



12

How to make the best notes

AIMS

To introduce you to notemaking strategies, making connections with reading strategies (Chapter 11) and creative learning (Chapter 8).

LEARNING OUTCOMES

It is hoped that by the end of working through this chapter, you will have:

- been introduced to notemaking theory
- been introduced to notemaking practice, with the emphasis on creative, pattern notes
- realised the importance of active and creative learning strategies.

From notes to creative notes

In this section, we are going to explore notemaking per se; we will then go on to make a case for a creative notemaking system, specifically pattern notes. We will then ask you to put pattern notemaking theory into practice immediately, with an exercise on notemaking (see exercise in Chapter 10).

Activity 1: Structured brainstorm

Before you move on to the section on notemaking, spend a few minutes preparing yourself with a structured brainstorm around the following topics.

Tip: When brainstorming, just look at the topic and write down anything that pops into your head – do not try to get things ‘right’; just try to capture your immediate responses.

Spend five minutes jotting down your responses to:

- Why do we make notes?
- When and where do we make notes?
- How do we make notes?

Once you have jotted down some thoughts of your own, compare your responses with those of some other students:

Why do we make notes?

- To remember – I make shopping lists and lists of things to do
- To use the information, for example, in my essays and exams
- To recall key points
- To understand what I am learning.


When and where do we make notes?

- I take notes at work, especially in meetings
- In lectures, seminars and tutorials
- When I’m reading – I’m not going to remember it all, am I?
- In the middle of the night in bed – no, seriously. I often wake up and think of a really good point for my essay. So I keep a pad and pen by the bed, so that I don’t lose the thought.


How do we make notes?

- Well, I write my notes down – I know other people who tape theirs
- I take down too much information – I really hate my notes
- I take down key words, but I sometimes forget what they mean
- I make rough notes and do a shorter version later.






Query: Are any of these comments similar to your own? It really does not matter if they are or not. Remember, the point was to brainstorm and that is a creative activity – there is no right or wrong when brainstorming. What you may get are interesting ideas that you can follow up.



Discussion: As always with the preparatory activities that we set at the beginning of our chapters, the point of this brainstorm was to get you ready for the work that is to come. This happens in two ways: first, it quickly reminds you of what you do know on the subject (you are not empty). Second, it can indicate the gaps in your knowledge, thus it can tell you what you need to get from the chapter. We always learn more when we are reaching out for what we want and need.



Tip: Always brainstorm before a class, lecture, seminar, or any reading that you do. It acts as a goal-setting, focusing device and you will get more.

Notemaking – a dying art

Most people are aware that as students they are expected to make notes of some sort. They are aware that these notes would form some sort of record of their studies, and that they will need this record to help them remember key points. Maybe they intend to use the information in the notes in their assignments and exams. So far so good.

However, we have noticed a change in student behaviour over the last few years. When we started teaching, students tended to take down too much information. They would write page after page of notes that tried to capture everything a lecturer was saying, or everything that was in the book. But recently we have seen students who sit through lectures making no notes at all. We have also seen those who think that they can get a degree without doing any reading, let alone making notes of their reading. Now none of these strategies is going to prove particularly useful to you as a student:

Making too many notes is too passive: you do not need to take down pages and pages of information when in lectures or when reading. But you do need to take down new information, preferably just in key words or phrases, to seed further thought.

Making no notes – from lectures or reading – means that you are not really engaging with your learning at all. You might be there in body, but you have left your mind at the door.

A good notemaking system will help you to record, understand, remember and use key information. You need to excavate lectures, seminars and your reading for ideas to learn, follow up and use in your assignments. No notes means no engagement – no active learning. This is not a good thing.

There are many different notemaking systems that people use, but they tend to break down into two main formats: some sort of linear (line by line) system or some sort of non-linear or pattern system. We shall briefly discuss these below, but first we shall consider what every set of good notes should have.

Ideal notes

Successful notes should have the following:

Source – if lecture, title, lecturer's name, date. If text, author, date, title, town, publisher.

Headings – capturing key topics.

Key words – key points, examples, illustrations, names, new ideas.

Some structure – things that make the notes easy to navigate: patterns, numbering, arrows, highlighting, etc.; things that link the notes to the course aims, outcomes and assignment.

