Module 4

Note Taking

Improve Your Study Skills:

A series of Seven Modules by
Virginia Nilsson, Ph.D.

Services for Students

Athabasca University

Learning and Study Skills Assistance Program
Student Services
Note Taking

A Series of Seven Modules for Adult Students
by Virginia Nilsson, Ph.D.

The more I study,
The more I know.
The more I know,
The more I forget.
The more I forget,
The less I know.
So why study?”

Anonymous

Learning Assistance Program
Student Services

Athabasca University
Improve Your Study Skills:

A Series of Seven Modules for Adult Students

1 Getting Started
2 Time Management
3 Reading to Remember
4 Note Taking
5 Writing
6 Surviving the Slumps
7 Exams

For information about these publications, contact:

Counselling Services
Athabasca University
1 University Drive
Athabasca, AB T9S 3A3
Canada
counselling@athabascau.ca

Cover Design: Mark Dunsire

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Preface

The first edition of Improve Your Study Skills: A Series of Seven Modules for Adult Students was written specifically for Athabasca University students. While there are some aspects of studying and some problems which may be unique to home-study students and to adults just returning to formal study, the series deals with skills and strategies from which all adult students can benefit by becoming better students. This third edition is aimed at “the adult independent learner.”

The modular format of the series enables you to concentrate on any one of seven areas, or to work through the material in the order most beneficial to your particular needs. Checklists and surveys providing diagnostic and prescriptive information, and exercises encouraging you to practise the skills and strategies presented make the series interactive. As an adult student you are much more alone, working on your own, unsupported by other students and teachers, than are traditionally aged college and university students. While we are not suggesting that this handbook can take the place of fellow students and helpful and supportive teachers, the interactive nature of the material does facilitate learning and will help you to improve your study behaviours. And the annotated bibliography at the end of each module tells you where you can find information complementary and supplementary to that in the handbook.

Each module concludes with a summary and review section. When answering the questions keep in mind the purpose of the series: to help and encourage you to become a better student by improving your study behaviours and honing your study skills. You can use this section as a self-test of whether you have understood the material.
Introduction

Why an Adult Study Skills Series?

You probably think you don’t need to learn how to study. You’ve studied before. You’ve been to school. What’s this series going to tell you that you don’t already know?

Of course, you have some useful study skills. But as an adult university student, you’ll probably find that you could use some different or additional skills and techniques now. You will need to apply goal- and priority-setting skills to use your time well. You’ll be required to read advanced texts, search original documents, and review scholarly material and intellectual presentations. You’ll be expected to remember in detail what you read and to organize your learning to demonstrate your memory, understanding, problem-solving ability, and creativity for the purpose of evaluation or testing. This kind of learning will demand skills you may not have developed or didn’t use in any previous schooling.

You’ll probably discover that some of your learning styles and strategies will have to change simply because studying will have a different impact on you as an adult than it did when you were younger. For example, research has shown that tasks or methods involving significant time pressure are more difficult for adults than for young people. Although some degree of anxiety is desirable or even necessary in a learning situation, it has been shown that the optimal level of anxiety for adults is lower than for younger people. And for older adults, tasks causing considerable mental or physical fatigue may be a problem. On the other hand, you can take encouragement from the fact that most verbal skills are not influenced by age until quite late in life.
How to Use This Series

This series comprises seven modules, each of which will assist you in developing or refining a different skill. The first module can help you get started in your course and also assist you in determining which other modules in this series might be helpful to you. To make the best use of your time, it is suggested that you try the following general strategy:

1. Read the “Getting Started” module.

2. Complete the Study Skills Self-Assessment in “Getting Started” to determine if you need help and in what areas.

3. Review each of the module summaries that follows the self-assessment and number them in order of need, based on the results of the self-assessment.

