

“Write That Down”: A Genre Analysis of Academic Note-Taking

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In this article, Katy Lewis examines several note-taking methods in order to think through how she came to understand her own note-taking. She breaks down note-taking by using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to analyze what might be considered the “genre of academic note-taking,” specifically considering socialization, production, ecology, and reception.

There comes a time in your life when you realize the things that you thought you knew aren’t necessarily true. While that sounds really cheesy and cliché, I think this idea best describes what it’s like to see a genre that you’ve been so used to all of your life in a new and almost unfamiliar way. For me, this genre was note-taking. I’d been taking notes all of my life, so I just assumed that the way I took notes didn’t really need to be thought about or deconstructed. For most of my undergraduate career, I didn’t think about note-taking at all, really. I just did it.

And then I took American literature.

I remember staring at an American literature exam and realizing that the sentence my professor had pulled out of one of the texts that we had read was completely unfamiliar to me. I also remember getting my exam back, seeing the wrong answer slashed through, and going back to my notes to find that I had, in fact, noted this particular sentence. But it was lost in the jumble of notes that I had taken, so I didn’t notice it. Clearly, the way that I had taken notes hadn’t helped me on the test. This was the first time that I actively thought about the way I took notes and why I was taking them in a particular way.

This particular experience inspired me to write this article. So, I'm going to talk a lot about my own note-taking process, but my ultimate goal is to consider how the activities surrounding note-taking in the classroom¹ work. While my note-taking process will be very specific to my respective field—English literature—that doesn't mean that what I've learned through processing my own note-taking isn't valuable. In fact, by investigating my own note-taking, I've revised and changed things to fit the new situations I've found myself in. One of the biggest things that I've reconsidered is my understanding, in general, of note-taking as a genre. When I was younger, I often felt like there was only one way to take notes because I was taught specific methods to note-taking. In order to think through how I came to understand note-taking, my goal in this article is to break down note-taking by using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to analyze what might be considered the “genre of academic note-taking.” In doing this, I hope that you will see that note-taking isn't a completely stable genre and that understanding its instability will allow you to figure out a note-taking strategy for yourself. I'll consider my own note-taking alongside other examples of note-taking in order to reflect on the note-taking that I do now as a first year Master's student.

The Socialization of Note-Taking: Why do I Take Notes the Way that I Take Notes?

I think that it is important to understand how we are socialized to think about particular genres. Before we can move on to the actual production of the notes, we need to first examine our attitudes about note-taking. When I first began thinking about this article, I knew I would have to think about why I take notes the way that I do, and I found that the **socialization** component of CHAT gave me a good way to begin to consider why I've made the choices I did. Joyce Walker, in “Just CHATting,” notes that “Socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices” (76). I began thinking about socialization in relation to my note-taking by considering a few questions: *When did this specific way of note-taking start? What were its influences? How did one note-taking setting differ from another setting?* To answer them, I want to describe two distinct experiences that affected how I viewed note-taking and how I learned to take notes.

The first time that I can remember distinctly being taught how to take notes was in my sixth grade science class. My teacher was very strict about the way that we recorded our notes. She would create outlined notes with roman numerals and would then project them on the overhead for us to copy exactly as she had written them. I began to associate note-taking with

a proper format. You did exactly as you were told; you recorded things in a linear format; you put things in order. My teacher, who was neither unkind nor cold, simply wanted things done in a specific way. In a way, I became socialized to this type of note-taking because the outline method is the most obvious formatting influence on my particular note-taking.

My second distinct experience occurred during my junior year of college in an American literature course. As an English major, I grew accustomed to a discussion-based classroom prompted by the professor’s guidance through a text. Oftentimes, this meant that the things that I had written down in my notes weren’t linear but instead focused on wherever our ideas took us, so the outline method didn’t work perfectly for me. My professor really enjoyed focusing on key words or sentences, and when I went to take his exam, I struggled to identify those sentences or words because my notes were one big blur. Even though I indented things, like I had learned to do way back in sixth grade, my eyes somehow skipped the things that mattered most to the professor. So, I tried to think of a way to pay more attention to what my professor said. While reading the text, I would highlight the things I liked in green. In class, whatever my professor pointed out, I would highlight in orange, so that when I studied I could go back and see what he pointed out, e.g. the things that would likely end up on the exam. This simple distinction helped me to begin thinking about the ways that people discussed texts and contributed to each other’s understanding of a text, which I’ll come back to later.

