

The art of writing effective notes

We live in a highly competitive environment and consequently, the pressure to perform well in academic and competitive exams has reached alarmingly high levels. However, there's very little is being done to reduce this pressure by equipping the students with an appropriate learning strategy.

There are several factors such as individual goals and aspirations, intelligence, aptitude, creativity, motivation etc., which influence the learning process. Regardless of the variations of these factors, each student must develop a learning strategy, that's perfectly aligned with their needs. In this regard, all students can follow a methodology of writing notes in the classes and combine them with other skills, to form their unique learning strategy, which will go a long way in easing the anxieties and pressures.

How to write notes effectively?

An observation of notes written by students usually highlights how disorganized they are, apart from an unnecessary length, thus limiting their utility in the learning and development process. As Stephen Covey famously said in his landmark book, 'The seven habits of highly successful people', begin with the end in mind. Think about, how notes have to be used for studying, understanding, enhancing memory and ability to recall information, when needed like in examinations. Here's a methodology for writing notes that meet these criteria.

- Make three columns on the page of your physical or digital notepad. The first column is on the left with 25% of the width of the page, the second about 65% in the centre and the third about 10% on the right.
- Use the centre portion of 65% of the page, to write notes in the class. You can write them the way you are writing now or can make them as orderly as you can imagine. The objective is not to write everything, but to decipher the lecture into about 10-15 sub-headings. Ensure these short notes are an outcome of your understanding. Using your creativity, arrange the notes legibly, in a visually appealing manner with arrows/symbols/diagrams/flow charts/mind maps etc.
- Review the notes in the centre portion after the classes, at home or hostel. Reduce the notes which can be concepts, theorems or explanations into points or keywords. It can even be the questions for which answers are already in the centre column. In short, the left column represents or is an extract of the main concept in the centre column.
- As you read the keywords and the corresponding explanatory notes, develop your critical thinking skills by asking conceptual/exploratory/probing/comparative/hypothetical/connecting questions. Use the 10% of the width on the right column for your comments or even a summary.

By following this methodology, you have detailed notes in the centre written in the class; keywords or questions related to it on the left and some of your thoughts, reflections or a summary, on the right.

Your revisions now become comprehensive and easier, with the notes effectively written in three parts. While writing notes increases your short-term memory, reviewing it and combining it with effective reading, moves the knowledge learnt, to your long-term memory.

The benefits

The initiative to write notes methodically has immense benefits, apart from reinforcing the purpose of education, which is to gain knowledge.

- Writing notes in a structured manner develops a disciplined mindset.
- As you get involved in writing notes, it avoids distraction and increases concentration in the class.
- Concentration helps to improve listening skills and eye contact with the faculty results in better understanding and insight into the subject.
- Notes taking process also eliminates student hesitancy and facilitates questioning.
- Reading and reviewing the notes after classes, helps in a deeper understanding of the subject, thereby increasing long-term memory.
- Reduces anxiety, increases self-confidence and with better recall, increases performance in examinations.

The learning strategy

Recording notes in the class in the centre column, reducing them to keywords or ideas in the left column, using the right column for your reflections on the subject and finally reviewing the entire notes, can be a crucial part of your learning strategy.

As a student, it's important to introspect and examine your current learning style to develop a learning strategy, based on your academic and career goals. Listening skills, questioning skills, eye and mind training, interests and curiosity, notes and reading techniques, together can form your holistic learning strategy. Also, combine your learning strategy with academic and exam-focused writing skills, to achieve your goals. Importantly, such a learning strategy supports your academic and professional development and helps in realising your potential.

(The author is a management and career consultant)