Why take notes...?

When we’re studying, taking notes is an important skill. Note taking is best done in outline form, which has structure, using dot points or numbers, and indents to show main and sub points – like this:

**Learning & outlining**

- Learning is a process of:
  - Structuring new information in our mind
  - Moving that info. from short => long term memory
  - Recapping that info, & accessing it later

- Outlining helps us process new information & learn it, since it:
  - structures info (into main & sub-ideas)
  - makes complex info simpler, allowing easier recapping
  - compresses information, making it briefer & easier to store

- Outlining is a vital learning skill:
  - using numbers or dot points
  - showing main & sub-points indented for clarity
  - allowing us to structure information for learning

Why should note taking and outlining be so important? Well, as this outline here suggests, learning is a process of taking information up, and moving it into our long-term memory so we can get at it again, and use it - to pass a test, to do an assignment, to do our job.

When we are reading, or listening to a lecture, or organising a presentation or report, we process information in short-term memory. But the trouble is, we have only a small short-term memory, new things push the older information out. This paragraph may be pushing the beginning of this little leaflet out already!

To remember something, to be able to work with it later, short-term memories must be moved into long-term memory. But long-term memory is complex, and prefers organised, structured information. Long-term memory also likes information which is brief! Visual presentation is also important, as we read ‘shaped’ data much faster than unshaped blocks of verbal information.

This is where outline notes come in. Most of us think of outline notes as something we will read later, as a ‘product’ to help us to study. But learning is a process, and note taking can be a part of it.

As we read or listen, our mind partly takes in, and partly creates, the structure or organisation of the topic we’re dealing with. This organising process consists of identifying the main ideas, the sub-ideas or sub-points about each main idea, and any examples or illustrations concerning these.

This process takes place in short-term memory. To help move these ideas to long-term memory we need to do more; and one useful ‘more’ is to recap by writing notes in outline form which represent (approximately!) the structure and content we’re holding in mind. In an outline, these points are presented as brief, structured, dot point (or numbered), indented notes.

Thus our outline notes are much more than a record of our reading or of a lesson: they are a map of our mental processes concerning the structure and content of a topic, and aid us in understanding and therefore in memory transfer. Note taking is a central aspect of learning itself!
Features of Note Taking

Let's look again at that outline:

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1. Notice that an outline does not present a complete picture of the information it records: an outline is a structured *selection*, and the selection process is part of putting the information into long term memory.

2. Notice also a sensible (but not excessive) use of symbols and abbreviations. We must be careful when outlining to achieve a reasonable balance between compression and readability!

3. Yet another feature is stylistic: the lead-in to sub points can allow these to read as completing a sentence, making easier reading.

4. The system of indented or numbered sub- (and sub-sub-) points is critical, since the structure of the outline reflects the map of the topic in our mind. Outlining is a mind tool, not just something done on paper or screen.

5. When taking lecture notes, listen for the signals from the teacher that s/he is presenting a main point. There may be words used which contrast or emphasise, just as in the middle of a main point section there will be details and examples. Some lecturers present their own outline to begin with – jot down the points of this as your introduction.

6. If you’ve taken lecture notes, it’s important to recap, to read over and type up neatly that evening, or at the end of the week. Re-writing brief lecture notes is a form of relearning, and relearning is much easier than learning. (Using MS *Word* is an excellent idea, since *Word’s* formatting toolbar does bullets or numbers automatically.)

7. If you’re outlining from reading – and you should! – skim before you outline; and then go back, skimming and outlining progressively. Some people ‘read’ at their computers, outlining as they go: outlining on screen can be very useful when reading too!

8. And if you’re preparing a report or presentation, sketch an outline first. Doing this over a cup of coffee while you’re not thinking too hard about your project is good way to ease yourself into beginning. As a mind tool, an outline has many uses!

So: Happy Outlining!!