

Class Notes--Why Bother?

Why do we have to take notes on our class literature discussions?

1. Taking notes gives you an easy way to study for tests. The chances are good that a number of the issues raised in class will be relevant either to the objective test or to the essay on that literature—maybe even both. Although a few students might be able to remember all the details, most people need to refresh their memories. *Spark Notes* and similar aids have their uses but cannot replace all the ideas discussed in class, and few people are likely to reread the literature entirely. In addition to preparing for immediate tests, students often find literature notes handy in preparing for a cumulative essay or for a literature final examination (if there is one), which covers all the material for the semester. Even if you could remember the literary details for a while, you aren't likely to remember them for months without a little assistance.
2. Taking notes makes you more likely to remember material in the first place. Studies show that information or ideas heard and written down are more likely to be retained than material that is just heard.
3. Taking notes helps keep you focused. Come on, you know your mind wanders a little from time to time! Having to take notes helps keep you on task and therefore likely to learn more.
4. Taking notes is a survival skill at the college level. Material is covered in so much larger quantities over such a shorter period of time that even people with excellent memories are hard-pressed to remember it all. Since being able to take notes, listen and participate simultaneously is an acquired skill, you need all the practice you can get before college, where you will have to be able to do this kind of juggling.

(Skeptical about the value of notes? The chart below shows the results of a small study I did a few years ago. The results indicate what common sense would have told us anyway: taking notes produces better test scores than not taking notes, and the better the notes are, the higher the test scores are likely to be.)



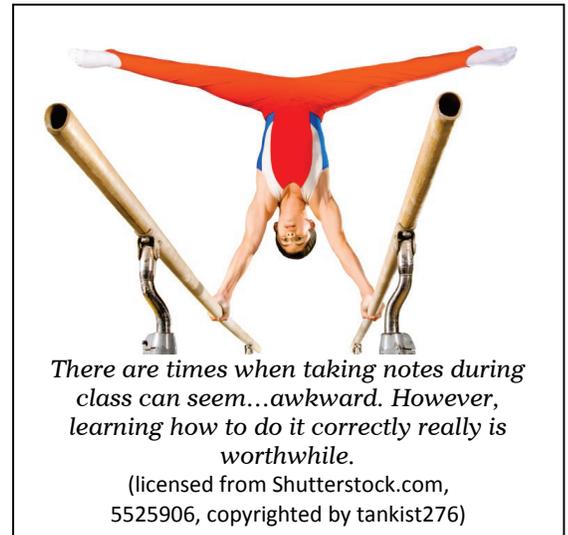
(licensed from Shutterstock.com, 51268708, copyrighted by Konstantin Chagin)

Type of Student	Class #1 Average Literature Objective Test Scores	Class #2 Average Literature Objective Test Scores
All students	79.3	78.1
Students taking no notes	71.0	57.9
Students taking at least some notes	83.7	82.2
Students taking the best notes	90.0	83.1
Percentage difference between no notes and the best notes	19.0	25.2

This pattern is not unique to my own informal research. Indeed, four separate, formal studies on note-taking found that it improved student achievement by anywhere from 13 to 44 percentage points (Marzano et al 44). Studies also show that, while trying to write down everything that is said is counterproductive, “there was a strong relationship between the amount of information taken in notes and students’ achievement on examinations.” (Marzano et al 45)

What do we have to do?

1. Notes can be abbreviated, sloppy, etc.--whatever format works for you. However, they must be recognizable as notes. Some students find that an informal outline style, with some obvious separation between major points and perhaps between major points and sub points or examples works well for them; others are content with a much more “right brain” kind of arrangement. Some students use graphic elements like arrows to show relationships, while others use color coding or highlighting (sometimes after the fact). If you are not used to note-taking, you may need to experiment to find the format that works best for you.
2. You must take notes whenever we discuss literature or related subject matter and whenever we discuss writing techniques. Note-taking during discussions of grammar and vocabulary is optional, though highly encouraged if you are having trouble in either or both of those areas.
3. Notes should represent a reasonably detailed response to what went on in class during the time in which they were taken. I am fairly liberal about detail in notes early in the semester, but if I make comments about lack of detail on your early notes, I will expect to see improvement. I am much more demanding about detail as the semester progresses. It is even possible that some days of note-taking will be designated as letter-graded assignments.
4. You need to keep whatever notes have not yet been collected and checked with you at all times. Even if I don't collect every day, I will collect frequently, and I will expect you to have all the notes accumulated since the last collection.
5. Sometimes students ask about revising notes after the fact: reorganizing, sometimes even typing them up. This is largely a matter of individual preference. Literature discussions in particular often meander a bit, and some students prefer a more linear presentation of the material. There may be some classes in which creating separate notes for a particular strand of content (rhetorical terms in AP Language and Composition, for example) might be a good idea. However, if you revise notes later, always keep the originals. If you are in an “open notes” testing situation, you can normally use only those notes which you talk in class, so to use revised copies, you need to be able to present the original notes for comparison purposes to verify that they are indeed based on notes you took in class.
6. As indicated in other handouts, you may take notes digitally. If you do so, make sure you have some way to turn them in from the device that you are using. Also, since note-taking is such a common activity, using a digital device for note-taking can place constant temptation in your path—resist it! If I catch you off-task too often, I will require you to take physical notes instead.



Works Cited

Marzano, Robert J., Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock, *Classroom Instruction That Works*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.