

Thoughts on Best Practices for New College Students

By Erica Bender, Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology, UC San Diego

Here are some tips to help you study and take notes more effectively in college.

First, it should be made explicitly that there are no “quick fixes” for becoming a strong student. It takes time and effort and a lot of practice. The study strategies that served you best in high school will not always translate to the college context, so you will have to find new strategies for successful learning, and that takes time. However, the simplest and easiest thing you can do to improve your learning right away is ATTEND LECTURE and LEAVE YOUR LAPTOP AT HOME.

Several researchers have tested whether taking notes with a pen and paper is more or less effective than taking notes on a word processor/laptop. Most of these studies find that even when students only use their laptops for note taking (i.e. without being distracted by email or Facebook), they are still learning LESS than students who take notes with a pen and paper. So, even if you are disciplined with your laptop, you’re still better off with a pen and paper.

If that sounds surprising to you, you’re not alone. We have created a whole technology industry for students, allegedly to help them learn “quickly” and “easily.” However, what your laptop manufacturer won’t tell you is that there are no shortcuts to learning. In order to learn, your brain needs to engage in **cognitive processing**. Meaning you need to integrate whatever it is you’re hearing/reading into your preexisting thought structure. That is a messy process, but it is ultimately the only way to learn. Imagine you are sitting in lecture and you only have a pen and 1 piece of paper. You have to take notes, but there’s no way you can copy all the lecture slides AND what the professor is saying. So what do you do? You have to listen, write down what seems important, and add in extra notes if you can. That is what I mean by cognitive processing – because during that process you are not simply copying information, you are thinking about the information as you are hearing it. THAT is how you learn.

Here is a link to an article that reports on one such study referenced above:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/body/taking-notes-by-hand-could-improve-memory-wt/>

So, how do you take good notes without a laptop? Here are some ideas:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AffuwyJZTQQ>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAhRf3U50IM>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rGRT4LmJZc>

Going Beyond

Beyond taking notes, there are a whole range of other strategies you can integrate into your life that will help you learn material more deeply. Below are links to a series of 5 videos put together by a cognitive psychology professor at Samford University. He does a great job introducing the science behind learning and giving ideas for more effective study strategies. I HIGHLY encourage you to watch these videos. They are 5-8 minutes long and should be watched back to back.

1 of 5 - Beliefs that Make You Fail or Succeed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RH95h36NChI>

2 of 5 – What Students Should Know About How People Learn: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9O7y7XEC66M>

3 of 5 – Cognitive Principles for Optimizing Learning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xeHh5DnClw>

4 of 5 – Putting Principles for Learning into Practice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9GrOxhYZdQ>

5 of 5 – I Blew the Exam, Now What?: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QVRiMkdRsU>