

What research tells us about note-making

Note making is an important academic skill. Notes act as a form of external memory, allowing you to record far more information than you could easily learn at one time. They allow you to distil out the key ideas from reflections and class discussions. But also, if approached the right way, note-making is an activity from which you can learn; and a good set of notes will be organised in ways that match your courses, making revision easier.

A great deal of research has been done into what makes effective note making. One key finding is that copying things down verbatim is probably the least effective note-making method. Deep processing is necessary for learning, and people have a limited capacity to process information. If you are trying to record everything you encounter you are unlikely to be processing and synthesising the information very deeply.

Notes are more effective when you view them as a work in progress. You will learn more if you revisit and add to your notes as your knowledge and understanding increase. This allows you to review your previous learning, which is important for preventing forgetting. However, it also gives you the opportunity to add new things you have learned and identify and correct misconceptions you noted earlier.

A third finding is that good notes – ones that have been well-designed and fully elaborated on – are about the best exam preparation materials you can have. This is because they reflect your own processing and understanding of the content, and are well-matched to the course on which you are studying. However, a surprisingly large number of students don't actually use their notes when preparing for exams.

It also appears that handwritten notes are superior to computer-generated notes where it comes to learning. Although a laptop might be convenient, using it can consume mental resources that are better devoted to understanding the material, and it can encourage you to 'copy and paste', which can give you a false sense of how much you have learned. Handwriting creates richer memory codes that last for longer in your memory.

Finally, the more notes you take, the better. Rather than keeping your notes super-short, it is better to include lots of information. Students with more information in their notes tend to perform better because they end up knowing more – and the more you know, the easier it is to learn new things. But, at the same time, the notes you make must be the result of your own mental effort and processing. If you just copy down the textbook you will end up learning little or nothing.