Mnemonic triggers – things that make the notes memorable: cartoons, colour, illustrations (the Von Rostorff effect – we remember that which is bizarre, funny or bawdy (in Palmer and Pope, 1984).

Further reading – people or articles to read – noted and highlighted.

Query: Do your notes usually appear like this? If not, and you do want to get better at notemaking? Then read on.

Tip: Even when your lecturer gives out handouts of a lecture, it is in your own interest to make your own notes to keep you active, developing and in control of your own learning.

What's my line? Linear notes

If you do make notes already, you might be writing down information in a linear fashion, that is, line-by-line writing – the way it is here on this page. And the 'old' student described above would feel that they had got 'really good' at notemaking, if they always ended up with pages and pages of information. There would be a very reassuring feel to having captured everything.

However, there are many problems with linear notes:

- You take so many notes you feel swamped by them.
- You take so many notes that you never use them again.
- If you cannot write really fast, you feel left out of studying.

- If you don't capture something in a lecture, you panic and miss even more.
- If you leave things out, you can feel like a failure.
- It is an exceedingly passive form of notemaking – you do not need to be able to think to make linear notes, but you do need to think to be able to learn.
- All the information looks the same, which makes it very difficult to recall specific points of information.
- It is a monotonous way of learning – Buzan's half-brain learning point. It is boring and it only engages a small part of the brain, which is not a good thing.

Of course, you do not have to make even linear notes in this really passive way. You can select key points and structure the notes with headings, sub-headings, numbers or bullets, adding highlighting and mnemonics to make these notes as memorable as possible. In fact, if you follow all the advice in the beginner's guide to pattern notes, below, you can choose to make linear or pattern note formations. See Figure 12.1 for an example of successful linear notes.

However, as our whole emphasis is on active learning, we are going to recommend a much more active notemaking system than the linear. Specifically, we advise you to consider – and then rehearse and develop – a pattern notemaking system that will improve your notemaking and your overall learning.

Creative notes – pattern notes

To build creativity and activity into your notemaking, we recommend that you develop a key-word, pattern notemaking system. As you might guess, the key-word aspect implies that instead of taking down every word that is said – or every word that you read – you devise your own key words that summarise or stand for the information that you have decided that you want to keep. It is important to reduce information to key words:

- they are easier to remember
- you have chosen them
- you should be using information for yourself, not rote-learning a particular lecture or chapter from a book.

The point of gathering information is that you understand it, then you practise using it for yourself in classes, in discussion, in presentations and in your written assignments. You want to strip back information to the basics, and learn them. They can then be the foundation to your own thinking, talking and writing, but you decide what you think and say with that information.

A beginner's guide to pattern notes

You can make key-word notes from lectures and from your reading. There are several stages that you can go through – the trick is to remember that you can draft and re-draft notes. You do not need to get them right first go.



- 1 **Prepare:** Get an overview of the lecture or chapter before you start. With books, read the beginning and end of chapters. With lectures, you should get the sense of what the lecture is to be about from your syllabus or scheme of work.
- 2 **Brainstorm:** Once you know what the lecture or text is about, brainstorm – identify what you know on the topic and what you need to find out (your assignment question will help you here).
- 3 **Goal-set:** That is, work out the sort of information that you want to take away (an overview, key points, key names and dates, key quotes, etc.). Remember to look at your assignment question to help you here.
- 4 **Be active:** With your goals in mind, engage with the lecture or the text in an active way, searching for and identifying key words, points, etc.
- 5 **Draft:** Put the key points down in a ‘rough’ way first. With a book, we have suggested that you make notes on the text itself. With the lecture, you might put the title in the centre of a piece of paper and draw points away from the title. If things connect directly to the central topic, branch them off. If they connect with each other, draw them off from the sub-branches.
- 6 **Review your rough notes.** Decide what you need to keep and what you do not need. Think about how to connect ideas with each other.
- 7 **Construct** your own key-word pattern, adding colour, pictures and diagrams to illustrate points and to act as memory triggers.
- 8 **Revise:** Review your notes regularly to commit them to your long-term memory (see also Chapter 19).

