



Learning Connection

Making the most of lectures

- What are lectures?
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What are lectures?

Lectures are a traditional part of learning at university. They are generally fairly formal presentations by the lecturer to relatively large numbers of students. They may include the use of other resources such as handouts, overhead projection slides, powerpoint presentations. The audience is generally expected to be attentive and there are usually very limited opportunities for interaction. Understanding the form and purpose of lectures lets you consider how you can use lectures for your own learning.

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What you can get out of lectures

Lectures can help you gain:

- an overall framework for your program and an indication of the areas you should study in more depth for assessment purposes
- essential knowledge in those areas and direction for where you can find further information for assignments
- a review of research findings and inspiration for further discussion and reading
- a chance to hear particular points of view on the major areas of concern to the program
- explanations of difficult concepts and areas of controversy
- a chance to ask the lecturer questions about the program material.

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Why take notes?

Taking notes can help you maintain your concentration throughout the lecture and can reinforce your understanding and retention of the material being presented. Your notes can provide you with a useful resource for revision of the course. It will help if you are clear about your own purposes for taking notes and how you intend to use them afterwards.

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Before the lecture

Actively preparing for the lecture helps you to incorporate new information into your existing knowledge framework more effectively. The more prepared you are, the easier it will be for you to predict what is coming next in the lecture. It will also be easier for you to select the main points and to take more relevant and effective notes.

You can prepare yourself for the lecture by:

- checking the program outline to find out the topic of the lecture
- doing the pre-reading as suggested by your lecturer, even if you only manage to read the summary of a

relevant text-book chapter or the glossary of terms for the chapter

- scanning your notes from the previous lecture
- arriving early to collect and skim through any handout
- reading through the outline or plan of the lecture if it is given out.
- sitting where you can see and hear clearly, feel more involved in what is going on, and avoid distractions.

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During the lecture

Try and work out the structure of the lecture

The lecturer's format or plan may be written on the board, on a handout or on an overhead transparency. Most lectures will have an introduction, a development of the topic and a conclusion. Listen particularly for verbal 'sign-posts' with which the lecturer reveals how the main points are organised. For example, if the lecturer says 'I will now outline *three* major stages in the development of the new legislation', this is your cue to write down numbers 1, 2 and 3 and to try and note down all three stages next to them.

Use active listening techniques

Analyse the information you are receiving by looking for deeper meanings and by considering the relationships between the concepts being presented. Ask yourself *critical* questions such as:

- How does this information link to my previous knowledge or experience? Does it support or contradict it?
- Is the lecturer stating facts or giving opinions?
- What examples is the lecturer using to illustrate points? Are these good examples?
- What are the lecturer's main arguments? Do they seem to be valid arguments?
- What evidence is the lecturer giving to support these arguments or viewpoints?
- Is any evidence to the contrary being presented? Is the lecturer refuting opposing viewpoints?
- What are the lecturer's sources and references? Do these seem to be reliable?
- Can I think of additional points for or against what is being said?
- What do I really think about the views being expressed? Do I agree or disagree? Why?
- What questions do I have that remain unanswered?

If the lecturer expects or asks the audience to for questions, *do* take the opportunity to ask about anything of concern or interest to you. This is one of the most useful ways of maintaining your concentration; it encourages the lecturer and may lead to useful discussion and lively debate among the students.

Take useful notes

You will probably develop your own note-taking technique to suit your purposes but the following strategies are useful:

- head your page with the course, topic, lecturer and date
- try to put different sections of the lecture under headings, subheadings, letters or numbers following the lecturer's format or structure
- write by phrases rather than whole sentences and use as many abbreviations as you can
- allow a wide margin, and space between sections for marking significant items, connecting points and writing in comments later
- write on one side of the paper only and use the other side for later additions to your notes, such as summaries, text references, questions; information from textbooks, tutorials and practicals.

Don't take too many notes—be *selective* by identifying the main points and the supporting details. To do this you will need to mentally separate out any examples or digressions from the main points. Put most notes in your own words, except for formulas and definitions and if you miss a point, write down the key words, leave a few lines and get the information from another student after the lecture

Many students, particularly in the sciences, find it very useful to represent ideas and concepts using boxes, grids and flow-charts which show the relationship of the main concept to sub-sets or examples. Try to develop your own system of tables, diagrams or visuals to suit your purposes.

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After the lecture

- Fill in any gaps and complete details of diagrams or graphs, using your textbook if appropriate.
- Note down points of poor understanding and ask your lecturer or tutor for clarification as soon as possible after the lecture.
- Try to create a visual summary which will allow you to link ideas together
- Check reference details and highlight points to link your notes to your research.

It is important to *revise* your notes as soon as possible after the lecture, adding your own comments or questions. You might want to expand on areas that you will need to recall later. Where material needs to be learned and consolidated for tests or exams, you may even want to *rewrite* your notes into some other format. As most courses are taught as 'topics', you will probably want to *link* your notes to information from tutorials or practicals. You could then draw up a one or two page summary of the whole topic. It's also a good idea to develop a reliable filing system for your notes so that they can be retrieved whenever you need them.

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Sources

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