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Making the Note-Taking Process More Accessible: What Educators Can Do

Though it is important to strive toward the goal of students becoming self-sufficient note-takers, while students are learning how to take notes, educators can provide scaffolding to make the process accessible to all students. Appropriate support strategies will vary depending upon the age and developmental needs of the students; however, as students approach independency, providing fill-in-the-blank outlines or copying notes verbatim is strongly discouraged as these common practices do little to develop students' skills for discerning what information is important and how that information should be organized in their notes. If the instructor makes all the decisions, the students will never become autonomous note-takers.

There are, however, some ways in which educators can help make the note-taking process more student-friendly:

Provide a preview: Prior to beginning note-taking on a lecture, a video, or a text, explain the organizational structure of the material the students are about to encounter. This allows them to focus on the content itself rather than trying to determine how the pieces fit together in an overall plan. It will also give them a better idea of how they could structure their notes. Example: *“The video you are about to watch begins with an overview of the Enlightenment and then examines the life and work of the most prominent philosophers of the age. The discussion of each philosopher will have three parts: an overview of his or her life, an explanation of the philosopher’s most important ideas, and a description of the long-term impact of the philosopher’s beliefs.”*

Advance Organizers: David Ausubel describes advance organizers as instructional materials “presented at a higher level of abstraction, generality, and inclusiveness than the information presented... to provide ideational scaffolding for the stable incorporation and retention of the more detailed and differentiated materials that follow” (as cited in Marzano et al., 2008, p. 117). Providing a skeletal outline or a graphic organizer (such as a very general mind map) can give students a structure to help them make sense of the material they are about to learn. It is essential that the advance organizer does not contain too much information, so that the onus of the note-taking rests on the students.

10–2–2: Break up the information students are taking notes on into chunks to allow students processing time; this could include information from working collaboratively in groups, watching a video, listening to a lecture, reading, etc. Stop every 10 minutes to allow students time to process their notes. Provide 2 minutes for students to confer with a partner about the notes they have taken, revising, adding to, deleting, questioning, and clarifying what they have written. Then provide 2 minutes for individual reflection and revision of the notes before moving on. This is also a good time for students to identify words that should be added to the communal word bank. This word bank can be posted on the walls of the classroom as well as online, providing students access to the word bank outside of the classroom. Allow 5 minutes at the end of class to respond to questions generated by students during the processing time. The opportunity to

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compare notes with a peer allows the learner to observe others' note-taking styles and practices and provides reinforcement of the material students are learning.

“Wait, wait! Hold on!”: The fast pace of some lectures causes panic and frustration for students who are unable to catch everything that is said. In some cases, students feel familiar enough with the instructor that the class will cry out in unison for the lecturer to slow down. Be aware of students' note-taking abilities and vary the lecturing speed accordingly, but do not let students dictate the pace of the lecture, as this is inappropriate behavior in an academic setting. Instead, teach students to indicate in their notes the places where they were unable to write all they needed or missed something. Encourage them to insert a blank to fill in later or to indicate a gap with a question mark. Provide time during or after the lecture for students to compare notes (perhaps using the 10–2–2 structure described above). If students are unable to fill in the missing information by consulting with a classmate, encourage them to ask the lecturer at the appointed time at the end of the lecture or class time.

Modeling Note-Taking: Ask students to take notes about a portion of a lecture, a video, or a reading passage, such as an informational article or textbook excerpt. After students have completed their notes, allow students to view instructor-taken notes on the same content. Emphasize that every note-taker's notes will look different and that the example is not necessarily the only “right” way to take notes. Talk through the notes with the students, pointing out the note-taking techniques used and discussing the decisions about what was included, what was left out, and how the material was organized.

Think-Aloud Note-Taking: Use a document camera or project your screen to display real-time note-taking for the students. Take notes over a source while verbalizing the thinking underlying the note-taking. As with any form of writing, taking notes in front of the students and modeling the best practices allows students to see the mental work that occurs during the note-taking process.

PAT List: Nancy Motley (2013) encourages instructors to provide students with a PAT (“Pay Attention To”) List prior to a reading assignment. This gives students a heads up about what is important for them to focus on in a particular text. A PAT list might look like this: “As you read about the early river-valley civilization, pay attention to each civilization's main accomplishments and lasting impact.”

Word Banks: Before lecturing, provide students with a visible word bank of key terms, names, and concepts they will want to include in their notes. Word banks help students focus on essential ideas and assist with fluency of note-taking for students struggling with getting the ideas on the page. As another option, a class can create a “communal word bank” containing words students identify as important throughout the course of a unit. This shifts the ownership of identifying vocabulary from the instructor to the class as a whole. Consider posting this word bank in the classroom and online, as doing so can give all students the ability to add to and edit it, and provide access to the word bank outside of class. This is a powerful strategy to embed into the 10–2–2 note-taking structure.