

Making the Most of Lectures

This 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.

Related guides: '[Effective Note Making](#)', '[Thought Mapping](#)' and '[Contributing to Seminars and Tutorials](#)'.

The purpose of lectures

Lectures are commonly used:

- to offer an overview of a subject - you will still need to fill in the detail with your own research
- to deliver detailed information on a subject - you will need to fill in the background
- to model a process, such as how to analyse a text or solve a problem

Lectures provide you with a valuable resource. They can bring together and synthesise the views of several researchers and text books, identify central issues in the subject, show how processes work, and provide new and unpublished information.

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

- preparing for lectures
- listening in lectures
- taking notes
- following up lectures

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 what 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.

Listening in lectures

Balancing listening to the lecture with note-taking is important. Having a sense in advance of what you want to learn from the lecture can make your listening more effective. As you listen, try to focus on the structure of the content. Sometimes this is laid out at the beginning, either as a list of headings or as a brief summary of the content. Try to 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 identify a new point and you can show this in your notes accordingly. Other signposts include:

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

Some signposts are less obvious, but can still help you structure your notes. For example, listen for phrases such as:

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

Certain words and phrases 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.

Taking notes

There are a number of ways of doing this: you may like to use pen and paper or to take notes on a lap-top or tablet. Whatever your preference, try to avoid taking too many detailed notes. A dense transcript may be difficult to work with later, particularly if you want to add further details, examples and ideas from your own study. The following techniques may 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

- Try to reduce the number of words you use when taking notes – focus on the key facts and ideas that are most useful to you.
- Use keywords to represent points or ideas briefly.
- Use any abbreviations that you think will be helpful to you.
- Add brief details of any examples or evidence that support a point.

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

Handouts will often be made available on Blackboard after lectures, and can help you fill in any gaps and review key points and ideas. In some cases, your lecturer may provide handouts in advance. These can help you follow the lecture and highlight important information. You can also add your own comments and questions which you can follow-up afterwards, for example in your own study. It can therefore be useful to:

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

Organising your notes

- Make sure you have a system for storing and filing your notes that will make them accessible when you need them, for example when revising for exams.
- 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.

Following up lectures

Don't be afraid to ask a lecturer for clarification either in the lecture or afterwards, especially if the lecturer invites questions. 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 additional 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 where you need further information

Overcoming problems

Failing concentration

It can be hard to concentrate throughout a lecture and you may find your attention drifting at times. Using an active approach to note-taking can help you maintain your concentration. For example, you can try putting points into your own words, using space, colour and image.

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 try following this up later with your lecturer or another student. Doing some background, pre-lecture reading will help you keep up as the information will not be entirely new or unfamiliar.

Sometimes you can get lost because you don't understand the material. 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, whether you prefer using pen and paper, or lap-top or tablet.
- **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.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Services**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.

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