

Communication 4312 – On Taking Notes

If you are serious about learning to write better you have to do all the things that go into making you a good writer. One of these is notetaking.

Learning to take good useful notes takes time and practice. You can't just say that one of these days you'll start taking notes. You need to learn how to organize the notes, what to include, what to exclude.

Listening and taking notes is not easy to do. You need to learn how to listen, take notes and think about what you are going to ask next – all at the same time.

You ought to have more than one notebook and you ought to write in them every day. You especially need one for this class. Write in it every day. What happened in class. Include details. Have a separate pad so that when someone comes to the class you can write down what they say. You can summarize that in your class notebook.

When you are interviewing someone for a story, you have to learn how to pay attention to the person and take notes at the same time. If you don't do this well, that can be distracting. You must take notes during an interview. Otherwise, the person will think you aren't serious.

Learn to use a tape recorder and learn to operate it without it getting in the way. However, the tape recorder isn't a replacement for your notes. You don't want to have to transcribe an entire interview. Instead, use the tape recorder to check on facts and to be sure the quotes are exact.

Details and quotes. Those are the two things you are looking for. Getting information correct is critical. You can't afford to mess up on the facts. And you absolutely must have good quotes. Full quotes. You have to listen a lot, take a lot of notes until you learn how to hear the quote and then get it down in your notes.

To paraphrase Muhammad Ali, if it was easy everybody would be doing it.

Sometimes I'm going to make suggestions or say things that I think you should do. If you are serious about becoming a better writer, you will take these things to heart and make them part of your life as a writer.

■ David McHam