

## **Active Listening and Note Taking**

*Flowing Wakefulness for Accurate Impressions and Expressions*

**Some of the points below may be new to you. See how many describe your habits, and see how many you would like to explore further. There will be a discussion of each point below the list.**

1. I am on time for each class.
2. I listen to a speaker with an open mind.
3. If I have received materials beforehand, I review them before a lecture.
4. I take clear, organized notes.
5. I find it easy to keep my mind on a lecture.
6. I take time to read over my notes before class is over.
7. When listening to a lecture, I can distinguish between main points and supporting details and examples.
8. I test myself on the material from a lecture at the end of the day.
9. I can follow a speaker's organizational pattern.
10. I know when to listen and when to write.

### **Discussion**

All of the points above relate to active listening and note taking. There will be a basic consistency in the related advice below: the importance of preparation and the importance of keeping an open mind, staying simple, maintaining a sense of the whole picture and fitting parts into that picture, and creating notes that can be used easily for study.

### **Being Prepared: Why is Well Begun, Half Done?**

When we feel prepared we feel more relaxed. When the professor starts speaking, and some of what he or she says is already familiar to us, it is easier to organize our notes as we listen.

There are two important preparation times:

- ❖ The day (or night) before a lecture
- ❖ Right before the lecture starts

### **The Day Before**

If we have received some materials that refer to the content of the lecture to be given, it is good to look at this material. Anything that starts us thinking about the information to be presented is a useful tool.

### **Right Before the Lecture**

The basic purposes of a lecture are usually given in the introductory remarks, so it is important to be seated and ready before these remarks are made. This means with the notebook open, and the attention settled.

If we make this a regular habit, it will not only serve us individually, but it will directly affect the collective awareness of the class. Professors appreciate a coherent start to their lectures. It helps them to think more clearly, maintain their train of thought, and very often allows them to spontaneously go more deeply into their subject as they are speaking. This in turn draws our attention more closely to the points of the lecture and helps us to listen more attentively.

### **What is the Value of Keeping an Open Mind?**

We have come to class to learn. There are several steps to learning: receiving and recording information, and then thinking about what we have recorded. Receiving and recording can be done simultaneously, but trying to think and evaluate as we listen is too much for the mind and often results in scattered, inefficient note taking. Therefore active listening involves being attentive to main ideas and details and recording them.

We first make sure we have a firm basis for understanding what the professor has said. Then we formulate questions or relate the information to our own opinions.

### **The Organizing Power of Simplicity**

A lecture usually has three parts: introductory remarks, main body, and summary.

- ❖ In the introductory remarks, the professor presents an overview of the material to be covered and states the purpose of the lecture in the context of the course.
- ❖ In the main body, the professor will present main ideas, supporting details, and examples.
- ❖ In the summary the professor will draw everything together, usually referring back to the introduction to remind students of the basic purpose of presenting the material.

Occasionally, professors may not follow the organizational pattern described above, and we need to be alert to how they are structuring their talk. For example the professor may start the lecture with a question and not present an overview until later on in the talk.

Our notes should reflect the professor's structure. If we try to impose a structure as the professor is speaking, this will distract us and we might miss some important points. So we keep things simple for ourselves and gain organizing power for the future use of our notes.

### **Reaping the Benefits of Our Own Organizing Power**

We are receiving a higher education not only to gain information, but also to culture our ability to think. The notes that we take during a lecture form the basis for thinking about what we have heard. Recording information simply and innocently is only the first step. Then we have an opportunity to really exercise our brainpower.

Most lectures are followed by a discussion period. This is the time to listen carefully and see if there are any gaps in our understanding or in our agreement with the information presented. This is also the time to make comments and ask questions.

Sometime soon after the lecture it is good to make any necessary revisions to make our notes as clear and as accurate as possible. Timing can be tight sometimes in a busy schedule, but if we can find time to do this, it is very useful. This is an opportunity to turn our notes into study tools for future review.

### **A Technique for Turning Notes into Study Tools**

One technique is the *SORT Technique for Active Listening and Note Taking*. Linda Egenes, M.A., former Maharishi University of Management faculty member, designed this method. SORT is an acronym for **S**et up, **O**rganize, **R**evise and **T**est.

