The Most Effective Way to Take Notes in Class

By *Dustin Le* on *February 6, 2015*.

Notetaking is a skill that students will take with them into their careers. Whether they are in meetings, participating in brainstorming sessions, or making annotations during reading, notes are an effective way of learning, retaining, and recalling ideas and concepts. This article talks about the three best techniques for taking notes in the classroom and how your students can benefit from them.

The Most Common Mistakes

Before we get into the techniques, let's discuss the three big mistakes that students make when taking notes in class.

Mistake #1

Students try to write down every single thing the teacher says without actually listening. Taking notes should be 75% listening and only 25% writing. When listening, students should constantly be working the new concepts in their head in order to solidify them. This is the best time to consider questions that they may have about ideas they do not completely understand. When writing, notes should be short, and right to the point. Each sentence should be no more than 1-5 words long. This forces students to record only the critical information.
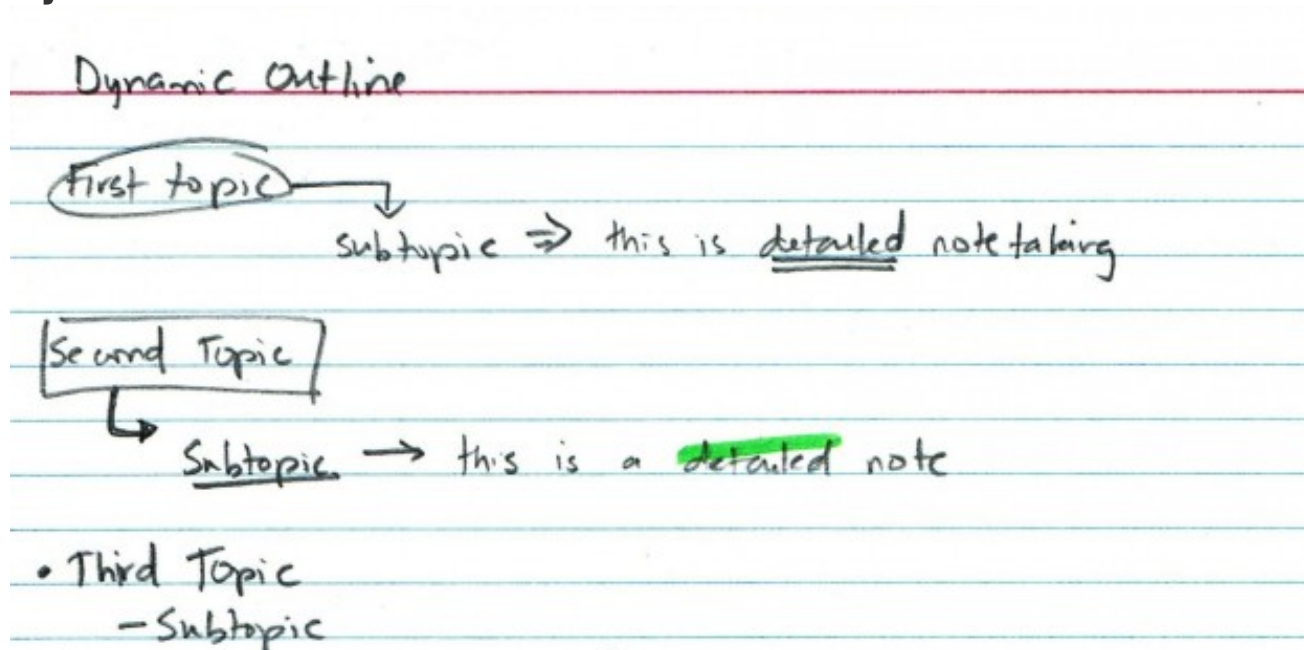
Mistake #2

While taking notes, students do not think about the topics their teachers are saying. It is important to take notes in order to remember ideas, but it is more important to understand the new complex ideas that are being introduced to them at a fast rate. Notes are useless if students do not understand the underlying concept.

Mistake #3

Students do not ask questions while the teacher is lecturing, when the ideas are fresh in their minds. This is so commonly said that it is almost cliche, but if students have a question, it is likely that another student has that same question. Regardless, questions show you (the teacher) that they are interested in *learning*, not pleasing. Students should not wait until after the lecture (if possible) to ask questions. If students wait to ask questions, they end up going through the rest of the lecture missing a piece of information.

