Effective Note-Taking For Online Learners

Taking notes effectively involves more than simply putting the course materials into your own words. Students who are taking online courses often feel the need to take pages of notes as textbooks and other written material tends to make up the bulk of the course materials, but this is not necessary and can actually be counterproductive. To really engage with your course material, you need to take a more active approach to note taking.

**Active reading**

Effective note taking starts with active reading. While this is important on any course, it is even more crucial for online learners as written material makes up such a large part of the overall course material. Instead of skimming through the material and paraphrasing it into your own words, it is better to get into the habit of making notes as you go. This may involve making notes in the margin to summarize the reading, raise any questions or concerns that you may have about the material and incorporate any relevant examples that spring to mind. This involves a closer engagement with and understanding of the text, and makes it less likely that you will commit plagiarism when making your notes. In addition to these techniques, make a point of thinking about the ways that the material links to other material from the course. Examining how the material 'cross references' with other material demonstrates a good understanding of the course as a whole.

If you encounter key words or phrases that are unfamiliar to you, make a note of them so that you can look them up at a later date. These will typically be crucial to your overall understanding of the material, so they will need to be incorporated into your notes in some capacity.

**Use diagrams**

If you are finding it difficult to make sense of the course material, try using
diagrams to improve your understanding. Mind maps are a popular way of doing this. These are also known as spider diagrams, and are intended to draw connections between key points and ideas. Start by writing the key theme in the middle of the page, and branching out from there as key points spring to mind. Further ideas may well be garnered by these key points.

If mind maps do not appeal, you can gather information together in table form instead. This is a particularly useful way to take notes if you need to compare information as you can see similarities and differences at a glance.

Audio-visual materials

As online courses do not generally require students to attend face-to-face lectures (unless your course involves tutorials or a one-day residential school), audio-visual material such as audio CDs and DVD-ROMs are often used as a substitute. If this is the case for your course, you will need to take a slightly different approach to your note taking. This is more in line with taking notes on lectures at a bricks-and-mortar university. The key here is to be selective when taking notes. There is no real need to take notes on everything, and doing so can mean that you do not pay enough attention to subsequent points. Instead, you should restrict your notes to the key points and themes that run through the material.

Note Taking Software

NoteScribe is a great note taking software for creating, storing, and organizing notes on your computer. In addition to creating notes, you can also create and generate sources and bibliographies, share notes with your peers, and attach files (images, audio, video, spreadsheets, PDFs, and more) to further supplement your notes. NoteScribe also has a calendar that is great for keeping track of appointments and assignments, and you can set it up to receive alerts through text messages, email, or a pop-up on your desktop.

Reflecting on material

Going back over your notes shortly afterwards is recommended to cement the information in your mind and ensure that the key points have been 'pulled' from the course material. If you leave this longer than a day, the material will
not be so fresh in your mind. Reflecting on material can be a useful way of identifying links to other parts of the course material, especially in relation to audio-visual material. This step is especially important for online learners as there is often a greater degree of independent study involved in distance learning courses.

Referencing

Even though you are required to summarize course material in your own words, you still need to reference the author to avoid plagiarism. Using the Harvard system, this is usually as simple as writing the names of the author(s) and the year in which the material was published in brackets after the notes. If you fail to add the reference into your notes, it is likely that you will also fail to do so in an essay. This will count as plagiarism and could easily lead to your essay being automatically given a 'fail' mark.

While effective note taking skills directly effect your ability to perform well on tests and achieve good grades, no tips or strategies are effective unless you have the ambition and drive to succeed in the first place. Approach your online classes with the desire to win, remember what the goal you hope to attain with your education is, and be persistent! As Publilius Syrus said, "Practice is the best of all instructors."