In both instances, note-taking was a teacher-centered activity. While I, the student, was actually doing the activity, it was the teacher who ultimately had control over what I wrote down. Although the two note-taking settings seem so different (sixth grade versus junior year of college), thinking about them through socialization made me realize that they were more similar than I had originally thought. As a teacher-centered activity, note-taking, then, implies that there is a right and a wrong way to take notes—that if you didn’t do it a certain way then they weren’t really notes. Even though I would be the only person who saw them, years later I still felt compelled to follow a certain format because that was how I’d been trained to think about notes. I would take these note-taking strategies with me throughout the rest of my career, and they would continue to shape the way that I took notes.

The Production of Note-Taking: A Quick Overview of Other Note-Taking Methods

While the above are the most important note-taking experiences that I’ve ever had, I also want to consider other ways of producing notes. In CHAT, “**Production** deals with the means through which a text is produced . . . [which]

includes both tools . . . and practices,” Walker notes (Walker 74). “Production also considers the genres and structures that can contribute to and even ‘pre-shape’ our ability to produce text,” which is what I think is the most important thing to consider about note-taking methods (Walker 74). So, we could consider the tools of note-taking to be pens and paper—or maybe you’re a pencil person—or maybe you like to take notes on your laptop. All of these directly affect the way that the notes will be composed. If you’re writing in pencil, you can erase if you wrote down the wrong date for an important historical battle. If you’re typing, you can simply backspace it away. However, if you’re using pen, are you going to scratch through it or attempt to white it out? Will you forget later that you did that and be confused by the scratches? If you’re particular, like me, maybe you can’t stand to see all of those marks on your paper. Maybe, though, it doesn’t bother you at all. Whatever your preferences, your production of notes, at some point in time, was structured and socialized.

Like I mentioned previously, there is probably an instance in which you were specifically taught how to take notes. Since there are so many varied settings in which note-taking is required, one note-taking method isn’t going to work for every setting. Somehow, though, we all believe that there is a *right way* to produce notes because many of our **antecedent genres** of note-taking come from situations in which we were taught a particular formula for completing notes. This understanding of notes is why I think it would help to first provide short descriptions of several note-taking methods and discuss how these systems influenced my own note-taking. These methods complicate the ways that we can understand note-taking because of the limits and freedoms each method places on the creator of the text.

The Outline Method

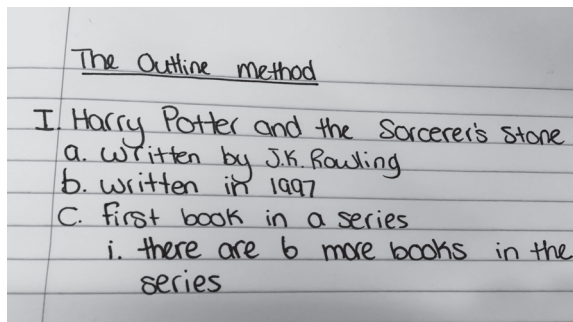


Figure 1: An example of the Outline Method.

The outline method is probably the method that most people are familiar with and is the method that influenced my notes the most. In this method, as you can see in Figure 1, you take notes so that you start with the most important points and then “[i]ndent each more specific point to the right” (“Note Taking Systems”). You

can indicate the indents with a variety of symbols, such as “Roman numerals or decimals,” or you can use letters, like I used in Figure 1 (“Note Taking Systems”). While using symbols isn’t necessary since you can identify the main points of your notes based on how things have been indented, I prefer to use three symbols: a dash (—) for major points, a dot (•) for the first level of specific points, and an arrow (→) for the second level of specific points. This allows me to not only see the relationships formed by space but also to see the relationship differentiated by symbols, which can be really helpful when skimming for a quick reference.