Tips:

- The Von Rostorff effect – our minds are playful by nature, and the triggers that work best with our minds are funny, dramatic, obscene or colourful (in Palmer and Pope, 1984).
- There are many, many different ways of arranging notes in patterns – from concept maps to mind maps and beyond. Go to: http://www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html# to see a table demonstrating all the different forms of visual notemaking modes. Practise using different styles and select the mode that best suits your thinking style.

See Figures 12.1 and 12.2 for examples of notes on notes.

Patterns are best

This very active, interactive form of notemaking definitely requires some practice to get used to. But, when mastered, you will find that each time you make your notes, you create distinctive patterns that not only record key points but also help you to learn those points.

The advantages of pattern notes are:

- Instead of taking down masses of possibly useless information, you select only that information that will be of use to you.
- They are short notes and you are inclined to re-use notes that are manageable.
- You do not need to be able to write quickly, you just need to practise selecting useful information (working in stages from rough draft to revised key-word notes).
- Selecting and arranging useful information keeps you actively engaged with your information and hence you learn more.
- You can choose to make your notes interesting and memorable.
- Each set of notes looks unique – this also helps to make them memorable.
- Building colour, pictures, diagrams and unusual things (mnemonic triggers) into your notes engages the whole brain into your learning and therefore you learn more.

<p><i>Notes:</i></p> <p><i>What:</i> Bare bones Record Key words For assignments/further research Names and dates</p> <p>Active</p> <p>Organised Patterns – see Buzan Linear – like this</p> <p><i>Why:</i> Review and recall Future reference Research Assignments Exams</p> <p>Active learning Understanding</p> <p>Date</p>	<p><i>When:</i></p> <p><i>Listening:</i> Lectures Seminars Tutorials Discussion Radio and TV</p> <p><i>Reading:</i> Books Journals Websites</p> <p><i>Thinking:</i> In bed Travelling</p> <p><i>Planning:</i> Timetables Assignments (shopping, etc.)</p> <p><i>How:</i> Key points Emphasis and highlighting Structure and connections Linear or pattern</p>
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FIGURE 12.1 Example of linear notes: This is linear presentation of what is presented in a pattern in Figure 12.2

