



Study Skills

More than Note Taking

Follow along for explicit instructions on active learning strategies designed to improve your study habits and increase your retention.

What do you consider to be good study habits? Capturing your professor's lectures word for word? Completing course readings? Perhaps reviewing lecture slides? These methods can all be considered as passive learning strategies. While passive strategies have a purpose there are other more effective methods to study.

Active Strategies

Focuses on manipulating words, symbols, and ideas so you better understand and remember information.

Passive Strategies

Emphasizes describing and defining information without you necessarily understanding the material.

Note-Taking for Lectures

It can be difficult to take notes while simultaneously trying to understand the material during class (especially if you attempt to record everything you hear). This is largely inefficient as you likely miss large amounts of information¹.

Instead, organize your notes using columns, colour coding, or one of the strategies outlined in this guide to better highlight important concepts.



Tip: Listen for prompts that indicate when the topic changes and when a key concept is introduced. You can also use the lecture agenda or PowerPoint titles to organize your key terms/concepts.

¹ Most undergraduate students take notes in a single sequential column. While this can be efficient for listing important factual information, it is poorly suited to show relationships between concepts and is generally considered among the least effective note taking methods.

Annotated Note-taking

Maximize the effectiveness of sequential notes by dividing the note pages into columns. This allows you to take notes during the lecture while also reserving space to summarize information, edit your notes, and include your questions and reflections.



Course Name:		Date:
Key Terms/Concepts	Textbook/Lecture Notes	Reflections & Related Questions

Figure 1: Annotated Note-Taking Structure

Cornell Method

This note taking method is particularly effective as the different information is contained in one place, including a summary section that you complete following class.

Course Name:		Date:
Cues/Key Points <i>After Class</i> <i>Use this section to include prompts for what you need to remember.</i> <i>You can also include vocabulary words and study questions.</i>	Notes/Details <i>Use this section to take lecture notes.</i>	<i>During Class</i>
Summary <i>Use this section to summarize your notes or highlight the main points of the lecture</i>		<i>After Class</i>

Figure 2: Cornell Method Format.

Looking for fillable PDF versions and/or full page print outs? Go to [Academic Success Resources](#) on Accessible Learning Services' Website.

SQ4R (Survey, Question, Read, Respond, Record, & Review)

This structured strategy focusses on working independently and interactively with written material. It is a great way to increase your reading comprehension while developing study notes.

Step 1: Survey

Creates context for the material.

- Look at the index and table of contents.
- Before reading each chapter, review the titles, subtitles, charts, figures, and summary at the end.
- Write these notes on paper and review overall idea of what the Author intends to say.

Step 2: Question

Focusses your attention on what you should be getting from each section.

- Rephrase the title of each paragraph/subsection/into a question before reading the section. (e.g. "Basic Concepts of Reading" to "What are the Basic Concepts of Reading?")
- Write these questions out.

Step 3: Read

Improves comprehension of the material.

- Read the text and try to answer each question.
- Write notes, in your own words, under each question.

Step 4: Respond/Recall

Identifies material that you need to review more thoroughly.

- Try to answer the questions you wrote in your own words. without looking at your notes/books.
- Spend more time recording and reviewing material that you had difficulty recalling

Note: *More time should be spent on recall than reading*

Step 5: Record

Makes the information easier to locate later when studying.

- Record information by highlighting it, underlining it, or taking additional notes. *Be careful to avoid highlighting everything: it isn't all equally important.*

Step 6: Review

Increases retention of information.

- At the end of the note taking session, look at your questions, answers, notes and book to see how well you did recall.

Adapted from: Robinson, F. (1948) *Effective Study*. Chapter II. New York: Harper and Bros

Tip: Establish regular review periods early in the term. *While the amount of information increases, the time spent on earlier chapters decreases. Leaving the overall time for review consistent.*

Reading Comprehension

Repeatedly reading textbooks or other assigned readings will not improve your understanding of the material. Instead you need to use strategies designed to assist your efficiency and highlight main ideas.



Some general tips:

1. **Read sitting up** with good light, and at a desk or table.
2. **Keep background noise to a minimum.** Loud rock music will not make you a better reader. The same goes for other distractions: talking to roommates, kids playing nearby, television or radio. Give yourself a quiet environment so that you can concentrate on the text.
3. **Keep paper and pen within reach** to record thoughts, questions, or other notes while you read.

For more explicit instructions on how to improve your reading comprehension, try the SQ4R method outlined on the previous page.

Study Tools: Flash Cards

Flash cards are valuable tools that you can save and continue to use throughout your university career. They can be a great way to summarize your lecture notes. Overall, flash cards make great study tools. You can use them to “quiz” yourself on different material and identify concepts that you focus on when reviewing material.

1. **Identify** key concepts as you read through the text.
2. Write each **key concept** or term on one side of an index card (blank side).
3. **Explain** the concept on the back of the index card (lined side).



Tip: There are many ways to adapt this strategy to various disciplines. Math students can create “formula cards.” Art History students could create a flash card for each significant artwork that they need to be able to reference.

Mapping

Mapping is a particular style of note-taking where a "tree" is built around a central concept. This style can be particularly suited for visual learners and showing the connection between different ideas or topics. All maps will look different. Be creative when you adapt content for your map.

Concept Mapping



1. Start with a central topic (*ex: study skills*)
2. Add main branches (*factors affecting the topic*)
3. Add sub categories (*smaller topics/factors*)
4. Connect and describe the relationships between each branch (*name the impact or connection*)

Tip: Be concise! Use short nouns and descriptive verbs to describe each branch. Long words or sentences will make these maps harder to follow.

Matrices

Matrices are an effective way to organize, categorize, and otherwise learn the relationships between related aspects of a topic. Essentially, they are tables where you list common attributes for different topics.

For a visual example of a matrix, check out the table “Overview of Note Taking Types” [HERE](#) on our Website.

Building your reading skills: a guide for students. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.
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