



*a podcast about  
how we learn,  
how we teach,  
and how they overlap*

### **Episode 17: How to Take Effective Notes**

[Theme Music]

**Adam:** Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

**Dinur:** And I'm Dinur Blum, I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

**Adam:** And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, and how we teach, and how they overlap.

Welcome back to Learning Made Easier! This is Episode 17, where we'll talk about how to take notes that will work as study tools and review tools, not just frantically scribbled transcripts of the lecture.

**Dinur:** Are your notes okay, but not great? Do you need help with how to take good notes in class? How do you even know if you have this problem? Well, here are a few telltale signs that your notes are not going to work for you as study tools.

**Adam:** They're scribbled, not written, as in you're writing so fast that your writing is hard to read. Maybe you go back and look at it, and say "what the heck is that?" because you can't read your own writing. Or if you type your notes in your computer, the typing is just paragraph, after paragraph, after paragraph of the teacher's lecture written down word for word, wall to wall.

**Dinur:** Your notes are taken on a computer, not by hand. But I think we should put a caveat: There are some students who legitimately need a computer, because it's hard for them to write. If you are not in this situation, meaning you can write fairly comfortably, but you're only writing on or you're only typing the notes on the computer, this may be a problem.

**Adam:** Your notes might be full of examples, but they're kind of light on terms and definitions. Now here's the reason that happens. Most teachers will give examples of what they're talking about, in hopes that students make a connection with the terms that they're talking about, but you still need the term and its definition. The examples aren't going to show up on the exam, but the term is. Knowing what it means? That's going to be part of the exam. Understanding why they're using this term? That might be part of the exam.

The example, on the other hand? Probably not.

**Dinur:** Maybe your notes are written with complete words, and absolutely no abbreviations. Shorthand is your friend. It helps you save time, which helps you focus. If you're writing down complete sentences, with every word completely written out, you're missing a lot of information.

**Adam:** Right, because when you're writing that many characters, it takes time, and that's time that you really need to grab the main points.

Another issue is that your notes might be the kind that are wall to wall, margin to margin, and there's no space left to make notes. There's no space left to clarify, there's no space left to put in a definition that you forgot to write down. There's no space left or checking them against somebody else's notes and saying, "oh yeah," and writing in, "I missed this part." And when it comes to your book...

**Dinur:** Yeah, let's say you want to make notes in your book or on articles you're reading, and you say, "I'm going to highlight" or "I'm going to underline what I think is important. "And you start highlighting, and then the next sentence seems really important, and the next one, and so on, and before you know it, you've highlighted the entire page. And you haven't really added any of your own thoughts, whether you're trying to summarize information or what you want emphasized made clear to you.

**Adam:** And the thing about highlighting and underlining - a lot of students don't realize this - if all you're doing is highlighting, you may not even be reading what you're highlighting. A lot of students treat it almost like a coloring book: I'm going to highlight this whole paragraph.

Are you reading it? Underlining is marginally better, because at least you have to look at each word as you underline it, but if you don't make any notes in the margins why are you underlining it? Why are you highlighting it?

So, if this is what your notes look like - and for most students they do - you may need some help creating notes that actually work as study tools. If they're scribbled, or walls of text, or crammed together on the page with no space to make notes or to explain anything to yourself, you're not going to want to study using those notes. In fact, they're probably going to discourage you from trying!

**Dinur:** And there are a lot of methods and different layouts for taking notes. Cornell Notes is one of the best known, and we'll provide a template for that in the show notes, but in order to take effective notes, you must know both what goes in them and what should stay out of them.

**Adam:** So, Dinur and I are going to talk about the process for actually taking effective notes. Now I've coached students on this. I've actually had several students just in the last few weeks come to my office hours and say, "I'm studying for seven hours a day."

And they show me their notes, and for a fifteen-minute lecture they have 19 pages of wall-to-wall, word-for-word handwritten notes. And I ask them, "how are you using these to study?"

And they say "well, I just don't - I have to write everything down, don't I?"

No, you don't.

So, note-taking. First of all, a lot of students think that note-taking is a single step. I go to class, I sit down, I write down what the teacher says, and I leave.

That's not the way it works. Why are you writing it down if you're not going to use it?

So, the first step is to take down those messy notes that you're taking in class, but then you need to rewrite them, so that they actually make sense, and so they actually work for you as study tools. And remember, any time you interact with material, you're studying, so rewriting your notes is not a waste of time, because when you rewrite your notes you're still studying.