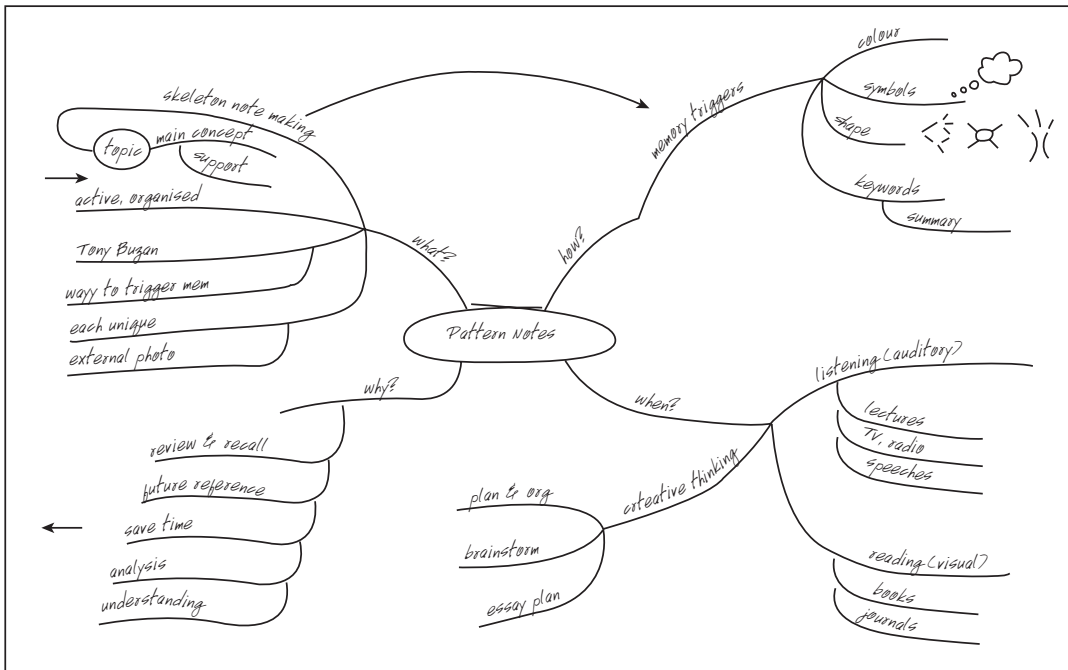


FIGURE 12.2 Example of pattern notes

But it feels so strange

As we have mentioned above, typically, this involves a dramatic change in your learning style, which will need considerable practice and will involve discomfort. The trick is to take your time, and don't try to get things right on the first go. To get better at pattern notemaking, you will need to make mistakes and get it wrong. You will need to do rough drafts of notes that you then shorten and rearrange. And, yes, it is difficult to make short notes when you do not feel that you understand a subject, and when you do not feel confident. But, it does get easier to make those short notes when you do know and understand more.

And, do remember, you will not be making your notes in 'the dark'. If you follow the advice on gaining the overview of a course (Chapter 3) you will know what you need to do and learn to pass the course, and this should tell you what notes you need to make.

Notemaking as learning

In Chapter 4, we discussed how learning could be said to be gathering new ideas and information, recording them, reorganising, understanding, remembering and using them. The creative, pattern notemaking system that we are describing here actually encourages you to *reorganise* the information you gather as you make sense of and record it. Thus we argue that a pattern notemaking system is beyond a mere recording system – it is a learning practice as well. But real learning will only happen with notemaking if you do something after you make notes, whichever system you eventually choose to adopt.

After you make notes, do something with them!

After every notemaking activity (lecture or reading), the active student should do something with their notes. The first task is to make time to do short, dynamic and memorable versions of the notes. Buzan argues that unless we do something with our notes, we will forget 98 per cent of the information in just three weeks. So, it is important to start a revision cycle as soon after completing a set of notes as possible.

So, once you have a first draft set of notes, spend ten minutes producing a shorter and more memorable set of notes (the first stage of your revision cycle). This may take more than ten minutes at first, but it will get easier with practice.

Another excellent, simple and really enjoyable revision strategy is to discuss the lecture or your reading with someone else (a study partner, if you have one). Talking really is the simplest way of improving understanding of a topic.

And don't stop at discussion; why not compare your notes with someone else? Not only is it reassuring to know that you will be doing this (thus, it doesn't matter so much if you miss a bit in a lecture), it is really interesting to see what someone else has taken away from the same lecture, or the same reading that you have done.

After the lecture – and the review and revision of notes – you should set new goals for yourself. That is, once you have made your notes, you should decide what to read or what to do next. It is always a good idea to book these activities on a calendar or in a diary. If it is not booked in, it tends not to get done.

Finally, take a moment every day to reflect on exactly what you have learned from the lecture/reading. Making learning conscious helps the learning process.

**Tips:**

- Buy an A1 pad and build up a pattern note of every module that you do. Add to your module pattern week by week.
- When preparing for an essay (or other assignment), put key words from the assignment question onto different sheets of A1 paper; then after every lecture or your reading, add new points to the different paragraph patterns.

Activity 2: Practising (pattern) notes

Here, we want you to practise your (pattern) notemaking techniques. Choose this or any chapter from this book. Prepare yourself for making pattern notes on the piece:

- Have a piece of paper that you turn sideways, landscape-fashion.
- Have plenty of coloured pens to hand.
- Remember your beginner's guide to pattern notes, above, or your active reading techniques (Chapter 11):
- Question: Remember why you are reading and what you want to get.



- Overview: Remember your overview of your course – think about how your reading meets a particular assignment's goals
- Overview: Read the introduction and the conclusion of the piece first so that you understand what it is about.
- Question why you are reading it and what information you would like to take away from it.
- Read through once, marking up the text as you notice useful points.
- Re-read: Construct your key-word (pattern) notes.
- Review your notes and check that they are useable.



Query: Have you made your pattern notes yet? If not, please attempt to do so before moving on. Do not be afraid of making mistakes. There are no mistakes, only rough drafts. The only way to avoid making mistakes is to do nothing at all, and that really is not an option if you want to be a successful student.