The tricky part with the outline method in an academic setting is that your professor may reference something in class that doesn’t fit well into your outline. Maybe they go off on a tangent that has nothing to do with the previous topic. (Say, they start talking about *The Hunger Games* before they’ve finished talking about *Sorcerer’s Stone*.) Or they start talking about something that happened in 1830 even though they’ve been talking about 1870. This particular shortcoming of the outline method is because this format is best “used if the lecture is presented in outline organization” (“Note Taking Systems”). Like any genre with shortcomings, you can find a way to subvert it or change what you’ve been doing in order to fit the needs of your own production. In my case, whenever my professor references something that doesn’t fit under then main topic of the outline section I am recording in, I mark that information with brackets—[]—to indicate that the information was relevant but didn’t necessarily occur under that main bullet point.

The Cornell Method

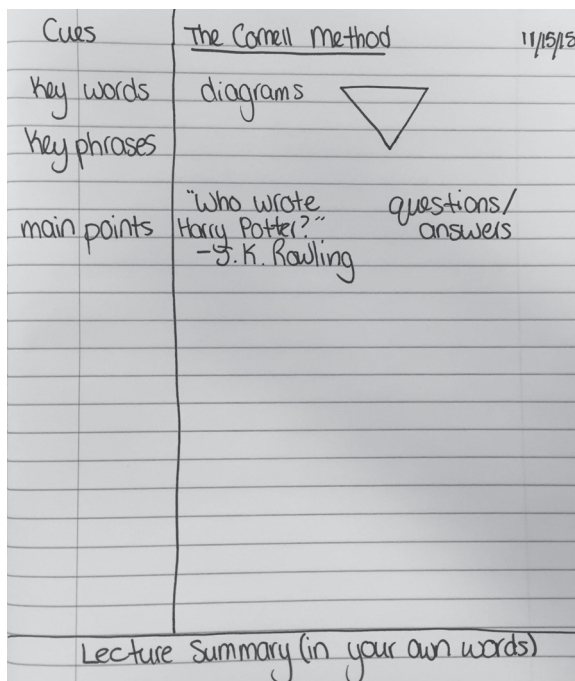


Figure 2: An example of the Cornell Method.

I first encountered this method during a class that I took when I visited Yellowstone National Park, during which we were required to keep a field journal of our interviews with local residents. To begin with, the Cornell method has a more rigid structure than other note-taking methods, which you can see in Figure 2. In this method, you must leave “a 2 ½ inch margin on the left leaving a six-inch area on the right in which to make notes” (“Note Taking Systems”). The six-inch area is used for general lecture notes, which can be anything from “diagrams” to “questions/answers provided by the professor during her lecture” (“Note Taking: Cornell Method”). During my Yellowstone trip, I used this section to differentiate between each individual interviewed. The 2 ½ inch margin is used in the next step of the Cornell note-taking method, which is the review process.

After you’ve taken your notes, you should go back over them and try to “condense your notes,” because “[r]eviewing lecture material within 24-48 hours of the lecture can increase how much material you remember by approximately 80%” (“Note Taking: Cornell Method”). During this stage, you use the 2 ½ margin as the “recall column,” where you can write keywords or phrases that relate to your notes, and finally, you use the bottom section to “summarize the lecture in your own words” (“Note Taking: Cornell Method”). I used the reflection section to talk about the main things that I took away from my interviews, which I used for my final project in the class.

The most important thing to understand about the Cornell method is that it helps you organize your notes so that you can review them. Specifically, you are supposed to “[c]over up the right-hand column where you recorded your notes and use the key words and phrases in the recall column to trigger your memory” (“Note Taking: Cornell Method”). Additionally, the Cornell Method is good for “any lecture situation” since it allows you to follow the lecture and provides you with an “[o]rganized and systematic [way] for recording and reviewing notes” and its “[e]asy format [allows] for pulling out major concept[s] and ideas” (“Note Taking Systems”). While this can be a helpful process for many people, I don’t study this way. In my Yellowstone course, I didn’t need to review my notes this way either because my final project was a paper, not an exam.

