How to Take Notes in Science Classes

Put dates, chapter numbers and topics on your notebook pages to help you find things later.

Take down the most important information that allows you to understand the idea.

Do not copy what the instructor says word for word, condense ideas. Use an outline system with brief sentences, phrases and abbreviations. Use enough detail to help you remember how to do something when you come back to it, but not so much detail that it becomes cumbersome.

With this being said, it is still common for students to not write enough notes. Often this is due to not being able to tell what is important or difficulty understanding the material. In these cases thorough reading of the material in the text before the lecture is crucial.

Cues for note taking – generally you should be taking notes when the instructor:
  • writes on the blackboard
  • repeats something
  • emphasizes something either by stressing it verbally or by the amount of time spent on it
  • uses word cues, for example: there are three reasons for..., the two most important points are...
  • recaps at the beginning or end of class, so you may want to go over your notes along with the review to make sure you didn’t miss anything

Another reason students often do not take enough notes is that they overestimate how much they can remember. Just because the concept is easy to understand doesn’t mean you will remember it later.

Explain ideas to yourself by putting them in your own words. Remember the primary purpose of your notes is to help you understand the material!!! If you had difficulty with a certain part of the lecture, write it down or make a check in the margin of your notes and ask the instructor to explain it after class. Then write the explanation in your own words and check it with the instructor. If the instructor is not available use your textbook or a friend’s notes. This may solve the problem without having to go back to the instructor. The point is to address difficulties as soon as possible, so that you don’t forget them, and they do not become a future problem – such as on the night before the exam.

Use drawings and diagrams combined with short phrases to help explain things to yourself. You don’t have to be an artist, your diagram just has to be good enough to help you remember the process correctly. It does not have to be elaborate or attractive.
Your notes should be good enough to re-teach you the material after you have set it aside and forgotten it. I still use my notes from subjects I have taken many years ago. The more professionally oriented the job you wish to get, the more you will probably need to do this. For instance, the factor label method you use in chemistry will also be used when you are computing drug dosages in nursing classes.