4. Go to the modules in the order you have listed them to study the methods that fit your requirements.

5. Do the exercises as you go.

6. Try new ideas one at a time.

7. Test the new methods you’ve learned by applying them.

8. And remember, always pat yourself on the back for a job well done.

An annotated bibliography in each module provides alternative approaches to the same problems or emphasis and elaboration of the same methods. You can find these or similar titles at your local public or school library or bookstore. They are also available on loan from the Athabasca University library.
Will It Work for You?

You may have taken courses before, you may have just begun some courses, or you might be only thinking about university. Whatever the case, some of the tips and techniques presented in this series should help you learn more effectively. For example, we’ll show you how to pace yourself, provide information on how to learn more from your notes, and give you some helpful tips on improving your performance on exams.

Of course, nobody expects you to follow these guidelines to the letter. You will still want to do some things a certain way because that way works for you. This series provides popular and proven methods that can help you make the most of your study efforts. It’s up to you to pick and choose what’s best for you.

There are many factors which contribute to learning, only one of which is study skills. Just doing all of your course-related activities the way the series suggests does not ensure that you will learn or be a successful student. Likewise, you can be a successful student, and you can learn, even if the self-assessments point out that your study habits and behaviour are different from those of most successful students.
Virginia Nilsson, retired Professor of Psychology and Learning Assistance Psychologist at Athabasca University, was for many years a Chartered Psychologist in the Province of Alberta and a member of the Psychologists' Association of Alberta. Dr. Nilsson's extensive experience in adult education, in course development and course delivery, made her aware of the demands that Athabasca University courses place on students and the problems students face in meeting these demands. Hearing the same questions and problems from students over a period of years prompted her to write these study skills modules as a strategy to help students overcome common study skills problems.

Dr. Nilsson earned advanced degrees in Psychology at Columbia University in New York City and at the University of Alberta, specializing in learning theory. She presently resides on a farm near Colinton, Alberta.
Module 4
Note Taking

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Note Taking

Why Take Notes?

If you had the opportunity to watch a lecture hall full of students during a lecture you could assume that the students must know the importance of taking notes in a learning situation. They sit with notebooks open and pencils in hand. Many are writing almost continuously, while some are listening attentively and occasionally writing something down.

Notes recorded during a lecture or while reading are supposed to help you to remember and then to recall facts, details, key terms, major concepts, and research that you are being introduced to in your studies. Notes help to refresh your memory before exams without having to reread all of your course materials.

But not everyone understands the importance of making personalized notes—records of your studies that make sense to you, that relate to your life, and that help you to describe course content in your own words.

If your note taking involves practically rewriting chapters, using full sentences and excessive detail, you are wasting a lot of valuable time.

For one thing, you are not able to listen as well if you are trying to write down all the details. If you are to engage in an active learning process then you must understand the material as you go along. If you are too busy writing it all down, then you are not able to give the material your full attention and you increase the chances of recording the author’s ideas inaccurately.

But most importantly, a re-recording of the original material does not help you to really understand or remember what you have read or been told. As one student says:

“I always take lots of notes while I'm reading, but they never seem to be very useful. I always have to read the material in the book over again to remember what it is all about.”

A. S.

Chances are that A. S. has taken “passive” notes. Passive note taking, like passive reading, is the slow road to learning.

Active note taking is a product of active reading. The key to making really effective notes is, first, to understand your material. If you don’t, your notes will make no sense to you later on. To understand the material you will need to read whole paragraphs or sections. Review them to yourself. Go over the essential points and the meaning, aloud if necessary.
Then, if you are satisfied that you understand what you have read and how it relates to what you are studying, you can make notes that will help you remember your understanding of what you have read. Active note taking is somewhat like explaining to a friend something which you are reading. For example, suppose that while you are reading someone comes along and says:

“What are you reading?”

You stop reading and tell the person something about what you are reading.

“It’s an article by Dr. Clark describing a process for recovering oil from the tar sands. He says you can inject hot water into the sands underground to separate the oil from the sand. He predicts that within five years there will be a great boost to the economy here as a result of the oil production by this method. I think I’ll wait a few years before selling this house. If the economy takes an upswing I should be able to sell easily then. In fact, this would be a good time to snatch up some real estate and hang on to it until then. I could make a killing.”

