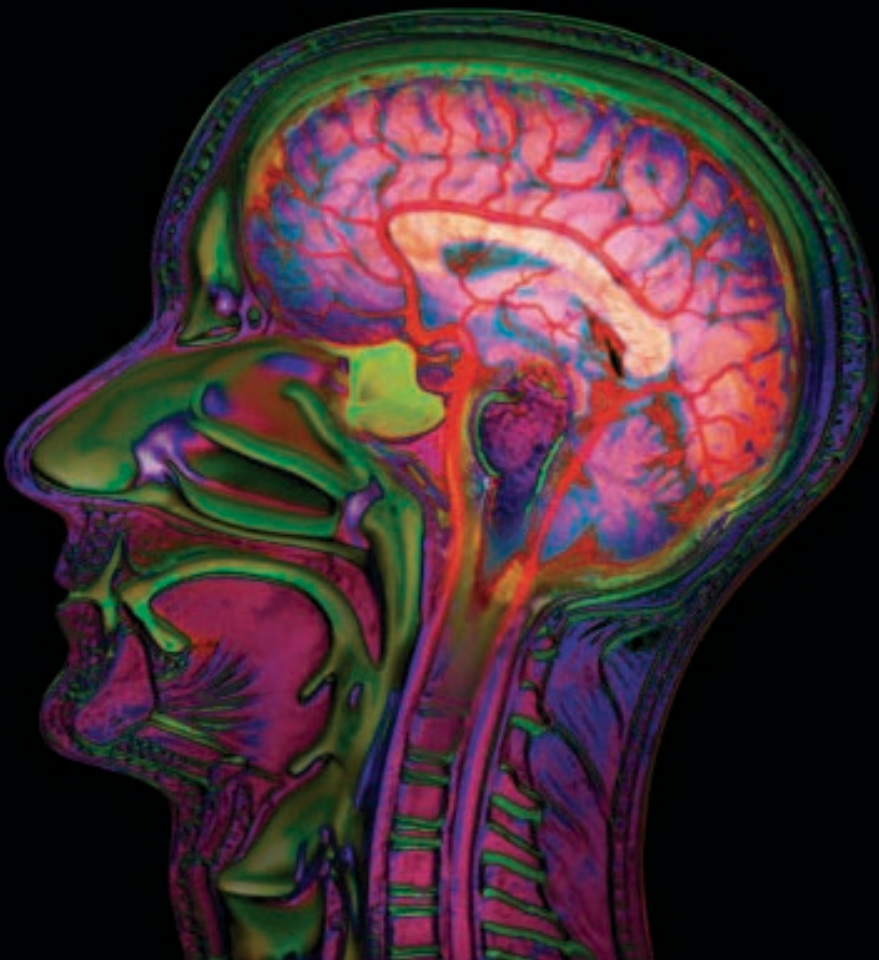


Engaging
your mind.
An academic
guide to lectures
& seminars



One of the biggest differences between being a student in further education and an undergraduate in university is the format of the delivery of your education. The main method used for getting information to you is through lectures and seminars.

This guide aims to give you some straightforward advice on how to get the most from learning through this form of delivery.

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1. What are lectures and seminars?

Generally speaking, in lectures a speaker delivers information to a group who listen and take notes. However, you should keep in mind that there is no such thing as a **typical** lecture. The style of a lecture will differ depending upon the subject, the institution, and the personal style of the speaker(s).

Seminars are usually about group discussion, and it is up to the members of the seminar group to contribute their own points of view and answers. Sometimes the lecturer might get discussions started, but another method is pyramid teaching (e.g. getting students to prepare short presentations for delivery to their peers). You should make sure that you are well prepared and ready to contribute to a seminar. You will get much more out of it, and remember a lot more of the content, if you are actively engaged with the discussion, and do not try to hide in the corner worrying about being asked questions.

1.1 How big are lectures and seminars?

Lectures differ from course to course, and institution to institution. Some lectures are large, with as many as 500 or more students, while others can be much smaller, perhaps with groups no larger than 10. The size of a lecture will also impact on the style of lecture that is delivered by the lecturer. Seminar groups typically tend to be anywhere from 5 to 30 students.

