**Chapter Seven**

**THE FUNDAMENTALS OF NOTE TAKING AND NOTE MAKING**

**By**

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It has been gathered from research findings, observation and personal experience that human beings forget more than half of what they hear within twenty four hours. This therefore makes it very important and necessary for students of tertiary institutions to take down notes.

**What are notes?**

Notes are records of important information that have either been heard in a lecture, seminar or read in a book, written down in a notebook or jotter for easy access at a later period.

However, good notes are extracts or precise statements and summaries of main ideas and supporting facts and figures. They should be clear, unambiguous, easy to understand and meaningful.

**Three important findings from studies concerned with note-taking are as follows:**

1. Note-taking helps a student to listen; it does not interfere with listening and comprehension.
2. Students who study their notes using the recitation method remember one and a half times more after six weeks than students who do not review or revisit their notes shortly after lecture.
3. Students who take no notes or do not study their notes forget approximately 80% of the lectures by the end of two weeks. (www.northshore.edu/support\_center/pdf/listen\_notes)

A student of tertiary institution cannot help being frequently faced with the need to take notes from classroom lectures, “either delivered through recorded tapes, floppy disks, hard disks, compact disc-read-only memory (popularly called CD-ROMs) or other electronic information storage and retrieval devices” Olujide (2013:25). As a result of this, taking and making good notes is a skill that is important in all aspects of students’ studies especially for reasons such as identified below:

a. There is a great mass of new information and knowledge to be assimilated in the university.

b. Human memory is limited and so would not likely effectively recall the vast amount of knowledge and information students come across.

c. There are urgent mental tasks competing for time.

d. Lectures must be complemented by personal reading.

e. Notes are handy in order to save time and energy that would have been spent on re- reading written texts.

f. Assignments and projects are tied to deadlines.

g. Books or other materials used in the library may not be available for subsequent use either due to being borrowed by some other person, stolen or lost.

h. Success is hinged on timely completion and submission of well-done assignments and the fulfillment of other academic requirements.

i. Inability to meet up could lead to frustration and failure.

Note-taking and note-making are related in the sense that as a student, you take note of what you hear or read and then make note to sort out ideas and information from more than one source. This process is essential as a reminder of important points, aids concentration and often guides you towards preparation for examination.

According to Babatunde (2005:127), “note-making and note- taking are valuable for enabling the student to be actively involved in the learning process, thus enhancing concentration. Secondly, they provide an invaluable written record of the main ideas and important details, which may be used for revision. And lastly, notes help to retain knowledge or salient details of lectures. It should be noted however, that of upmost importance are listening and writing skills (discussed in another chapter of this book), to note-taking/making.

**Lecture note-taking strategies**

The following related strategies are involved in note-taking from a lecture:

1. Arriving on time at the class in order to be settled comfortably for the lecture
2. Ensuring availability of appropriate writing materials such as notebook and pen
3. Listening to the topic of the lecture
4. Dating and giving the topic as titles for the notes for reference, revision and test/examination preparation
5. Listening attentively to the lectures and making a note only when something has been understood
6. Leaving wide margins and not crowding lines together
7. Using note-taking shorthand to reduce the number of words used in the notes
8. Not taking too many notes; there should be more listening than writing
9. Capturing but not taking down everything the lecturer says by noting only the key points
10. Writing notes in an outline form to save time and to ensure brevity
11. Using writing techniques like incomplete sentences, abbreviations, paraphrase, phrases, diagrams, tables, etc. to summarize lectures
12. Organizing points for easy understanding
13. Reading your notes over as soon as possible after class to fix handwriting, spelling mistakes and clarity

**Common problems in note-taking from lectures and their solutions**

1. ***Poor physical or emotional condition:*** while in the lecture room**,** you should try as much as possible to be focussed and be determined to concentrate deeply on the topics of the lecture and to become very interested in them. Such a practice may help you to forget minor physical discomfort such as a hot lecture room, noisy environment or emotional upset by detracting from it for a while.
2. ***Difficulty in seeing or hearing:*** When seeing or hearing is difficult, a seat change during the lecture or for the next lecture is in order. If a problem arises such as a light glare preventing the students from seeing the place on the board where the lecturer is writing or probably the lecturer handwriting is illegible, the lecturer might be informed of this. He would probably rather be interrupted to be informed of such a condition than to have part of his lecture lost.
3. **Missed points:** The best solution to this is to leave spaces. However, you should try to fill it later from the text or by checking with classmates or lecturer of the concerned course.
4. ***Unknown spelling of a word*:** The word should be written as best as possible phonetically. A code such as (sp?) should be written above the word or in bracket and check the dictionary later for the correct spelling.
5. ***Illegibility:***It is usually sufficient that you should be able to read your own notes. It may be difficult to write legibly during a lecture as you will need to write as the lecturer speaks. It is advisable to go over your notes while still fresh in order to clarify any illegible or blank parts. This is particularly important in the case of notes that had been taken rapidly.
6. ***Ink or paper supply becomes exhausted:*** Since forgetting is possible when notes are not taken, it is wise for you to check and ensure you have sufficient paper and ink before leaving for class. In any case, a replacement might be obtained from a neighbour if it can be done quickly and unobtrusively. Otherwise you should listen especially carefully and write the missing notes as soon as possible after the lecture.
7. ***Missed lectures:*** When a classmate must miss a lecture and entrusts you with taking notes for him/her, use a piece of carbon paper when taking down your own notes and provide him with his own copy. Thus there is less chance that he/she will be using your notes at a time when you would like to have them available for review and also less chance of the notes being lost. If you must miss a lecture (but try as much as possible not to), your classmate can do likewise for you.

