



3

How to Learn Efficiently.

Note taking skills

- How well do you learn from listening?
- How many notes should you take?
- What do you do with your notes once you have made them?

Your course may involve attending a lecture, or reading and working through course notes and attending a weekly lesson run by a tutor as part of a small group. This means you must be able to both *read* and *listen* well, in order to make good notes. We will firstly examine listening skills and then move on to some reading skills related to note taking.

Listening Skills

The skill of listening is something that varies with everyone; however, it is a skill that can be improved on. There are three aspects of listening.

1. **Hearing:** the physical aspect of receiving sounds.
2. **Tuning In:** focusing in on the topic's dimensions.
3. **Being Involved:** the thinking processes of:
 - relating
 - linking
 - associating
 - integrating
 - remembering

Tuning In: Focus is easier if you have done the weekly readings for each lecture; these are posted online. Each lecture/class also has objectives or learning outcomes that are covered in the online notes. The lecturer may not cover all the notes in class so you should come prepared to have difficult or obscure points clarified, and to dig deeper into the meaning of the topic. Don't come to the lecture just to listen. Come to be involved.

Being Involved: This is the thinking part. Be prepared to ask a few pertinent questions during the sessions. With the information you receive from the lecture you want to actively process it – relate the information to what you know, link, make associations, integrate the specifics into the big picture. [Acts 1.8 is the programmatic passage of the book – why? It continues the story started in Luke, advances through Jesus life, death and resurrection, now Pentecost and into missionary work, to the ends of the earth].

Note-making in lectures

1. *Flexibility* is required. Different tutors, different subjects, require differing amounts of information to be taken down.

2. In general, your *notes should be as full as possible*. It is easier to cull information out of notes than to add it in. Hand written notes enable a point-for-point record of the lecture, getting the main points down, along with sub points. This does not mean a word-for-word record of the lecture as often happens when students use a laptop (for an academic study on why taking verbatim notes does not work as well see:

<http://www.npr.org/2016/04/17/474525392/attention-students-put-your-laptops-away>).

3. Use *abbreviations* to speed your notes while still being able to read them. The following are some examples of common abbreviations:

eg	For example	ind	Industry
ie	That is	esp	Especially
imp	Important	=	Is the same as
cf	Compare	C	Century (C19)
adv	Advantage	&	And
alt	Alternative	-ve	Negative
cond	Condition	+ve	positive

4. *Space your notes* well. There is nothing worse than little cramped notes that you can hardly read at a later stage. Space them well, leave a lot of room between points and ideas (often the lecturer will give subsequent information about a previous point! *#@).

5. Underline headings, use **highlighters**,  key concepts, use * and bullet points. Whatever it takes to make your notes:

- clear
- easy to read
- and separates the MAIN points from sub points

Just don't make the page too busy or confusing.¹

Going Over Your Notes

The following are a few hints in this regard.

1. Weekly notes should be *re-read and learned the same day you took them*. The content is still clear in your mind and you can consolidate the information.

2. *Re-write your lecture notes the same day*. This does not mean completely re-writing, but it involves:

- a. Sorting out the *main ideas* from the detail.
- b. Identifying *key words* which link things together.

¹ For further information on note-taking see; Tamblin, *The Smart Study Guide*, 153-170.

- c. Composing diagrams, making side comments, summaries, bringing essential elements together, showing the relationship between one thing and another; in other words *personalising* your learning.
- d. Reading *references* that have been given to broaden your knowledge beyond the notes.

If you leave space in your notes as you go, it is easier to add summaries and other material later.

3. *Join a study group*, the Carey Student Association (SASS) encourages the formation of study groups, so ask a representative if you would like to join or form one.

4. *Blog about your courses* is a suggestion from Tim Bulkeley (an ex-Carey lecturer); it will get the information into your own words. ² Or...

5. *Use the discussion forums*, here you can ask questions arising from a class, and start discussions on the topic. This has the added advantage of helping distance students to feel connected.

