

THE “TAKING NOTES” TRAP - Advantages and Disadvantages

“How did you go in your test?”

“Pretty badly.”

“Did you study?”

“Yep.”

“What did you do to study for it?”

“I took notes.”

“Ok. Did you read through the notes a few times?”

“Yep.”

“Were you able to picture your notes in your head when you went into your test?”

“Not really.”

“Did you learn your notes off by heart?”

“Nope.”

This is a really common conversation I have with the students I work with. Really common. Actually I’m sure there must be a hashtag for #ididntlearnmynotesproperly.

Yet, “taking notes” is the most popular way I’ve found that secondary students study for their tests and exams. A lot of the time I think most people find taking notes the easiest and most convenient way to study. You feel like you’re doing “something”. It’s something to do when you’re not really sure what it is you need to do. And absolutely,

it's better than nothing... just not the best you can do in terms of improving your knowledge and also managing your time effectively.

So how do you "take notes"? Well, you go back through the notes your teacher gave you in class, your text book and other information you've either been given or looked up yourself on the Internet. Then you summarise it all in dot point form. For example:

The Great Wall of China

- 21 196 kilometres in length
- Constructed 2000 years ago
- During Warring States Period & Ming Dynasty
- Part of Chinese symbolism & Mythology

This helps you break down larger portions of information into chunks that are easier to learn and make sense of. It helps you get your head around what you actually need to know about a topic; cutting through the unnecessary stuff and getting down to the main points. Dot points. This is the good thing about taking notes. It's a good starting point; a good launching pad into the further revision we could do to achieve better understanding and actually get this stuff into our long term memory and store it in a better way so we can retrieve it more easily at a later time.

Now, what happens to the notes after you write them?

Do you look at them again? Do you employ other strategies to help encode them into your long term memory? By writing notes, are you using strategies like Repetition, Familiarisation, Memory Tricks or Visualisation? Or are you hoping your brain will recall the information by scanning over them a few times?

Writing notes is a good way of getting all the information you need to learn in one place and in dot point form.

But don't stop there!!

Take it further.

THINK: How can I get this information solidly and reliably into my memory? What strategies can I employ?

Here are some ideas:

- Write those same notes in different coloured pens and stick them on the wall so you can see them everyday and get to know them. Or create a mind map from your notes.
- Once those notes are on the wall, you could choose a couple of “facts of the day” from the page and rehearse it over and over.
- Put each dot point on a flashcard in a way you can test yourself.
- Record your notes onto the voice recorder on your phone and listen to them on the way to school every day.
- Photograph your notes on your phone and look at them a couple of times each day, committing them to memory.
- Put the information from your notes into a table and either stick it up around the house or make up a blank table and practice filling in the missing columns every few days.
- White out every second word on your notes and see if you can fill them all back in.

Experiment with different ways of learning your notes. Try some different ideas and see what works for you best, and also what strategies work for each of your subjects. They will be different. You'll come up with the best methods that support you as the type of learner you are and that will help you store the information in your brain so you can retrieve it simply.

REMEMBER:

You can't take the notes on paper with you into your test or exam.

BUT... you can take them into your test or exam, safely stored in the memory compartments of your brain. You just have to store them in there in the right way to start with.

You might well be asking the question: Aren't I creating more work for myself by first writing things down into note form and then transferring it to another form? Won't it take me more time to do it that way?

The answer is: sometimes yes and sometimes no.

If you're not overly familiar with what you have to revise, then it's definitely worth taking notes first; for example, if it's something that you either had difficulty grasping, or you've left it til you've got a lot of information to add and you have a lot of information to sort through. Notes will help you organise the information you might have forgotten or not used for a while, which can then be transferred to different formats (eg, flashcards or mind maps) to help you

memorise them. It may take a little longer this way, but in the long run it will be easier and more effective than simply writing the notes or spending longer sifting through them to find what to put straight onto a mind map.

If you pretty much know the information you need to put down, then consider bypassing the note taking stage and putting the information from your text book or notes straight onto the flashcards, or create a mind map, tables or making up memory tricks. You will get better at doing this the more you do it and it will be a quick and effective way that you can get your information learnt.

REMEMBER: Whether you write notes first, or put the information directly onto different formats, the key to studying is to plan and organise your study...

AS MUCH IN ADVANCE AS YOU POSSIBLY CAN!!

Give your brain as much time as possible to make the connections it needs to make to ensure retrieval from your memory is flawless and reliable.

With a little bit of effort, consistently, test and exam time need not be stressful and panicky.