**Note-taking from written sources**

The written sources through which a university student can take down notes include: books, journals, magazines, newspapers, computer/internet web texts, etc.

It is important and advisable when taking notes from a written source such as a textbook, to start with a quick survey of the text. This should be followed by another quick reading through which a mental note can be made, bearing in mind the connectivity between the points. It is important to understand the essential points of the text before taking notes. According to Babatunde (2005:127) “a usual way of ensuring a consistent noting of the main ideas of the text being read is to use writing materials (preferably pencil) to mark the text. The marks you make on the text must be meaningful and consistent.” However, you should mark only the book that belongs to you and not a book borrowed from the library or a fellow student.

There are mainly two ways of taking notes from a text. They are:

1. Writing within the text or making comments in the margin and underlining or marking important words. As mentioned earlier, you should write only in the books that belong to you and strictly not in any borrowed book.
2. Taking notes in a note book based on information derived from the text.

Benefits of taking notes from textbooks:

1. It helps you to retain the knowledge of the book read
2. It actively involves you and helps you to concentrate more
3. It is a guide to important parts of the text thus it assists you in reviewing without having to go through reading the whole text again

Useful tips for taking notes from textbooks:

1. Avoid writing down the exact words used by the author(s)
2. Using your own words prevents plagiarism when using written materials for research project or to answer examination questions
3. The source of the notes should be stated specifically
4. Definition of terms used by the author should be included and referenced
5. Reflect the organization of the text by indenting minor ideas or items under major headings. This is better done in an outline form
6. To ensure proper storage and easy retrieval of information, all notes taken from various sources must be properly organized. This can be done effectively by the use of manually produced (using cardboard paper) index cards - an information storage device containing notes with sub-headings, subjects, titles, main points and references

**How to further achieve success in note-taking from lectures or texts**

1. Concentrate and find out the subject of the lecture or text and make it the title of your notes- e.g*. The Core Values of Landmark University*
2. Rule a margin and put the appropriate date at the top of the page before you start writing. This makes easy reference when the need arises.
3. Identify the main points of the lecture or the text
4. Look out for the logic of the text or the speech
5. Follow specific semantic markers (i.e. signals used by lecturers to structure their lectures) as guides such as listing, sequencing and time relatives e.g.
6. **Markers used for listing chronology of ideas:**

First, in the first place, secondly, my next point, lastly, finally etc.

1. **Markers for expressing time relationship:**

Previously, while, after that, then, when, next

1. **Markers used for emphasis or repetition:**

I would like to emphasize…

This is important because…

1. **Markers used for transition:**

Consequently, nevertheless, for this reason

1. **Markers used for summary and to signal redundancy:**

To conclude…, in summary, let me say…

The reasons stated before…, as we have seen

What I have been trying to say is…

1. **Markers to indicate a cause and effect relationship:**

So, because, therefore, since, thus etc.

1. **Markers used for contrasting ideas:**

But, nevertheless, on the contrary, even if, however, on the other hand, although, yet, unless etc.

**Uses of note-taking**

Note-taking has been found to be useful in the following areas:

1. What to say as a speech
2. What to write as a text or an essay
3. Examination preparation i.e. providing answers with good points from lecture notes and relevant books
4. Research- involving review of relevant sources on specific topics
5. Enhancing good memory

**Forms of note-taking**

As stated earlier, one of the importance of note-taking is to assist the student in recalling the main ideas of an important detail at a later time, to make this easy, the student must consider what form his note should take. There are a variety of ways of taking notes. While some of them are highly personalized, others are quite standardized. Most of the personalized ones occur as diagrams, charts, maps or designs. The standard methods are the outline and the summary in connected sentences. The outline form of note taking is advisable for a student as it is a detailed plan or skeleton of a lecture or a text; hence, it gives a detailed picture of the main ideas and their relationships.

