Class preparation is an essential element of studying for any course. The time you spend in class each week shouldn’t be a time in which you take frantic and copious notes but have little or no idea of what’s going on. In fact, class time can be a time in which you actually begin to learn and understand the course material. How do you make that happen?

1. **Analyze your syllabus, not only at the beginning of the semester but throughout the course.** Much can be learned from reading your syllabus carefully and reflecting on the information it provides. And we don’t mean simply how many tests will be given and when, or what percentage of your grade will be determined by class participation. In addition to those ‘facts’, the syllabus can give you information about how to approach the course material. It can tell you how reading intensive the course will be, and thus help you plan weekly reading time as part of your class prep. A syllabus can provide a concept map of the course, one which you can consult frequently to see whether you’re on track. To learn how to analyze a course syllabus, talk to an ASIP instructor.

2. **Review your notes from the last two class periods for about ten to fifteen minutes, either the night before your class or in the time between classes that day.** Ask yourself: what are the main topics or concepts that we’ve just covered? How do they relate to one another? What connection might they have to the topics or ideas likely to be addressed in this next class? Do you see certain themes emerging? Are you moving from specifics to the bigger picture, or vice-versa? This class preparation strategy helps you begin to synthesize course material throughout the semester, and not just on the night before the test.

3. **Pre-read. Avoid being blind-sided in a dark alley.** For some courses, this may mean skimming a textbook chapter to get the main ideas and hopping from one illustration, table or diagram (where chapter information is illustrated or summarized) to the next, in pogo-stick fashion. The goal for this kind of pre-reading is to get a sense of what’s likely to be covered by your professor in the next lecture, and to, therefore, not arrive ‘cold’ to the class. See general study strategies for problem-solving courses. Other courses may require careful and reflective pre-reading, so that you are prepared to summarize an argument or to discuss in detail one author’s stance versus another’s on a given topic. See Reading Rate and Comprehension [or yet to be written handout, How Do You Approach Thinking About Reading] for detailed reading strategies, or see an ASIP instructor to discuss what kind of pre-reading would be appropriate for a particular course.
What’s Your Listening Quotient?

Listening in class will be a prime source of course information. Unfortunately, people do not instinctively listen well. Listening is a skill which must be developed, largely by getting rid of bad listening habits and replacing them with good ones. We are all prone to bad listening, from routinely finding the subject dull and the speaker boring to faking attention and allowing ourselves to be easily distracted.

To determine your current Listening Quotient, take our online quiz, What’s Your “LQ”? If your skills are satisfactory to outstanding, great! The following suggestions for improvement may serve as reminders to keep you on track. If your listening skills need work, start with these suggestions, and meet with an ASIP instructor to develop a more individualized approach for improving these skills.

1. Look for the speaker’s pattern of organization. In a lecture, a speaker is generally referring to notes or some other source of information. You can understand much better if you work to recognize what the speaker’s driving at and how she or he is getting there. Try to anticipate the points a speaker will make in developing a subject. If you guess right, the speaker’s words will reinforce your guess. If you guess wrong, you’ll have to think to discover why you and the speaker disagreed. In either case, your chance of understanding and remembering what was said is nearly double what it would have been if you had simply listened passively.

2. Look for the main idea or ideas of the lecture. Facts are important only as they support the speaker’s points. If you have trouble distinguishing between the important and the trivial, see an ASIP instructor.

3. Look for the supporting material. Good listeners also try to identify a speaker’s supporting material. A speaker can’t keep making points without giving listeners some of the evidence on which the conclusions are based. And you, the listener, will want to examine that evidence for relevance and soundness.

4. Recapitulate for yourself when the speaker pauses. A speaker is likely to speak at an average rate of 100 to 125 words per minute. But how fast do listeners listen? If all one’s thoughts were measurable in words per minute, the answer would seem to be an average of 400 to 500 words per minute. That’s a problem! Our ability to listen ‘fast’ allows us to think we’re taking it all in, to let our minds wander, and to be passive listeners. The three previous suggestions all assume that you as a listener do have the time to anticipate and to seek out and identify main ideas and supporting evidence. One final suggestion for good use of that listening differential is to summarize in about five seconds the highlights covered by a speaker in about five minutes. When the speaker stops to take a swallow of water or walks over to the blackboard to write something or switches to the next PowerPoint slide and takes a deep breath, the experienced listener
makes a mental summary. The accumulation of these mental summaries will help you to understand and retain course information.

