

Making the most of lectures

This study guide shows you how to make the most of lectures through the use of active listening skills and effective note taking techniques. These skills will help you produce clear, helpful notes that will be of use to you in all your study activities.

The purpose of lectures

Lectures are commonly used:

- to offer an overview of a subject - you will need to fill in the detail;
- to deliver detailed information on a subject - you will need to fill in the background.

Lectures provide you with a valuable resource. They can synthesise the views of several researchers and text books or provide new and unpublished information.

This guide shows you how to make the most of your lectures by following four main steps:

1. preparing for lectures;
2. listening in lectures;
3. taking notes;
4. following up lectures.

1. Preparing for lectures

Know your course

Find out how your lectures relate to the course as a whole.

- Do the seminars or tutorials prepare you for the lecture or do they follow up the content of the lectures?
- Are there opportunities to discuss the lecture content in your seminars?

Look in your module handbook for more information or ask your tutor.

Reading before the lecture

Find out if there is any recommended reading you can do in preparation for the lecture. Preparatory reading will make it easier for you to engage with the lecture content and provide you with a framework for making opinions and comparisons. When the lectures are linked in a series, you should also review your notes from the previous lecture.

2. Listening in lectures

Listening to the lecture should take priority over note taking. If you listen effectively you will have a better understanding of the lecture content which will enable you to write clear, helpful notes that will make sense to you after the lecture.

Listen for structure

As you listen to a lecture, try to focus on the structure of the lecture content. Sometimes the structure is laid out for you at the beginning of a lecture, either as a list of headings or as a potted summary of the content. Make a note of this structure straight away, it will give you a sense of direction, enabling you to anticipate points or take up the thread of information again should you get lost.

During a lecture, a speaker may structure their material by using verbal signposts such as:

"I shall now discuss..."; "My next point is....."; "Finally...".

These signposts identify a new point and you can show this in your notes accordingly. Other sign posts include:

- *pausing* to indicate a new point or heading;
- *summarising* what has been said prior to moving on.

There are other, less obvious linguistic signposts which can help you structure your notes; you will need to listen for these. Examples include:

"On the other hand..."; "Others have argued..."; "Turning now to...".

Certain words and phrases will indicate that an illustration is being given:

"an example of this is..."; "this can be seen when..."; "evidence for this can be found in...".

Your ability to listen will improve with experience. You will be better able to spot digressions or additional examples and highlight these in your notes.

3. Taking notes

Avoid taking too many detailed notes. A dense transcript will be difficult to work with at a later stage. The following techniques will help you make structured, useful notes.

Using structure in your notes

- Use headings to order information.
- Give each point a new line or number it.
- Highlight examples and illustrations.
- Separate digressions from the main points.

Using your own words

Putting each point in your own words will help you understand and recall the lecture content.

Remember to:

- copy down important quotations or examples word for word;
- separate quotations and examples from your own words;
- record points you don't understand in the lecturer's words adding a question mark as a reminder to follow the point up later.

Using fewer words

- Reduce the number of words you use in taking notes: detailed notes are of little use in remembering facts and ideas.
- Use keywords to represent points or ideas briefly.
- Add brief details of any examples or evidence that support a point.

Using abbreviations

- Use standard abbreviations and subject specific abbreviations.
- Make up your own abbreviations for common words, but be sure to be consistent.
- Don't use so many abbreviations that your notes become a shorthand transcript; continue to use your own words.

Using space

- Show structure in your notes e.g. putting each point on a new line.
- Leave gaps for additions or corrections at a later date.
- Make notes easier to read and review by using space to separate the points.

Using colour and image

- Categorise points under colour coded headings.
- Highlight in colour any points you want to remember.
- Use images or diagrams as a quick way of describing a concept or idea.

You may want to consider using a diagrammatic style of note taking for lectures. Refer to the guide: *Thought mapping* for details.

Using handouts

Lecturers use handouts to help you follow the lecture and to highlight important information. You can maximise the benefits of handouts by adding your own comments.

- Highlight keywords.
- Add colour to categorise information.
- Add notes in the margin.

Organising your notes

- A4 paper stored in a ring binder with dividers is the most practical system for organising notes.
- Begin each lecture with a clear heading of the lecture title, date and name of the lecturer.
- Number the pages clearly so they can be easily kept in order later on.

4. Following up lectures

Don't be afraid to ask a lecturer for clarification either in the lecture or afterwards. Use seminars and tutorials to clarify or discuss material from the lectures. Review your notes as soon as possible after a lecture. Make the most of your review by:

- highlighting points which seem particularly important or central;
- adding any details which you can remember from the lecture;
- showing links between points;
- correcting any mistakes;
- adding questions to highlight areas you don't understand or need further information on.

Overcoming problems

Failing concentration

You are much less likely to find your concentration straying when you use an active approach to note taking. Putting points into your own words, using space, colour and image, will make note taking a busy but interesting activity. If you do miss some points because your attention strays then just leave a space in your notes and check it out with the lecturer or another student later.

Being left behind

You may find that the information is being delivered too fast for you to write down. If points pass you by, then leave a space and compare your notes with another student's. Doing some background reading for the lecture will help you to keep up as the information will not be entirely unfamiliar to you.

Sometimes you can get lost because you don't understand the material that is being delivered. This may be the case for the occasional point or even for a large section of the lecture. Rather than giving up on the lecture, write a series of questions that you can try to follow up later.

Summary

- **Be prepared** - get to know the course structure and do pre-lecture reading.
- **Be organised** - have a system for storing notes and take a selection of pens and pencils to the lecture.
- **Listen for structure** - watch out for signposts that help you follow the lecture.
- **Be brief** - try using key words and phrases as much as possible so the emphasis is on listening and understanding.
- **Make note taking an active process** - summarise in your own words, make good use of space, colour, symbols and images.
- **Leave gaps** - if you miss a point, don't get further behind by panicking about it, just leave a space and check it out with another student.
- **Actively review** your notes after the lecture, making additions and corrections as you read.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

studyhelp@le.ac.uk | www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies