After: reviewing & retaining information

How long do you think you retain information after a lecture? If you simply put your notes away and never look at them again it is likely you will forget about 80% of the lecture within as little as 1 week after.

So what can you do after a lecture to help you remember?

- Soon after the lecture, spend a little time thinking about and writing what you have learnt without consulting your notes. This gets your brain to process the information and makes a good basis for revision notes later.
- Talk with friends – check what you understood and compare what you found out…it’s a good chance to have a coffee too 😊
- Skim over your notes – identify any gaps you need to fill, then do some extra reading to fill them!
- Do a coversheet or spider diagram summarising the key points of the lecture as a trigger when it comes to revising.
- Have a simple and easy to use filing system so you can find everything again e.g. a box file for each module.

Top Tip: Do not waste time by copying your notes out neatly afterwards - but do something more active and effective, like turn your notes into a spider diagram, a series of flash cards, or a poster.

For more information....

See Research 2. Making useful notes

See Lectures, seminars & group work 2. Getting the most from seminars

See Lectures, seminars & group work 3. Effective group work

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Before: preparing for a lecture

Coming into a lecture unprepared - especially if it is on an entirely new topic - can soon leave you struggling to follow the lecturer and awash in a sea of unfamiliar terms and ideas.

Doing a little preparation beforehand can help you follow the lecture by giving you a basic framework onto which you can hang all the new information.

Things you could do before a lecture:

- Look at the lecture title and outline to see the basic content
- Get any handouts from Blackboard and skim through them
- If it is a new topic, find an overview on the web or in a textbook
- Think about how this lecture fits into the whole module and with previous lectures
- Think - what do you want to find out from this lecture?

….and of course get all the pens, paper, and equipment you need, and set yourself a reminder alarm if you are likely to forget to turn up!

If you have dyslexia, or find it hard to follow lectures, then preparation before is really beneficial – make sure you get to see any handouts in advance and also look up unfamiliar terms.

What to avoid...

There is no need to do a lot of extra reading before your lectures. This is unnecessary and inefficient, as you may duplicate what is covered in the lecture anyway, or go off on the wrong track. Remember lectures are your introduction to a topic, so save in-depth reading for afterwards.

During: active listening & note-taking

Lectures can involve a lot of multi-tasking: you have to listen, comprehend, understand, interpret, and write down information, often all at once! So it will help to have strategies which will keep your mind active and organised.

Listening:

Listening and understanding are often more important than trying to take lots of notes. Focus on the lecturer rather than having your head down scribbling notes.

Listen actively by thinking about what you are hearing. What questions are raised? Do you agree with what is being said? What evidence is there to support this? Does it link to anything you have come across before?

Look for clues: if the lecturer lists, repeats, or summarises something it is likely to be important. Pay attention to the lecturer’s introductions and conclusions, as these also tell you what is important.

If you lose track of what is being said, don’t just switch off or worry about what you may have missed. Listen carefully to the next section of the lecture – you may even find that you can work out what you’ve missed.

Note-taking:

Develop a system for taking notes that works for you. You might use abbreviations, colour, keywords, and pictures – whatever makes your notes meaningful. If you have handouts, find a way of annotating them or writing notes that link to them.

Resist the temptation to transcribe every word the lecturer says – this won’t help you understand. Leave your pen on the desk and only pick it up when there is something important to note down.

Spider diagrams can be a good way to show connections and avoid transcribing everything.

Note down your own thoughts as you go: for example, ideas to follow-up later or parts you don’t understand that you need to read more about. Make it clear which are your own ideas – perhaps underline or circle them?

Finally, leave some spaces so you can add to your notes later and fill in any gaps.

To record or not to record...

If you record lectures you will find it very time-consuming to transcribe everything afterwards – not an efficient use of your time! Try to take written notes too, and use the recording as a back up. If you have a counter on the recorder, you can note down the times of key information to find it later.