

Large Class FAQ: Notetaking

1. How can I help students take better notes?

One common question for discussion is whether or not to give students your notes. There is much agreement that the act of taking notes in class contributes to the learning process and should not be discouraged. However, there is also a disadvantage to writing frantically and not listening, so some compromise seems advisable.

- Explain to your students the differences between observing and note-taking, between concept and recall, between thinking and fact.
- Shelley M. Stoffels (Civil and Environmental Engineering) submitted the following idea: "This is a tip I picked up from a discussion at Colloquy V. I utilized in the spring, and although both the students and I had some initial reservations, it worked well. Quite simply, each student signs up to take notes for one class during the semester. With a large class, this provides multiple sets of notes for each day. I considered this a homework assignment. The students then place the notes (I required copies in multiple notebooks) on reserve. The objectives are to allow students to stop taking notes and just pay attention on the topics they are having the most trouble with, etc. Many students also just like to see how someone else organized and interpreted the material. I casually observed no noticeable decrease in attendance, an apparent increase in student participation, and perhaps improved overall achievement of course goals as reflected in exam performance. A significant number of students took the time to write positive comments about it on the comment forms accompanying the SRTEs. So I'm doing it again this semester in another, larger, class. We'll see how it goes. Thanks to the unremembered initiator of this idea! I think this is significantly different than either Nittany Notes or posted instructor notes."
- Some hand out partial notes, outlines, or graphs with space for notes below so that students have some but not all the information they need.
- One faculty member occasionally puts her notes on the class Web page the day after the lecture simply as a model. However, she cautions that when students skip class and try to study for the test using notes downloaded from the Web, their scores tend to be much lower than those of students who came to class and took their own notes.
- Many teachers put outlines of their notes on the Web page. This encourages students to come to class, but it makes them more selective in their notetaking since they know what key concepts are.
- Some publishers will copy a packet of instructor notes and shrink wrap these notes to the textbook at no extra charge to students. The disadvantage is that students must buy new textbooks in order to get the free notes.
- Bob Mitchell (Biology) has his lectures audio-taped and found it useful to listen to one of the tapes: "What really stunned me was that I wasn't as well organized as I had thought. I actually listened to my own lecture and tried to take notes from it, and I found myself jumping around a lot. I would recommend that exercise to all of you--tape your

lectures and listen to them later." (You can have your lectures taped through the Dial Access system.)

- Before class starts, display an overhead with key words or an outline for the upcoming lecture.
- Assign a student scribe for in-class problem solving exercises.
- Glenn Johnson (Education Technology Services) writes: "In response to having seen textbooks that have been literally painted pink from highlighter, I teach students to take notes with highlighters using different colors for different purposes. Identify what those purposes are depending on the content that is being studied. For instance, key concepts/definitions might be in yellow, controversial issues might be in pink, and summaries might be in green highlighter. The point is, in having to choose which highlighter to use, the student is doing more than skimming the words on the page and has to make decisions about what is being read. In having to make these decisions there is perhaps more of a chance that meaning making is going to occur."

2. What about Nittany Notes?

Don Epp (Agric. Economics) posted this question to the Web page: "I'd like to see some discussion (on-line or at a luncheon) about Nittany Notes, borrowing classmates' notes, and other similar approaches to organizing what went on in class. This should address both students present in the classroom and those who were not present (for various reasons to be discussed). The notes from the recent large class luncheon indicate that the discussion at one table reflected the opinion that Nittany Notes should be opposed, possibly even driven out of business. Is that the generally held opinion? I don't hold that view. In fact, I see Nittany Notes as a resource (albeit, of somewhat uneven quality) that students may use. I take the opportunity to give what I believe are appropriate cautions to students about Nittany Notes, but I do that with the textbook, too. I'd really like to hear what other teachers, especially those with large classes, think about students who use notes that other people have taken (from wherever those notes are obtained and considering the variety of commercialization currently encountered)."

- Pier Larson (History) responded: "I suspect that required attendance policies shut down Nittany Notes. This has happened in my class and I think others. Can you do some research to check this idea out?"
- Someone else suggested that creating a packet lessens the likelihood of Nittany Notes putting together their own packet and selling it to students. Putting notes (chalkboard and overhead materials) on the WEB along with answers to frequently asked questions also shuts down the Nittany Notes machine.
- The University's administrative policy on this matter is outlined in Policy AD40: Classroom Note-taking Services.