

# Lecture Notes

## A. Introduction

The 50 minute lecture is the main method of teaching at university, but many students do not know how to take appropriate lecture notes or get the most out of their lectures. This leaflet is designed to help you acquire those skills.

## B. The Point of Lectures

Lectures can perform any one or more of the following functions:

- Give a summary of important information the lecturer has gathered from numerous sources.
- Comment on material presented e.g. clarify your readings; take a different approach from your textbook; evaluate alternative points of view or solutions; emphasize what is important and why.
- Demonstrate how to do something e.g. solve a maths problem; analyse a poem; apply a theory.
- Provide a general basis for material to be examined in detail in a tutorial or laboratory.
- Challenge your thinking – perhaps by deliberately presenting a provocative point of view, or producing evidence to overturn common beliefs.
- Stimulate your interest in the subject.

One of the most important things for a new student to do is define *how* lecturers approach their subject. When a sociologist speaks about sociology, or a literature expert discusses drama, what do they emphasize? What specialist language is used? You need to learn how to think and speak in similar terms, beginning with your lecture notes.

## C. Preparation

Much of a highly specialized lecture will be wasted on you if you do not read the relevant texts beforehand. These readings are normally set out in your lecture schedule or reading-list.

If you have prepared for the lecture:

- You will be familiar with technical terms, key names and case studies etc which will make the lecture much easier to follow.
- You will be in a better position to think about the material and be an active rather than a passive listener.
- You will be able to distinguish between material in your texts/handouts (so there is no need to take notes) and new material.
- You will realize when points in your readings are being clarified or you are being given an alternative point of view.

## D. Taking notes

The kind of notes you make obviously depends on the kind of lecture you are attending (see Section B). In some lectures it could be more important to watch and listen than write much down.

- Most lecturers provide key points on PowerPoint, or headings on an overhead or the board. Use these to structure your notes.
- Use lots of headings and subheadings, and list points briefly. Space your notes out rather than write long paragraphs.
- Do not try to write everything down. Distinguish between key points and the links between them. Examples, anecdotes or jokes are often intended not only to illustrate a point, but give the students a breathing space.

- You should be able not only to understand your notes months in the future, but also retrieve information quickly. After the lecture try colour coding different types of information e.g. definitions, examples, different aspects of subject.
- Look for the lecturer's focus and comments as well as any 'factual' content e.g. are you being given a particular perspective, or a range of opinions about the subject? This is usually the kind of material you will need to discuss in assignments.
- Think as you listen – make notes to look up a reference or definition, go back over a tricky point, work out why you disagree, raise an issue in your tutorial. Use symbols to save time e.g. # = define.
- If you have problems getting material down, try working in a study partnership or group, sharing and discussing notes afterwards. This technique is especially useful for getting down diagrams/tables *and* the explanation; making sure you don't miss anything important; identifying questions to ask the lecturer/tutor; learning the material.
- Whether or not you work with someone else, try to go over your lecture notes the same day as the lecture to consolidate your learning and clarify the material.

## E. General Points

**Concentration:** concentrating for 50 minutes is hard work. Be aware that after 25 minutes most people's thoughts are wandering.

**Handouts:** as you enter the lecture theatre, watch for handouts piled on a table near the door or circulating round the room, and make sure you collect them before the lecture starts.

**Questions:** in large classes, most lecturers do not encourage questions during the lecture as time is tight. It might be possible to ask questions afterwards; otherwise ask your tutor or see your lecturer during his/her office hours.

**Missing lectures:** many Stage 1 lectures are available on the department's website; some are taped and put on reserve in the library. Otherwise arrange with one or more students to borrow their notes if you cannot attend a lecture.

**Problem lectures:** sometimes students have difficulty following a lecture because, for example, the lecturer cannot be heard, speaks too quickly, or takes overheads off the screen too soon. If you do not feel comfortable discussing problems with the lecturer yourself, ask your class representative to raise the issue.

**Use of tape recorders and laptop computers:** it is a courtesy to ask the lecturer's permission before using this equipment in the lecture theatre. Recording lectures is not a substitute for making notes at the time; it takes ages to transcribe recorded material, and much will be lost when the lecturer turns to use the board or overhead, or when students cough and rustle paper.