#### **Set Up**

Please refer to the following page for the format of your notebook sheets. Note the margin that you create on the left. The use of this margin is explained below.



## **Organize**

We take notes in the main area of the page, leaving the wide left margin blank for the time being. As mentioned above, paying attention to the organizational pattern of the lecture and arranging notes in the same pattern helps us to have main ideas stand out as headings with supporting details clearly indented underneath.

## **Revise**

There are two opportunities for revision:

- ❖ When we hear something important during the discussion after the lecture
- ❖ Sometime the same day

### **During the Discussion**

During the discussion, we glance at our notes to see if we have any questions. As another person is speaking, we find the place in the lecture that he or she is referring to and see if the professor's answer clarifies a point for us as well.

If we don't understand, or we disagree with a particular point, this is a good time to ask a question. One technique for asking questions is to state the point that we do understand that comes right before the part that we don't understand or agree with, and then we ask the professor to help make the connection between the two points.

As a point comes up that we are not sure of, we write it down with a question mark next to it and we leave some extra space after it to add in clarifications after we have asked questions. This is the first stage of revision—adding in clarifications.

### **Sometime the Same Day**

This is the second stage of revision. First, we read through our notes to make sure they are clear and legible. If there is still some point that needs clarification, we mark it with a question mark so we know we still need to fill some gaps (either with a classmate that night, or with the professor, in the next class).

Now it is time to use the margin on the left that we have so far left blank. Next to each main idea, we write one to three key words that will trigger a question that we can use to test ourselves on the material. The key words should not provide an answer; they should allow us to ask questions.

For example, if we are taking notes in a biology class, and the professor lists specific functions of the cerebral cortex of the brain, we put "functions: cerebral cortex" in the margin so we can see if we remember all of them.

Once we have key words written in the margin, we are ready for the last step in the SORT Technique for Active Listening and Note Taking—seeing how well we remember and understand the important points of the lesson. This is the Test step.

• **Test**

We do this in the evening, alone or with a classmate. Using the key words, as described above, we ask our classmate or ourselves questions. Answers can be written or spoken. If there is time after the questioning, we summarize the whole lesson, either speaking out the summary or writing a summary paragraph.

The SORT Technique for Active Listening and Note Taking is a comprehensive technique. It incorporates Maharishi's five fundamentals of education: receptivity, intelligence, knowledge, experience, and expression. More suggestions for active listening and note taking are discussed below.

**When Do We Listen, and When Do We Write?**

As stated above, a lecture usually has three parts: introductory remarks, main body, and summary. Even if the organizational pattern is not clear, there is usually a beginning, a middle, and an end. During each part there are opportunities to listen and times to write. In the following situations, check the appropriate circle to show when it would be important to listen and write, and when would it be good to just listen. The answers appear below. Cover them as you answer the questions; then check your answers.

- ❖ The professor gives some background material that explains why things are done in a certain way.  Listen and Write  Just Listen
- ❖ The professor presents a main idea.  Listen and Write  Just Listen
- ❖ The professor provides supporting details and examples.  
 Listen and Write  Just Listen
- ❖ The professor presents new terminology.  Listen and Write  Just Listen
- ❖ The professor makes connections that make sense and are familiar.  
 Listen and Write  Just Listen

**Answers to When Do We Listen, and When Do We Write?**

- ❖ The professor gives some background material that explains why things are done in a certain way: We should predominately just listen but it is fine to take down a few points if the information is new to us.

- ❖ The professor presents a main idea: Listen and Write
- ❖ The professor provides supporting details and examples: Listen and Write
- ❖ The professor presents new terminology: Listen and Write
- ❖ The professor makes connections that make sense and are familiar: Just Listen

The main idea here is that we stay comfortable and enjoy focusing on the lecture. When something new is mentioned, we write it down. When the professor is on fairly familiar ground, we just listen. If there is enough balance between writing and listening, we will not feel strained or tired at the end of the lecture.

### **Try This**

Try the *SORT Technique for Active Listening and Note Taking* in your next week of classes and see how you like it.

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We'd love to hear from you. Let us know about your experiences using the advice in this section.

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