

# Tips for Developing Students' Note-taking Skills

 [www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/tips-for-developing-students-note-taking-skills/](http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/tips-for-developing-students-note-taking-skills/)

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Should students take notes? What about giving students access to your PowerPoint slides and lecture notes? Students have been known to ask for them pretty aggressively and lots of teachers do make them available. Is it a good idea?

The related research on using PowerPoint slides shows with some consistency that although students think using PowerPoint slides helps them learn, it does not change their grades. Findings about giving student the slides are mixed, but are quite strong against giving them your notes.



Here are some of the reasons why students should be taking notes for themselves. The practice of note-taking develops several important skills—starting with listening. You can't take notes if you aren't listening. You need to be able to take decent notes because in most professional contexts, indeed in life, you are regularly in situations that require taking in and processing information that you need to remember and later apply. You can't always be asking people to give you a copy of what they just told you.

Beyond being an essential basic skill, note-taking offers students the opportunity to make the material their own. That doesn't involve making it mean whatever they want it to mean, but it does allow them to interact with it in ways that develop the learner's understanding of it. Now, this doesn't happen when students equate note-taking with stenography and copy down exactly what the teacher says, and it doesn't happen when students recopy their notes and think that's studying. But it does happen when students work on and with their notes—when they put definitions into their own works, when they list relevant pages in the text, when they re-order the material so that it better connects with their knowledge, and when they write summaries and relate details to main points.

The reasons students should take notes may be clear to teachers, but students often remain unconvinced. When you aren't all that motivated to listen well and don't see note-taking as a valuable skill, getting notes and slides from the teacher is decidedly a preferable (read: *easier*) option. But students might be persuaded if you could prove that working with their notes will boost their exam scores, and that's what the study referenced below does. Students used the protocol described in the article to interact with their notes and when they did, their exam scores improved. [There's more about this article in the December issue of *The Teaching Professor*.]

In addition to evidence, there's lots of small ways teachers can demonstrate the value of having good notes and work with students on developing better note-taking skills. Here's a list to start your thinking.

- Identify key concepts in the day's lesson: "Now here's something you need to have in your notes. Listen carefully."
- Challenge students to retrieve things from their notes: "Look at your notes from November 5. What have you got about X? Nothing? That's not good."
- Provide a definition, pause, and give students one minute to rewrite it in their own words. Ask students why it might be important to do so.
- At the beginning of the period, give students three minutes to review their notes and summarize them in a sentence. Have several students share their summary, which the class then compares, revises, etc.
- At the end of class have students trade notes with somebody sitting near them and use their partner's notes

to review the class session. Ask them to identify what was the same and different about their notes and those of their partner?

- For frequently missed exam questions, have everyone find the date when that content was covered and see what they have in their notes that relates to the question. Ask someone who got the question correct to read what they have in their notes.
- Tell students that any notes they take in class today can be used when they take the quiz tomorrow. Follow-up at the end of class by asking how that changed listening and note-taking.

Like most other skills, note-taking can start with theoretical knowledge, but it takes practice to become an efficient and skillful note-taker. What are some ways you encourage your students to see the value of a good set of notes? Please share in the comment box.

Reference: Cohen, D., Kim, E., Tan, J., and Winkelmes, M. (2013). A note-restructuring intervention increases students' exam scores. *College Teaching*, 61 (Summer), 95-99.