- Once you have made your own notes, compare them with the pattern supplied (see Figure 12.3). What do you think? Are you happy with your notes? I bet that they are not bad for a first attempt. What are you going to do now to improve? Mark some time in your diary for developing your notemaking.

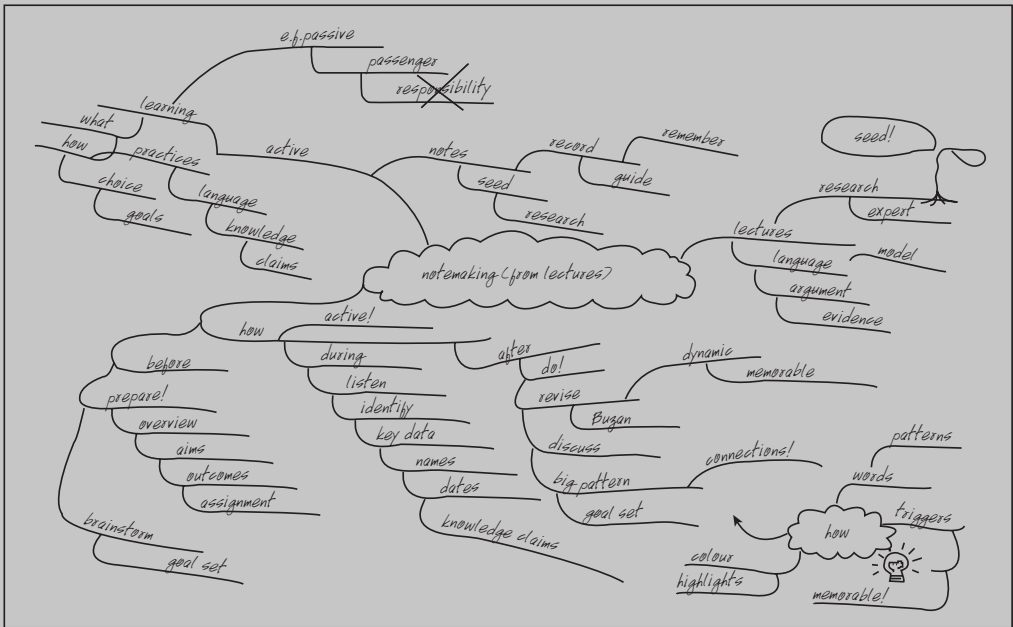


FIGURE 12.3 Example of a pattern on this chapter



**Tips:**

- Why not make pattern notes for each topic in this book? This will definitely give you the practice that you need to get started.
- Make pattern notes of television and radio programmes. This provides more practice, without the stress of it being vital for success in your own subject.
- Visit other people's lectures and make pattern notes in those. Again, there is no stress, just practice.

Conclusion

So we have examined notemaking as part of your active learning strategies, and argued that a good notemaking strategy helps you both record and learn information. We have explored linear and pattern notes, and given the Web address (http://www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html#) of a website containing a periodic table of visual notemaking systems, so that you can eventually choose the system that best suits your learning style. We particularly wanted to make a good case for pattern notes, so that you felt persuaded to develop them for yourself. In order to start this process off, we included an exercise on notemaking and an example of a pattern on the topic of notemaking itself. So now it is up to you.

Further reading

If you are interested in taking the ideas in this chapter further, you might like to try the following:

Buzan, T. (1989) *Use Your Head*. London: BBC publications.

Buzan, B. and Buzan, T. (1999) *The Mind Map Book*. London: BBC publications.

Gibbs, G. and Makeshaw, T. (1992) *53 Interesting Things to Do in Your Lectures*. Bristol: Technical and Educational Services.

Palmer, R. and Pope, C. (1984) *Brain Train: Studying for Success*. Bristol: Arrowsmith.

Rogers, C. (1992) *Freedom to Learn*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Rose, C. and Goll, L. (1992) *Accelerate Your Learning*. Aylesbury: Accelerated Learning Systems.

Review points

When reflecting on this chapter, you might notice that:

- you do realise the importance of notemaking and have decided to improve your note-making strategies
- you have practised pattern notes, and have found that it's a really useful strategy
- you have decided to construct module and/or paragraph patterns to improve your understanding of your studies and your preparation for assignments.