



History Lab

LAB 458

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Tips for Taking Good Notes¹

- * **Start by reading**
 - Keeping up with class reading assignments will give you the background knowledge to understand the lectures and class presentations.
 - Learn how the textbook is organized and laid out. Look at headings, section titles, and keywords. Use these to help structure your notes.
- * **Take notes on the readings**
 - Pay attention to main ideas and key terms. Write out definitions for key terms.
 - Writing notes by hand helps you remember information.
 - *One strategy for writing book vs. lecture notes:* write reading notes on one side of an open-faced notebook and lecture notes on the other. This allows you to compare the notes on specific topics side-by-side as you take them.
- * **Take notes in class**
 - Use your reading notes to prepare for lecture
 - Write the lecture subject / title and date at the top of each page of notes (this keeps them organized)
 - Be selective. Summarize. Do *not* try to write everything the professor says!
 - Write down anything that the instructor (a) puts on the board; (b) says is important; (c) repeats more than once; or (d) provides in a list.
 - Write down names, dates, and events. Summarize the professor's explanation of why that point is historically important.
 - Underline especially important points.
 - Look up the meaning of unfamiliar words.
 - Rewrite notes that are poorly organized or hard to read.
 - Reread your notes. If things are unclear, ask your professor. If you have questions about the material, make a note of it and ask your professor. They are happy to help during their office hours.
- * **Listen, listen, listen!**
 - A key part of taking notes is actively listening.
 - Since the purpose of note taking is not to write down every word of the lecture you have to actively listen to determine what information is most important to write down.
- * **If you are struggling with note taking, visit with your professor or TA.**

¹ All tips and examples, including the figures on the following pages, are taken from Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*, 12th ed. (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2013), 14-23.

- Be sure to take a sample of your notes with you to the meeting. This allows the professor / TA to provide feedback on your notes specifically instead of generic tips.
- * **Find the strategy that works best for you!**

Example of Poor Note Taking

Main ideas of the lecture: The relationship between European-Asian trade and the religious struggle between Islam and Christianity. The connection between the enslavement of Africans and the need for plantation labor in the New World.

Colonization of Africa—People were afraid to sail out. Afraid of sea monsters. But they liked the stories about gold in Africa. The Portuguese King Henry sailed south to find the gold mines and built a fort at Emma.

England and France want to trade with Africa. They begin trading. Competing with Portugal. These countries got into wars. They wanted to control Africa.

China had spices. They traded with Cairo and Venice. The Asians wanted gold, but the Muslims stopped all trade. They fought wars about religion for hundreds of years. Fought over Jerusalem. The Pope called for a crusade. This was in the Middle Ages.

Spices came from Asia. In Europe they were valuable because the kings used them to become rich. They also ate them. The Portuguese wanted to explore Africa and make a way to India. Their boats couldn't get around until Bartolomeu Dias discovered the Cape of Good Hope in 1487.

Most of all, the Portuguese wanted slaves. They shipped them back from Africa. Columbus took them after he discovered America (1492). The Pope made a line in the Atlantic Ocean so the Catholics wouldn't fight. The colonies needed slaves. They sent 15 million from 1502 to the 19th century. Slaves did the hard work. They got free later after the Civil War.

What are the problems with these notes?

- Not well organized
- No title of the lecture, date, or course number
- Just a series of sentences without any order or connections.
- Few dates used, and little sense of a historical timeline
- Focus on factual information and details instead of key themes, or big ideas.
- Does not cover the main idea of the lecture

Example of Good Note Taking

Early European Contact with Africa
Why did Europeans come to Africa?