Find out *what works best for you* given the time constraints you have.³

Common Misunderstandings

1. Adult education is *different from high school*. The course notes or lectures will not always take you step-by-step through every aspect of a subject. Rather they will provide an overview of the topic and zoom in on a few specifics. You must supplement the lectures and course notes with the assigned reading, and other discussions as needed. Establish a pattern of asking questions on any area that you have found hard to understand. Do not worry about a question appearing basic, if you want to know, there will be others who also need to know but are afraid to ask. You can always put questions to the lecturer using the online forums for each class.

2. Adult education is *largely self-help*. While Carey staff are here to help in any way possible, at the end of the day, **you** are responsible for your learning. Gain the necessary skills of research, note taking, and information sorting, as quickly as possible.

3. Adult education *can also be a community undertaking*: study groups are encouraged, SASS is able to provide student to student help in many areas, there is academic support for

² <http://bigbible.org/sansblogue/education/helping-students-remember/> “bigbible” is an excellent source of study information.

³ If you do take hand written notes, take comfort in the knowledge that the process of mentally engaging with the lecturer as you make notes will *on its own* aid your memory even if you never look at them again.

Maori and Pacifica students, the library staff can help⁴, and you can always email your lecturer or make an appointment to see them.

4. Finally, teach what you are learning to one another and to anyone who happens to be within earshot. Throughout the week go over what you have learnt with family and friends.

If you can teach it correctly, then you have learnt it correctly.

Reading Skills

Because most of your study involves working through the course books the following ideas on reading may be a help. Many people emerge from secondary school with the idea that it is clever or a sign of genius to be able to read a book slowly, once, and to have absorbed all the information within it – this is a *myth*! Reading is a flexible affair. Some books must be read slowly, others quickly (some not at all!). The best type of reading is *flexible* reading, being able to adjust your speed to your need. After working out “what sort of book I am reading?” (research, poetry, light, heavy, devotional), the most important thing to remember is to **think about your reading in terms of outcomes:**

- I want to learn it – commit it all to memory
- I want to get the gist of it – a broad overview
- I want to support my argument to get evidence
- I want to find out what happened next
- I want to be able to answer an exam question on the topic
- I want to refresh my memory
- I want a range of opinions on the topic
- I am hunting for concrete facts and figures.

Obviously *how* you read something will depend on *why* you are reading it.

⁴ The library runs sessions on study skills, referencing, accessing the online catalogue and how to search for books and articles at the beginning of each semester. The staff are also able to provide assistance individually in these areas when you need help.

Read Faster?

Many people believe the eyes move smoothly across a page similar to the movement of a typewriter, with only an occasional interruption. This is false. Our eyes take in a few letters, between 7 and 9, at one go, though faster readers use peripheral vision to anticipate.⁵ Reading speed varies with the type of material: 250 – 400 words per minute is fast for light material, 100 wpm for normal text, 70 wpm for moderately hard text which you want to follow closely, 40 wpm for difficult text which you want to understand in depth. Despite much publicity for “speed reading”, academic studies demonstrate that as reading speed increases, comprehension drops. For a student this “means you're not taking in the information, which defeats the purpose of reading”.⁶ The best way to increase your speed of reading is to expand your vocabulary. So learn the meaning of the new vocabulary that occurs in notes and in lectures. The better your vocabulary the faster you will be able to read *and* understand.

Above all read with a purpose in mind, and don't read all material in the same way.

How many books to read?

By doing a course at Carey, especially by distance, you will be required to read possibly more books than you have read in your entire life! While you must read and work through your course notes, you are often required to also read some related articles or even refer to a few books. Unfortunately, *many students read far too many books!* Or to be more specific – they read far too many of the wrong books! What a waste of time.