So, here are the five steps that you've got to take when you are taking notes in class, and some of these have sub steps of their own, so we'll comment on that. But if those notes are going to be useful to you later, you've got to start with preparation.

**Dinur:** Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, “if you fail to prepare, then you prepare to fail.” So, when you're preparing to take notes, good notes, your first step is reviewing the material.

Before you come to class, you, as the student, have to get familiar with the material. Look at the readings for that week. If there's a book chapter or an article, you read that, you make notes of the important points. You work as best you can through it and when there are areas you don't know or you're confused with, make a note of that.

That way, you know you can ask in class, or you know what to listen for during the lecture. You're going to find that you're going to have a lot less trouble taking notes. If you're already familiar with the terms or with the general ideas that the lecture is going to cover, because you've at least gotten an introduction to it. You've given yourself a once-over, so now the lecture is reinforcing, it's strengthening something that you're already a little bit familiar with.

And keep in mind it really, really helps to review material several times. First time, you get passing familiarity and know what to expect. The second time you read through, you get into some of the nitty-gritty details. You read it a third time, see if you missed anything the first two times.

**Adam:** Another part of preparation is making an important terms list. So before you go to class, make a list of the important terms or concepts that you find in your readings, or the videos you have to watch, or the podcasts you have to listen to, on the first blank pages that are available in your notebook. And leave some space for the in-class definitions of those terms.

Now, don't try to fill in the definitions during class, but make the list, because it will help you identify any gaps in your notes once you've taken them. And it's another way to really make sure that you're aware of “These are the things I need to listen for. These are the things I need to ask about if the teacher doesn't mention, say, anomie. Then I need to put my hand up and say, ‘Dr. Smith, anomie was in the video, or anomie was in the reading. You haven't mentioned it. Can you help me understand it, because I'm really kind of uncertain?’”

**Dinur:** Another step to prepare in is writing your notes by hand. Believe it or not, writing by hand increases retention, and it also means you're going to have to write down what's actually important, instead of just transcribing every single word the professor says. It's not a good idea.

Writing by hand allows you more flexibility. You can draw a diagram if it explains an idea better than words.

Now a big recommendation is that when you write by hand, use clear legible handwriting. Print if you can't do cursive, because you need to be able to read your notes later on.

**Adam:** One of the things I recommend learning for this purpose is draftsman's hand, which is an all-caps writing style that is used for blueprints. It's used for engineering designs. My father did it when he was in college, because he originally intended to be an architect, and I picked it up from him. My writing, when I don't write in that particular draftsman's hand, the all-caps writing, is amazingly bad, but if I use the all-caps writing it's legible, and I can write it fairly quickly.

**Dinur:** Much like Adam, my handwriting looks like a combination of both a doctor and a three-year-old.

**Adam:** The three-year-old, maybe a three-year-old doctor?

**Dinur:** Yeah, I mean, we both know the pains of writing something down, reading, and going "what the hell did I just write here?" But what I would tend to do is, I would take those awfully written notes, and I would type them, but I would also talk through the notes. I would verbally say each word, because that way I was not only writing it down by hand, the first time, I was writing it a second time when I was typing it out, and now I'm both saying it and I'm hearing it. So that three of my senses are engaged.

**Adam:** And it really helps to engage those senses. When we have Gretchen Wegner on in Episode 20, she's going to talk about the study senses, which is one of the methods that she came up with for the Anti-Boring Approach to Learning. So, and yes I absolutely agree, that if you are writing by hand and your writing is not great, train yourself to write by hand.

But also, once you've written it by hand, you don't need to rewrite your notes by hand. If, at that point, you want to take the notes and rewrite them by typing them up, that's totally okay.

Now the second step is, when you get to class, or when you sit down to watch a video lecture, or read your book, or listen to a podcast that your teacher assigned, you've got to take efficient notes without missing the important stuff.

Now part of how to take good notes is about what you write down, and part of it is about what you leave out, and this is a skill set. It is not something that comes naturally. But it is something you can learn, and knowing about it makes it much easier to learn.

So, first, abbreviations are your friend! Some common abbreviations that you see a lot are b/c for "because," w/ for "with," the letter B and the number four for "before" and just P for "page." As long as you know an abbreviation, don't hesitate to use it.

Abbreviations, like Dinur said earlier, they're a form of shorthand. They allow you to take your notes much faster, while still understanding what you meant when you reread them later. And if you come up with your own shorthand or your own abbreviations, use them! These notes are for you, they're not for someone else. So use abbreviations that make sense to you.

