THE WRITING CENTER
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY LAW CENTER

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR TAKING NOTES IN CLASS[1]

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Taking notes is a crucial skill for law students and critical to success on exams. In law school, your notes are your record of what was covered by your professor. They offer your professor's perspective, which is unavailable in any commercial outline, and they will be one of your primary sources for studying for exams. Effective note taking can help you discover not only what your professor finds significant and what is likely to be on the exam, but also the larger, primary themes and issues of the course. This outline provides tips and techniques that may be useful for taking notes in your classes at the Law Center.

Keep in mind that taking notes is a personal endeavor. What works for one person may not work for another. Furthermore, different note taking techniques may work for different classes and different professors. Try not to feel constrained by prior experience; what worked for you as an undergraduate may not work for you as a law student. Also, keep in mind that your note taking strategies may change throughout the semester and throughout the years as you adjust to your professors' styles, as your understanding of the subject matter increases, and as you learn more about what you will be tested on at the end of the semester. The following are a few ideas to get you started on your own process of exploring the note taking techniques that work for you.

1. Goals of In-Class Notetaking

a. Outlining: The primary goal of taking good class notes is to ultimately produce a good outline in order to be successful on the exam. In order to produce a thorough, complete, and comprehensible outline, you must first capture the key concepts and information of the course. This requires effective note taking. If your notes are poorly organized or do not have the right level of detail, this will negatively affect the quality of your outline. If you take notes with an eye toward the ultimate goal of understanding concepts and preserving them for later incorporation into your outline, your notes will be more useful later in the semester. Some students accomplish this by flagging key concepts for outlining while they are taking notes, while others write a brief outline of the topics covered at the end of each class. For guidance on outlining, refer to the Writing Center

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handout, "Outlining Tips and Techniques."

b. Preparing to Respond to Cold Calls: Many law students, particularly first year students, are anxious about being cold-called in class. Although the best way to prepare for getting cold called is to carefully read the assignment for each class and take notes, taking good class notes can also be of assistance in responding to the professor's questions.

c. Learning and Retaining Concepts: For some students, the process of taking notes aids in comprehension and retention of new concepts. Several studies on notetaking support the idea that notetaking can make it easier to learn and remember new concepts.[2]

2. Determine What to Take Notes on by Reading your Professor's Signals

Before and during note taking, consider your professor's goals and methods in teaching the course because she will be the ultimate judge of your mastery of the material. Successful notetaking for exams requires anticipating what information is important and what information need not be captured in your notes. The following are tips on helping you figure out where your professor is coming from so you can decide what types of information you want your notes to capture.

a. Read the Syllabus: The syllabus for the course is a key resource for helping you frame your notes because it usually includes the professor's stated goals as well as a general outline of the material to be covered. It can also be useful to look at the casebook's table of contents.

b. Listen for Indicators during Class: There are many indicators that a professor may provide during class that you should listen for. The following are some common indicators that may signal that certain material is especially important and should be taken note of.

- *Summaries.* Summaries are an important opportunity to find out what the professor considered to be the most important points on a given topic. It is also an opportunity to fill in any gaps in your notes or to elaborate on certain points. Sometimes professors begin class with a short review of the topics covered in the previous lecture. Taking down the summary and, after class, comparing that summary with your previous day's notes can be a useful exercise.

- *Emphasis and repetition.* Sometimes professors will directly state that you need to understand a particular concept, definition, statute, etc. Make sure this emphasis is duly recorded. Similarly, if a professor repeats a sentence or concept that is often a sign that it is particularly important.

[2] Francoise Boch and Annie Piolate, *Note Taking and Learning: A Summary of Research*, 16 THE WAC JOURNAL 101 (September 2005).

- *Hypotheticals.* Hypotheticals are potential exam questions and provide valuable insight into how your professor answers questions and applies the law. Pay particular attention when your professor mentions a hypothetical in class as it is common for the professors to discuss examples of the very legal tests that you will be asked to apply on your exam.

- *Recurring themes.* Listen for concepts that professors repeatedly bring up. For example, in a Constitutional Law class, federalism or separation of powers doctrine are key lenses through which to consider legal questions, and these recurring themes are often tested on the exam.

- *Favorite words and phrases*. These can be terms of art or phrases that the professor tends to emphasize in class. It is useful to write these down because they could be helpful when answering exam questions. This is one of the times notes should be taken verbatim, because using the language and terms of art the professor prefers can improve exam answers.

- *Numbered lists.* A numbered list may indicate the importance of a topic or provide a useful method for organizing your notes on a particular topic.

- *Colleagues' questions and the professor's responses.* Like hypotheticals, questions that your colleagues raise during class can become exam questions.

