

Cheng Chat: Be Note-Able !



By Richard Kearney

February is a great time to talk about taking notes!

Yes, midterms are still weeks away, and finals are a speck on the distant horizon. But it's what you're doing *right now* that will make the difference when exam time rolls around.

Most courses require at least some reading, and many require a lot. Relying on memory is not going to get you very far, even if you have an excellent memory. Just play a few rounds of the “telephone game” to see how that works.

Good note-taking is among the most important skills you can have for success. Taking notes during class helps you to focus and listen carefully to the topics under discussion. By focusing your attention, you will acquire a knack for extracting the main points from any lecture, discussion, article, chapter, or web site. With experience, the better and more efficient you'll get.

Taking notes is the most effective way to transform large and unwieldy textbooks, piles of articles, and lists of web links into a compact and manageable resource, one that is custom-made by you and for you.

Important as it is, note-taking is not usually taught, unless a teacher takes a special interest in helping students develop the skill. But it's never too late to learn, and help is available.

Often we'll use highlighting and marking up our books as a substitute for note-taking. No one denies that highlighting can be helpful - even our e-books support this function - but it's not the same the same thing as note-taking, and the more you highlight a book the more difficult it can be to search for the information you want later. Haven't you seen those textbooks with 100 index tabs sticking out of the pages?

Many faculty try to be helpful by providing students with notes, sometimes in the form of PowerPoint slides or other handouts that compress and distill main points. This is wonderful, of course, but it also makes the distributed notes just something else to read. It's too passive.

Note-taking is a transformative act that makes the material you read your own and helps enormously with your retention of important points.

Think of what happens when the body digests food. That's also a process of transformation and extraction of useful things like nutrients. So good note-taking is like digestion, and you have to take an active role in the process.

There's no need to worry about a "right" way to take notes. Plenty of note-taking systems exist, and you can get advice from the Library or your professors if you want it.

The key thing is to do it, and do it now. Your GPA will thank you.