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# How to make the best use of a lecture

Ailsa Benson is a freelance consultant with over 20 years of experience in education and training in community pharmacy

**W**hen I first started to think about this article, my mind visualised the considerable range of lectures that I have

attended over my life. Good and bad memories quickly flooded in, followed swiftly by an acknowledgement that perhaps, with a few tips, I might have made rather better use of some of them. In particular, preparing myself, having strategies for making notes during the lecture and then deciding how to manage those notes afterwards. For sometimes when I have turned to my notes for examination purposes or for writing assignments they have rather failed me. I also realised that my own behaviour (and that of other students) can play a role. So, those are the four aspects that I will consider here.

## Preparation

It is always worth taking a few minutes before a lecture to compose yourself. Think about:

- Why are you attending it?

- Where does it fit into the scheme of things?
- Is it a one off?
- Is it one of a series?

Seeing the lecture in some kind of context may help make it more understandable!

What do you know about the lecturer? Does he or she have

- A particular view on the topic?
- A particular style of delivery?

This latter may influence the way that you take notes, particularly if handouts are provided. Is there anything about the particular style that you know is distracting — mannerisms or bad habits? Try to put them out of your mind so that you can concentrate on the substance. Is there a large or a small audience? This may affect the time in which you can ask questions — and how comfortable you will feel in asking them. If you have been given guidance on pre-reading, then do try to do it. It may not make much sense at the time, but it will help you to recognise specialist vocabulary, names,

spare space to add in what was being said. So, an important technique is to:

- ▶ Ensure that as you write down your notes you leave space, including
- ▶ wide margin(s) either side
- ▶ blank lines every so often

By far and the best way of managing this is to mind map — that is, start in the middle of the page with the central theme for the lecture. Then, as each aspect is dealt with, you can draw a line out from this centre to a separate place on the page, give it some kind of boxed heading and note down key issues under it. Mind mapping this article would mean the title appearing in the centre of the page and the first line coming out, let us say, up to the top right hand corner of the page. This section title could be boxed in or underlined, and then the points made written underneath.

Lecturers move at different paces and have different expectations about students' understanding of the topic. It can therefore be useful for you to find some way of:

- ▶ Highlighting key terms that you do not understand
- ▶ Highlighting points that you would like to clarify when the opportunity arises

The higher up the educational tree you go, the more likely it is that your lecturer will refer to significant people in the field. You need to be familiar with both their names and the key titles of books or papers that they have written.

### After the lecture

Look through the notes again.

- ▶ Check the meanings of words you did not understand
- ▶ Check spelling of unusual names or terms
- ▶ Tidy them up as necessary, perhaps through making a new version

It is worthwhile:

- ▶ Summarising key points in a box
- ▶ Perhaps in another box, note down how this lecture links into other

lectures, perhaps by extending a concept or illustrating an alternative view to the subject

If you use a consistent place for these summary boxes, then they will be easy to find when it comes to revision. The ideal, of course, is to mind map these boxes onto another sheet that deals with the whole topic area so that you can see how the lectures link up. Better still, you can then develop another map that shows how each topic area links into others, whether within or across disciplinary boundaries. The benefits of this latter work will come at examination and dissertation time.

### Behaviour during the lecture

I am not going to discuss here things like eating sweets or drinking (water) during lectures, other than to say be aware that some lecturers find this irritating. My concern here is about how you can engage yourself actively in the lecture. All the research on learning suggests that active learning rather than passive is the most effective.

Some lecturers are good at finding ways of involving students; others make no attempt to do so.

Important ways in which you can make your learning active are:

- ▶ Seeking clarification
- ▶ Asking questions
- ▶ Answering questions

Remember, the question that you dare not ask is often the one that others are worrying about too. Answering questions posed by the lecturer provides you with an opportunity to express ideas in your own words — this is active learning. If you are afraid that others will laugh at you — well, does that matter? After all, why are you there, attending the lecture? — which takes us neatly back to our beginning. ☺

or ideas that will be introduced in the lecture.

### Making notes

Have your notebook, etc, to hand, and write down the title of the lecture, the name of the lecturer and the date (do not forget the year) before things get going.

For years I used to sit with pen in hand, poised over the note pad intent in writing down as much of the lecture as I possibly could. I could see that not all other students did that; some wrote nothing down at all and others odd sentences or words. Time and experience of different lecturers demonstrated that I needed to vary my style. But the one consistent problem with my technique was:

lecturers do not always deal with their ideas in a logical and consistent way

This means that when, for example, a lecturer returned to an earlier point, sometimes I would find that I had no