Through this experience, I also realized that the major thing that I didn’t like about the Cornell method was that the structure was too rigid for me. I often felt like I just wanted to write things in and draw arrows to things, but I couldn’t because I had to follow the format provided. When interviewing someone, I felt like I couldn’t just let the interview flow because I was so concerned about how the notes needed to look. This production method hindered me more than helped me because it disconnected my interview experience by causing me to focus mainly on the text I was producing rather than the information my interviewee was producing.

Other Methods

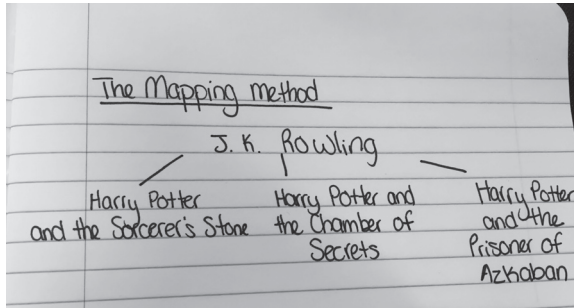


Figure 3: An example of the Mapping Method.

The Mapping Method

The Mapping Method is useful for visual learners. This method in particular is “graphic representation of the content or lecture,” so you can see how the relationships between “each fact or idea to every other fact or idea” (“Note Taking Systems”). This method is useful “when the lecture content is heavy and well-organized,” and it “[m]ay also be used effectively when you have a guest lecturer and have no idea how the lecture is going to be presented” (“Note Taking Systems”). I usually don’t use this method because, while I am a visual learner, I prefer to differentiate topics with indentions rather than arrows and space. Additionally, this method takes up a lot of space, and I try to conserve my paper. As well, the English literature classroom doesn’t really promote this type of note-taking because it is more discussion-based than lecture-based. However, I have found the mapping method useful in history classes, where I have to connect historical events and people.

The Charting Method

<u>Author</u>	<u>Book</u>	<u>Year</u>
Lemony Snicket	The Bad Beginning	1999
J.K. Rowling	Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone	1997

Figure 4: An example of the Charting Method.

The Charting Method is good for a “setting up your paper by drawing columns and labeling appropriate headings in a table,” and it “[h]elps you track conversation and dialogues where you would normally be confused” (“Note Taking Systems”). While I don’t generally use this method, I have

appropriated this method and use it to compare and contrast two topics that we're discussing in class. For me, this is a better way than using a Venn Diagram because my handwriting doesn't usually fit in those circles.

The four types of note-taking methods that I've discussed so far are only a few examples of how you could take notes. There are many methods of note-taking, each imposing their own constraints and freedoms on the producer of the text, whether that producer actually realizes it or not. The fact that note-taking generally presents itself as a format or formula you're supposed to follow signals to us that we often view note-taking rigidly—as something that has one right way. However, academic note-taking, like any other genre, can be subverted. Many of the choices that I've made about my personal notes have subverted the conventions in one way or another. For the Outline Method, I often don't worry about tangential information because I've figured out a way to include it; while I generally disliked using the Cornell Method, I loved the idea of keywords and phrases written out on the side, so I try to include that in my annotations when I'm reading a text. Thus, my production of my particular note-taking genre involved deliberate decision making, thinking about whether to adhere to genre conventions or subvert them. In the next section, I'll move away from talking about a system of note-taking to talking about how the ecology aspects of my own note-taking influenced my note-taking and my chosen production tools.

The Overlapping Production and Ecology of (My) Graduate Student Notes

Production, as I mentioned previously, considers the tools and processes that occur when creating a specific genre. The production of my notes, while relying heavily on some of the note-taking methods I've already talked about, ultimately was influenced by office supplies. Silly, I know, and before actively reflecting on my own note-taking, I had never considered the role that office supplies would play in the production of my notes.

