

Effective Note-Taking

Note-taking allows you to develop a deeper understanding of the topic by capturing the key points in your own words. This article provides tips on making and organising clear and concise notes, with an overview of one of the most popular methods of note-taking: the Cornell System.

Why take notes?

The main aim of note-taking is to record and remember. Good note-taking involves analysing and organising the information to build a better understanding of the subject, and therefore aiding recall. Most people will take notes to:

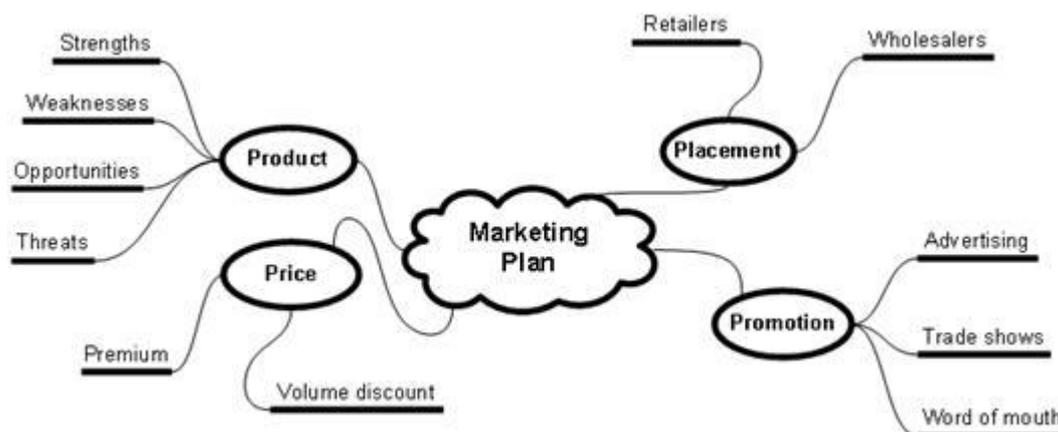
- remind themselves of the key points of a book/article/presentation/speech/lecture or meeting
- record information and/or sources of information for future reference
- build a better understanding of the subject
- summarise and memorise information
- revise for tests or exams

It is important to take the time to think about your purpose before making notes – what do you want to get out of your notes? What are you going to use them for (for example, as the basis of a presentation or report)? A clear purpose will help focus your mind, reducing the amount of material you need to collect and review. Your notes should only contain the main themes, with key points written in your own words and detailed references for follow-up.

Note-taking techniques

There are many different methods of note-taking. Whatever you choose will depend on your personal preference and what works for you. Make sure that you use a method that comes naturally to you and that provides you with comprehensive, legible notes that are easy for you to understand when you refer back to them. You may try several methods before deciding on what is right for you. The most popular methods of note-taking are:

- **Linear notes:** Lists or short sentences with headings, subheadings and underlined or highlighted key points, laid out in a structured, logical way.
- **Diagrams:** Useful for people who like to see the way different ideas link with each other, Mind Maps or spider diagrams are diagrams with the main theme in the centre, with key ideas linked as branches around the theme. The lines show the links between ideas. An example of a Mind Map is shown here:



Whichever form of note-taking you use, your notes should not be a verbatim transcript of a speech or a word-for-word copy of text. If you have copied directly from the text, make sure that you use quote marks to show exactly what you have copied (with a note of the information source used) to avoid accusations of plagiarism.

You can make your notes even more effective by ensuring your handwriting is legible and numbering your pages. It is a good idea to leave plenty of space around the notes so you can add in your own ideas and questions later. Using highlighter pens, underlining, using capital letters or asterisks will help to make the key ideas stand out from the rest of the notes.