If you looking for material to read in order to write an assignment then look for the following things in order to save you time (and sanity):

1. *The title and sub-title* of book. Sometimes the subtitle reveals the true content of the book; covers can be deceiving.
2. *The date of the book*. If it is outdated, then it may not be wise to read it if your time is limited.
3. *Preface and contents* pages. Is the information you seek there? Spend a few minutes – often this will tell you which chapters are relevant if at all.
4. *The index/s at the back*. If you are looking for a specific topic see if the key word/s are in the book and how often. Read these pages first – is this the type of material you need?
5. Read the *foreword*, which is where the author tells you what they think the book is about, and the *conclusion*, where they sum up what they have said.
6. For the *chapters* you have decided are relevant, look at the beginning, end and headings. Skip through the rest. In this way the gist of the author's perspective will

⁵ This article has interesting insights into how reading works, Susan Weinschenk, “How People Read.” *Graphics*. <http://www.graphics.com/article-old/how-people-read>

⁶ Thorin Klosowski, “The Truth About Speed Reading.” *Lifehacker*. <http://lifehacker.com/the-truth-about-speed-reading-1542508398>

become apparent. Introductions and summaries need reading – these are a blessing and should be well utilised.

7. Finally, read carefully the passages that matter the most.⁷

Do not read a book from “cover to cover”; while it may make you *feel* virtuous, it is of very little value! Learn to read for the information *you* need as quickly as you can and save hours of fruitless labour.

Research

Objectives

- To understand what is involved in writing good essays.
- How to decide what to write and how to limit the topic.
- The rudiments of research.

Most of your written work will be in the form of essays, assignments, or research papers. These may range from a few hundred to a few thousand words. For this reason it is absolutely crucial that you learn to write good essays, in order to get good marks, and in order to graduate. But even aside from good grades, good essays are to be pursued for their intrinsic worth – if you can write a good essay it means several things:

- You can gather *relevant information* on a given topic
- You can *process and evaluate* this information
- You can *represent existing ideas* honestly and *present your own ideas* logically
- You can use English (or your chosen tongue) to *express these ideas* in a form that can be easily assimilated and interacted with.

So we write essays (or other forms of assignment) to help us learn and demonstrate our learning.

The Essay Question

You will be given a specific essay question to answer (this eliminates the need to choose a topic). However, sometimes a course will give you a *choice of topics*.

Choose *which* topic you will answer as soon as possible.

The longer you leave this decision the less time you have to research and write. Writing an essay on a topic that appeals to you is far easier than writing on a topic which bores you senseless. But take the following points into account:

⁷ Much of this comes from a helpful (and short) blogpost by a former Carey lecturer: Tim Bulkeley, “How to Avoid Reading Books,” *Sansblog*, 25 May 2010, <http://bigbible.org/sansblogue/education/how-to-avoid-reading-books/>

- Go with your gut instinct (what immediately appeals to you).
- Make sure your topic has enough resources available.
- Don't always choose the topic you are most familiar with (how will this enable God to speak to you through your study?).

If you *are* given the opportunity to choose your own topic; then do so quickly. Once you have chosen a topic, narrow it down three or four times. For example: You choose to write a 1000 word essay on “salvation”. What can you say about salvation in 1000 words? Narrow it down to salvation as defined or illustrated by the apostle Paul. Narrow it down again, salvation as expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans. Narrow it down again, Salvation as expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans by the word “reconcile”. You now have a much more *focused* essay topic and one which could provide a brief but interesting overview of the term reconciliation as an aspect of Paul’s understanding of salvation within the book of Romans.

Even when the topic is given already it is advisable to *narrow the topic* to provide space for more depth in your essay; the more specific your question, the better. If you are unsure, ask your lecturer if what you propose is ok.

What is the Question Asking?

If a question is asked, then a specific answer is required. Many students, who are very competent, submit essays that **fail to answer the question**. They tell me everything about the subject except what the question requires. So read the question carefully and understand what it is you are asked – then answer it specifically. Below is an example of a question from Reading and Interpreting the New Testament:

Exegesis of a Gospel passage

Marks: 40% of total marks for the course

Word Count: 1500 words

Due date: 30th April, 11.55pm

Assessing: LO 1-7

Instructions:

Write an exegesis of Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV) following the method outlined in week 6 and as detailed below:

Explanation:

The context of the passage (approx. 300 words)

1. INTRODUCTION – *What is this passage about?*

- Summarise its content in a sentence or two.

