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Part One

The Big Picture
1 Taking Notes

INTRODUCTION

In lectures, some of us hope to rely on our memories and some of us try to write down absolutely everything. But unless you have a brilliant memory, the first method won’t work, and if you try the second, you’ll exhaust yourself and your notes might not make much sense. You need a method that picks up key points without having to write too much.

Note-taking from written materials involves a different procedure. You’ll be taking notes for an assignment and aiming to find just those things that will serve your purpose. So you need to analyse what you’re reading as you go along. The better you become at understanding a text, the better your notes will be and, consequently, the better your essays.

NOTE-TAKING IN LECTURES AND CLASS SESSIONS

In any class or lecture session, you need to spend some time considering what’s being said. Lecture sessions sometimes include brief periods of discussion too, so your mind needs to be free to follow these. What you need is a set of notes that give you outline information in a very readable format. So notes written in sentences aren’t going to make things easy for you. You’ll need to get into the habit of writing down individual words and phrases. Listen out for names, dates, technical terms and other key words. This might take a bit of practice.

* note down names, dates, technical terms and key words and phrases

Watch, first of all, for the way a lecture is structured. Some tutors start by telling you what will be covered. So if you’re told there will be three sections, mark them out as you go along. Your syllabus may also give you some clues as to the important areas to concentrate on, so check it out before the lecture and then listen out for key topics.
You might be given a hand-out showing the main areas of the day’s lecture. This is an invaluable guide. There may even be spaces for you to fill things in as you go along.

* think about the structure of a lecture and put headings in your notes

Quite often, the way a lecturer speaks can give a clue to important points: a tutor’s voice might rise, he or she might stress certain words very strongly, he or she might pause before an important point or even repeat a phrase or two. Note these down and either underline or ring them as you go along. You’ll probably want to leave out extras such as full descriptions and details of examples, because there just isn’t time to record everything.

It’s possible to use your page rather like a drawing-board, ignoring the printed lines if you find that easier. Spreading out your notes and leaving space on each page is especially important. After the lecture, or even months later or when you’re revising, you might come across something else you need to add. It’s infuriating if there’s no space. Not only that, a cramped page can be hard to read later. It can look very daunting, too, and there’ll be no clear sense of an overall structure.

* watch for clues from the way a lecturer stresses points

Here’s how Helen might have begun to make notes from a lecture on the Founding Fathers from her course on American Studies before she’d learnt some new and easier methods of note-taking:

---

**Founding Fathers – America**

*Country gents / upper class / those in commerce – had influence & power – e.g. Thomas Jefferson (7,500 acres) & wife (11,000 acres).*

The colony was governed separately from Britain – the Governor appointed by the Crown.

Governor app. a Council. Council app. local assemblies.

There was more representation of the people than in Britain because more land available.

N. States – 75% males voted

S. States – 50% " "

Most colonists were loyal to the British Crown. When there were difficulties, they blamed Parliament (not the King).

There were some tensions over taxes. Britain passed acts to recoup expenses – e.g. for British troops in N. America – to protect against Indians & French.

Colonists resisted the Stamp Act and the Townsend Act (which led to problems in Boston).
Below, you can see what Helen actually did, because, by the time she took these notes, she’d had a bit of practice in using a clearer layout that gives space to add things later:

The main things to notice here are:

- only a few key words are written down
- lines are drawn to link points
- there’s space to add more later
- these notes are very easy to read

It’s also possible to use mind maps (see Chapter 2), where you start in the middle of the page and work outwards. There can be a problem with using mind maps for lecture notes, however: it can be hard to
link to a second page when you’ve filled one up. For this reason, I tend to favour Helen’s method of working down the page. Diagrams are good, too. Whatever method you use, you can add colour after the lecture to make things stand out. If you’re comfortable with drawing, it’s even worth adding pictures, since visual cues are really good memory-joggers. By the way, mind maps are very useful for other tasks.

It’s important to find a method that works for you in relation to the course you’re on and the type of lectures you attend. Trying out some new methods should help you discover what’s going to be best. Taking notes can be quite hard work, so it’s useful to adopt a good posture during lectures. Sit upright and you’ll remain alert and more able to spot crucial points in what you hear.

* try out different methods of note-taking in lectures

Before a lecture, it can be useful to devise a few questions about what will be covered. This can be especially helpful for getting your brain in gear so that it’s easier to absorb the material.

There will always be things you miss. So go over your notes on the same day if you can to fill in any blanks. You’re likely to be able to remember things while your memory is still fresh. If there’s time for a brief study session with a friend, you’ll probably come up with all the important points between you.

Here are some tips for getting the best value from a lecture:

**beforehand:**

- check your syllabus to see how this lecture fits in
- do some pre-reading on the topic
- write down three questions on the topic before the lecture
- talk to other students about likely topics

**during:**

- note key headlines on any handouts provided
- pay special attention to the introduction
- listen for words or phrases that are stressed
- write down dates, technical terms, key phrases, etc.
- leave plenty of space on each page
afterwards:

- debrief with another student
- discuss any contentious points
- add items you missed

All the following can help you to remember things more easily:

- patterns
- colour
- pictures
- diagrams
- lists
- highlighting
- underlining
- boxing
- ringing
- arrows for linking

Make use of as many basic abbreviations as you can, because these are great time-savers. For example: *hist.* for history, *psych.* for psychology and *trad.* for tradition. There are symbols too, of course:

- *therefore* \( \therefore \)
- *because* \( \because \)
- *is* \( = \)
- *isn’t* \( \neq \)
- nineteenth century \( ^{19} \)
- twentieth century \( ^{20} \)
- *more than* \( > \)
- *less than* \( < \)

If you need to get in some practice at note-taking before starting a course, you might try listening to a radio programme on a subject linked to your studies. Go for radio rather than TV programmes so that you won’t be distracted by pictures.

