

A Bit of History

Note Taking

By D.H. Coop

When I went through paramedic training I took pages of notes on yellow legal tablets and tape-recorded every lecture. The guy that sat in front of me took a one-letter size page of notes for each lecture. I passed tests with 94% and he passed with 99%. I looked at my note taking and saw that with my notes I was reviewing the whole lecture and not focusing on the central points. I decided it was not necessary to write notes in complete sentences. Notes should be key words that trigger memory for a quick review.

Later, when I continued my education at a university, everyone took notes as they read with a highlighter. Some of their highlighted pages had turned into a pages of pink, yellow or green color. That caused them to reread the complete pages once more taking valuable time. Rereading is good if one wants to have a better understanding of the subject; however, rereading is not good for review.

When I became a secondary teacher, I noticed my students would take notes in complete sentences with every "the," "and" and "a" in their notes. They also followed the same highlighting practice of coloring in whole paragraphs and pages. This not to say that all students made these mistakes and that they had not been told how to take notes. The fact was they had been told many different methods to take notes and given samples of note taking. The problem was the form became the grading standard instead of the understanding of material. For example, I told the students to highlight key words and that there should be no more than ten words highlighted per page. Being bright students, they randomly highlighted words to demonstrate that they had taken their notes. They miscalculated in that I did not look at the page and count the words highlighted. Instead I asked what the words triggered in their memory. Note taking should be for the recall of important points and to internalize information.

So here are my three suggestions for note taking. First, when listening or reading, write only key words related to the topic that will cause you to recall and connect to the topic. Second, review and rewrite notes at a later time and fill-in blank spots. If you cannot fill-in the blanks, write down your questions and reread that section or ask the teacher. Finally, talk to someone about what you have learned. This allows you to internalize the information and develop a better understand.