1.2 How are lectures and seminars structured?

Sometimes lectures and seminars are written to stand alone, and each one covers a totally different topic. At other times, they are designed to link together as part of a series. You should make sure that you are aware of the structure of your lectures and seminars. If they are part of a series, reread your notes from the previous meetings before you attend the latest one.

1.3 How do lectures relate to seminars?

In some cases, lectures will be written to give you a broad overview of a topic. You will be expected to fill in the details, which will then be discussed in more depth in a follow-up seminar. In the seminar, you will have the chance to ask detailed questions and debate the conclusions put forward in the lecture.

In other instances, the seminar may be used to introduce broad themes and ideas, and to give you a chance to become familiar with the content and terminology of the topic at hand. The lecture will then cover the key ideas in great detail. This will give you a chance to note down the main details uninterrupted in the lecture itself, but with a better understanding of the subject due to the discussions from the previous seminar.

1.4 Will I be expected or able to ask questions?

This depends very much upon the style of the lecturer. In some cases, lecturers are happy to interact with the audience and take questions as they go along, whilst others will prefer to take questions at the end, or even in the follow-up seminars. If you are unsure, it is worth checking at the start of a lecture. If questions are taken at the end of a lecture or in follow-up seminars, then make sure that you note down any questions as you think of them so you can raise them later.

Asking questions is a vital part of any seminar. You will be expected to get involved, to contribute your own ideas, and to comment on the points raised by your peers. The more active you are in a seminar the more you will get from it. Remember, as long as you can support your point of view, there is no such thing as a wrong answer. Be willing to disagree with the lecturer and put forward alternative viewpoints. University education is all about challenging yourself and others. Even if you feel you do not have the knowledge to agree or disagree with a point of view put forward it is important that you consider it and reflect upon what you have heard.

2. Preparing for lectures and seminars

Preparation is key to getting the most out of your lectures. The following tips should help you.

2.1 Reading lists

You will usually be provided with a list of recommended reading in advance of any lectures or seminars. It is important that you read through the material on this list, as it will ensure that you understand the key concepts that will be covered in the lecture or seminar. It will also give you an opportunity to familiarise yourself with any specialist terminology, names, etc., and make it easier for you to contribute. You will be expected to read more widely around a subject in order to give yourself a broad understanding.

2.2 Printing notes and handouts

For many lectures and seminars, there will be an opportunity to download and print notes or PowerPoint slides beforehand. If this is the case, you should take advantage of the opportunity. Do not, however, take this as a sign that you do not need to take any notes yourself, as this is just an aid to further your understanding of the topic in hand. You should use the printed notes as a basis for your work and add your own notes around these.

2.3 Materials

You will probably take a lot of notes during lectures, and you may find that you also want to note down the ideas of your peers and their contributions during seminars. Make sure you have a notepad and pens. This notepad should be clearly labelled so that you know which subject it is for.

Some students like to record lectures and seminars so that they can listen and note down any points that they may have missed. Many mobile phones will include a record option. Alternatively, you can purchase Dictaphones cheaply. Be aware that it is courteous to first ask the lecturer if he or she minds if you record the lecture.

3. During lectures and seminars

Everyone has their own way of dealing with lectures and seminars, and there are no set rules as to which approach is best. It may take you some time to develop a style with which you are most comfortable. Below are some techniques that you may find of help.

3.1 Listening

A common mistake amongst students in lectures and seminars is to try so hard to note everything down that they do not actually **listen** to what is being said. It is more important that you listen clearly and understand what is being said than you copy it all down. This way you are more likely to understand what is being said and therefore will only copy down the most important parts.

3.2 Verbal signposts

Lecturers will use a variety of techniques, such as giving verbal signposts, to alert students as to when they need to copy down a key point, and also to provide structure to the talk. Some examples of verbal signposts are:

Structure

Lecturers will often set out the structure of their lecture at the beginning. You should note down this structure so that you can follow the stages of their argument. For example:

‘This lecture will examine what the global community is doing to reduce CO² emissions. First, we will look at the policies of China and the United States, then we will examine the European Union’s response, and finally we will look at what actions the developing nations are taking.’

