

Introduction

Notetaking is not necessarily learning.

Remember that learning is work. And there are two kinds of work involved—one physical, the other mental.

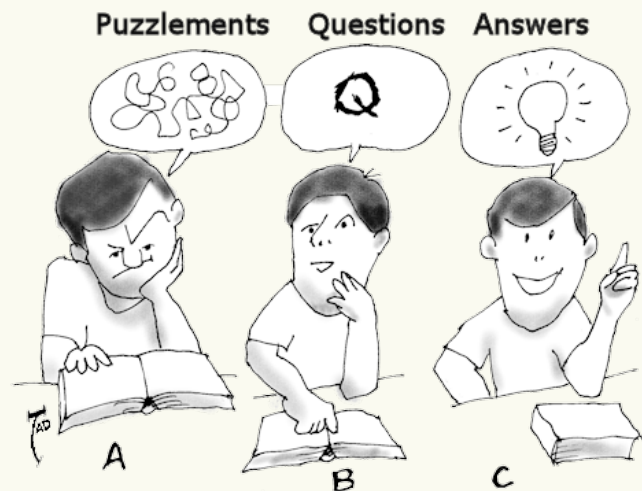
The physical work is getting yourself to the classroom, logging in to online sites, purchasing books, making copies of course material, and all the movements of your hand when you write papers and, yes, take notes. All of this is just preparation. **None of these physical activities is learning.**

Learning happens through the mental work of asking and answering questions. If these occur to you while writing a paper or while taking notes, then you are learning. If these happen when you review your notes or when they suddenly pop into your mind when you were thinking about something completely different, then you are learning.

Everyone knows that when we get answers to questions, we have learned something. But even **discovering the relevant question is learning.** It takes work to formulating exactly—as a question—what bothers you mentally.

Here's a picture of the learning process that I've referred to in previous lectures. At **A** your mind is jumbled; you're confused, puzzled, or curious. At **B**, you put a question into words. At **C**, you reach an answer to your question.

Now this move from A to B is extremely important. Everyone experiences mental discomfort, but not everyone wonders about what bothers them. They don't move to B. Many just conclude that they're stupid. But most people are not stupid; they are only ignorant. The problem is that some of these people prefer to stay "blissfully ignorant." True, they may notice what bothers them about things they are skilled at—like job tasks or hobbies, but still fail to notice bothersome things like a daughter's recent bad mood or an article about rising food



costs. In certain areas they don't like feeling mentally uncomfortable; they prefer the peace of mind of a slug.

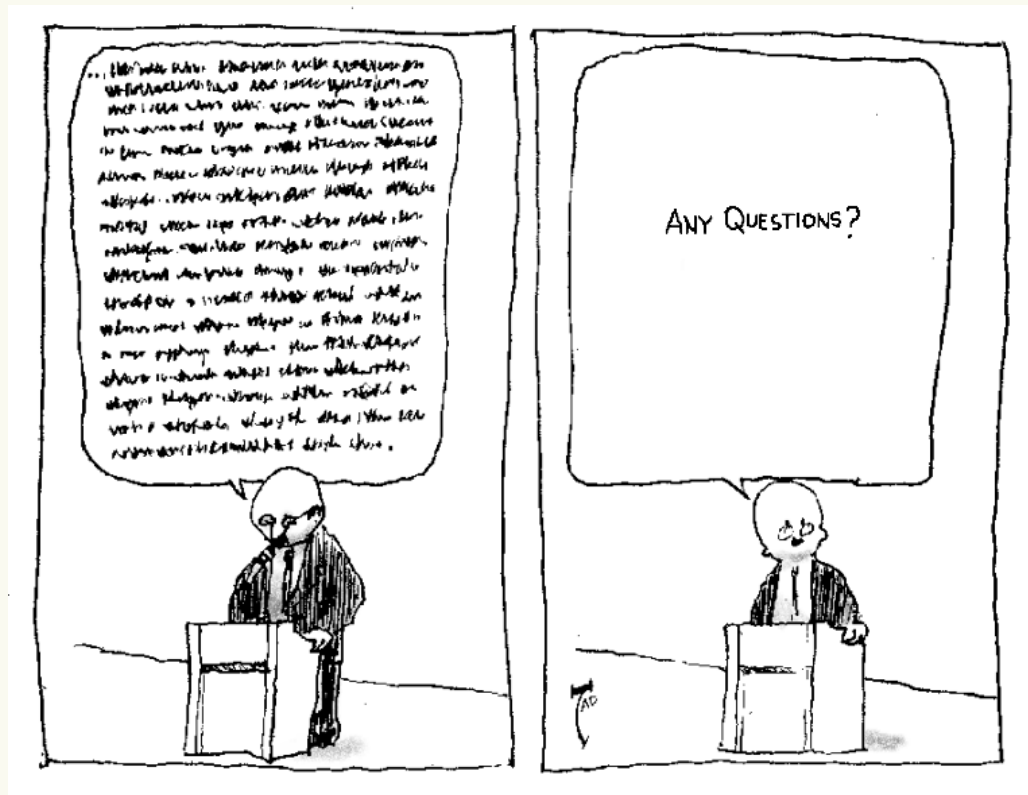
In contrast, people who trust their intelligence, who are not afraid of their own natural wonder and the discomfort it brings, often take notes to help them learn. Notes help them move from A to B because of the work involved in using the right words to formulate their discomfort in accurately worded questions. They have learned which questions are most relevant to the issue they wonder about. A light goes on. They understand things they didn't understand before. Where before, they could *describe* a problem, now they can *explain* it: They can easily answer questions like these: Why is this is a problem? How does it work? And what what might be done to resolve it?

