

Basics

When we listen, we are usually able to remember information to use later. However, depending on how much we have to remember and for how long, we might not be able to rely on just our memories. That's why note taking is an essential life skill: our notes can help our memory to reconstruct the information.

The academic context

As much as you understood a particular lesson, you might not be able to remember all the important details for an exam. Effective note taking is one of the most important academic skills, as it influences how much information you have and how well organized it is (on paper and in your mind).

Key features

There are three important stages of note taking:

Before you listen

- Make sure you're ready and have the right material: lots of paper and at least two pens or pencils. There's nothing more frustrating than breaking your pencil tip or running out of ink in the middle of the listening!

While you are listening

- Don't write full sentences, but don't just use isolated words either (you might struggle to understand them later). You should write short sentences, leaving out unimportant words (articles, auxiliary verbs, etc.).
- Use abbreviations and symbols to save time. They can be standard ones (*info* for *information*; or *n.b.* for *note well, important*) or your own, especially for the key words in a text (e.g. *gov* for *government*).
- Don't write exactly what the speaker says. It will help you understand and remember better if you paraphrase, i.e. write the idea in your own words.
- Depending on the type of text, bullet points can be effective, but word maps can also be very good to show the relation between ideas (see an example of each below).

After you have listened

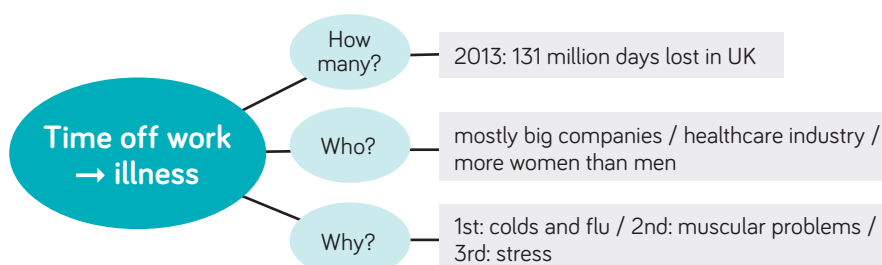
- Go over your notes while the content is still fresh in your memory. Will you be able to understand them in a week's time? A good strategy is to show them to a friend who wasn't present. You should also make extra notes with your opinions as soon as possible.

BULLET POINTS

Time off work → illness

- 2013: 131 million days lost in UK
- mostly big companies
- healthcare industry
- more women than men
- older → more days off
- lower among managers
- 1st reason: colds and flu
- 2nd reason: muscular problems
- 3rd reason: stress

WORD MAP



Challenges / difficulties

A common challenge when note taking is not knowing which information to write down. A lot of what is said in any context is secondary or completely irrelevant. Among other factors, the essential information will be clear from the tone of the speaker: there is usually a change in volume, speed, emotion and emphasis.

In order to decide what to write down, it's also important to understand the structure of the text and the connections between ideas. For example, is what the speaker is saying now related to what they said before? Is it an example of it, or a reason, or maybe an argument to defend what was said? Or maybe it's a completely new idea altogether.

How can I develop this skill?

Practise listening and taking notes to as many different speakers as you can. You can use the internet, TV or radio – try documentaries, sports commentary or films. Listening with a partner can be very helpful, as you can swap your notes afterwards and compare what you noticed. If you can repeat the listening (e.g. if you have downloaded a video), listen again and try to identify the changes of volume, speed, tone and emphasis that accompanied the main points.

Learning outcome

Making and keeping accurate notes will help your memory to access and rebuild the information you learn when needed, for example in a test.

Theory to practice

1 Read the transcript below and underline the key information.

This is Shizuka Arakawa. She says: 'It's nice to meet you! How are you?'
 Shizuka Gozen was a famous Japanese dancer a long time ago. That's why her name is Shizuka. Shizuka has another name – a nickname. It's 'Cool Beauty'. Can you guess why?
 She's from Shinagawa in Tokyo, the capital of Japan. It's by the sea. Tokyo is a very busy city. There are millions of people and thousands of shops. It's great.
 For her job, Shizuka wears dresses and special boots. So, what does she do? Can you guess?
 She has a degree from Waseda University. But she doesn't study now. She has another job. Any ideas?
 Shizuka has a pet dog. Her name is Charo. She's a shih tzu. Shizuka misses Charo when she travels.
 When she travels, Shizuka listens to music. She's a fan of Christina Aguilera. And she likes Beyoncé. They're singers from America. She really likes Mai Kuraki. She's Japanese too. They're friends!
 So, what does Shizuka do? Can you guess? Well ... She's a skater. That's right – an ice skater. Or, a figure skater. Ice skaters have strong legs and excellent balance. Shizuka's dancing is really beautiful. You see, Shizuka is the 2004 World Champion! And ... She's the 2006 Olympic Champion too. She says: 'Wow! I can't believe it!'
 Shizuka is very, very famous in Japan. Sometimes, she's in the newspapers. Everyone knows her! These days, she skates at ice shows. And she works with children. She loves it! She's very happy.

2 Read again and complete the notes below with information from the extract.

SHIZUKA ARAKAWA

- named after Shizuka _____ (famous Japanese dancer)
- nickname: _____
- from _____ (Tokyo, Japan)
- has degree from _____ University
- has shih tzu called _____
- likes Christina Aguilera, _____ and Mai Kuraki (friends)
- job: figure _____ / champion (World: in _____ / Olympic: in _____)

3 Tick the correct option for you.

- a** ☐ I had underlined all the information to complete the task in Exercise 2, and a lot more.
- b** ☐ There were some answers in Exercise 2 that I hadn't underlined.
- c** ☐ I had underlined all the information to complete the task in Exercise 2, and not much more.

If you ticked option a, you might be writing too many notes, including information that is not important.

Try making fewer notes.

If you ticked option b, you might be leaving out important information when you're taking notes.

If you ticked option c, well done! You identified only the important information, and all of it!

Ways to get more practice

Online videos are one of the best ways to get practice in note taking. Choose a video with a topic that interests you. If you have difficulty writing fast enough, you can pause the video very briefly. With practice, you will find yourself pausing less and less.

Once you have gained practice, the news is another good source for note-taking material: it is full of information and is usually quite fast!