When I originally started distinguishing between the professor's thoughts and my own, I used an orange highlighter for the things that the professor pointed out and a green highlighter for my ideas. However, the green/orange combo didn't last very long because I couldn't afford it. I am quite particular about which office supplies I buy, and when reading, I only used Sharpie Accent Pocket Highlighters because they worked better with texts with smaller prints, which is usually what I was reading. However, in order to have green highlighters of this kind I have to buy them in bulk, which costs between \$7 and \$10, depending on what store I went to. So, it became too expensive to continue using green for the things that I found important

since I went through them so quickly, so I switched to blue because two blue highlighters come in the bulk packages. At this point, I still used orange for the things my professor found important, but over the next few semesters I switched to green because I just liked that color better. Since my professor usually didn't point out as many quotes as I normally would have underlined during my first reading of the text, green was still a good choice because I didn't go through them very quickly. However, I still needed a color to identify the places where my thoughts about what was important in a text overlapped with what the professor thought. Orange, then, became the color that I used to show those, and I often highlighted next to the things that overlapped, so I would know what was doubly important.

However, becoming a graduate student involved a whole new way of understanding note-taking. Part of this came from having to understand note-taking as a student-centered activity rather than a teacher-centered activity. As I entered my first semester of graduate school, I had to confront my own note-taking process once again. This is where **ecology** —“what we usually think of as a mere backdrop for our purposeful activities in creating texts”—comes in because ecology often works on texts in mysterious ways (Walker 76). Walker says that “environmental factors can become very active in some situations in shaping or interacting with our textual productions” (76). Ecology is often identifiable in the things that the author of a text doesn't necessarily have control over. In two of my three graduate courses, I was asked to keep a notebook in which I responded to readings and made connections between readings and class discussion; at the same time, I recorded my notes from class in these notebooks. Before this, I specifically chose to take notes with loose-leaf paper and a binder so I could insert or take out things as necessary. I had to change how I took notes because of something out of my control (my professor's request). In addition to this, my classes involved a different level of discussion. More voices joined the conversation about readings, and I wanted—even needed—my notes to reflect these additional opinions. My reading method changed, too; because I was reading so much, I was going through my highlighters really quickly, so I started using different colored pens to do the work of the highlighters and jumped from 3 color designations to 6.

As the situations in which I was taking notes changed, I had to adjust. My classes were no longer about listening to the professor say things just so I could write them down in my notes. The simple regurgitation of sixth grade was no more. Thus, taking notes involves more than putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. (What if you lose power and can't charge your laptop? What if you leave your notebook or pens at home?) Considering these ecological aspects helps us better understand the ways that note-taking occurs and how this genre isn't completely stable.

The Potentiality of Reception

I'd like to now consider the **reception** aspect of CHAT in regards to note-taking. Walker points out that “[r]eception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (75). Because of its various forms, methods, and settings, note-taking can be taken up in a variety of ways. As we've seen by examining the production, socialization, and ecology aspects of note-taking, a variety of things influence the ways that we take notes.

While my particular note-taking is specific to my process of understanding, I hope that sharing my investigation of my personal note-taking through CHAT helped you better consider the complicated nature of note-taking and the various activities involved in producing this text. Since thinking about note-taking as one large genre ignores the variety of influences and activities involved in creating notes, it is important to realize that what works in one setting will not necessarily work for another setting. As you find yourself existing in different educational spaces, you are also going to find that your process for studying/taking notes/writing isn't going to perfectly transfer from one space to another. This doesn't mean, though, you need to toss away all of your hard work from one class because another class is asking you to do something completely different. Rather, you can (and, I believe, should) imagine how what you've learned in one place will work (and won't work) in another place.

This is essentially the process that I went through in order to create the note-taking method that I use now. As I have discovered through this reflective journey, you must decide for yourself what parts of a note-taking system works for you and what parts don't. By assessing yourself and your situation, you can learn to be more successful in a variety of situations.

Endnotes

¹Of course, there are other kinds of note-taking, (such as note-taking in professional settings), but I am most interested in note-taking that occurs in academic settings since this is what I have the most experience with. With that said, any of the points that I make about academic note-taking can be applied to any other sort of note-taking. More importantly, when I say note-taking, I specifically mean academic note-taking.

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Katy Lewis hails from a small town in Virginia, but she's enjoyed adventuring in Illinois. She is currently working on her Master's in English, specifically focusing on children's literature. You can probably find her discussing two of her favorite things—*Deadpool* and *Lemony Snicket*.