**Outlining**

Outlining concentrates on the main points of the lecture or text and it can be defined as a guide to the writing or reading of a text. According to Olujide (2013:27) “an outline can be seen as a double-edged tool, which can be used either in composing or in the deconstruction of a text… one way to impose a kind of order on notes taken through brainstorming and other sources of information is by drawing up a well laid down outline, which functions to collate an organized whole, all information jotted down during note-taking/making.”

A good outline is a pre-requisite for writing a good summary therefore it should be accurate, brief, clear, orderly and easy to recall. The main points, the major sub-division of the main points should be easily identified by reading the content of the outline because they are represented in the organization and labeling of what has been outlined.

**Summary**

Summary is an advancement of the outline. As mentioned earlier, the construction of a good outline is required for summary writing. What is then required after that is to develop the words and phrases of the outline into complete sentences for a summary of the text. The points jotted are used in writing connected, coherent and co-ordinated sentences. Therefore, summary simply means a shortened version of something said or written, containing only the gist (main points) Olujide (2013:29).

It is important to note that the two main features in summary writing are brevity and clarity. However this does not mean that summary is “a mindless reduction of the length of a passage, but it is a purposeful concise presentation of the main ideas of a passage: one-fifth of a good passage can effectively be its summary.” Babatunde (2005:133).

The following guidelines are required to achieve success in summarizing

1. Select only relevant points
2. Present the points briefly and accurately
3. Write the points in short sentences and in your own words. Avoid copying verbatim (word-for- word) from the passage
4. There should be no numbering of points
5. Do away with examples, illustrations, descriptions, explanations and other supporting details used by the speaker or writer to support his points.

**Abbreviations**

Another useful device in note-taking in the lecture-room is the use of abbreviations, acronyms, short symbols and their like. It is essential that you know that the use of abbreviations is helpful in note taking. They facilitate fast note-taking and this helps to save time while taking notes at lectures. It is advisable for you to decide in time which words to abbreviate and how to abbreviate them and you should be consistent with the kind of symbols and abbreviations that you employ.

According to Longe and Ofuani (2008:166), “there are about three abbreviations…”

1. Discipline based abbreviations: the student specializing in certain fields of discipline will learn certain abbreviations as part of such a discipline. A student of Chemistry for example, will know that C stands for carbon and Ca for Calcium since such abbreviations are usually used in the discipline.
2. Commonly understood abbreviations: These are abbreviations that are commonly used such as; ‘i.e.’- ‘that is’, ‘viz’- ‘namely’, ‘e.g.’- ‘for example’ ‘u’- ‘you’, ‘ur’- ‘your’ etc.
3. Personalized abbreviation: This is made up by the student himself. If he frequently needs to note down a certain word, there is the need to find a way of abbreviating it. For instance, a student of History listening to a lecture on Nelson Mandela may use the initial ‘NM’ instead of writing the full name. It is necessary however, for you to write the meanings of personalized abbreviations somewhere for reference at the time of invention so that you do not forget their meanings. Frequent use over a long period of time eventually renders such process irrelevant anyway.

**Some common abbreviations and symbols**

p.a. per annum i.e. that is

NB note well cc. cubic centimeter

op. cit already cited e.g. for example

etc. et cetera et al and others

IV invitation ID identification

Ltd limited med medical/medicine

b4 before bcos because

thot thought fmr former

b be c see

r are d the

ppl people fm from

lang language lit literature

geog geography govt government

econs economics edu education

sc science psych psychology/ psychiatric

anat anatomy trad tradition

@ at % percentage

< less than > greater than

“ inches + positive

$ dollar = equal to

ᵒc degree - negative/minus

L1 first language L2 second language

p(p) page(s) yr year

movt movement temp temperature

Univ university dept department

lect lecture cont continue

km kilometer cm centimeter/choir master/mistress

Prof. Professor Dr. Doctor

No number intro introduction

2moro tomorrow 2geda together

4get forget 4eva forever

n.b. nota bene op.ct opera citato

There are several other abbreviations and symbols that can be used in note-taking apart from these ones.

**Preservation of notes**

Our discussion on note-taking/making would be incomplete without mentioning how the notes should be kept, especially because of their usefulness now and in the future in facilitating easy studying. Notebooks or their equivalent should be seen as an academic investment and they should be catered for and preserved. Below are some tips on how to keep your notes:

1. Keep your notes handy, neat, safe and properly maintained.
2. Avoid spilling water, oil, ink or any of such liquid on them. Do not also leave them carelessly where somebody else could spill them.
3. Do not cram up many notebooks in a small bag as this could weather them and get them torn. Bigger bags are better.
4. One note per course will be appropriate
5. Bound notebooks are handier and last longer but they have the disadvantage of not being easy to rearrange according to the similarity of topics.
6. Files or folders could also be used, and one file for one course is adequate
7. Keep all notes on the same topic together. This could be effectively achieved with the use of a file but not with a bound note book
8. A leaf from a file or folder could be removed in order to add more information on a particular topic and be inserted back to its formal position afterwards. Note that this cannot be achieved with a bound notebook.
9. Remember to fix back any leaf removed for the purpose of adding more information immediately in order not to lose it if forgotten.
10. Notebooks should be locked up in a safe place such as a book cabinet or locker when not being used to avoid losing them through theft. Losing a note book or file half way through an assignment, long/project essay or before an examination could cause a lot of imbalance, confusion and anxiety.