And we've also included some downloads in the show notes that have some common abbreviations which you can use. I recommend - I give this handout to my students, and I recommend that they try adding ten abbreviations a week. So, get really good at these ten, and then add another ten, and add another ten. Before you know it, your writing may not make sense to anybody but you, but you will know what you said.

**Dinur:** And Adam mentioned diagramming earlier. One of the things that I do a lot in my own notes. when I'm trying to show that one thing leads to another, leads to another. is I just use arrow.s because that way it tells me what comes after what. and it saves you a little time.

Now you also want to leave space in your notes, so that you can write in clarifications, ideas, question,s and definitions. And one way to do this is to divide your paper into thirds, with the right-hand two-thirds being used for class notes, and the left-hand third being left blank, to allow you to write in clarifications, notes, and so on. Just fold your paper to create a crease line, and stay on the right-hand side of the line.

Another way is to write your notes double-spaced. Leave a blank line after each line you write, or two blank lines, so that there's room for notes and for expansion.

**Adam:** Now let's talk about what to put in your notes, because we've talked about how to leave space so that you can make notes on what you wrote, and how to use abbreviations to save some space, but now we should really talk about what makes effective notes. What do you put in them?

**Dinur:** One you should really write down any of the following things if they come up in class: terms and their definitions - and here's the key, put the definitions in your own words. It's okay if you try and use the author's or your professors the first time, but then translate it into words that make sense to you, because you have to understand the material.

**Adam:** And I've got to say about that - don't use the textbook's definition, unless it's already simply worded. A lot of textbook writers, with the best of intentions, forget that they're writing to undergrads - and they write as if their textbook is being written for people who have PhDs. I was required once to use a textbook - and I won't mention the name of the author - but the definitions that were in the sidebars were so incredibly, stultifyingly full of jargon, that my students were more confused by the definitions than they were by what I was talking about in class.

You need to write the definition so that you could explain it to your grandmother and she would understand it. And so I tell my students, use "grandma language."

**Dinur:** Make sure that you keep track of facts, names and dates. Look, not every teacher is going to have you memorize dates. Some will, but you definitely need to be familiar with them. You're going to know what your teachers emphasize better than we would, but you also need to keep track of who's important in the lecture, because if your teacher is mentioning specific people, it's because maybe they did something or their ideas were so important to what you're learning, that it's worth associating the idea with that name.

And you also want to keep track of facts, because, well, that's very useful information that you're going to at some point be tested on, or you're going to need to use when you're writing a paper. So, it helps if you have that information handy.

**Adam:** Now another couple of things to keep an eye out for:

If the teacher took the time to put it on the board, you should write it down. Because putting things on the board - I don't know if you've ever written on a whiteboard or a chalkboard, but it's annoying to have to write on a whiteboard or a chalkboard, because writing vertically is really uncomfortable. So if the teacher took the time to be uncomfortable and stick it on the board, put it in your notes.

Also, if the teacher asks a question to the class about something, write that question down and make sure you get its answer. If the professor's asking you for the answer, it means they expect

you to know it. That's also really big blinking neon light "I'm probably going to put this on a test sometime!" So, make sure that if it's put on the board or if the teacher asks a question about it, it goes in your notes.

**Dinur:** And just as we say that you should write anything the teacher asks a question about in class, if you have a question, ask it, write down the answer - because clearly that was information that you didn't know before. Now you have it, so it makes sense for you to keep it.

**Adam:** And a suggestion about that if you have a question: write it down first, then raise your hand. This will avoid the situation where you've had your hand up for five minutes, while the teacher's answering other people's questions, and when he or she gets to you, you're like, "I don't remember what my question was." So, write it down and then put your hand up.

**Dinur:** And a dirty little secret is, if you have a question about something, odds are some of your classmates have that same question too. But people are afraid to ask questions - and we've discussed this in previous episodes. So if you have a question, or when other students have questions about the material, write that down and write down the answer.

Also, if your teacher starts listing things for you: first this happened, second, third... or something like "five reasons why" in a non-BuzzFeed sentence, write those lists down. Because odds are, part of those lists are going to appear on a test or as part of an assignment.

**Adam:** And anything the teacher identifies as "important" or "significant" or "having an impact," "having an effect," "formative," "central," when you hear words like this, these are teacher code words. They say "this is going to be on the exam; write it down."

Now that's a lot to put in your notes, but there are also things you should leave out. Avoid writing down examples, unless a specific example really helps you understand a concept in ways that you didn't understand it.

Also, you're not a court reporter. Don't write every single word the teacher says. A word-for-word transcript is not what you're looking for here. It's not going to help you remember.