- *Future issues or developing areas*. Professors will often telegraph issues for exam questions by discussing the interaction between the law and current events, or potential future changes to the law. Often professors base their exam fact patterns on the new legal questions raised by a recent event or new technology.

c. Do the Reading: Any particular day's class will likely focus on the reading assigned for that class. As you prepare class, try to get a sense of how the larger subject matter is developed by the reading for the day. You will be in a much better position to focus on (and therefore take note of) the issues, the rules, and the larger themes of the course, if you're not hearing the facts of the case for the first time during lecture.

d. Look at Old Exams: Old exams can provide useful insight into your professor's view of the course. Looking at old exams can help you understand which material presented in lecture turns up on the exams, and the form it takes on exams: it can provide insights into what sort of material the professor tests, and the level of detail the professor tests. For example, looking at old exams can help you to determine whether the professor tends to focus more on the policy behind the law, the black letter law, or both. You will also want to pay attention to whether the professor asks short answer, long answer or multiple-choice questions. The type of questions used on old exams can indicate more or less detail will be required in your note taking.

Old exams can also be helpful in deciding what should be included in your outline for the course. Be careful, however, because old exams are a precious resource in studying for finals; late in the semester, you will likely benefit from taking questions from old exams under test-like circumstances. Therefore, while it may be helpful to look at past exam questions at the beginning of the semester to get a sense of how to organize and take notes most effectively, you should probably not scour every question and answer on past exams because that might limit your ability to use those exams as a study tool later in the semester.

3. Use Effective Note Taking Techniques

Once you have figured out the types of information your notes should capture, you need to figure out the most effective techniques for capturing them. The list provided below is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it is offered to give you a place to start thinking about effective ways to take notes.

a. Begin the Note Taking Process While You Complete the Reading Assignment: Prior to class, you should carefully read the assignment for that day, taking notes on the key information and concepts in the reading. Briefing the cases you read for class is an effective way to begin learning the law, but whether you fully brief each case or not, your reading notes should capture the key principles from the assigned cases. Reading carefully (including taking notes) prior to class is an essential part of taking effective class notes for several reasons. Understanding the broad overview of the topic the class will cover will help you conceptually organize your class notes as you are taking them and will help in identifying which information is important to take note of. Additionally, having case briefs or notes from the reading will reduce the notetaking load in class because much of the important information will have already been written down.

b. Tailor the Level of Detail to the Requirements of the Class: Finding the optimal level of detail to take notes at is a crucial note taking skill. In taking notes, you want to strive to capture the right amount of information. Missing key information is obviously problematic. At the end of the semester, when you are preparing to outline, you do not want to be left with significant gaps in your notes that require further research or re-reading of class material.

However, a commonly-overlooked problem is including too much detail in your notes. If you take notes verbatim, or worse, write down *everything* the professor said, you will be left with a too much information to wade through in preparing your outline. Worse still, the most important information will be hard to identify because it will be buried by irrelevant information. Trying to retain too much superfluous information can also reduce your mental “bandwidth” and make it harder to focus on the key concepts needed to ace the exam. Moreover, taking down everything verbatim can sometimes distract you during class or hamper your ability to keep up with and understand the discussion. Finding the right level of detail to take notes at requires practice. If you are unsure of whether to write something down, it may make sense to err on the side of over-inclusion early in the class.

This process is largely a matter of trial and error, and so you will have to continually reevaluate to see that you're capturing the important information as your understanding of the course material increases and as the professor reviews course material.

c. Write Notes in Your Own Voice: Rather than writing down words and sentences verbatim, try to re-write the concepts in your own words. This will help keep your notes concise, and more importantly will improve learning, by using the notetaking process to assist in comprehension and synthesis of the key concepts. Remember, you are the audience for these notes. Thus, they must contain a level of detail that allows you to understand the material without getting bogged down. For example, if you learn best by listening, you may take fewer notes and spend more time after the lecture recording the points covered during lecture. Alternatively, if you find it easier to retain information that you have read, it may make sense to take notes with greater detail and review them thoroughly after class.

d. Formatting: Organization is another often-overlooked aspect of effective notetaking. Just as legal briefs are more effective when the information is presented in a clear and organized format, your notes will be more effective if they are organized. Organizing notes not only helps later in finding information and outlining, but also, well organized notes can help you internalize how key legal concepts are structured and organized.

For example, a statute often has several layers of sections and subsections, and a legal concept may have several sub-concepts. Organizing your notes to reflect that structure will help order your own thinking on the topic, make it easier to understand how different concepts fit together, and understand which discussions relate to which concepts. The techniques below are suggested to enhance the efficacy of your notes. The goal is not to have "pretty" notes, but rather notes that are useful, comprehensible, and aid in understanding the concepts being taught. Again, you are your own audience, so pick those techniques that work best for you.