Annotations:

- This tells you how important the essay is and indicates how much work is involved – *at least 30 hours*
- How many words required – remember there are penalties for being over or under
- The date is important for planning your workload – and not getting a late penalty
- This tells you which of the learning outcomes this assessment is covering – check them out in the course notes
- Here is what to do – in this case not a question – but instructions
- This is **HOW** to go about the essay – so read this and the following explanation really well
- An exegesis is a type of essay. There are others, critical, comparative, case study, book review, etc.
- Lecturers often recommend the number of words for parts of an essay; this reflects how much work each part requires and how important it is to the overall essay. So *follow the recommendations* – lecturers will use them to allocate marks.
- Look for descriptive words – they tell you what to do – don't know what they mean – google or ask ☺

2. CONTEXT – *Where does this passage fit in Mark’s narrative?*

- Mark’s Gospel as a whole: Locate the passage in *one sentence* into the structure of Mark’s Gospel.
- The immediate context: Describe the **narrative context** of your passage. What material is placed immediately before and after this passage? Are there specific connections that are significant for understanding the passage? Remember that bio (ancient biographies) are carefully structured to convey meaning. This narrative context is vital for interpretation.

Find out what terms like this mean so you know what to do...

This tells you exactly what to do – if the information is less helpful, you can ask the lecturer what they are looking for

The content of the passage (*approx. 900 words*)

If you are not sure how to do this there are many books on how to do exegesis in the library

3. CONTENT – *What does the passage say?*

Work through your passage **verse by verse** highlighting all significant features in the text.

This may include:

- Providing some background information on the historical, cultural and religious background to what is described.
- Pointing out any distinctive Markan literary features such as repeated words, verbs (and their tense and voice) which are particularly important.
- Ending with a brief and clear summary of what message this passage would have conveyed to Mark’s contemporaries – in other words, what is its specific message “in their town”?

The application of the passage (300 words)

All essays should have an application portion – because Carey is theology applied! So even if not mentioned it will probably be necessary – ask your lecturer

4. APPLICATION

- How could the message of this passage be applied in your context? Develop one application to your own context (to yourself as a follower of Jesus, or to a particular part of the Christian community) of the general truths and principles you have identified. This should be practical and specific.

Note that the lecturer has given you the **structure** of the essay – introduction, context, content and application – this makes it easier for you.

Use footnotes to identify sources of quotations, information and insights, and where appropriate to supplement the discussion in the main body of the assignment. Footnotes are NOT included in your word count.

This means all works you use – not only those you quote or reference. Often you are only asked for ones you have referenced.

Provide a full bibliography in correct format of all works used in the preparation of your assignment. It is not necessary to list the Bible in the bibliography – I assume you’ll be using that! Do however list commentaries, other books and articles. This is NOT included in your word count.

There should be at least **FOUR items in your bibliography**.

Four means **four** – it is the minimum that is necessary. More would be better, but not too many – you will notice repetition – that means there is no new information.

There are some key words that are commonly used in questions, the meaning of these should be clearly understood. The following should be kept close at hand and referred to often.

Glossary of Study Terms

Analyse – Take to pieces and determine what makes up the various parts. Examine minutely and critically.

Compare – Liken one thing to another, and discuss the degree of likeness and unlikeness.

Contrast – Set things in opposition so as to show the difference between them, including the degree of difference, if any. N.B. Many examiners ask to 'compare and contrast' but if you are only asked to compare, this means to contrast as well (and vice versa).

Critique – Weigh up all aspects by careful examination, and deliver an opinion upon.

Define – Give the exact meaning.

Describe – Set out the features, qualities, or properties of what is asked, in detail. In some subjects diagrams as well as words are required.