The Three Best Note-taking Methods

Dynamic Outline

Dynamic Outline

First topic
    Subtopic ⇒ this is detailed note taking

Second Topic
    Subtopic → this is a detailed note

• Third Topic
    —Subtopic

This is a fresh take on the classic outline format that many of us were taught as students. While the classic version worked fairly well for the most part, it was too constrained and boring. The new version makes use of three new tools:

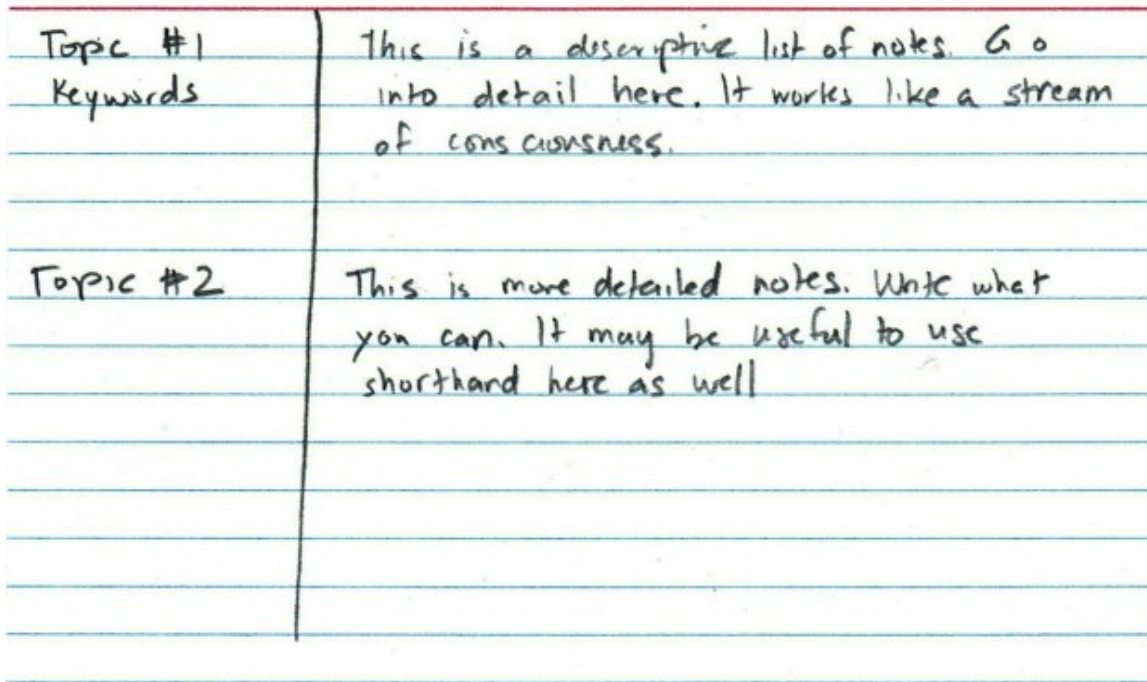1. Notation symbols, such as arrows, circles, boxes
2. Color
3. Mapping Web

These new tools allow students to stay organized and lined up, as the classic outline format was, but also allows for dynamic symbols and colors within the outline. The use of symbols and colors makes the dynamic outline more easily readable and interesting than the blocks of text. Essentially, the Dynamic Outline combines the classic outline with the Mind Mapping method discussed later in the article. The classic method is visually unappealing to go back and reference because it is essentially a block of text. This uses color and symbols to make sure that important words stand out. In addition, it replaces words with symbols to make it easier to understand.

Good: Organized format, simple

Bad: Not easy to reread

Page Split

This method is for students who like the organized format that the dynamic outline allows, but dislike the fact that it is unpleasant to go back and read once the notes are taken. The Page Split revamps the outline and makes it easier on the eyes by separating the main topics from the subtext. While this is great, it also means that there are points where students will waste paper space.

Topic #1 Keywords	This is a descriptive list of notes. Go into detail here. It works like a stream of cons ciousness.
Topic #2	This is more detailed notes. Write what you can. It may be useful to use shorthand here as well

To set up the page, have your students draw a vertical line about 2.5 inches from the left margin. On the right side, notes are written down as they would be using the techniques from the dynamic outline format. The left side is what makes this particular technique useful. After notes are taken on the right side of the vertical line, students should write 1-3 word descriptions on the left side.

Why is this useful? Because when students refer back to their notes to review for exams or subsequent assignments, they are able to quickly scan their notes for keywords that pertain to the assignment, thus making recall more efficient.