- *Margins & Columns.* You should use tabs, margins, or columns to separate information. For example, you can tab in or bullet certain information that fits under a larger conceptual framework. Alternatively, you can put case and statutory provisions in one column and class discussion notes in the other. Similarly, you could take notes in one column and record questions as they arise in your mind in a different column. Be creative, find the technique that works best for you.

- *Color or Highlighting.* You could use color or highlighting to set off rules of law, to differentiate between the facts, reasoning, and holding of a case, to emphasize in class hypotheticals, or to distinguish in class discussion or student questions from professor lecture.

- *Numbering & Bulleting.* The numbering and bulleting functions of your word processor can help keep information organized.

- *Charts and tables.* You could consider using charts in your notes to summarize key information in a very succinct way. Additionally, you can use the table function in Word to organize information such as the key holdings from several cases, or the differences between two statutes.

e. Don't End the Note Taking Process Once the Lecture Ends: Effective note taking is not a "once and done" proposition. It can be extremely valuable to review your notes while your memory of the class is still fresh in your mind in order to correct typos, fill in gaps, clarify things that came up during lecture, and formulate questions about your understanding of the material. It's best to do this as close in time to the lecture as possible, while the information is still fresh in your mind. Also, you could check your notes against questions posed in your textbook to determine if you have enough information to answer those questions. Another easy way to review your notes for accuracy and understanding is to compare them to your professor's summary of previously covered material.[3] Finally, exchanging notes with a classmate can provide a new perspective on the material and new ideas on note taking techniques, however you should avoid relying on the content of another's notes.[4]

f. Typing vs. Handwriting: In deciding whether to take your notes on paper or on the computer, there are several considerations. First, in order to enhance your educational experience, you should take notes in the medium in which you are most comfortable. Second, your typing or handwriting speed may influence the choice between typing and handwriting, particularly if the class is fast-paced. Third, the nature of the material may influence the choice between typing and handwriting. If the material contains important graphs or diagrams, it might make sense to handwrite at least part of your notes for that class; be careful, though, because two sets of notes can create organizational challenges at the end of the semester. If you primarily take notes using one method, but occasionally use another method, you should regularly incorporate those miscellaneous notes into your main notes.[5]

Finally, consider how the use of a laptop affects your ability to focus in class. Typing notes on a laptop has the additional advantage of allowing you to access online materials and look up cases or concepts during class, however laptops also come with distractions in the form of email, chatting, web browsing, etc. Handwriting your notes is one way to mitigate these distractions at the price of reducing your access to electronic course materials or other online information. Short of switching to handwriting, some students

[3] This is an area in which past exams can be helpful. As you develop your note taking technique, it may be helpful to compare your notes to past exams to determine whether your notes sufficiently captured the material to enable you to answer the exam questions. If your reading notes, case briefs, and class notes together do not contain enough information to provide a thorough exam answer once the professor has fully covered a topic that is a good indicator that your notes are insufficient.

[4] Using another's notes in lieu of your own, or taking turns taking notes with a study group is inadvisable. Other students may not be as effective note takers, and taking notes in a way that matches your thinking and learning style will greatly increase their usefulness when outlining and preparing for exams.

[5] It is generally a good practice to regularly review and consolidate your notes, rather than waiting until you begin outlining later in the semester.

find it helpful to disable the internet while taking notes on your laptop, and turn off email, or set your chat status to invisible.

g. Software for Taking Notes: There are numerous software options available for taking notes on a laptop. A blank Word document is the most basic and is effectively used by many students. You can use tabs, tables, numbering, or bullet point features to organize. The "Notebook Layout" setting in Word provides a nice way to divide up your notes by lecture while keeping all your notes for a class in a single file. You should divide your notes by lecture or by topic covered to help keep things ordered and should date and title notes so it is easier for find material later. It is all too common for students to know that a certain concept is "in my notes," but be unable to find it easily because the notes are poorly organized.

Another software option is Google Documents, which provides a basic, but perfectly adequate, online word processor for free. An advantage of using Google Documents is that the files are available over the web from any computer with internet access. Also, Google handles backing up your files for you, which can be helpful in case of a computer crash. Other software options used by students include OneNote and Evernote. If Powerpoint slides, or other electronic slides, are made available by your professor, it may also be helpful to take notes directly on those slides, or use them to organize your own notes. The test of any software platform is whether it works with your own note taking style and facilitates in organizing and maintaining your notes. Often a small expenditure of time on experimentation with different platforms and organizational frameworks can save enormous time later by ensuring well-formatted and clear notes from which to create your outline. Therefore, experimentation with different notetaking methods is helpful in finding the optimal long-term notetaking strategy.