The lecturer has highlighted that this lecture on CO² emissions will be in three parts:

- (1) China and the United States
- (2) The European Union
- (3) Developing Nations

These should be your headings. When the lecturer finishes discussing the policies of China and the United States, then you know that you are one third of the way through the lecture and should move on to your next heading, which will be the European Union.

Key points

The key points to note down are often highlighted. Lecturers will say something as obvious as ‘the key thing to remember about this is...’ or ‘the most important consequence of this is ...’. This is a clear sign that they are about to discuss a point you should note down.

Changing topic

If the lecturer says something like ‘We shall now discuss ...’ or ‘Turning to ...’, it is a verbal sign that they are changing topic. You should leave a space in your notes to mark out this change of topic.

Alternative arguments

Lecturers will usually present both sides of an argument to ensure their work is balanced. Typical verbal signposts for doing this include ‘on the other hand...’ or ‘alternatively some have argued ...’. If you hear these phrases, you should mark in your notes that this is the other side of the argument.

Summary

Many lectures and seminars will contain summaries that will recap the key details covered. These are usually easy to spot as they are often introduced by phrases such as ‘To summarise ...’ or ‘To recap what has been discussed ...’. Use this opportunity to ensure that you have taken notes on each key point that is outlined in the summary. If there are any points you have missed or did not fully understand, then make a note so you can ask a question, read up on the topic after the lecture or ask your lecturer about the subject at a later date.

Conclusion

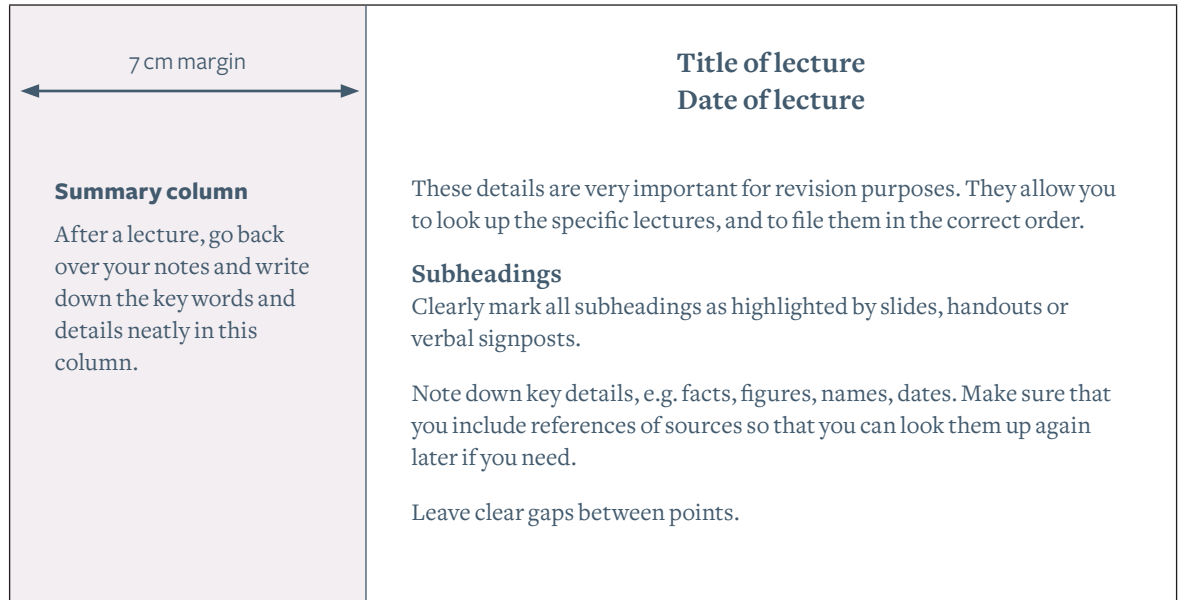
Often a lecture will end with a clear conclusion. Like summaries, these are easy to spot as they will be flagged by verbal signposts such as ‘In conclusion ...’ or ‘To conclude ...’. You should ensure that you note down your lecturer’s conclusion, as this is their judgement based upon their research and knowledge. It is important to understand, however, that this is not intended as something with which everyone in the lecture will agree. University study is built around people putting forward their own opinions that are supported by evidence. You may find you disagree with the conclusions of your lecturer – that is perfectly fine, and is in fact encouraged, as long as you back up your opposition with well-researched evidence.

