Say Focused for Meaningful and Memorable Notes

Students often find themselves daydreaming in the middle of an important lesson. Here’s why. The teacher speaks at the rate of 200 to 300 words a minute. The brain can process language at 600 to 800 words a minute. It’s no wonder that during long lessons, students’ minds start to fill in that lag time with more interesting things: tomorrow’s date, last Friday’s football game, today’s lunch. The teacher’s words trigger associations that send the students off to la-la land.

Even if they’re taking notes, students’ minds still tend to wander. And unfortunately, without cultivating some habits to keep them focused, their notes may be little more than hurried, incomprehensible scribbles that end up being of little or no use to them. The main purpose of note-taking—whether creating a mind map of any other form of notes—is to help us remember valuable information, so our notes will be meaningless if they don’t trigger our memory.

Here are some tips we’ve put together to help students stay focused and make their note-taking more effective. And although directed at students, they’re equally effective for anyone who wants to remember what takes place in a similar setting, such as a meeting.

1. **Listen Actively**
   
   Ask yourself, *What does the teacher expect me to learn? Why? What is he saying? How does it relate to the subject? Is it important? Is it something I need to be sure to remember?* Asking these questions keeps you focused on the teacher and the content being delivered, and helps you to separate what’s important from what’s not important.

2. **Observe Attentively**
   
   Pay attention to clues you can pick up from the teacher and your reading material. Clues in the reading material can take the form of headings, bold type, italics, pictures, graphs, and diagrams. Some books have chapter outlines that contain important topics. Look at section and chapter summaries. Note the author’s or teacher’s conclusions. Look for physical clues from the teacher too. Every teacher has a unique style and you can pick up on important points by becoming familiar with that style. Pay attention to the teacher’s facial expressions, gestures, body movements, and raised or lowered voice. Notice when she repeats an idea or a word, and be attentive to what she writes on the board. Always sit as close to the front of the room as possible—it’s easier to pick up on important clues that way.

3. **Participate**
   
   If you don’t understand something or have questions about it, ask! Join in discussions. Some people hold back, worrying about what others might think. Surveys show that people in an audience usually think highly of those who participate, often envying them for their courage. Besides, what’s the worst other people can think—that you’re selfish in wanting to gain new knowledge?

4. **Preview**
   
   If you know what the teacher is going to discuss, preview the material and find as much information on it as possible beforehand. Having some knowledge ahead of time will help you identify important points during a speech or lecture.
You’ll also know which concepts are unclear to you, so you can be prepared to ask questions. As you hear bits of information, you’ll find it easier to see how they fit together in the big picture. Previewing is one of the most effective ways to ensure success and understanding.

5. **Make the Auditory Visual**

Your notes should be personal and meaningful to you, just like snapshots. Have you ever noticed how a picture from a vacation or important event brings a flood of memories—things you’d forgotten?

When you’re taking in information, add visual associations to your notes like symbols, drawings, and arrows as they occur to you. This way, your notes, even if reviewed months later, will remind you instantly of material you knew was important at the time—and need to recall now.

6. **Making Reviewing Easy**

When taking notes, write on only one side of the paper. Use single sheets, not pages in a bound notebook. This way you can lay the sheets out in front of you or hang them on the wall later when you’re reviewing.

Try these six steps and you’ll find your notes becoming much more meaningful—and memorable!