

Taking Lecture Notes

There are several relatively easy things you can do that will put you on the road to being successful in a History class:

- 1) Attend class
- 2) Pay attention
- 3) **Take good notes**

Taking notes in class is important because it helps you to stay alert and focused on the class and because you will walk away from the class with a fairly detailed record of what was said. Memory is imperfect and will not last long, but you will have the notes for review throughout the term. Finally, taking good notes will help you differentiate the more and less important and discern the instructor's main point.

Accurate notes will be helpful when you need to review material for an exam or assignment. In addition to helping you merely remember the contents of a lecture, your note taking strategy can help you grapple with the material and more fully understand a historical topic, event, or question. Thus, you should consider note taking as an **interactive** process rather than just a secretarial skill. It is more than simply an aid to memory. Note taking and review is part of the process of analyzing the material.

Do not lean on other people for good class notes; take notes yourself. By writing things down, you take the first step toward putting the information and ideas in your own words and making them part of your own intellect. It is hard at first, mostly because you are trying to write down the last point while simultaneously listening to the next point. But keep practicing, and you will find that it gets easier.

Current research supports these ideas and also shows that final results on exams and papers can be improved if certain methods for taking notes are employed.

- **Take notes by hand in a notebook.** Significant research has demonstrated that typing notes on a computer is less effective than writing notes by hand in a notebook. So, put your computer (and phone) away, and get out your notebook.
- **Organization is key.** Your notes should be written legibly and begin with the date and subject of the lecture. It is often best to write on every other line or to leave a large margin on at least one side of the page. This will allow you to add material later and to underline your notes and write additional comments without cluttering the page.
- **An outline is not a proper set of notes.** If the professor hands out an outline or makes one available electronically, make sure to use it. The outline is usually just a barebones list of topics to be covered in class. You can use the outline's points as the major headings in your notes, but you will need to fill in a lot of information that is not on the outline. Fill in examples taken from the lecture, class discussion,

and/or the assigned reading that illustrate the main points on that outline. Add relevant dates and names. Define terms used on the outline.

- **Do not try to write down every word the instructor says.** The more time you devote to writing, the less attention you can give to understanding the main points and identifying the outline and argument of the lecture. You do not want every word of a lecture, but you do want every idea. You will need to process the subject matter in order to condense the lecture without losing the significant meaning. Taking notes is an exercise in abridgement and paraphrasing.
- **Develop your own shorthand.** Never use a sentence when you can use a phrase or a phrase when you can use a word. Use abbreviations and symbols whenever possible. Why write out "popular sovereignty" when you could write "pop sov"? John C. Calhoun can become JCC, Abraham Lincoln AL, etc. Every note taker also develops short forms of words such as cd for could, wd for would, w/ for with, n for not, k for can, gd for good, etc. Start by using one or two such forms, and then gradually add more.
- **Complete reading assignments before class.** This allows you to develop an overview of the main ideas, secondary points, and definitions for important concepts. If everything the instructor says is new to you, you will spend so much time writing that you may not be able to grasp the theme of the lecture. If you have obtained some basic information from the reading, however, you will be able to concentrate on noting points in the lecture that are new or different.
- **Watch for clues from the instructor.** If the instructor writes something on the board or overhead, it is likely important. If the instructor repeats a point during the lecture, make sure to note it. Dramatic voice changes and long, intentional pauses usually indicate emphasis as well.
- **Pay attention to class discussions.** Many students let their minds drift off or start fiddling with their phones when a student asks a question and the professor stops lecturing. Do not. Oftentimes, class discussion covers material that the professor would otherwise lecture on and so is pertinent.
- **Review your notes as soon as possible after the lecture.** This dramatically improves retention. Fill in missing verbs and punctuation so that, a month from now, the sentences make sense. Write a summary at the end of the day's notes, recapping the main themes and the most interesting points made. These mini-essays will be valuable when you study for the exam. Who knows? The professor may ask for a short essay on one of these very topics.
- **Merge notes from the lecture and readings.** Keep notes from the lecture with notes from the readings on the same topic. Look for gaps in your understanding in each, and identify where they complement or contradict each other. Ask your instructor if you still do not understand a point.
- **Review notes repeatedly, not only just before exams.**