

Hacking Chaos: The Cornell Method of Note-Taking

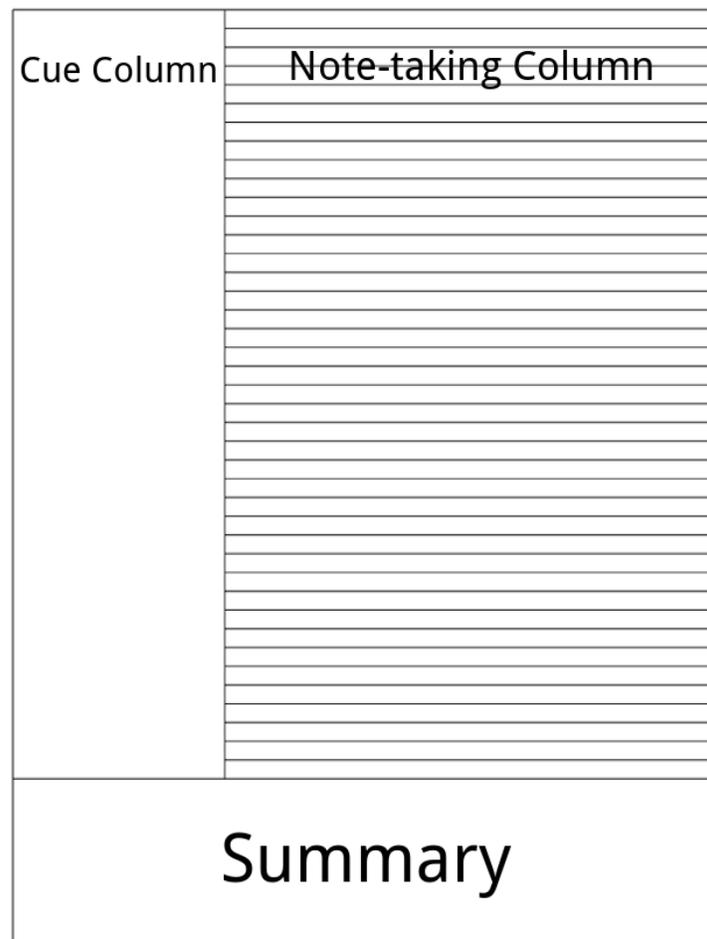
by Lisa Needham on July 18th, 2014

Taking notes by hand is better than typing notes, because it forces you to slow down and focus on what is important. Slowing down greatly increases your understanding of information, which is why you need to become better at note-taking.

That's where the [Cornell Method](#) comes in. The Cornell Method has you separate your notes into a note-taking portion, key points and a summary.

Setting Up the Cornell Method

It is absurdly simple to arrange your notes in the Cornell fashion. Take your standard legal pad and draw a thick vertical line down the left-hand side of the paper approximately 2-3 inches from the side of the page. Then draw a horizontal line all the way across the paper about two inches from the bottom of the page. You'll end up with something like this.



If this line-drawing strikes you as too daunting or ugly, you can design one in [seconds online](#) and print it on any old paper you'd like. You can also purchase [Levenger pads optimized for the Cornell Method](#).

There. You're all done getting ready to take notes Cornell-style. Easiest life hack prep ever.

The Structure of the Cornell Method

Dividing your paper gave you three sections. The largest one is the note-taking section, the left-hand margin is the key points/questions section and the bottom is the summary.

Opinions differ wildly on what should happen with the notes section. Some people — particularly those that recommend it as a college study tool — subscribe to a [fairly elaborate](#) set of rules about recording, reciting, reflecting and reviewing. You probably don't need to go that deep. However, there's one principle that should guide you if you're going to take notes using the Cornell Method: write less not more. If you've gotten used to taking notes on a laptop, you are already guilty of writing down too much. Treat the notes section like an outline. Shoot for key points, not a verbatim transcript. Think of that section as an outline you will return to later, after your class or meeting has finished.

