

A STUDENT GUIDE · GRADES 9–12 AND COLLEGE

Taking Notes in English Class

A Student Guide to Board Notes, Discussion, and Reading

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Methods, templates, and practice for students
of literature and writing

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Why Notes Matter in an English Class

In a math or science class, the notes are often on the board. In an English class, much of what matters is said aloud: a classmate's reading of a line, a teacher's question that has no single answer, a disagreement that sharpens what a passage means. Good notes capture those ideas so that, when you sit down to write an essay, you have evidence and arguments waiting for you rather than a blank memory.

This guide shows you how to take notes from the board, from discussion, and from your own reading, and how to turn those notes into writing.

The Three Rules

- 1. Write ideas, not transcripts.** You cannot write everything. Write the claim, the evidence, and the question.
- 2. Always record the page number.** A quotation without a page is hard to use later.
- 3. Review within a day.** Ten minutes of review the same evening makes your notes far more useful a week later.

Board Notes

What a teacher writes on the board is a signal: it is what the teacher thinks matters most. But board notes are usually shorthand. Your job is to add the meaning around them.

How to Copy Board Notes Well

- Copy the board exactly, then add a few words of your own that explain it.
- When the teacher circles, underlines, or repeats something, mark it with a star.
- If a term is new, write it in the margin and look it up the same day.
- When the board shows a quotation, write the page number beside it.
- If you miss something, leave a gap and a question mark. Ask after class or compare with a classmate.

A Simple Layout

On the board	What it means (your words)
Irony: gap between expected and actual	Like when the title says one thing and the story shows the opposite
“Araby” — epiphany, p. __	The boy suddenly sees himself clearly at the end; look at the last sentence
Question: who is the narrator talking to?	Discuss; write my own answer here before the next class

Notes from Discussion

Discussion is where interpretations are tested. Notes from discussion are some of the most valuable you can take, because they record the moves you will need in an essay: a claim, the evidence for it, and an objection.

The Claim, Evidence, Question Method

Divide a page into three columns. Each time someone makes a point worth keeping, fill a row.

Claim	Evidence (with page)	Question or objection
The grandmother is both cruel and loving	She mocks the neighbor, then helps her into the sea	Is the kindness real, or another performance?
The ending is hopeful	Final image of light	But the character still dies; hope for whom?

What to Listen For

- **Turns:** “But,” “However,” “On the other hand.” A turn signals a second reading worth recording.
- **Quotations:** when someone reads a line aloud, write the line and page.
- **Questions the teacher repeats:** they often become essay prompts.
- **Your own disagreements:** write them down. Disagreement is the start of a thesis.

The Cornell Method

The Cornell method was developed by Walter Pauk at Cornell University and described in his book *How to Study in College*. It works well for English because it builds review into the page.

How to Set Up the Page

1. Draw a vertical line about two and a half inches from the left edge.
2. Draw a horizontal line about two inches from the bottom.
3. Take notes during class in the large right-hand column.
4. After class, write questions or key words in the left column that match the notes beside them.
5. At the bottom, write a two- or three-sentence summary of the whole page.

Why It Works

Covering the right column and answering the questions in the left column turns your notes into a self-test. The summary forces you to decide what the class was really about, which is often the first draft of an essay idea.

Cornell Page Template

Cues and questions	Notes
What is the narrator hiding?	Discussion: narrator never says why he left; class thinks shame. Evidence p. ____.
Key term: unreliable narrator	A narrator whose account the reader cannot fully trust.
Summary:	The narrator's silences may matter more than what he says. Possible essay topic.

Notes While Reading

Reading notes are the bridge between the book and your essay. Whether you write in the margin, on sticky notes, or in a notebook, use the same small set of marks so you can find things quickly.

Mark	Meaning
Underline	A key line you may quote
Star	Something important or surprising
?	Something confusing to ask about
!	A strong reaction
R	A repeated word, image, or idea (track it)
T	A connection to a theme discussed in class

The Two-Sentence Chapter Note

After each chapter or story, write two sentences: one for what happened, one for what it might mean. Over a novel, these notes become a ready-made map of the book.

From Notes to Essay

1. **Gather.** Read through all your notes on the text and highlight every claim and every question that interests you.
2. **Group.** Sort the highlights into two or three clusters. Each cluster may become a body paragraph.
3. **Choose a question.** Pick the question you most want to answer. Your answer is your working thesis.
4. **Find the evidence.** Use the page numbers in your notes to return to the text and copy exact quotations.
5. **Answer the objection.** Use the objections from your discussion notes to make your argument stronger.

Practice Exercises

1. Take Cornell notes on one class discussion this week. That evening, cover the right column and answer your own cue questions.
2. During the next discussion, fill at least five rows of a Claim, Evidence, Question chart.
3. Write two-sentence chapter notes for the next three chapters you read.
4. Compare notes with a classmate after class. Write down one idea they caught that you missed.
5. Choose one question from your notes and write a one-paragraph answer with a quotation and page number.

Self-Check

- Do my notes show claims and evidence, not just facts?
- Does every quotation have a page number?
- Did I review the notes within a day?
- Can I find at least one possible essay topic in this week's notes?

Works Cited

Pauk, Walter, and Ross J. Q. Owens. *How to Study in College*. Cengage Learning, many editions.

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