

# Best Practices for Notetaking

Building a framework for decision-making that supports independence and accessibility

Paul Harwell, PhD | AHEAD 2026

# Purpose

- Notetaking accommodations are critical in our profession, but until recently the topic was rarely included in best practice conversations
- Innovations typically focus on specific technology and less on practice
- AI has made everything more complicated
- Ideally this talk shares a broad overview of elements to consider for an intentional and holistic approach to notetaking accommodations
- The approach to notetaking offers a great framework for working through all accommodation decisions

# Learning Outcomes

- Understand the underlying processes and purpose of taking notes
- Build awareness for best practices for a holistic approach to notetaking accommodations

# Interactive Process

# Accommodation Decision-Making

- Determine accommodations with an affirmative rationale
- Remember to focus on access
- Communicate accommodations clearly to students and faculty
  - Avoid combining multiple accommodations into one
- Support accommodations with coaching on strategies and tools
- Continually assess students' experiences with accommodations and support systems (e.g., tech and coaching)

# Accommodation Fit

- Difficult to tease apart disability and notetaking skill
- Use the interactive process to determine barriers and reasonable accommodations that remove or mitigate actual barriers (Big 3 Questions)
- Accommodations should only supplement the amount of notes necessary for access
- Ask reflective questions about experiences and needs
  - How do you usually take notes (type, handwrite, record, etc.)? Why?
  - How do you feel about your notes (likes/dislikes, success/failures)?
  - Have you tried other tools, strategies, or accommodations? If yes, ask about those.
  - If they have a specific request in mind, why that one?

# Anecdotal Observations

- “I type because I can’t keep up”
- “I don’t take notes, I just listen”
- “I don’t know what to write down” or “I don’t know what to study”
- On-Demand lectures:
  - Pause/play to get everything just right
  - Want captions/transcript to speed up
- Limited practice as notetakers, with studying notes, and reflection
- Compare self to peers negatively

# Notetaking Research

# Notetaking Research

- Encoding Hypothesis: the act of processing while taking notes improves learning outcomes (p. 1159)
- External-storage Hypothesis: the act of reviewing notes (from self or others) improves learning outcomes (p. 1159)
- These are not mutually exclusive, both are important
- Encoding benefits increase with engaging the lectures while verbatim notes are shallow and predict poorer performance
  - More detailed notes have been correlated with increased performance

Key Source: The Pen is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking (2014) by Mueller, P.A. and Oppenheimer, D.M.

# Applying the Research

- Effective notetaking and notes are more than a summary or transcript
- Engaging the ideas is more important than recording all the words
- Paraphrasing is essential, and prep work makes it easier
  - Avoid verbatim notes, transcripts, and AI summaries
- Handwriting is correlated to better performance, but digital notes work too
  - Intentionally avoid tendency to transcribe; limit reliance on AI
  - Practice paraphrasing, short-hand, and making meaningful notes
- Knowledge is power; students do better when they understand these concepts.

# Removing the Barriers

# Common Accommodations

## Independent Accommodations

- *Goal is to supplement gaps in notes*
- Permission to audio record
- Copies of lecture slides and materials
- Photos of the board or overheads
- Use of notetaking technology in the classroom

## Dependent Accommodations

- *Goal is to provide complete copy of notes*
- Copies of notes from others (usually peers)
- Real-time learning may be limited or lost to outsourced notetaking

# Audio Recording Lecture

- Independent accommodations provide a safety net while students build their skills as a notetaker
- CRITICAL to coach students to effectively fill gaps in their notes
  - Methods will vary by tools, classroom context
- Plan for visual information that is not picked up by audio
- Consider organization (colors, structure, sketches, importing slides, etc.)
- Avoid perfections (share the lessons from research)
- Plan and discuss how to study the notes
  - Top 10 strategy
  - Pare down

**“When you focus on the tool rather than the problem you are trying to solve, you have already missed the point.”**

**Justin Romack**

# Tools of the Trade: Technology

- “When you focus on the tool rather than the problem you are trying to solve, you have already missed the point.” - Justin Romack
- There are no one size fits all tools and they constantly change
- Practice with the tools and strategies you may recommend so you know how it can be used to solve the problem
- Two most common areas of concern: missing information and organization
- Microsoft OneNote, Glean, Notability, Good Notes, tons of Others
- Smartpens (Neo, Others), Digital Recorders
- AI and auto-transcription apps are not typically good options for conceptual notes

# Other Strategies

# Peer Notes

- Own the process! You are responsible for it anyway
  - Train notetakers, monitor incoming notes (rotating schedule)
  - Students should know when and how to report missing/poor notes
- Paid and volunteer both work, but consider the following:
  - Create a system with a pool of returning notetakers to be less reactive
  - If volunteer, consider incentive programs
  - Have a contingency plan for when notetakers are not available
- Automate as much of the process as possible
- Avoid the trap of increase reliance on peer notes once it is improved or automated
- Continue to assess and improve

# Other Strategies for Students

- Everyone uses trial and error to find what works best
- Skill building resources help speedup the trial and error process
- Consider using academic support resources on campus
- Reddit, YouTube, and TikTok have tons of helpful resources
- Connect with peers to learn about their notetaking style
- Ask instructors about methods they've seen work in their class
- Avoid productive procrastination

# Summary

- Use the interactive process to decide which notetaking accommodations are appropriate; move beyond the surface
- Accommodations should be very precise and should be determined by DRO; Remember you are responsible for implementation (not the student or faculty)
- Build a holistic approach to providing notetaking support and simultaneously train skills for notetaking, technology, and strategies
  - If not you, partner with campus colleagues to tag team this approach
- Automate as much process as you can
- Make data-driven decisions to continuously improve, especially the peer-notetaker system

# Summary

- Access, not success – use your process
- Accommodation language should be precise
- Use a holistic approach to support access and simultaneously coach skills for notetaking, technology, and strategies
  - If not you, partner with campus colleagues to tag team this approach
- Automate as much process as you can
- Make data-driven decisions to continuously improve, especially the peer-notetaker system

# Resources

- Taking Notes Crash Course (YouTube): [bit.ly/TakingNotesCC](https://bit.ly/TakingNotesCC)
- Notetaking Accommodations and Technology: The Basics
  - Part I: [bit.ly/NotetakingI](https://bit.ly/NotetakingI) | Part II: [bit.ly/NotetakingII](https://bit.ly/NotetakingII)
- Notetaking Research Information:
  - The Pen is Mightier than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking (Mueller, P.A. & Oppenheimer, D.M.; 2014): [bit.ly/noteresearch](https://bit.ly/noteresearch)
  - Attention Students: Put Your Laptops Away (NPR Story): [bit.ly/notesresearch NPR](https://bit.ly/notesresearch_NPR)