The left-hand margin is the cue/recall section. When you're using Cornell as an academic note-taking method the cue functions as a memorization and comprehension tool. You should be able to cover up the notes section, and answer any questions you posed to yourself in the cue section. Depending on what you are taking notes about, this section can contain a series of questions, a roundup of notable points or, to get all business-speak, action items. You should be able to throw the entire notes section away and walk out of your meeting or class with the key ideas intact.

The summary at the bottom is exactly what you would expect — a quick summary of the notes on that page. Internet nerds differ on whether you should do that right when you finish taking notes or after you've reviewed them. I tend to summarize right away, because otherwise that summary section sits alone and unloved forever.

How the Cornell Method Works For Me

It isn't an exaggeration to say that the Cornell Method helps me in every note-taking situation I have encountered in my professional life.

In meetings, I use it to easily call out follow-up items by dumping them in the cue section. This can be anything from something I need to look up to a call I need to return. Pulling those to-do items and reminders out of the main text of the notes really highlights them. Every time I fall in love with a new type of notebook that doesn't have the Cornell margin, I go back to trying to just circle, underline or highlight my follow up items and two things happen. First, my notes look like an utter mess, and second, I can't easily find the things I want just by glancing at the page.

Pulling your next steps/to dos/action items over into the left-hand column also works well if you like to reduce your notes to an actual to-do list that you put on an index card, in a computer file, or a fancy [Getting Things Done](#) tickler file, because that left-hand column is now functionally your list of next actions. In meeting situations, the summary

usually ends up being nothing but the date, time, purpose and attendees of the meeting, but even that can be helpful, as it gives me a way to file the notes easily.

When I am listening to someone else talk for any length of time, being forced to organize my notes Cornell-style on the fly means that I am actively engaged and listening. If I don't take handwritten notes, my mind drifts, and suddenly I've missed everything. Here, I use the notes section to force me into keeping a cohesive outline, even if the speaker wanders around a bit.

Then I use the recall section to break out big-picture points I'm going to address and key questions I'd like to ask. Again, pulling those things out of the notes section cleans up my notes visually, and creates a quick mini-outline that I can refer to quickly.

The arena in which I've definitely found the Cornell method most helpful is in organizing my class notes. The notes section covers the main points of the lecture in an outline and forces me to stay on task. The recall section is my dumping ground for everything I can't deal with in my notes without things getting messy. Questions I plan on asking appear there, linked to whichever part of the lecture they're related to. Reminders to myself also go there when I'm re-reading notes. Notes on sources, if I need to mention those, go in the side margin as well.

Finally, the summary functions like the tagging function in [Evernote](#). I've got the week of the semester the lecture occurs, class name, major topics covered that week and a page number. This way, when I've hopelessly shuffled and reshuffled the pages while studying, I can easily put them back together again when I'm done.

If you are hopelessly disorganized like me, but wish you were an organized person hacking your own tendencies towards chaos, you really can't go wrong with taking your notes by hand using the Cornell Method to force you into a specific but flexible note-taking framework. All my notes — meeting notes, lecture notes, work notes — look and function the same, which means I always know where to put information when I am writing, and I always know how to find information when I'm reviewing later.

The Cornell Method is the only productivity tool that has stuck with me for more than a year, and I'm never giving it up.

I didn't pursue the Cornell Method as some sort of life hack or magic productivity enhancer. I stumbled upon it because I wanted some really nice legal pads. I developed a completely unnecessary fondness for the [Levenger](#) catalog, which carried within its pages nice pens, some lap desks and some legal pads that cost approximately five times any other legal pad I'd ever seen. The catalog waxed rhapsodically about the weight of the paper and the smooth as silk feel you'd have writing on it with your pen, but never explained the weird huge margin at the left hand side. I figured I'd live with that, and plunked down \$25 in 2001 dollars for a five-pack. That large left-hand margin turned out to be my introduction to the Cornell Method, and I've been a devotee and an evangelist ever since.