

Metacognitive Note-Taking for Better Retention

To Begin: This approach to note-taking can make your time taking notes more effective because it is based on how you learn. Whenever you start a new section of notes, write the Date, Course/Session & Topics on the top of the page, then draw a line down the middle of the page, 1/4 or 1/3 the way from the left edge. At the end of each session, take 5 minutes to summarize what you most want to remember and follow up on.

Date:

Course/Session:

Topics:

Putting this information at the top of the page primes your brain with what you already know about these topics, making it faster and easier for you to make new connections. It also makes it easier to keep your notes organized, which reduces stress and saves time.

Reflections/Comments

Reflections: Use this space for noting your reactions and responses to what happens during the session. Make sure you capture your emotional responses, since they have the largest effect on your ability to recall what happened. Pay extra attention when you see connections, similarities and metaphors.

Write or draw: include your feelings, questions, emerging ideas and other comments. Note items to follow up on here too.

What you put in this column acts as a key and an index, aiding recall, because recalling the experience makes the content easier to remember.

This section keeps your note-taking active and metacognitive.

Notes

Notes: Use this space for taking notes on what is being presented, using whatever method you like. Doodling is better than nothing. These are notes on content.

Summary: *Here's where brain-based research really kicks in.* At the bottom of your notes for each session, draw a line below your notes to write a summary. As soon as possible after the talk (but always, before you sleep), take 3-5 minutes to write a summary of what you want to remember from these notes. Writing your summaries before you sleep will help solidify the new neural connections you want to keep.

If you review your summaries within 24 hours, you do even more to move what you learned from short term to long term memory. And you strengthen those neural connections again.

When you review your notes, in most cases all you'll need to review is your summaries.

Not sure what to write in the summary? One of the easiest ways to do it is in 3 sentences:

1) summarize what the speaker is proposing you think about or do differently

2) reference the key supports for the proposition

3) make a bulleted list of what you most want to remember later

Then create appropriate items in your calendar and to do lists.

Summary: ←

Review of Metacognitive Note-Taking in Order of Importance:

- 1) Writing a summary is the most important thing you can do to help you retain what happened in a session.
 - a. Keep the summary short so that you will do it and so that you won't overthink. This is supposed to be a summary, not a recapitulation of the material. Part of the value of the process comes from the fact that you have to decide what is most important.
 - b. Write your summary as close to the end of the session as possible. Always write it before you sleep, since one important function of sleep is to erase non-essential information accumulated during the day (and if you haven't marked the things that happened in the session as important, they are likely to be deleted). Another important function of sleep is to consolidate and file memories, so again, having that summary written before you sleep helps your brain process it appropriately. Writing the summary also strengthens the new neural connections you made during the session.
 - c. Reviewing your summary within 24 hours helps move what you learned from short-term to long-term memory. (Regular, repeated review is the best way to learn/remember anything.) After writing the summary, this is the next-most important thing you can do to help you retain what you learned. Review further reinforces your new neural connections, making them more likely to last.
 - d. Ideally, you write a summary for every 40-45 minutes worth of material in a lecture of average density. A summary for every 2-3 pages of notes is about right.
- 2) The second-most important thing you can do to help you retain what you learned in a session is to make your note-taking actively metacognitive.
 - a. Making your note-taking dialectical keeps your brain actively looking for connections—and making connections is how learning works.
 - b. Paying attention in this way helps keep you engaged and motivated.
 - c. Making your note-taking active helps prevent you from becoming passive—a state in which learning is not possible.
 - d. The mental “soundtrack” that you record in the left column is a far better aid to recall than the content itself. Recording your emotional responses is especially effective in this regard because along with repetition, emotions have the biggest influence on your ability to recall.
 - e. Write down connections you make, similarities you see, metaphors that come to you, and all associations you make—these connections are the foundation of all learning.
 - f. Writing down questions and reactions provides armatures for future reflection and further learning.
- 3) Writing header information at the top of the page facilitates learning.
 - a. Reviewing what you know about the topic moves existing knowledge into working memory, making access to that knowledge easier and faster. This improves your ability to make connections between existing knowledge and what happens in the session.
 - b. Writing out your objectives before you start keeps you focused on what you want to learn.