History 102
10/23/18

1. Desire for gold
 - Medieval legends about gold in Africa
 - Prince Henry (Portuguese nobleman) sent men down coast of Africa to find source of gold. (Also to gain direct access to gold trade controlled by Muslims.)
 - Portuguese built forts along the coast. Their ships carried gold and ivory back to Portugal (16th century).
 - Then the other European states came (England, Holland, France, Spain) to set up their own trading posts.
 - Competed with each other for African trade. (Will talk about rivalry next week.)
2. Wanted to trade with Asia and weaken the Muslims (The Muslims had created a large empire based on the religion of Islam)
 - Religious conflict between Christianity and Islam. Fought a religious war in the 11th-12th centuries—the Crusades.
 - The Muslims had expanded their empire when Europe was weak. In 15th century they controlled North Africa and they dominated trade in the Mediterranean. They controlled the spices coming from Asia, which were in great demand in Europe. In Europe they were used to preserve meat. So valuable, sometimes used as money.
 - Portugal and Spain were ruled by Catholic monarchs. Very religious. The Catholic monarchs wanted to force the Muslims out of Europe. (They still held part of Spain.) Wanted to convert them to Christianity.
 - The Muslims controlled North Africa and Mediterranean trade. If the Portuguese and Spanish could sail to the Indian Ocean directly, they could get goods from China and the Muslims couldn't stop them. The way to Asia was the sea route around Africa.
3. The Europeans wanted slaves
 - When the Portuguese explored West Africa (15th century), they send back the first slaves (around 1440).
 - The Spanish conquered the New World (Mexico, Peru, etc.). (Columbus had made several trips for Queen Isabella I of Spain.)
 - In America (the name for the New World), they needed slaves. Most slaves were sent to America.
 - Native Americans died from diseases of white men. They were also killed in the wars. There was nobody to work the mines (gold and silver).
 - Sugar plantations of the Caribbean (and Brazil) needed labor. Cotton and rice plantations in the south of U.S. also. It was hard work and nobody wanted to do it.
 - 15 million slaves were brought to work the plantations starting in 1502 until mid-19th century.

What makes these notes good?

- Follow the organization of the lecture
- Touch on major points
- Emphasize important information by underlining

Example of Rewritten Good Notes

Early European Contact with Africa
What Drew Europeans to Africa?

History 1-2
10/23/18

1. GOLD

There were medieval legends that there was a lot of gold in West Africa. Access to the gold was controlled by non-Christian powers (Muslims—believers in Islamic religion). Tales of gold lured the Portuguese (led by Prince Henry) to explore the coast of West Africa in the late 15th century. By the 16th century, the Portuguese had built several trading posts and forts along the West African coast and were bringing back gold, ivory, and pepper.

By the 17th century, English, Dutch, French, and Spanish ships challenged the Portuguese trading monopoly and set up their own trading posts. This was the start of European rivalry over Africa's wealth.

2. DESIRE TO WEAKEN THE POWER OF THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE (MUSLIMS) AND EXPAND TRADE WITH ASIA

Conflict between Christianity and Islam was an old religious conflict (the Crusades as an example in 11th and 12th centuries). The Muslims controlled North Africa and the Mediterranean. They also controlled the spice trade from Asia. Spices were important in Europe because they were the only known way to preserve meat.

The Catholic states of Portugal and Spain wanted to fight with the Muslims. They wanted to drive them out of Spain and challenge the large Muslim empire in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. They hoped to convert them to Christianity. The Muslims were strong in North Africa, but if European powers could discover a way around Africa into the Indian Ocean, they could outflank the Muslims and obtain direct access to the trade with Indian and Asia.

3. SLAVES

Portuguese trading posts in Africa had sent a small number of slaves to Europe starting in the late 15th century. With the discovery and conquest of America at the turn of the 16th century, a new and larger slave trade began to European colonies in the New World (America).

The Native Americans died (they were killed in war and by European diseases in great numbers). There was a shortage of labor. In the 17th and 18th centuries, large sugar plantation were set up in the Caribbean and Brazil and rice and cotton plantations in the southern United States. The need for laborers to do the hard agricultural work led to the importing of millions of slaves from Africa. Approximately 15 million Africans were sent to America as slaves between 1502 and the mid-19th century. This slave trade made Africa valuable to the European powers.

What makes these better?

- Eliminate repeated phrases
- Connected sentences make for a better study guide
- They clarify the material
- Rewritten within a day of the lecture so the material was still fresh in your mind
- This allows the student to make note of any questions they have and ask the professor during the next lecture or office hours