What you are doing when you relate all of this information to your friend actually involves the same process as effective note taking. You are reciting the information in a way that is meaningful to you. If something is unclear to you, it becomes apparent as you try to recite it. You draw connections between what you have read and your life. And you remember what is particularly meaningful or interesting to you. Oil extraction methods, as such, may not mean much to you. But as a property owner or a real estate salesperson, you understand the impact of the oil patch on the economy.

Depending on the lecturer, note taking in a classroom or lecture hall may be much more complicated and challenging, but the same principles apply.

**The Note-Taking Process**

The basic process of note taking involves:

1. **SELECTING** the important concepts, ideas, and facts. Think about the material you have read to decide what you will write down.

2. **CONDENSING** the information into manageable units and phrases. Record the important words and terms, but leave out the connecting words, examples, and repetitious explanatory information.

3. **ORGANIZING** the notes into some meaningful and logical structure or network.

4. **FILING** the notes in such a way that you can retrieve them easily and use them for review.
Choosing a System

Whether you have already developed a note-taking system or are just exploring the possibilities now, it is important that you find a system that works for you. Review the many systems presented here and pick and choose what fits your own style and can be applied to the material you are trying to master.

The following worksheets use a paragraph on reading skills to illustrate some of the various note-taking systems. You will find that the basis for all is the same—select, condense, organize, and file. The main ideas, key terms, and concepts selected from this excerpt are the same in all five systems. It is only the format, or actual method of filing, that differs.

Read the paragraph below. Then study and compare the notes made using the outline, Cornell, mind-mapping, note card and underline methods that follow.

"It is important to understand the process of reading before you can begin to increase your reading speed and improve your reading comprehension. When you read, your eyes sweep across each line of print and then make a return sweep as they drop to the next line of print. Your eyes make several stops, or fixations, as they sweep across a line. When the eye fixates it takes in a number of words around the point of fixation. This area is called the eyespan. If you watch someone’s eyes when they are reading you can see the eyes stop and start as they fixate and then move on. You can increase your reading speed by decreasing the number of fixations per line and by increasing your eyespan. Some people read one word at a time. Their eyespan is one word and they fixate on each word. If you watch their eyes as they read you will see a jerky motion. Some people mouth each word and you can sometimes see them saying the words to themselves."
The Outline Method

This method involves selecting major and minor headings and subheadings and organizing them in order of priority. The headings and subheadings are the concepts and main ideas. Brief notes can be made when an idea or term does not make sense to you on its own.

A—Reading

1. Process
   a. sweeps of eye movement
      initial sweep across line of print
      return sweep
      drop to next line
   b. fixations—stops made on initial sweep
   c. eyespan—the number of words around point of fixation

2. Improvement
   a. speed
      decrease # of fixations
      increase eyespan
   b. comprehension

There are a number of sentences and bits of information left out of this outline. For example, there are no notes about the fact that some people fixate on each word, or mouth each word as if reading aloud, and that you can see the eye movement. You are given information and examples in this excerpt to help you understand how you read and to connect or associate this information with your everyday experiences. So if you have not noticed another person’s jerky eye movements or seen someone mouthing words while reading, you can watch for it now to confirm what you have read. But these are pieces of information for helping you to understand and remember while you are reading. They enhance the basic concepts or ideas, but they do not have to be included in your notes unless you find the concepts or ideas particularly difficult to understand or the examples particularly interesting. You might want to include your own examples to illustrate the information. Directions for how to make up your own examples are given on pages 10-11 of this module.
The Cornell System

The Cornell System is similar to the outline method, except that you record the information in a vertical column. Begin by drawing a vertical line that doesn’t quite divide the page in half. On the larger side, usually the right side, you select and condense the material by jotting down phrases and concepts. On the smaller or left side, note what is contained on the larger side. The left side then becomes a sort of index to the notes on the right. If you are taking notes from a lecture the Cornell System is particularly useful. During the lecture you can take notes in the wider column. After the lecture you can review these notes and organize and improve them with notes in the narrower column.