How to take good notes is at least as much about what you leave out of them as it is about what you put into them. So, now that you've finished your notes in class, or writing from the book, or writing from the video lecture, or whatever you're taking notes on, you're not done yet. You have a set of messy notes; now it's time to refine.



**Dinur:** Yeah, so you've got to clarify your notes. You've got to make them make sense to you. After your class is over, take a half hour to an hour to go for your day's notes, while that lecture is still fresh in your mind. This is one of the reasons we tell you to leave space. This lets you write in clarifications and definitions that might not have made it into your notes in class, and you can also move definitions from your lecture notes into the list of terms you made before class started.

So, now you're reorganizing the list, or your notes, so that they are making more sense to you.

**Adam:** And at least once a week you should get together with two or three of your classmates - yes, we mean a study group - so that you can fill in the holes in each other's notes, because Bob might have heard and written down 90% of the lecture; Maria might have too, and each of them missed at different 10%. You will also have missed a different 10%.

But if you get together, you can fill in the hole in Bob's notes, Bob can fill in the hole in Maria's notes, and Maria's got the information you need to fill in yours.

So, it's a really good idea to get together, share copies of your notes, and fill in and clarify what you missed or what you didn't understand.

**Dinur:** And you get the bonus of forming a study group, so that when test time comes around you've already been working with a few people and you can prepare for tests together.

Now you've written notes the first time, you've clarified them. Now you have to rewrite your notes. After you filled in the holes in your notes, spend some time each week rewriting them.

The notes we take in class are never organized, even if we use an outline format because teachers hop all over the place even in the most organized and planned-out lectures. I ask my students a lot of questions, and there are times where we will get sidetracked on something related to the lecture, or something related to a future lecture, or something related to something previously discussed.

So, even though I've written out and I've planned my lectures, there's going to be some flexibility and some jumping around. Which, by definition, likely means that my students' notes are going to be all over the place, because we're jumping around. The classmate might ask the teacher about a concept covered ten minutes ago, right?

So, I'm not even talking about a previous week or a previous day, I'm just talking about ten minutes ago, fifteen minutes ago, "I didn't understand something, can you explain it?"

And now your notes are going to be out of order. And if your teacher has to hop from topic to topic, it's going to happen that your notes are going to do the same thing, and that kind of disorganized notes really isn't going to help you very much.

**Adam:** Another reason to rewrite your notes: remember we talked about "take notes in a way that makes sense to you." Well, the teacher's organization of their notes might not be the organization that works for you. Your history teacher might take their lecture about the Revolutionary War, and put it in order of chronology, in order of the date,s because it makes sense to them to do it that way, but for you, categorizing what happened by the type of battle, or by the people involved in the event, might make more sense.

If your teacher is talking about gun violence and they talk about types of gun violence that involve children and involve teens and involve adults, that's the way that they organized it. That's the way that makes sense to them. But you might notice more that some of those gun violence incidents are homicides, some of them are suicides and some of them are accidents, and that makes more sense to you. So when you rewrite your notes you need to rewrite them in an order, and a format, and an organization that makes sense to you, because you're the one who's going to need to use them. You're the one who's going to need to study from them, not your teacher.

**Dinur:** Absolutely. And the last part is that interacting with course material is a form of studying. Rewriting your notes makes you interact with the material directly, because you're refining, you're rewording, clarifying, organizing a lot of information that you're getting in class. And this is a way of studying and a way of preparing for tests.

So, by the time test time rolls around, if you've been doing this consistently, the test should be a little lower-stress than it would be if you hadn't been going through these steps.

**Adam:** Now there are three main ways to rewrite your notes. You can summarize them, you can group them, or you can image them, so, we'll take these one at a time.

So, in summarizing, take your original notes and condense them. Try to break them down to - bring them down to like half, maybe even a third, of the original size of your notes. So if you had three pages of notes, boil them down to a page and a half, or even just a page. This forces you

to identify what's really important, and what's just detail. And you want to study what's really important, not the details.

**Dinur:** In grouping, collect all of the information that's similar or that goes together and organize your notes around the different groups. There are a few different ways to do this, including mind maps, outlines, and columns. Often the method you use will depend on what kind of information you're trying to group.

Sometimes it's similar concepts, sometimes its cause and effect, sometimes you group information based on chronology or time. As long as the way you group your information makes sense to you, the way as you see fit, and what we mean by the way you group makes sense to you is that if someone asks you why this information goes together, you have an easy ready answer that would make sense to both of you.