Good: Visually appealing, quick recall
Bad: Inefficient use of paper space

Mind Map

Mind maps have always worked for me because I am a perfectionist. I hate the feeling of writing notes in a perfectly clean outline, only to have the teacher hop back and forth between topics, forcing me to go back and write in the margins or in a smaller font. This usually results in a messy blur.

Instead I use mind maps. While the result is ultimately much more messy than the first two techniques, it allows me to take notes on topics and subtopics in order. And when necessary, I'm able to go back and forth between topics as the teacher hops around during lecture. The most powerful aspect of mind-mapping is that it gives me the option of visually connecting ideas together via a circle and line. This makes it easy to form connections between ideas.
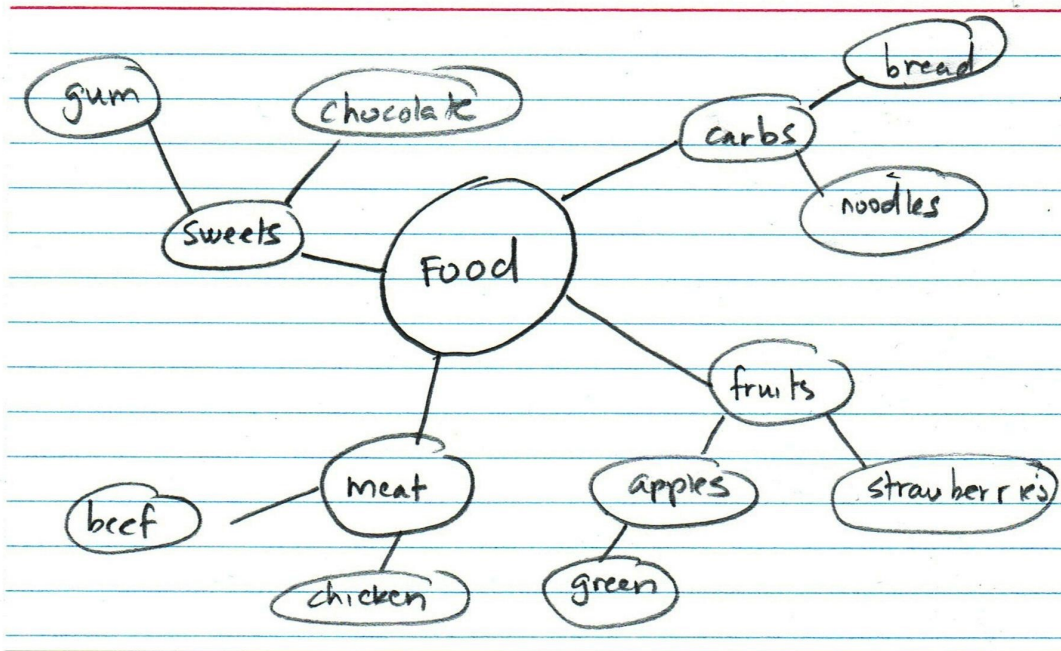
Usually when using this method, it's best to start with the overall topic in the center. For example, if the topic is food, write that in the center and circle it. As the teacher begins to talk about sweets, vegetables, carbohydrates, or another food type, draw lines from the center circle to these subtopics. If there are overlapping topics, such as hamburgers (which belong to multiple food groups), then multiple lines can be connected to this subtopic. This is a great way to make visual connections between topics and keep them in your memory. That is the strength of this technique.

Good: Strong connections between topics
Bad: Messy, difficult to review

Note-Taking Tips

Now that your students have chosen a technique that fits with their style, here are some useful tips to communicate to them:

1. **Pay attention** to what the teacher says and does, such as writing on the board or repeating information. This is usually important information, which means it is likely to end up on the exam.
2. If possible, **do some work before class**, whether it is reading or looking at a set of math problems. This primes the brain and prepares it for class by familiarizing it to the topic.
3. When taking notes, **write in your own words**. This reinforces understanding of the topic and strengthens the memory.
4. **Use a shorthand system** that makes writing notes quicker. One technique is to remove all vowels from words. For example:
   - *Without shorthand:* Drinking water will improve your health.
   - *With shorthand:* Drnkng wtr wll imprv yr hlth

Doing this allows one to nearly double your note-taking speed, which means that students are better able to listen and take notes more efficiently. You can even turn texting into a type of shorthand.

Takeaway

Notetaking is an important skill that is useful in school as well as in many careers because it helps one remember important information. Notetaking is a very personal practice, so methods will vary from person to person depending on personality. It is important for students to own their style. The three methods above are great ways to start.