

The Cornell Note-Taking Method

The Cornell Method was developed by Dr. Walter Pauk of Cornell University and is an excellent study system for organizing and reviewing your notes to increase your comprehension and critical thinking of course material, which typically results in improved test scores.

The distinguishing feature of the Cornell method is the layout of the page on which you write your notes. The page layout includes large margins on the left and bottom of the page. A picture of this layout (not to scale), with dimensions, is shown below.

Step 1: Record Notes

Prepare your paper by drawing a vertical line about 2 ½ inches from the left edge of your paper. This left column will become your cue column or self-test column, which you leave blank until step 2. The right, larger column is where you will write your notes. You can use any format you like to write your notes. Ensure that you include any information that the professor displays on the board, such as diagrams and problems/ solutions. Add verbal examples, questions/ answers, and other relevant, comments that the professor expresses during lecture. As you take notes, emphasize key ideas, rather than the actual words used to convey those ideas.

Step 2: Review Your Notes and Create Your Cue Column

This area should not be written in during the lecture, while you are taking notes. This column is created when you review your notes, ideally within a day of the class lecture. Reviewing the material within 24-48 hours of the lecture and several times a week thereafter can increase your long-term recall of information from approximately 20% to over 70%. Constant review also eliminates the stressful practice of cramming before a test or re-learning information you have forgotten during the intervening weeks.

In the cue/ self-test column, write key words or brief phrases to summarize the main points of the lecture. Develop and write potential test questions that you think your professor could ask on a test. Creating practice test questions is a very powerful and successful study strategy that significantly increases your understanding of the material as well as your long-term retention of the information.

Step 3: Summarize Your Notes

The area below the horizontal margin near the bottom of the page should be reserved for a summary of the notes on that page. A summary is brief – at most, only a few sentences. Summarizing information in your own words is another way of reviewing and critically thinking about what you have learned. It helps you to identify what you know and understand, as well

as highlighting the information for which you need more clarification from professors or study partners. Summaries can include diagrams and illustrations, equations, problems/ solutions, as well as words.

Step 4: Test Yourself

After you have completed your self-test column and summary, quiz yourself. Cover up the right-hand column where you recorded your notes and use the key words and self-test questions to review the information. Identify the concepts and facts that you had difficulty recalling, and study the information you didn't know or understand completely more carefully.

Step 5: Frequent Review

Review your notes and test yourself several times a week until you have a complete and accurate understanding of all the material. Use your textbook to supplement and clarify your notes to a gain a better understanding of terms, definitions, and concepts. Reviewing over several days, versus cramming before a test, ensures deeper learning and increases your chances of remembering what you have learned.

