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HEALTH | BURNING QUESTION

What's the Best Way to Take Notes?

Handwriting or typing can make a difference but the most important factor is what you do with the raw copy, one expert says



If you're taking notes for a class or in a meeting, some tips can make them more useful. PHOTO: ISTOCK

By Heidi Mitchell

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Now that so many students and employees have laptops, those leather-bound notebooks are going the way of the rotary dial. But does typing notes capture the concepts of a lecture or meeting as well as writing them longhand? One expert, Kenneth Kiewra, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, explains the most effective methods for taking notes.

Preservation Is the Point

The brain is fallible, says Dr. Kiewra, who does research on the teaching-learning process and how people develop talents. "We might experience an event and think it's easily locked away, but unless it is something of importance, we forget," he says. Information comes at us very quickly, making it difficult to effectively process what we are hearing and then store it in our long-term memory. Taking notes creates a physical record of what happened, while also making the listener more attentive. "Note-taking is incompatible with boredom," he says.

Dr. Kiewra believes the first priority of note-taking is capturing all the important information, and that writing or typing is secondary. "Don't worry about the form, that you can handle later when you have time to review your notes," he says.

Laptop vs. Paper

On digital devices, incoming messages and other notifications are distracting. True, at an average of 30-to-40 words a minute, a keyboarder will likely take more complete notes, but a longhand writer (averaging 20 or so words a minute) will tend to paraphrase, which is helpful in the learning process. "When you paraphrase you are filtering the information and putting your own stamp on it, understanding it," Dr. Kiewra says. Laptop note-takers, he adds, may get stuck if the speaker draws a graph, though they could pull out a smart phone and take a photo; a writer can simply sketch it out.

While the psychology professor doesn't know anyone who uses one of the major systems of shorthand, he says most people ultimately come up with their own ways to accelerate writing, by dropping vowels or creating symbols for commonly-used words. "Longhand writers also do something called 'signaling' in their notes," says the professor. "They might bold words or use all capitals, write in the margins, draw arrows, create a hierarchy. There is a lot more thinking going on than verbatim typing allows."

The act of writing longhand and organizing helps the writer reach abstract conclusions and store the material in the brain, he says. Studies have shown that students who type notes in class perform worse on conceptual questions than those who use pen and paper. But typing isn't a deal breaker as long as typists go over their notes and follow certain methods for processing the information, Dr. Kiewra says.

Serious Strategies

Whether typing or writing, people tend to be pretty poor at note-taking, taking down only about a third of relevant information, Dr. Kiewra says. While typing may result in too much information, writing in longhand may lead to missing the big points.

To avoid these pitfalls, Dr. Kiewra created a study method he calls SOAR (Select Organize Associate Regulate). After taking complete notes, the writer "selects" important information: This can mean taking lots of notes on a keyboard then editing them down, or highlighting points in written notes. Either way, "starting with more notes is better, because people tend to be overly selective," leaving out important learning tools such as examples, he says.

The next step is to organize those notes, in order to easily grab critical details and see bigger themes. "The brain is hungry to categorize information," he says. These organized notes often look like a matrix, with topics across the top, categories along the side, and details and examples in the cells, he says. Then comes "associating," in which you look over the notes and try to make connections to your own experience or create a memory trick to sear salient points into your brain. The final step is to "regulate": Go over the organized notes and see if they make sense and lead to a deeper understanding. This SOAR method, he says, can help whether you're taking a history class or processing what just happened in a major meeting.

Old-School Transcribers

Even if you record an interview or lecture, transcribing word-for-word isn't enough to result in deep processing, Dr. Kiewra says. Though studies show that the act of taking notes whether by typing or longhand helps with memory retention, they should be thought of as raw ingredients that can help reach a deeper understanding of the material later on, he says: "If you don't do anything with the notes you took in the moment, they are basically useless."