There are many different methods of taking notes, and which method you use will depend on your personal preferences as well as the subject matter of your course(s). This handout will help you to understand the difference between useful notes and notes that need to be improved. Here, we focus on one particular note-taking method, called metacognitive note-taking. For additional practice with these concepts or with alternative note-taking styles, make an appointment with an ASIP instructor.

**What should note-taking accomplish?**

You should be able to:
- get down the maximum amount of information needed for future studying.
- understand, at least generally, what is going on in lecture/seminar/discussion while you are taking notes.
- easily make sense of your notes later.
- enjoy your classes more.

Even if you took notes in your high school classes, you may need to learn new note-taking skills, or hone the skills you already have, in order to meet the demands of your Duke courses. Also, recognize that your skills may already be good in one course, and not so good in another. For example, as a biology major, you may already be taking good, reflective biology notes, but have difficulty taking notes in your art-history course.

It is worth taking a moment here to reflect on what it means to “learn” something, especially in college. Knowledge is not simply accumulating and memorizing facts; indeed, we would all be “stupid” if that was the case because there is simply too much information in any course (and in life) to memorize everything. Instead, you need to reflect on the material, place it into a context that is meaningful to you, and then apply it in a manner that you are more likely to remember. This process of “internalizing and contextualizing” will be easier in some disciplines than others, depending on your interests. However, it should be possible to increase your knowledge in any course if you put in the time and effort to do so. You owe it to yourself as a learner to think about your notes and note-taking styles for every class that you take.

Learning is an active process, and you have to apply yourself to the task just as you would any other skill. As with other skills, note-taking can be divided into several basic tasks, as follows:

- **Writing**
- **Organization**
- **Elaboration**
- **Analysis**
- **Evaluation**

![Diagram of note-taking tasks]

- Note-taking in lecture. See the rest of this handout.
- Can be performed in lecture, while taking notes.
- Requires post-processing. See handout: Using Your Notes III: Studying Your Notes and Reprocessing Information
- Or see handout: Using Your Notes II: Processing

The metacognitive note-taking method:

This method represents the fullest conception of an idealized note-taking scheme. The method is fully applicable as given, but many students adapt the basic premises of the method into something all their own, which can make it easier to implement.

This note-taking method accomplishes a few crucial tasks:
- First and foremost, your notes should provide some indication of your understanding (as opposed to being simply a written record of the course material).
- Your notes can also capture other useful elements of the lecture setting, such as:
  - professor emphases.
  - your alertness.
  - your metacognitive activity.

Notes section:
- **Write as little as possible.** Most of the information is available elsewhere, so capturing every written or spoken word is rarely useful or necessary.
- **Leave spaces in your notes.** Even if you try to write everything down, you are still missing information. Notes with no spaces are hard to use and give the mistaken impression of being “complete”.
- **Think about your understanding,** rather than writing everything down. If an example is being worked for you on the board, pay attention to the logic! You can always get the written example from the book, a friend, or even from the professor later.

Commentary section:
- **Write questions.** Questions are the best evidence you have that you are actually thinking about the material. You cannot recapture questions from other sources if you fail to write them down, so these should have high priority.
- **Record insights and “ah-hah!” moments.** If you suddenly realize that you understand something, or you make a connection between the current material and something you already know (such as previous course material), make sure to write those thoughts down.
- **Note your response to the material,** such as your thoughts about it or the questions you have. Monitor your level of understanding.
- **Note your mental state** during the lecture. For example: “too sleepy, don’t get this.”
- Write impressions about topic areas that the professor is emphasizing or ignoring.
- Pay attention to what is happening inside your head! **Metacognition!**
- **This section should be full.**

Summary section:
- This section should be a summary of both what was covered as well as how well you understood it.
- Can be a page summary or a lecture summary.
- The summary should be written as soon after the lecture as possible. We recommend that you simply stay in your seat for a few minutes instead of leaving with the crowd.

There should be an ongoing and dynamic interplay between the content (notes section) and your understanding (commentary section).

How you take notes in the actual note-taking area is up to you. Use whatever style comes most easily for you or best fits the nature of the material. The main structure in these notes comes from the three spaces you’ve created.

There are many advantages to the metacognitive note-taking method. For example:

- The shorter notes are easier to use, which:
  - saves time!
  - means less redundancy with other materials, thus making the notes more useful.
- The summary section provides a quick reference for later review.
- The commentary section:
  - makes the notes more interesting (and fun) to use. This is important when you are up late studying for an exam!
  - is a built-in guide for prior understanding. You will be able to track your understanding later on when studying for exams in a way that would not otherwise have been possible.
  - provides clues about likely emphases on exams. This makes your studying more efficient and directs studying to appropriate content areas.
  - demonstrates your thinking and comfort with the material, via questions and other forms of metacognition. You will quickly learn to recognize the difference between shaky content areas and areas you are confident about.

The biggest advantages lie in the fact that this method encourages you to become a “thinker”, as opposed to a “recorder.” You will find that you will be able to contribute meaningfully to the academic enterprise of the University as you develop greater confidence in engaging with the material in this way.

This method can be adapted to any type of course, though some of the biggest beneficiaries have been students in introductory science and math courses. As always, if you would like additional practice and practical advice about this or any other higher-order academic skill, visit the Academic Skills Instructional Program.