**READING AND ANALYSING ACADEMIC MATERIAL**

Obviously, you’ll have more thinking time when you take notes from books than when you’re in a lecture theatre and there are various strategies you can use to make the process easier. Read only what you need, look for journal articles and for relevant chapters in books – even a specific section of a chapter, and use contents lists and indexes to
direct you relevant pages. Scanning and skimming (see below) can also help you to locate the parts of a text that deal with the topic you’re studying.

Just as with a lecture, it’s a good idea to ask yourself some questions about what’s likely to be in the text before you start. Try to think up three or four, such as:

- Will I find out about x?
- What details will there be on y?
- What’s the writer’s view on z?

Then scan the material very quickly. Look at headings, sub-headings, diagrams, graphs and any illustrations. This will help you feel more comfortable because your brain will be starting to become familiar with the territory. You might also be able to pick out some of the sections that you’ll want to read in detail.

* scan headings, sub-headings, diagrams and graphs

Then you can skim. Read the first and last paragraphs of a chapter – the introduction and conclusion. This should give you a better idea of the areas covered. Then go a little deeper by reading the first and last sentences of each paragraph. This will show you more clearly which bits you need to focus on.

* to skim, read the first and last paragraphs of a chapter and the first and last sentences of all paragraphs

In order to work through the following section, please now read the article ‘Why a high society is a free society’ by the philosopher A.C. Grayling (originally published in the Observer). I’ve numbered the paragraphs so that you can refer to things easily.

**Why a high society is a free society**

*A.C. Grayling*

1 One measure of a good society is whether its individual members have the autonomy to do as they choose in respects that principally concern only them. The debate about heroin, cocaine and marijuana touches precisely on this. In my submission, a society in
which such substances are legal and available is a good society not because drugs are in themselves good, but because the autonomy of those who wish to use them is respected. For other and broader reasons, many of them practical, such a society will be a better one.

2 I have never taken drugs other than alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and medicinal drugs. Of these, I have for many years not taken the two former. I think it is inimical to a good life to be dependent for pleasure and personal fulfilment on substances which gloss or distort reality and interfere with rationality; and yet I believe that heroin, cocaine, marijuana, ecstasy and cognates of these should be legal and available in exactly the same way as nicotine and alcohol.

3 In logic [there] is no difference between legal and currently illegal drugs. Both are used for pleasure, relief from stress or anxiety, and ‘holidaying’ from normal life, and both are, in different degrees, dangerous to health. Given this, consistent policy must do one of two things: criminalise the use of nicotine and alcohol, in order to bring them in line with currently illegal substances; or legalise currently illegal substances under the same kinds of regime that govern nicotine and alcohol.

4 On civil liberties grounds the latter policy is preferable because there is no justification in a good society for policing behaviour unless, in the form of rape, murder, theft, riot or fraud, it is intrinsically damaging to the social fabric, and involves harm to unwilling third parties. Good law protects in these respects; bad law tries to coerce people into behaving according to norms chosen by people who claim to know and to do better than those for whom they legislate. But the imposition of such norms is an injustice. By all means let the disapprovers argue and exhort; giving them the power to coerce and punish as well is unacceptable.

5 Arguments to the effect that drugs should be kept illegal to protect children fall by the same token. On these grounds, nicotine and alcohol should be banned too. In fact there is greater danger to children from the illegality of drugs.

6 Almost everyone who wishes to try drugs, does so; almost everyone who wishes to make use of drugs does it irrespective of their legal status. Opponents say legalisation will lead to unrestrained use and abuse. Yet the evidence is that where laws have been relaxed there is little variation in frequency or kind of use.
The classic example is Prohibition in the USA during the 1920s. (The hysteria over alcohol extended to other drugs; heroin was made illegal in the USA in 1924, on the basis of poor research on its health risks and its alleged propensity to cause insanity and criminal behaviour.) Prohibition created a huge criminal industry. The end of Prohibition did not result in a frenzy of drinking, but did leave a much-enhanced crime problem, because the criminals turned to substances which remained illegal, and supplied them instead.

Crime destabilises society. Gangland rivalry, the use of criminal organisations to launder money, to fund terrorism and gun-running, to finance the trafficking of women and to buy political and judicial influence all destabilise the conditions for a good society far beyond such problems as could be created by private individuals' use of drugs. If drugs were legally and safely available through chemist shops, and if their use was governed by the same provisions as govern alcohol purchase and consumption, the main platform for organised crime would be removed, and thereby one large obstacle to the welfare of society.

It would also remove much petty crime, through which many users fund their habit. If addiction to drugs were treated as a medical rather than criminal matter, so that addicts could get safe, regular supplies on prescription, the crime rate would drop dramatically, as argued recently by certain police chiefs.

The safety issue is a simple one. Paracetamol is more dangerous than heroin. Taking double the standard dose of paracetamol, a non-prescription analgesic, can be dangerous. Taking double the standard medical dose of heroin (diamorphine) causes sleepiness and no lasting effects.

A good society should be able to accommodate practices which are not destructive of social bonds (in the way that theft, rape, murder and other serious crimes are), but mainly have to do with private behaviour. In fact, a good society should only interfere in private behaviour in extremis.

Until a century ago, now-criminal substances were legal and freely available. Some (opium in the form of laudanum) were widely used. Just as some people are damaged by misuse of alcohol, so a few were adversely affected by misuses of other drugs. Society as
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