I say all this because it's easy to assume that notetaking is learning. If all you are doing is recording words, then there's no learning. Like running a copy machine or highlighting words in books, you are just assembling the materials. You have not yet started the work of learning itself.

If you take notes, but don't expect to spend more time later actually learning from them, then **don't take notes**. It's a waste of time because you won't learn anything. Of course, you may actually learn something while taking notes, but what you learn this way is usually small pieces of a larger puzzle, and unless you come back later to assemble the pieces, your learning is just piecemeal.

However, if you do plan to learn how things fit into bigger pictures, then always set aside time to organize your notes. But organizing notes is not learning unless the effort helps you organizing your thinking. As you organize them, you will often get new insights into the bigger picture. You will also formulate what bothers your mind in clear and precise questions. In other words, organizing your notes means organizing what you think and what you know.

We take notes in all sorts of situations—during lectures, during meetings at work, while reading, while praying, while watching TV, while planning projects, while researching. Here, we will focus on three of these situations: lectures, research, and meetings.



Before the Lecture 1

Remember that your “notes” will be disorganized. You may have missed some important points. You probably won’t have time to distinguish between very important and less important points. Some notes will be about general principles and others about specific examples. So always, always, always, after any lecture, plan to *organize* and *learn from your notes*!

Use a **large notebook**. This helps you to keep your notes organized and it allows you to preserve extra space ideas that you want to put in later. Also, use a **wide left-hand margin**.² You’ll see why below.

During the Lecture

In formal lectures, we’re usually expected to save our questions until the end, but in many classroom settings, teachers allow questions any time. So don’t hesitate to ask your teacher to stop for a minute when you can’t keep up. Remember: you are paying your teachers for a service, so make sure they understand what you want! (I also recommend asking a question—any question—early in a lecture. This “gives permission” to everyone to ask questions.)

Don't you hate it when a teacher talks for a long time and then says, "Any questions?" Usually, no hands go up. But this does *not* mean that no one has a question. It usually means that students are so busy taking notes on the *content* of the lecture that they don't take notes on their own *questions*. Or they know something bothers them, but haven't yet discovered how to put it into the right words for a good question. So don't hesitate to pepper your notes with "?" where something bothered you but you know quite know why. And even though teachers usually say, "Any questions?" you really don't have to ask a question. You can simply make a statement like this: "Excuse me, professor, but something bothers me about what you just said." The teacher will almost always try to help you formulate your question.

After the Lecture

Now, once the lecture and discussion are over, and you are organizing your notes, convert your "?" marks into formulated questions. That wide left-hand margin is reserved for your formulations of your questions. Here are five typical areas of questions we all have: [3](#)

- Why is this material important? (Relevance)
- In what sort of specific situations might this material be useful? (Example)
- What is still confusing to me? (Clarification)
- What are some action steps to take? (Action)
- What do I disagree with? What bothers me? (Problem)

Your own formulation of your questions will be different. What is important is that your notes now contain not just informational content but also your own relevant questions. They are a record of two inputs: the teacher's ideas and your questions. Without a record of your questions, a later review will look like just a list of topics.

You might plan to type up your notes after each lecture. As you do, add headings under which various items fall. The very attempt to think of an appropriate name for a heading often clarifies our own thinking! Or, if you don't transcribe your notes, you might just use a felt highlighter on your paper notes. Stick in headings, numbers (or bullets) and arrows where appropriate.

Finally, now that your *notes* are organized, you need to *record what you learned*. Do you see the difference? It is extremely important. Do not skip this step! People call this "review," but it is nothing like a "re-viewing" that just looks at words again. It is *organizing your learning*. Ask yourself questions like these:

“So what have I learned here?

What do I now understand that I didn't understand before?

What relevant questions have I discovered in myself?

What questions have I discovered bother someone else?

What can I tell someone else, in my own words, without having to consult my notes?”

This is the step where learning takes place. Skip it, and you wasted your time and money.

Research

INTRO LECTURES RESEARCH MEETINGS

If you are taking notes for research, plan to **rely completely on your notes for documentation**. In other words, aim to capture the complete information on your sources, whether book, article, or website. The energy you spend flipping back through pages or surfing for the same website is intellectual energy diverted from actually doing your research. Your notes should capture the names of authors, speakers, publication dates, page numbers, ... anything that your final product needs to have in it. Get the spelling and quotations exact. Be sure to date your notes so that later you can tell whether later research casts a new and better light on the question you are researching.