3.3 Taking notes

Most students develop their own style of note-taking over time. There are, however, points of good practice that you can try to build into your note-taking.

Cornell method

The Cornell method is a useful technique for note-taking.



Writing versus listening

There will be too much information in a typical lecture for you to note it all down. Similarly, in seminars people will be discussing and debating a point and you will find it impossible to write everything down. It is more important for you to be an active part of a lecture or seminar, and to be engaged in either listening to the information or contributing yourself. Research has shown that sitting quietly in a corner and writing everything down, and as a result not fully engaging with the material results in the typical student only retaining around 20% of what has been said. Try to focus instead on getting an overview and the key points of the argument presented.

You can look up much of the highlighted information after a lecture or seminar. The lecturer will reference the sources from which his or her information has come. Make a note of these references, and this will enable you to look up the information at a later date. For example, if a lecturer used a clip of an important speech in a lecture, you only need to note down the name of the person delivering the speech, the date it was delivered, and why it was important. If you find that you want to go over the words of the speech again, then you can look it up after the lecture rather than having to get it all down in your notes.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations should be avoided when writing formally, such as in essays. However, your lecture and seminar notes are for your personal use, and so you should make as much use as possible of abbreviations as a way of saving time. The only thing to be careful about is that you can remember what your own abbreviations meant when revisiting your notes for revision months after a lecture. It is sometimes a good idea to include an explanation of your shorthand with your notes, e.g.:

GB	Great Britain
BE	British Empire
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
Fr	France
Hi	Hitler
LoN	League of Nations

If you are a visual learner (see the academic skills guide *Picking your profile* for more information on learning styles) you may prefer to use quick pictures as shorthand.

As well as your own subject specific shorthand, there are some common abbreviations you may like to make use of such as:

e.g.	for example
i.e.	that is
etc.	and the rest
=	equals
>	greater than
<	less than
∴	therefore
∵	because

Experiment, be creative, and develop your own kind of shorthand that suits you best. You can even make use of texting abbreviations, if it helps you to get information down clearly and quickly – just make sure that abbreviations do not creep into your formal written work, or it may end up costing you some marks.

4. After lectures and seminars

Attending lectures and seminars that are delivered as part of your course is only part of a university education. In higher education there is a much greater emphasis on independent study than at school or college. You will be expected to read around the subject, follow up issues raised in lectures and seminars, find answers to any questions you may have, and undertake your own research to support your own views and arguments. The notes you will have taken during lectures and seminars are an important part of this process.

4.1 Writing up your notes

It is vital that you revisit your notes within 24 hours of attending a lecture or seminar, while the details are still fresh in your mind. This way you guarantee that you will not forget important details, or what your abbreviations meant. If you are using the Cornell method of note-taking highlighted above (4.3), this is when you will pull out the key words, facts and details and write them in the summary margin.

Alternatively, you may prefer just to write up the notes in a neater style, perhaps using different colours to identify key words, facts, etc. Either way, you should ensure that you write up and file your notes to be reused for essays and exam revision.

4.2 Answering further questions

While providing answers to a number of issues in which you are interested, it is not unusual for a lecture or seminar to inspire new questions in your thinking on a subject. This is all part of the learning process, and such curiosity is encouraged by universities. If you find that you have noted down questions from lectures and seminars, seek out the answers yourself by using your research skills and reading lists. Then, either look to raise the issues in a follow-up session, or email your lecturer to ask if he or she can explain further.

4.3 Further reading

The reading lists provided for your course will give you some guidance on what you can read to further your understanding of a subject. However, you can also make use of the library, journals and other resources to expand your knowledge of a specific topic. Check the academic skills guide ***Making the case*** and the University of Southampton guide to research ***Learn, discover, develop and create*** for more information on how to do further research on topics raised in lectures and seminars.