Getting the most out of lectures and classes

Lectures form a central part of many tertiary courses. It is important to understand how they fit into the whole structure of the course and to be able to make the most effective use of the material presented in this format.

Taking notes from lectures allows us to recall the material in a form that is relevant and meaningful. It also provides a structure within which we can further develop the information on a particular topic through other sources.

Most students develop a very individual style of note taking, including abbreviations, diagrams and so on through practice and learn to adapt to a wide variety of lecturing styles.

**What is the purpose of lectures?**

In most course areas, lecturers do not aim to ‘teach’ a subject through lectures, they rather aim to:

- Indicate the overall scope of the subject
- Emphasize essential points
- Provide a starting point for private study
- Give explanations of certain difficult points
- Give examples relevant to the particular course area
- Provide a preliminary map of difficult reading material
- Suggest sources of further information and reference
- Stimulate your thinking and provide guidelines for your thoughts on a subject area assist you to develop a critical interest in the subject.

Thus a lecture is rarely the ‘whole story’ on a subject and a lecturer will assume that you may have some prior knowledge through reading, and that you will build up the ‘rest of the story’ through tutorials and other resources on an individual basis.

**How can you prepare for lectures?**

The course outline will provide you with;

- A list of topics to be covered
- The course structure, lectures, tutorials, practicals and
- Relevant references.

It is possible to identify the topics that will be covered and to do some pre-reading around the relevant areas. It's a bit like reading a tour guide before going to a foreign country! Don't expect to fully understand the material. You will be aiming to become familiar with terms and get a feel for the material in order to be sensitised to the topic.

**Being there! Why is it important?**

Each subject has its own particular set of terms, with which you will need to become familiar and be able to use appropriately in tutorials, assignments and so on. Lectures provide an excellent opportunity to become familiar with terms and to hear them used appropriately. Attending lectures provides you with your own record of what happened as opposed to a second hand version. It will be impossible at a later date to fill in the details missed out from another student's version.

Attending lectures provides clues to important topics to be followed up and assessment information. There may be an emphasis on certain points or incidental information about how to approach material. Usually this is not registered in notes but is taken in subconsciously. Notes taken by another student often will not refer to the incidental information.
Sometimes it may be useful if you are unable to attend a lecture to have a friend tape-record the lecture and obtain diagrams and handouts from them. This will provide a better record for your own work than merely using their notes.

Are there different ways of taking notes?

Generally there are two common ways of taking notes and within these styles individuals will develop a particular mode that suits them and the subject area in which they are studying. Regardless of what form of note taking you use remember to write legibly. The best notes are useless if you cannot read them.

1. Sequential or linear notes:

This is the familiar style in which a margin is used and points are taken down one after another. The following are useful points to remember;

- Start the page with the title, lecturers name, date and subject name
- Use a wide margin, this can be used for questions or adding points at a later stage
- Identify the main points and number these in sequence down the page - include reference to examples and indent supplementary information.

For example:

1) Main point:
   a)- evidence, example
   b)- evidence, example

2) Main point:
   a)- example

- Note any new words and definitions if given (if not given leave space to fill in a definition later)
- List references given with chapter and page numbers
- Write on only one side of the sheet leaving the back for further notes or notes from reading. Remember to leave space between points and don't try to get down every word.

The advantage of this form of note taking is that it retains the information in the order given by the lecturer and allows you to make further additions later when you review

2. Patterned notes:

The lecturer title or the central idea is written on the centre of the page and key points are written in a tree-like fashion branching out from the central idea. The major features of this style are:

you are restricted to key words only and must identify central ideas quickly

it requires practice and is most appropriate when the lecturer’s style is clear and easy to follow

- Sequential notes can be rewritten in this form as a summary
- This format can be used for relating ideas in preparation for assessment
- Two or more students can work together to develop a diagram of the central ideas from a lecture or section of the course as a revision exercise.

Different styles of note taking will suit different students in different situations and it is useful to work out which style suits you the best and further develop your skills in that area.

How do you fill in the gaps in the information?
• Ask as many questions as possible during the lecture
• Note down queries during the lecture and approach the lecturer later
• Refer to the relevant text book on the topic, read the chapters which are relevant with the questions in mind and make supplementary notes
• Discuss it with other students and ask questions in tutorials and practical sessions.

**What is the point of pre-reading lecture notes?**

Re-reading or reviewing lecture notes as soon as possible after the lecture allows you to add information which you may not have noted during the lecture. It also allows for the formation of questions which may not have occurred to you previously and gives direction to further reading.

Important points can be underlined and highlighted and questions prepared for tutorials and other staff contact times.

An immediate review consolidates the material and is a good start to the revision process.

**Storing handouts and lecture notes**

A loose leaf folder allows you to move notes around and insert handouts in the appropriate area, and insert extra summaries from books and tutorial notes. Handouts are intended to be read in conjunction with the lecture notes so include them with the lecture note review.

Assistance in these areas and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The Counselling Service can be contacted at **9925-4365** Monday through Friday, between 9am and 5pm.