

Two-Column Notes

Note taking is a procedure for recording information from anything that is read, said or done in the classroom. Taking notes enhances comprehension as students process, organize, and restate information in their own words. It encourages metacognition as students actively search for main ideas and key supporting details. It is also a valuable tool for gathering and organizing information to write from a variety of sources.

Why should we teach note taking?

Research consistently identifies note taking as an essential comprehension and writing strategy. Peverly and colleagues (2007) found that the act of taking written notes about text materials enhances comprehension. The *Writing to Read* research report (Graham & Hebert, 2010) found that teaching students to write notes about text is a highly effective instructional practice for enhancing reading comprehension.

There are several Common Core literacy standards (common to many state-specific standards) that require students to develop skills related to note taking, including:

- Reading Standard #1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking and writing to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Writing Standard #8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources.

Two-Column Format

To take notes, students must identify main ideas and key details, paraphrase them using as few words as possible, and record them in a structured format. In the late 1970's, Joan Sedita developed a two-column format adapted from the Cornell System used in colleges and described by Walter Pauk in the 1950's (Sedita, 1989, 2003; Pauk, 1997).

The Format

The format for two-column notes is shown in Figure 1. The notes are set up by drawing a vertical line down the length of the page and a horizontal line intersecting it near the top. The vertical line is approximately one third of the way across the page from the left border. This two-column format provides a clear visual distinction between the *big ideas* (written in the left column) and *supporting details* (written in the right column). A heading that states the topic of the notes is written at the top of the page.

The two-column format is especially helpful for studying: students can cover the details in the right column and use the big ideas to generate questions that require knowledge of the details. Likewise, students can cover the left column and use the supporting details to test their knowledge of the big ideas.

Two-Column for Different Kinds of Sources

As noted above, the two-column format can be used to take notes from different kinds of sources. Taking notes from lecture or video is a more challenging because it requires the integration of listening and writing skills at the same time. Taking notes from reading is easier because students can read portions of the text several times at their own pace. Therefore, note taking from text should be introduced and practiced before students are expected to apply the skill independently for note taking from lecture or video. Figure 2 shows how two-column notes can be used for informational or narrative sources.

Figure 1

heading for the overall topic	
big ideas	supporting details

Figure 2

Notes from Informational Sources

topic	
main idea 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• detail• detail• detail
main idea 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• detail• detail• detail
main idea 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• detail• detail• detail

Notes from Narrative Sources

title of narrative	
characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• detail• detail• detail
setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• detail• detail• detail
events	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• detail• detail• detail

Skills Needed for Effective Note Taking

Beyond teaching students the two-column format, the more challenging part of note taking instruction is teaching the underlying sub-skills needed to take notes effectively, including:

- how to identify main ideas and supporting details
- how to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information
- paraphrasing

- writing concisely and using abbreviation
- using visual cues such as arrows, stars, brackets, and underlining or highlighting to organize notes
- listening and attending skills when taking notes from a lecture, audio, or video source
- integrating information into notes from multiple sources.

Teachers should make sure that students have developed these underlying skills before expecting them to take two-column notes independently. For students who may not have these skills, teachers should provide explicit instruction that incorporates a *Gradual Release of Responsibility* model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). It is also known as an *I do it, You do it, We do it* model of instruction. At the *I do it stage*, the teacher introduces and models two-column note taking using *think aloud* to explain the thinking process used to identify the main ideas and details that are added to the notes. The teacher also clearly explains how the information is paraphrased and written concisely, as well as how abbreviations or visual cues might be used to make the notes more helpful. At the *We do it stage*, the teacher provides opportunities for students to practice generating notes, including opportunities to work in small collaborative groups to determine how the notes should be written. The teacher provides guided practice by providing feedback during this stage. The eventual goal is for students to take two-column notes independently from a variety of sources (*You do it*).

Scaffold Two Column Notes

One way to support students who are having difficulty taking notes is to provide them with partially completed notes. This can be done in several ways:

- Provide the main ideas in the left column, students add relevant details in the right column.
- Provide the details in the right column, students add main ideas in the left column.
- Provide some main ideas and some details, students add the rest.

References:

- Graham, S., and Hebert, M.A. (2010). *Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading. A Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
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- Peverly, S.T., Ramaswamy, V., Brown, C., Sumowski, J., Alidoost, M., and Garner, J. (2007). What predicts skill in lecture note taking? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99, 167-180.
- Sedita, J. (1989). *Landmark study skills guide*. Prides Crossing, MA: Landmark School Press.
- Sedita, J (2003). *The key comprehension routine*. Rowley, MA: Keys to Literacy.



For more information about two-column notes and other instructional strategies to support reading and writing across grades K-12, contact Keys to Literacy:

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