

Date your notes and make the main topic visible

By giving your notes a title, you can easily tell at first glance what they are about. Having a date and a title, preferably visible at the top of the page, enables you to organise your notes and find them at a later date.

Don't write everything down – write down the important points

Avoid scribbling everything that is being said (or everything that is on the slides) word for word. You would be so consumed by copying everything that you wouldn't have the time or brain space to process the information. Instead, listen and then summarise what you've learnt in your own words.

Ask yourself, 'What are the important issues here? What's the takeaway point for me?' This will not only help you better recall the information at a later date, but will also help you make the information relevant to you and your context.

Make short notes of the examples given

I often find that notes on abstract concepts might seem even more abstract when I come back to them at a later date. If examples, the speaker/teacher/presenter gives illustrations and anecdotes to back up certain main points, consider using key words to make short notes of them. They could help clarify what might seem incomprehensible.

Use colour

I remember classmates at my university lectures who would come armed with a whole set of coloured markers and highlighters, and their notes would be a perplexing rainbow-coloured jumble (to me, at least). I am not suggesting that you spend time obsessing about what colours to use for your next word, but a judicious use of colour can add variety and clarity to your notes. Consider for example using one colour for your key points, and another for the examples. Or use a colour to signal comments and opinions that are your own, rather than the speaker's.

Use illustrations and drawing

Sketchnotes are a way of taking visual notes filled with drawings and illustrations. But if like me, you're not confident in your ability to draw, don't be too quick to dismiss the use of drawing in your notes. By drawing our notes, we are forced to not just passively take down the information word for word but to process the information and translate them into our own sketches. You don't have to show anyone your drawings if you don't want to, so don't worry about how good or bad they are, just as long as they make sense to you. If you're interested in developing your Sketchnoting ability, here's a useful step-by-step guide.

Use headings and sub-headings

Create a heading for each set of main points or ideas. Headings act as a mini-summary and helps to break up long paragraphs of notes, and can bring clarity, especially when referring back to the notes later. By using your own words in the headings, you are also forcing yourself to process the information and make connections between the different points.

Keep your sentences short. Use bullet points and numbered lists.

Streams of long sentences can be mind-boggling. Good notes should allow you get the gist of what is being said at a glance. By keeping your sentences short, you also force yourself process the information as you are

not writing everything down word for word. Ensure you include the key words (which you could underline with a coloured pen) for more clarity. Use bullet points and numbered lists to help you keep your notes concise and easily accessible.

If you need to see how things are connected, consider using mindmaps

While some of us enjoy looking at lists, others prefer a less linear method of using mindmaps. Mindmaps can provide you with a visual representation of how concepts and ideas and examples are connected, and can make information more memorable. [Click here to find out more about the basics of mindmapping.](#) There are useful mindmapping software and websites available if you prefer to create and store your mindmaps digitally, like GoConqr and Mindmup.

Leave space on your notes

In my ETP (Issue 117) article, I described the Cornell method of notetaking where a page is divided into sections for different purposes. To take a leaf out of the Cornell method's (note) book, consider leaving a margin on your notes so that you have space for your comments and thoughts, which you might add on the spot or later when reviewing your notes.

Keep your notes organized

For me, there's nothing worse than finding random sheets of paper stashed in different notebooks, drawers and bags, and wondering what they refer to. First, ask yourself why you are making notes. Are they for future reference, or just to help you process the information (and you'll throw the notes away in a couple of days)? If you intend to refer to it in the future, decide how you are going to store them. Do all conference notes or lesson notes go into the same notebook? Are they in chronological order or according to topics and themes? Where do you keep your notes? If you are taking digital notes, do you have a filing system so that you can find them easily? Are all your notes stored in the same place? Or do they tend to get lost in the ether? Many of these tips may not be rocket science, but by spending a little time considering and implementing these pointers, you could find yourself making the best use of the time you spend listening in presentations, classes, workshops, meetings and lectures.