Still, once you begin writing, **new questions** may occur to you. Since these are new questions, they were not part of what guided you in your initial research. (This happens very often!) So you may well want to return to the primary source to take further notes, or clarify the notes you have, or verify that your summary and evaluation are valid. So do keep your mind open as you write. New questions can lead to much deeper insights!

Taking Notes

Take notes during work meetings, even if you're not the leader. It helps to capture the **assignments** of **who** will do **what** by **when**. This sounds easy, but, believe it or not, it requires courage!

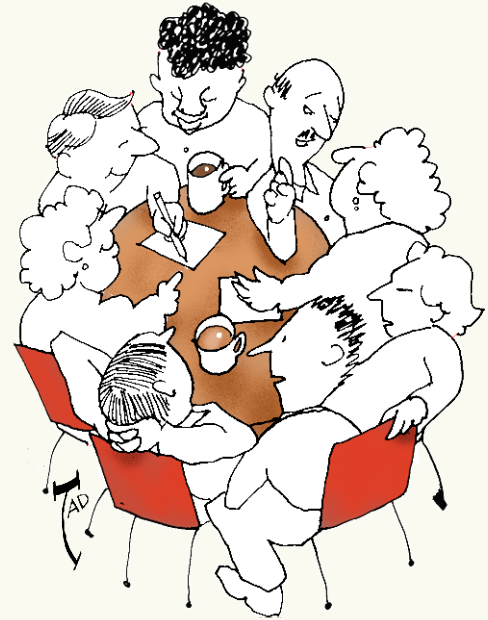
Why courage?

Many work meetings are badly chaired. A person may be an excellent manager but lack skill in effective chairing. In particular, unskilled leaders can neglect identifying *exactly who* will do *what* by *when*. So it requires some courage to ask these questions because you're taking over from the chair the direction of the meeting.

Then, when the next meeting rolls around, and the chair is still foggy about the last meeting's assignments, it requires courage again to speak up. Here, you are not only taking over the meeting from the chair; you are also requesting some accountability from your teammates. This takes courage, of course, but no small amount of tact as well.

In taking notes, it also helps to identify issues or problems that are still **unresolved**. This is because some issues come to light during the meeting that cannot be resolved right away. More information may be needed. Or further reflection. But the main value of noting what is unresolved is that it keeps an important question on the table.

So, for the start of the meeting, organize your notes like this:



Meeting: <date & time>		
<u>Assignments</u>		
Who	Does What	By When
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
<u>Unresolved</u>		
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Recording Minutes

The same principles apply to recording minutes. The main purpose of minutes is to have a record of **who decided, did, or promised what**. So it could be organized like this:

Attendees & Absentees:

Listing these is important for anyone to know who was (and wasn't) involved in a decision.

Progress

Reports on assignments. Note that these should *not* be "Activity Reports" (as if to impress people how busy you are) but reports on specific *accomplishments* that count as "progress."

So avoid verbs like *discussed, met, sent out, reviewed, telephoned, etc.* Instead use words like *decided, verified, identified, created, established, informed, etc.*

Decisions

These are essential because they can be appealed to when problems come up later.

Concerns

A record of concerns helps the group continue to foresee obstacles and to prepare ways to overcome them. They also help the chair develop *agenda* for upcoming meetings.

Assignments

These are essential because the progress should be reported at the following meeting. During that meeting, the chair can simply go down the list of assignments in order to capture whatever progress has been made.

Include the date of the next meeting.

Notice that there's nothing about the content of discussion, who said what, etc. Nor is there anything about what was said in a brainstorming for ideas. You'll notice too that minutes in this fashion are usually quite short and far easier to read than rambling narratives.

At the subsequent meeting, when the chair asks for approval of the minutes, the next agenda item is "Progress"—where members report on their progress. It keeps the meeting quite productive.

One final tip: If you agree to be a regular minutes-taker, state up front that you will read these three parts of full minutes at the start of the next meeting:

Decisions

Concerns

Assignments

This brings everyone up to speed right away—especially those who officially "approve" minutes they never read!

INTRO LECTURES RESEARCH MEETINGS

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1 The sketch is something I did in college years ago. I had no idea what the teacher was talking about. But I started having ideas about why.

2 I take this suggestion from
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/docs/cornell_note_taking.doc

3 Notice that "RECAP" represents these five kinds of questions. (Relevance, Example, Clarification, Action, Problem) I began thinking about this during my reading of the philosopher, John Macmurray. In 1932, he gave a few radio talks that were subsequently published as "Freedom in the Modern World" (London: Faber & Faber, 1932). The relevant chapter is "On Being Real in Our Thinking." There, he proposed that "real thinkers" ask three kinds of questions: "What are you talking about?" "For example?" "So what?" I added the questions about clarification and about disagreement. (I recommend this little book of Macmurray. He makes philosophy very simple and useful!)