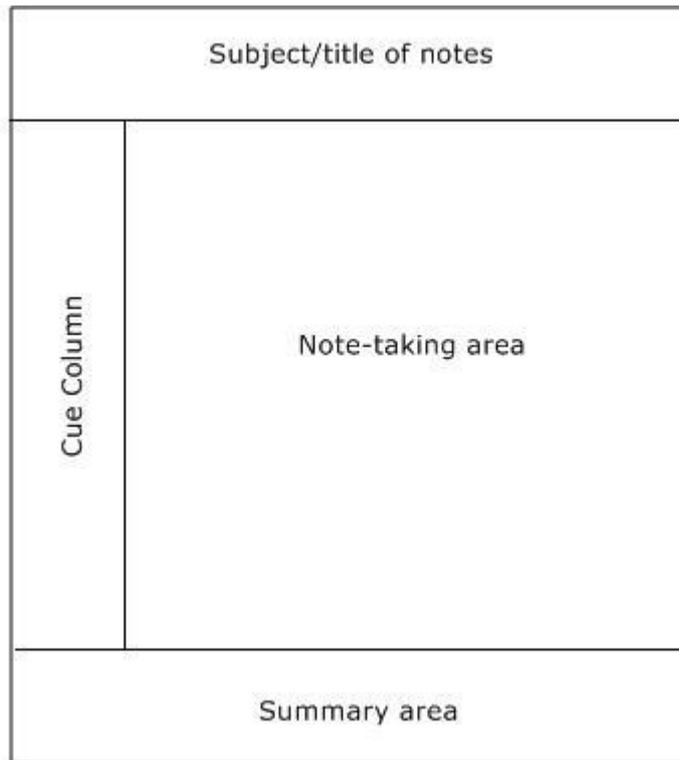
Organising notes

After you've made your notes, it is important to organise and store them in such a way that will allow you to find them easily when you need to return to them. Developing an effective filing technique will not only help you find the information easily, it will also save you valuable time. There are many different methods of storing and organising notes, as with note-taking whatever you decide on purely depends on your personal preference and what works for you. However, some suggestions for organisation and storage include:

- colour coding (use different coloured folders, files or labels for different subjects)
- dividers or tabs in large folders to separate topics or themes
- boxed card index
- separate notebooks for different topics
- computer systems (e.g. databases or file folders)

The Cornell System

A simple yet effective method of note-taking is the Cornell System. Designed by Dr Walter Pauk, of Cornell University, the system is based on using a loose-leaf notebook which lets you add or remove any extra information you require to supplement your notes. [1] The main feature of the Cornell system is the page layout, which involves drawing large margins (approximately 2.5 inches) to the left and at the bottom of the page, so that your page looks like this:



The largest space is the note-taking area, where you record your notes during the lecture/speech/presentation or during your reading. There are no rules about the format of this section – pick the method of note-taking that works for you, but try to avoid writing verbatim or copying directly from the text. The aim is to capture the key points rather than all the detail. Use abbreviations or shorthand if you can and make sure your handwriting is legible.

The summary area should be kept for a concise review of the notes on your page – a few sentences summing up the most important material on the page, showing how the information fits together.

The space to the left of the vertical margin is the cue (or recall) column. This area should be left blank while you are taking notes in the main part of the page. The cue column is not created until you come to review your notes. When reviewing your notes, write down key words and phrases in the left hand column which will act as cues for the information in your note-taking area. Writing these words and phrases helps you to organise and structure your notes, not only in your notebook but also in your head. It makes you think about the material in a way that clarifies meaning for you, in your own words, which will ultimately help strengthen your recall.

Top Tips for Effective Note-Taking

- Consider your purpose: what do you want to use the notes for?
- Keep notes as brief as possible – stick to the key themes/ideas of the subject in question.
- Avoid direct copying: if you do copy something word-for-word, make sure you note it in quote marks with a precise reference of the information source used.

- Leave plenty of space around your notes to add your own ideas and questions later.
 - Use abbreviations, symbols, shorthand or your own version of shorthand to save space and time.
 - Use headings to organise your notes, giving them a logical structure and emphasising the main points.
 - Highlight the most important ideas by using coloured pens, underlining, capital letters or asterisks.
 - Keep your notes well organised so you can find the information you need quickly and easily.
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[1] W Pauk and R Owens, *How to Study in College* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007).