



## Note Taking Skills

Effective note-taking is an important transferable skill, a skill that can be applied in all aspects of life, socially, at work and during study.

Note-taking is a powerful aid to communication, a way of summarising and retaining the key points from what you've heard and understood.

There are different approaches to note taking, depending on the type of communication you're engaged in. This article covers effective note-taking for verbal exchanges – that is, summarising what has been said, in face-to-face conversations, over the phone and in group situations – like in meetings or when attending a lecture.

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The Paper Industry Technical Association (PITA) is an independent organisation which operates for the general benefit of its members – both individual and corporate – dedicated to promoting and improving the technical and scientific knowledge of those working in the UK pulp and paper industry. Formed in 1960, it serves the Industry, both manufacturers and suppliers, by providing a forum for members to meet and network; it organises visits, conferences and training seminars that cover all aspects of papermaking science. It also publishes the prestigious journal *Paper Technology International* and the *PITA Annual Review*, both sent free to members, and a range of other technical publications which include conference proceedings and the acclaimed *Essential Guide to Aqueous Coating*.



## **What is Note-Taking?**

Note-taking is, simply, a way of concisely recording important information so that you can recall it later.

Regardless of how good you think your memory is – you will need to take notes in certain situations to remind yourself what was said. It is a mistake to think, when going to a meeting or attending a lecture or some other important talk, that you will remember the details of what has been said – you won't. You may well remember the overall topic of the discussion, even some very specific details, but you won't remember everything.

It is important to recognise that taking notes should not distract you from listening intently to what the speaker is saying. Effective note-taking involves listening whilst jotting down key points that will be important later: in a business meeting this may include action points that you have agreed to attend to; in a lecture this may include new vocabulary or theories that you can investigate further later.

Before you can take effective notes you need to be somewhat organised. It may seem obvious but you need to remember to take some appropriate note-taking equipment with you to meetings, lectures etc. The nature of the 'appropriate' note-taking equipment will depend partly on you and partly on the circumstances. The simplest low-tech way of taking notes is to use a pen (or series of different coloured pens) and a pad of paper. Bring plenty of paper and at least one spare pen or pencil.

Some people prefer to take notes on a laptop, tablet, smartphone or some other device – this is fine as long as you are very comfortable with the technology – so that they can concentrate fully on their notes – not on the actual process of writing them. If you are using some form of computer to take notes it is usually a good idea to turn off any messaging services first – otherwise you are likely to be distracted by new emails, text messages or the like.

When you arrive at the meeting or lecture try to sit so that you can clearly see and hear the main speaker.

## **General Note-Taking Guidelines:**

1. **Before you start taking any notes be clear about why you are attending the talk or meeting.** What are you hoping to learn or gain from it? Think of your notes as a guide to your learning and development after the event. Your notes form part of a working document that you'll return to and add to later.
2. **Think about whether or not a point is noteworthy before you write it down – do not take notes for the sake of taking notes.** Otherwise you'll end up with lots of irrelevant points, which will distract you from the important things. You probably only really need to make notes on things that are new to you.
3. **Do not write down everything that is said, word-for-word, that would be transcribing, which is an altogether different skill.** Concentrate on the key points, remain alert and attentive and listen to what is being said.
4. **Write in your own style and use your own words,** you don't need to worry too much about spelling, grammar, punctuation or neatness as long as you can read your notes later and they make sense to you. Your personal note-writing system will evolve and improve with practice.
5. **Try to use short concise points,** single words or phrases or short sentences, use bullet or numbered lists if necessary. If you are using a pen and paper then it is easy to add linking lines to join ideas and concepts.
6. Write down in full, key information that can't be shortened: names, contact details, dates, URL's, references, book titles, formulas etc.
7. Use abbreviations to help you – just note what they mean!
8. **Use underlining, indentation, circle words or phrases, use highlighter pens** – whatever system works for you to emphasise the most important points and add some structure to your notes.
9. **Use some sort of shorthand system that you will understand later** – develop this system as you become more skilled at note-taking.
10. **Don't panic if you miss something.** You can usually ask the speaker to repeat a point or ask a colleague or peer after the event. Note down that you have missed something to remind you to do this.



Once the event has finished:

1. **As soon as possible, after the event, you should review and, where necessary, rework your notes.** Fill in any gaps, adding content and further research to your notes. If your notes are handwritten you may want to type them into a computer. The more you interact with your notes the more you will remember and ultimately learn.
2. **If possible share and/or compare your notes with a colleague or peer.** Discuss your understandings and fill in any gaps together.

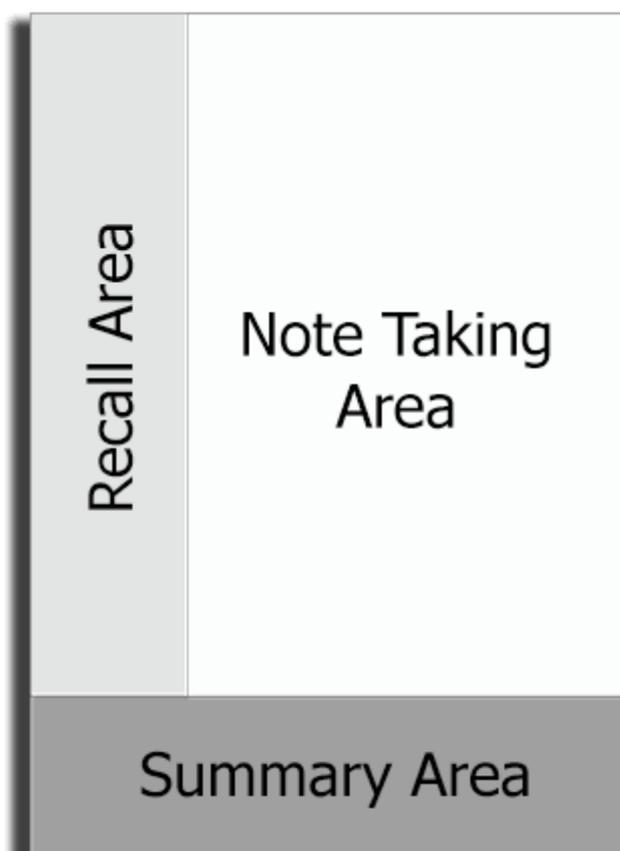
### **The Cornell Method**

The Cornell Method of note-taking is highly effective, see if it works for you.

1. Divide your sheet of paper, as the diagram, so you have a wide left margin (the recall area) and a deep (summary area) at the bottom. Leaving the rest of the sheet for the notes you take while attending the class or meeting.
2. Write notes in the 'note taking area'. After the event fill in any gaps in your notes, try to leave some white space between points. For each major point or idea covered in your notes write a 'cue word' or 'keyword' in the recall area of your sheet.

For example: If your notes were about 'note taking methods' and you had a section describing the Cornell Method then you would probably write 'Cornell' or 'Cornell Method' in your recall area aligned with the specific notes.

3. Use the summary area to write a brief summary of what your sheet contains – it may be useful to colour code this area. The summary will help you to find relevant notes later when you need to review them – this is especially useful for students when revising for exams or writing an assignment.



The Cornell Method of note-taking can be used as a powerful aid to recalling information.

Test your memory and knowledge by putting another sheet of paper over the 'note taking area' so just the 'recall area' is visible. Use the phrases in your recall area as your cue and recite as much information about each point as you can remember – check what you have remembered with your main notes. You will quickly find where the gaps in your knowledge are.