Discuss – Consider or examine by argument; investigate for and against.

Enumerate – Specify the items by numbering the points.

Evaluate – Interpret, analyse (take apart the whole), then synthesise (put together) the significant points and make a judgement upon them.

Examine – Inquire into, investigate by considering critically, thereby weighing and sifting information/opinions.

Explain – Make plain, clear; expound and illustrate the meaning of, and account for.

Illustrate – Make clear, explain by means of description and example.

Interpret – Explain the meaning of – which generally involves translating information from one form to another thereby showing a complete understanding of it.

Justify – Prove or show to be just or right; to show grounds for.

List – Number the items or ideas down the page.

Outline – Give the main general features, facts or principles.

Prove – Demonstrate by argument or reasoning, test.

Relate – Tell, recount; establish relation between.

Resolve – Separate into its component parts (analyse) and explain

Review – Go back over and look carefully and critically.

State – Set out the facts explicitly and with formality.

Summarise – Give a concise account of the main points.

Trace – Follow the course or track of events.⁸

Doing the Research: Hunting and Gathering Information

It is now time to get that precious information from the library. While this may appear to be the hardest stage initially, it becomes a simple procedure with a little practice.

1. You need to **formulate a bibliography** for your topic. That means – finding out where you can access information from. The *course notes* will normally provide a bibliography for the course. *Online readings* and the *course text* are also valuable. It is a good idea to begin to look for information in *Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias*. Often they will have bibliographies as a guide to further reading. The following is a representative list:

Brauer, J.C. *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*. Philadelphia : Westminster , 1971.

Cross, F.L (ed.). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford : Oxford University , 1971.

Douglas, J.D (ed.). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1974.

Douglas, J.D. et al. *The New Bible Dictionary*. Leicester : IVP, 1990.

Eliade, M (ed.). *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*. New York : Macmillan, 1987.

Elwell, W (ed.). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. USA : Baker, 1994.

Ferguson , S.B & Wright, D.F (eds.). *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Downers Grove : IVP, 1988.

Gonzalez, J.L. *A History of Christian Thought*. 3 vols. Nashville : Abingdon, 1975.

Gonzalez, J.L. *The Story of Christianity*. 2 vols. San Francisco : Harper, 1985.

Harrison , R.K (ed.). *Encyclopaedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*. 1987.

Hastings, J (ed.). *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1909.

Hunter, R (ed.). *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling*. 1990.

⁸ Adapted from N. Coster, *Success with Study*, 95–97.

Jackson , S.M (ed.). The New Schaff–Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge. Grand Rapids : Baker, 1953.

McKim, D.M (ed.). Encyclopaedia of the Reformed Faith. USA : Westminster , 1992.

McClintock, J & Strong, J (ed.). Encyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature. Grand Rapids : Baker, 1970.

Pelikan, J. The Christian Tradition – A History of the Development of Doctrine. 5 vols. Chicago : University of Chicago Press , 1984.

2. Begin with the most up-to-date and thorough treatments available and work backwards. This eliminates the need to read a lot of smaller, less useful works.

3. Journal articles are absolutely essential to any serious research and a great source of information for all students. They are more up to date than books, frequently better written and more digestible. Journals are scholarly magazines that are kept at Carey library, they cannot be borrowed, but are accessible online via Discovery and Open Athens (see the library guide).

4. Find all the books on the shelf and skim through them, looking for any information that is pertinent to your topic. There are labels on the shelves for topics, dewey numbers at the end of the shelf, and you can always ask where your topic might be located.

5. Commentaries. These are valuable sources for material as well as helpful summaries on texts and topics. The most up-to-date works will be the most helpful. For distance students – many commentaries are available online.

You should now have a comprehensive bibliography or list of useful books. This is the research phase of your essay complete. In addition to your course books you should now read this material and start taking notes. As you take notes it is important for referencing that you note page numbers, full details of the source, and make sure quotes are completely accurate.