Reading:

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<th>eye sweeps across page, fixates on one or more spots</th>
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<tr>
<td>meaningful units of information</td>
<td>at points of fixation the sweep stops and some words either side of the point are perceived as a group (EYESPAN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>improve—speed</td>
<td>decrease # of fixations and increase eyespan at each point</td>
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<tr>
<td>improve—comprehension</td>
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Improve Your Study Skills / Note Taking
Mind Mapping

Mind maps are constructed by writing the main topic in the centre of the page. Then subsidiary ideas are written around it with arrows pointing to it. Information is noted in concentric circles out from the main topic. Each subsidiary idea then acts like another smaller main topic which has its own subsidiary ideas in the next concentric circle, pointing to it.
Note Cards

In this system the same chunks of information are noted as in the other systems, but on separate cards, one for each main idea or concept. The cards can be organized in batches according to textbook, chapter, course unit, main topic, etc.

card # 1

Process of Reading

eyesweeps

fixations (where eye stops in its sweep)

eyespan (how much it see when it stops)

---

card # 2

Reading Improvement - Speed

work on process

# of fixations

size of eyespan

---

card # 3

Reading Improvement - Comprehension
Underlining

Of all note-taking methods, this is the one with which you are probably most familiar. Yet many students and educators denounce the underlining (or highlighting) method as a passive and mechanical process. They say it does not encourage you to reformulate concepts into your own words to demonstrate that you understand what you are reading. This is true if the same cautions are not applied to underlining as are applied to other forms of note taking.

To make this kind of note taking effective, you first must read the whole paragraph or section and review it in your head, or aloud if necessary. Do not underline while you are reading. It will only distract you and hinder your understanding. Once you have reached a full understanding, underline or highlight key terms, phrases, and words to help you remember what a paragraph or section is about. Underlining whole passages or sentences does not encourage you to reformulate ideas and does not facilitate review of the material.

A variation on underlining is to write notes and questions in the margins of your reading materials. Personalize the material, interact with it, talk back to it. But remember not to write in materials that do not belong to you. There is nothing worse than receiving a book from the library with someone else’s notes in it. They can only distract from your own understanding.

“It is important to understand the process of reading before you can begin to increase your reading speed and improve your reading comprehension. When you read, your eyes sweep across each line of print and then make a return sweep before dropping to the next line of print. Your eyes make several stops, or fixations, on the initial sweep across the line. When the eyes fixate they take in a number of words around the point of fixation. This area is called the eyespan. If you watch someone’s eyes when they are reading you can see the eyes stop and start as they fixate and then move on. You can increase your reading speed by decreasing the number of fixations per line and by increasing your eyespan. Some people read one word at a time. Their eyespan is one word and they fixate on each word. If you watch their eyes as they read you will see a jerky motion. Some people mouth each word and you can sometimes see them saying the words to themselves.”
How to Evolve Examples

As we've noted before, it's always easier to learn when you can apply what you're studying to real life. It's the best way to ensure that you understand a particular concept. You can relate your studies to your everyday life by making your own examples from textbook concepts. Try it by choosing an idea from your study materials and changing just one part of it. Make sure it still illustrates the concept. Then change another part of it, and another, and another, until the example is completely different from the one you started with. Always check carefully to be sure that the example you end up with still illustrates the concept.

To demonstrate, let's have a look at the concept of reinforcement.

1. The classic textbook definition of reinforcement is,

   according to Thorndike:
   
   "...that the effect of the food was to increase the frequency of the response that produced it."


   according to Skinner:
   
   "The behavior is said to be strengthened by its consequences, and for that reason the consequences themselves are called "reinforcers"."  


   according to Keller & Schoenfeld:
   
   "...positive reinforcers are those stimuli which strengthen responses when presented..."


2. An example of reinforcement is:

   A food-deprived white rat presses a lever which releases a food pellet into a food cup. The rat consumes the pellet and presses the lever again.