What kind of note-taker are you?

1. **There.** You sit in class and get hardly any information down on paper. You might have a list of topics that the professor has put on the board, or what you believe to be the main ideas from listening. You haven’t gotten down any details or even recognized what the details or examples or illustrations are. Very likely you find the class uninteresting.

2. **Scribe.** Big contrast to ‘there’! You are getting nearly everything down. You are a note-taking machine! Whatever your professor has written on the board, on the overhead or put on PowerPoint, you’ve got. You’ve got the examples, and even the tangents or anecdotes. Many incoming Duke students find themselves to be scribes, reflecting their abilities to take complete notes in high school.

3. **Note-taker.** Now you are actually taking notes. In other words, you are getting down on paper something that has more organization and more ‘sense’ to it. You are most likely taking notes that have a specific style to them (see note-taking styles below for some examples). You are listening and, for the most part, understanding at the same time, and your notes reflect that understanding. Your notes have breaks and headings to them. They indicate what is ‘background information,’ or an ‘example,’ or an ‘aside’ by the professor. You leave spaces for things you didn’t understand and you mark places in the notes where you will need to fill in information later, after talking with the professor or TA or a friend in the class.

4. **Smart Devil.** Organizing as you write information down is easy—you’ve become skilled at it, and do it without even realizing that you are. But more than understanding and automatically organizing, you are also thinking about the material as the professor presents it, and perhaps even jotting down your reactions to the material—a question you have, or your thoughts about a specific idea, or your own example. You are likely to get to this advanced note-taker stage only after a good number of lectures or after several courses in a discipline. This stage of note-taking requires knowing the context of the course, having the course goals (as they’ve been stated by the professor) clearly in mind, and grasping the vocabulary of the course and the discipline. It requires really engaging with the course material, probably outside of class first, before you can do it while actually listening to your professor. Note-takers 3 and 4 produce notes that are useful study aids for learning and studying for exams.
What’s Your Note-taking Style?

There are a number of classic note-taking styles (formats) appropriate for college-level classes, some of which will be familiar to you:

- Cornell Method
- Outline Method
- Chart Method
- Spider-web Method
- Methods for PowerPoint lectures
- Methods for Tracking Class Discussions

In addition to these familiar styles, we have developed a unique note-taking method that will turn you into a lecture critic. This note-taking method improves:

- Focus
- Concentration
- Memory
- Understanding

Come in and meet with an ASIP instructor and we can work on the right method for you.

Whatever style of notes you choose for a specific class, here are some important **basic things to do**:

- Write on only one side of the page.
- Leave lots of space on each page, for adding headings, making connections, jotting down questions or details later.
- If you use spiral notebooks, buy the kind that have perforated pages and holes for putting those pages into a three-ring binder. This allows you to tear out pages and insert additional pages, as you process and re-process your notes.
- Date and number each page.
Reflect, Relate, Apply: Making Notes You Can Use

Processing your notes within 24 hours of the class period is a final step in making sure you get the most out of attending each class. Note-processing can be roughly divided into three stages: reflect, relate, and apply. An ASIP instructor can guide you through these stages, working with a set of your class notes. Here is an overview of what processing your notes means:

1. Reflect:
   - Read through your notes. Get a general sense of the material.
   - What is the topic? What is the point of this lecture in the context of the course?
   - Identify parts of the notes. Group information as well as you can, using natural breaks, headings, etc. Review the overall structure and see if it makes sense to you.

2. Relate:
   - Evaluate your understanding of each piece of information in each group. Can you explain it in your own words? Look up terms and concepts you don’t understand.
   - Evaluate the significance of each piece of information in each group. Can you identify the relevance of the information in the context of the lecture and of the course?

3. Apply:
   - Edit your notes to reflect your understanding. It should now be possible for you to edit or rewrite your notes in a manner that will be useful both now and later. If your notes are pretty clear, you might make connections or groupings, or identify examples, or jot your reflections directly onto your existing notes. If you find that your notes are not well-arranged, you might want to rewrite portions of them, using any note-taking style that seems appropriate for the nature of the material.