**Adam:** That's right, and then finally, in imaging use pictures, drawings, color, and other visual methods to turn your notes into basically a pictogram of some sort. Have you ever seen one of those online videos, where someone's giving a speech and another person is drawing on a whiteboard to create images and big words and other visual indicators of the topic and the ideas? Well then, you've got a general sense of how to do this already.

You don't have to do it as quickly as they do it. You don't have to do it as artistically as they do it. You can use stick figures if you want. You can do the XKCD route. But you get the idea. Draw it as a picture. Maybe that's a new way to learn it.

If you're an artistic person this may be your go-to. My older child is a manga artist, and when they were in high school, when they took notes for history, they basically drew a comic strip of the Revolutionary War for every lecture. They got A's and B's in their class. The teacher - it drove the teacher crazy, because that's not the way that they would have taken notes but it is the way that works for my older kid and so they basically had like a comic book at the end of it.

**Dinur:** Oh, keep in mind that you can use these methods together or separately. The important part is that you actually use them. If you follow this process of taking notes, you're going to find that your notes become a lot more useful and a lot more helpful. Practice taking notes with your book and other course materials first, then move into the classroom, because when you're looking at something that's written down or you're watching a YouTube video, you have the benefit of being able to go back in real time to clarify what you need, and then taking notes in

the classroom, where you don't have that option, is kind of that next step. You might find that your new methods of note-taking cover a lot more ground than you thought they would.

Now we've geared this a lot towards students. but teachers can use this information too and the big idea for both Adam and I is that as teachers, we can work through taking notes with our students, because remember, we're used to taking notes. We've passed a bachelor's degree, some of us have gone to graduate school, some of us have done professional schooling, and all of these demand that we be able to take care of a lot of information, have it makes sense to us - so this is a skill set we've been working on for years. We've been developing it. And our students, regardless of their background, whether they're a first-generation student or not, they don't have the benefit of this experience.

Now our students believe they need to know everything that their teacher or professor says word for word. Not because they're trying to cheat, but I think a lot of them view it as a deference to authority, taken to an extreme. That this is the person who has a degree, they're the one teaching me, and so everything they say must be gold.

Well, no, like we're trying to convey information. We want you to learn the information. But you don't need to write down everything your teacher says going forward.

**Adam:** So, I've had students who get very confused about this, because they they say, "well, wait a minute, everything you say is going to be on the exam, right?"

Students, if your teacher is talking about an example from their own experience, it's highly unlikely that it's going to be on the exam. They're just trying to give you, first of all, some flavor so that it's not just I'm standing here talking about dry boring stuff for 45 minutes.

They're also actually trying to give you a little time to write down what you think while they talk about it. So think of it as sort of like a downtime moment, where they're just, they don't want it to be silent, because it's uncomfortable for the room to be silent, but they're just filling up a little space while you write down the main terms and give yourself a little time to absorb it.

And examples are often a way of sort of helping you absorb what we're talking about.

So here's how students can use this, now we've been focusing on how students can use this for most of this episode but remind yourself, your notes are important, because they're going to be the basis for most of your other study tools. You are going to base your self quizzes on them.

You're going to base your flashcards on them. You're going to probably base what you do in your study groups on them.

So, the notes are important and so it's a really good idea to slow down, so that you get the important information. And there are tricks to figuring out what information is important. Go back to step 3, where you're saying "all right, what do I put in my notes?" And there are ways to figure out how to make sure you didn't miss anything, and go back to clarifying your notes.

And so it's important that you do those things, because once you realize that your notes are a tool and they're actually the toolbox for most of your other tools, so remind yourself too that your first set of notes? They're messy. They're going to be messy. There's nothing you can do about that. You will need to update them. You will need to edit them. You will need to rewrite them. They're not going to be perfect the first time. Be okay with that.

Finally, remember that using your notes - that anything you do with your notes, whether it's writing the first time, or filling in the holes, or rewriting them so that they're usable - all of that is study, and so all of that is stuff that you can do with your notes.

**Dinur:** And also remember, you want effective notes. You don't need perfect notes, but you want your notes to work for you.

That's it for Episode 17! if you're finding this podcast helpful please share it with your friends. We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help even more people you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on blurbry.com, also we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review on of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

**Adam:** And be sure to join us next week for Episode 18, when we talk about how to get out of a slump and keep moving forward.

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**Dinur:** We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

**Adam:** If you want to support us, please go to [www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier](http://www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier).

**Dinur:** We look forward to seeing you next week.