3. Consider the elements of this example:

   a. the organism, or subject, a rat

   b. the manipulandum—a lever to be pressed downward

   c. the reinforcing stimulus—a food pellet
4. Change any one of these elements:
   a. make the rat a mouse, or
   b. make the lever a button to be pressed inward, or
   c. make the food pellet a piece of cheese

5. Change some more:
   a. make the mouse a child, or
   b. make the button a chore to be done, or
   c. make the cheese a candy bar

6. And again:
   a. make the child a student, or
   b. change the chore into studying for one hour, or
   c. make the candy bar a trip to the kitchen for a cuppa

Now try this again on your own by finding an example in your textbook and then 'evolving' it into your own example.
Summary and Review

We have looked at the reasons for taking notes and the four elements common to all systems of note taking. Five systems were explained as well as a method for making up your own examples. It is up to you to try these systems and determine what works best for you.

Take a bit of extra time to give yourself a review of this module.

1. How did this module on why and how to take notes change your perspective on your existing note-taking system or systems?
   - □ It confirmed that my methods are ok.
   - □ It suggested some ways in which I can improve.
   - □ It helped me understand why to take notes and what notes to take.

2. In what ways will you or have you begun to modify your notetaking?
   - □ I have tried out some new systems.
   - □ I have selected parts of different systems to use.
   - □ I have stopped using some of my old methods of taking notes which were not productive or efficient.

3. In what ways do you consider yourself an active note taker?
   - □ I “talk back” to my course materials.
   - □ I write in my books.
   - □ I evaluate authors’ and lecturers’ ideas to determine if I agree with them.

4. Have you ever made up your own examples of concepts and ideas?
   Do you think that doing so will help you to understand and remember material?
   Why is it important to make up your own examples?
Annotated Bibliography for Note Taking

The bibliography in this module comprises material related to student success through good note taking. Some of these materials repeat what this module has presented and some suggest alternative approaches.

The bibliography lists information on general study skills; how you can succeed, difficulties you may encounter in your studies and possible remedies for the difficulties. If you are encountering setbacks, or want to avoid encountering them, have a look at one or more of these books. They can help you define problems before you go on to the other modules. This list is only a sampling of the library holdings. If what you are interested in on this list is not available the librarian can help you find something similar.

There are many other good titles on the market, so do not feel that you are limited to these books. If you have access to a library or you can go on-line on your computer, you can find out what materials are available on note taking. Most bookstores have reference or "self-help" sections which you might find useful to browse through.


Buzan presents new techniques to help you study effectively. Included is a very good section on note taking and mind maps.

Ellis, David B. Becoming a Master Student. Rapid City, South Dakota: College Survival, Inc., 1996.

This book encourages students to take responsibility for their education. It explains and gives practice in note-taking strategies which have proved useful for successful students. The book is aimed at any new post-secondary student. The level is appropriate for any age.


This is a serious academic approach to study skills with plenty of examples and diagrams and a detailed table of contents, index and references. There are several chapters on notetaking.


The chapters are layed out as courses, with the material presented separately from the exercises for developing skills, and with opening objectives and closing summaries. The presentation is serious, with no illustrations, cartoons, or references. Included are chapters on both reading notes and listening notes.


The section on note taking includes examples and exercises and provides you with supervised practice in making notes on your reading.

Included in the extensive contents are chapters on lecture and reading notes. Schumm is written for an adult audience and concentrates on presenting textual material along with inventories, exercises and activities. It includes references for each chapter and has an extensive detailed table of contents and an index.


Included in this comprehensive book of study strategies are chapters on lecture and reading notes. Two unique features of this book are its recognition of different skills for different disciplines, and a section on computers. The text is broken up with some examples and illustrations, and exercises, diagnostic inventories, and quizzes with the answers provided. It is referenced and indexed.


This handbook has a particularly good section on making notes on what you read and includes exercises for you to use to practise the techniques.