

Basics

Apart from having a record of the most important information for future use, note-taking can also help you better understand whatever you're listening to. It is true that writing and listening at the same time can be challenging, but it keeps you focused and helps you to identify which information is relevant.

The academic context

Students often record lectures on their phones nowadays, or recordings are available online. However, taking notes is still essential for a number of reasons:

- It helps you to concentrate and listen efficiently.
- It increases your understanding as you have to select what to write.
- It identifies gaps in your knowledge to ask the teacher or research later.

Key features

Efficient note-taking involves:

- Understanding how the text is organized. In presentations, for example, it is common to have an overview at the beginning and a summary with the main ideas at the end.
- Identifying the key concepts of a text, as well as secondary concepts (e.g. examples, causes, consequences and supporting arguments) and important references for further study. These are often identified by signposting language, such as: *Moving on, ... A good example of this is ... The main reason for that is ...*
- Developing and consistently using a system with headings and subheadings, numbered lists, different colours and graphic symbols (e.g. arrows). See some universal examples in the box below.
- Taking information from slides when available, but not limiting yourself to just copying them. A good speaker will provide a lot more information than on the slides.
- Going over notes as soon as possible after listening to expand on abbreviations and tidy up handwriting (if necessary).
- Writing a brief summary of the notes, including your own opinions and contributions to the topic, and identifying anything that needs clarification, or areas for further study.

Common abbreviations and symbols for note-taking

Abbreviations	Symbols
etc. = and so on	= the same as
e.g. = for example	≠ not the same as, opposite
info = information	≅ the same, approximately
i.e. = that is	+ and, more
nb = note well, important	– less, minus
pp = pages	> more than
para = paragraph	< less than
no = number	→ leads to, results in

Challenges / difficulties

Even though your notes might seem clear at that moment, they can be difficult to understand a few weeks later! To ensure you can make sense of your notes at any time, group ideas into categories, write definitions of the main concepts, add your own questions and write a brief overall summary of the notes.

How can I develop this skill?

As with most skills, practice makes perfect when it comes to note-taking. Make a habit of carrying a small notepad around with you, and make notes whenever you have the chance: watching the news, overhearing a conversation on the bus or attending a lecture during your course. The approach should always be the same: recording in as few words as possible the main points you hear. You will soon develop a system of abbreviations and symbols that will allow you to record whatever you need. Remember: the less you have to write, the more you can focus on understanding what you hear.

Learning outcome

Taking notes will not only help you to recall the information later, but will also allow you to understand better and engage with the content while you are listening.

Theory to practice

1 Read the transcript and underline the key information.

... However, despite their reputation, some ants are not great team players. A recent study showed that about a quarter of all ants do very little. Meanwhile, a tiny proportion – about 3% – do most of the work. That's so unfair! But perhaps the 'lazy ants' are thinking great thoughts. Bill Gates, the former CEO of Microsoft, once claimed: 'I always hire a lazy person to do a difficult job'. Why did he say that? What did he mean?

Sometimes a team member has to speak up if he or she thinks the team is going in the wrong direction. For a lot of people, this can be very difficult.

On the other hand, most teams have an 'extrovert' – a team member who loves to speak up. As often as possible. Extroverts love to demonstrate their skills. This one's into windsurfing!

At work, these people are usually good at giving presentations. But they may not be so strong on planning or working with the rest of the team.

A good team member works hard for the team against tough competition. But at the same time they have to keep to the rules. No foul play.

2 Compare the notes different students made on the extract above. Which is the best one? What is the problem with the others?

a

A study showed that a quarter of all ants do very little. A tiny proportion (about 3%) do most of the work.

b

Gates: lazy / difficult

c

Extrovert = loves speak up + demonstrate skills → good at giving presentations

3 Now make notes about the extract in Exercise 1 using the information you have underlined.

Ways to get more practice

Although short online videos can help you get practice with the techniques above, you need longer and more elaborate texts to be able to fully develop your note-taking skills. Try recording lectures and listening to them again to check how good your notes are and how they can be improved.