note-taking
pay attention, listen carefully
photograph diagrams, etc
use questions to clarify
collect handouts &/ aids

3. Process
select note-taking method
record major points only
use own words
use keywords & shortcuts
leave spaces between lines
complete any follow-up
review, revise, reorganise, summarise, transcribe, etc

Effective note-taking requires: Preparation, Position, Process.
Each step involves a number of possible actions.

Learning how to take notes

For most of us, our first experience of taking notes was probably at school. Somewhere in my secondary school years a teacher advised the class that we now needed to learn how to take notes as preparation for university/college, or even for work.

As I recall, after an initial explanation of what to do, there was little follow-up towards helping students become effective at **note-taking**. From time to time we did hand in our notes from various classes for teachers to review.

This would usually result in feedback about the content – or perhaps the lack of content. So, while we were being made aware of 'gaps' in our work, what was missing was guidance on *how to capture the content* as it left the lips of the teacher!

Based on the articles, blogs, videos, and comments that I find on the internet, it would seem that **note-taking** is still a major challenge for many of our students, whether at secondary or tertiary levels. And, in our workplaces, for those of us who have jobs where **note-taking** may be required in meetings and so on, the challenge also remains.

Note-taking methods

There are a several common 'methods' for **note-taking**, including:

The Cornell method, originally developed by Professor Walter Pauk in 1949, this is particularly suited for students organising and revising notes from lectures.

Mind Mapping, as popularized by British authour Tony Buzan during the 1970s, offers a free-format approach to capturing information and drawing relationships between ideas, etc.

Linear *note-taking*, where information is recorded in the order it is received; '*Outlining*' is a structured method of linear ***note-taking***, with various lines of content indented to show dependency relationships.

Many universities and colleges offer online guidance on the various ***note-taking*** methods, and some also run classes to teach them. All of these methods can be used for ***note-taking*** when learning/studying, in a business/work situation, or for other personal purposes. Which method (or methods) we choose to use is a personal preference.

Quick, accurate note-taking

Earlier I mentioned that the biggest problem we face when ***note-taking*** is the speed at which we can write, compared to the rate at which someone can speak (and, of course, the writing must be legible!). The key to **effective *note-taking*** is being able to quickly and accurately record information, without missing anything that is important:

- ***Major points***: be brief, focus on the major points – do not try to capture everything

- ***Own words***: be prepared to use your own words – you don't need a verbatim record

- ***Keywords***: use these as headings or labels within your notes for structure.

Whichever method of ***note-taking*** we use, we need to make the best possible use of **shortcuts** – e.g. *symbols, codes, abbreviations, acronyms, keywords, etc.* Apart from 'shorthand', there is no universal system of **shortcuts**, so we can make up our own if we want. Here are some ideas:

- ***Acronyms***: acronyms are commonly used in many organisations and industries to shorten a name or title, e.g. SMS = Short Message Service.

- ***Abbreviations***: there are many common *abbr*(eviations), including: *approx*(imate),

∴ (therefore), ∵ (because); *txt spk* (text speak) as used for SMS, is another option for *abbr*.

Note: make your own *abbr* by omitting vowel letters, e.g. reconstruction = *rcnstrn*, large = *lrg* or *lg*.

- ***Codes***: if you have a word that is repeated several times, use a code such as circling the first letter of the word in the first instance where it appears, then using the circled letter thereafter, e.g. Reconstruction = ®enconstruction = ®, Commercialisation = ©ommercialisation = ©. Another use of codes could be inserting margin markers for follow-up actions, e.g. AP = Action point, RP = Research point, MP = Main point.

- ***Symbols***: Michael Hyatt (*see link below*) uses several symbols as margin markers, eg: ☆ = an important point, **?** = a point that requires further research or clarification, □ = an item for personal follow-up, ○ = a follow-up item to be assigned to someone else.

A word of caution: whatever you decide to use, try to keep it as simple and as intuitive as possible – at some stage in the future you might have to re-interpret your own work.

Any or all of the above can be used for ***note-taking*** from either a verbal or written source, for learning/studying, business/work, or other personal purposes. They can also be applied to the common ***note-taking*** methods (Cornell, Mind Map, Linear).

3 Steps – Prepare, Position, Process

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that effective ***note-taking*** actually begins long before the first word is recorded.

- **Preparation** may involve a review of a previous event (lecture, lesson, or meeting), and/or pre-reading of background material. We can use this to prepare an outline of topics/items expected to be covered (or a meeting agenda may be

available). If we know who the speaker/s is/are, we may know about their usual 'style', which can have an impact on *where* we want to be positioned.

- **Position** is important, particularly for a lecture or lesson, but also for a meeting. We need to be where we can listen clearly to the speaker/s, and ideally can also see them clearly. We will also need good lighting and adequate space for taking notes. Once we are in position, we are ready to begin our ***note-taking*** process.

- **Process** is where we apply our ***note-taking*** techniques – this means using our shortcuts, and whichever ***note-taking*** method we have opted to use (Cornell, Mind Map, Linear). But our process doesn't end there – we may have some follow-up actions to complete our notes. Once our initial notes are complete, depending on our purpose (learning/studying, business/work, or other personal purposes), we may now: review, revise, reorganise, summarise, transcribe, refer to, reflect on, and even recite them.

Closing thought

Good ***note-taking*** does not come easy; like many things in life, it is something that we need to persist at until it becomes a habit.

Worth a look

[Recovering the Lost Art of Note Taking - Michael Hyatt](#) [Blog Post – approx 3min read] Aug 20, 2009

[Students use new methods of taking notes in the classroom](#) [Stony Brook Statesman – approx 3min read] March 25, 2013

[Listen Actively and Take Great Notes](#) [Princeton University – approx 2 min read]

Coming next: How to use learning styles to make a connection

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