Brain-Friendly Note-Taking

Picture this: You’ve just finished English class. For most of the hour, you were feverishly scribbling notes, trying to capture the important points the teacher was making. You get home that night to study, open your notes—and just stare. All you see is a jumble of words. Even though your jottings are comprehensive, you don’t know what’s important and what’s not. You have bits of what the teacher said, but you’re not sure how they fit together. It’s like you have the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but you can’t see the whole picture.

What do you do? Call a classmate and ask her to explain the lesson to you, hoping that she took better notes than you did? Attempt to memorize everything you wrote down and hope that you manage to retain the right information? Pray for divine assistance?

If you’ve ever had such a problem, you need Notes:TM, a brain-friendly note-taking technique that will increase your ability to see the big picture, enable you to review more efficiently, and help you recall more accurately. Notes:TM is short for notes: taking and making. The most important feature of this information-gathering system is that it lets you to record your personal thoughts and conclusions while simultaneously capturing the key parts of a lecture.

Studies show that an emotional connection to learning increases recall. Think back to any emotionally charged event in your life and notice how easily you can recall the experience in detail, even though it may have taken place years ago. Using Notes:TM, you can create a greater emotional connection to the material you’re learning, making it easier to remember.

In order to learn Notes:TM, it’s helpful to understand the distinction between note-taking and note-making. Note-taking entails listening to what the teacher is saying and writing down the key points as you go. Note-making involves jotting down your own thoughts, questions and impressions as you listen to the material being presented. Notes:TM lets you do both things at the same time.

Notes:TM is a way of applying both our conscious and subconscious minds to the same information in a purposeful way. In fact, both minds are at work no matter what note-taking method we use! While our conscious minds are intently focusing on the process of getting the material down on paper, our subconscious minds are reacting, forming impressions, making connections, and doing a multitude of things more or less automatically. Notes:TM synchronizes both of these mental activities to achieve a more effective result.

To use Notes:TM, start with a blank piece of paper and draw a sort of lopsided T—a horizontal line across the top and a vertical line about one-third of the way in from the right edge. On the left note-taking side, write down what the teacher is saying—key points, terms, diagrams, figures, etc.—or key points from what you’re reading. On the right note-making side, record any thoughts that pop into your head during the lecture—your thoughts, feelings, questions and reactions. Write whatever comes to mind, uncensored, like . . .

Wow—interesting . . . boring! . . . where else have I hear/read this? . . . ??? GET HELP! . . .

Writing your thoughts down helps you to focus and keep your attention on what the teacher is saying. Later, it can help you better understand your notes, prompt you to ask questions, or just notice the items that had the biggest impact on you when you were hearing or reading them.

It’s important when using Notes:TM to take a moment after class to go back over your notes and add quick graphics on the right note-making side—any kind of pictures and symbols that are meaningful to you. For example, you could try using exclamation points to signify important points, arrows connecting similar thoughts.
and ideas, smiley faces for positive content and sad faces for negative content. You can also use different colors—changing colors with each new topic—either during the lecture or with highlighters when you review.

When you review your notes, the notes and graphics on the right note-making side trigger your mind to remember what the teacher was saying as well as relive what you were consciously and subconsciously thinking at the time. Often, the most valuable thing we get from a lecture is not the material itself but the ideas it sparks in our minds.

Like any new skill, Notes:TM will take practice before it becomes a permanent part of your information-gathering system. It may feel strange and awkward at first, but give it a chance—and practice! Your brain will thank you for it.