**Exercises on note-taking/making**

**Exercise 1**

1. Mention five other note-taking strategies apart from the ones mentioned in this chapter.
2. State five other problems apart from the ones mentioned in this chapter, which you and/or your classmates encounter while taking notes from lectures.
3. Invent ten personal abbreviations apart from the ones listed in this chapter that you can use while taking down notes. State also their meanings.
4. List five other ways aside from the ones mentioned in this chapter by which notebooks or files/folders can be preserved.
5. Does note-taking and note-making mean the same thing? In one sentence, explain your understanding of the two of them.

**Exercise 2**

1. Read through this chapter carefully and write an outline of the main points discussed.
2. Listen to 30-minute news after lectures period today on any electronic media and take useful notes as the news is presented. Submit next class.
3. Read the following passage carefully and in your own words, explain only the main points of the speech. Other details used by the speaker to develop his points should be left out.

The last Federal Military Government drew up a programme with the aim of handing over political power to the civilians in 1979. This programme as you all know was implemented to the letter. The 1979 constitution was promulgated. However, little did the military realize that the political leadership of the second republic will circumvent most of the checks and balances in the constitution and bring the present state of general insecurity. The premium on political power became so exceedingly high that political contestants regarded victory at elections as a matter of life and death struggle and were determined to capture or retain power by all means.

It is true that there is worldwide economic recession. However, in the case of Nigeria, its impact was aggravated by mismanagement. We believe the appropriate government agencies have good advice but the leadership disregarded their advice. The situation could have been avoided if the legislators were alive to their constitutional responsibilities. Instead, the legislators were preoccupied with determining their salary scales, fringe benefit and unnecessary foreign travels, et al, which took no account of the state of the economy and the welfare of the people they represented. As a result of our inability to cultivate financial discipline and prudent management of the economy, we have come to depend largely on internal and external borrowing to execute government projects with attendant domestic pressure and soaring external debts, thus aggravating the propensity of the outgoing civilian administration to mismanage our financial resources…

The last general election was anything but free and fair. The only political parties that could complain of election rigging are those parties that lacked the resources to rig. There is ample evidence that rigging and thuggery were relative to the resources available to the parties. This conclusively proved to us that the parties have not developed confidence in the presidential system of the government on which the nation invested so much material and human resources. While corruption and indiscipline have been associated with our state of under-development, these two evils in our body politic have attained unprecedented height in the past few years. The corrupt, inept and insensitive leadership in the last four years has been the source of immorality and impropriety in our society…

Arson has been used to cover up fraudulent acts in public institutions. I am referring to the fire incidents that gutted the P&T buildings in Lagos, the Anambra State Broadcasting Corporation, the Republic Building at Marina, the Federal Ministry of Education, the Federal Capital Development Authority Accounts at Abuja and the NET Building. Most of these fire incidents occurred at a time when Nigerians were being apprehensive of the frequency of fraud scandals and the government’s incapacity to deal with them. Corruption has become so pervasive and intractable that a whole ministry has been created to stem it.

Fellow Nigerians, this indeed is the moment of truth…We are determined that with the help of God we shall do our best to settle genuine payments, to which the Government is committed, including backlog of workers’ salaries after security. We are confident and we assure you that even in the face of the global recession, and the seemingly gloomy financial future, given prudent management of Nigeria existing financial resources and our determination to substantially reduce and eventually nail down rises in budgetary deficits and weak balance of payments position.

Fellow Nigerians, finally, we have dutifully intervened to save this nation from imminent collapse. We therefore expect all Nigerians, including those who participated directly or indirectly in bringing the nation to this present predicament, to cooperate with us. This generation of Nigerians, and indeed future generations, has no other country other than Nigeria. We shall remain here and salvage it together.

Excerpts from Maj. Gen. I. M. Buhari’s broadcast on Dec. 31, 1983

(*Culled from Christian Quarterly Info-Link of Jan-Mar., 2011*)

**Conclusion**

Listening to lectures and reading will not achieve the desired result without note-taking. Students who take notes concentrate better, create records for future use and enhance their memory. Taking notes involves the ability to adopt strategies to enhance easy, faster and convenient ways of doing so by making outlines, summarizing and using abbreviations and symbols. These are the requirements for becoming great and outstanding students in a world-class University.

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