

CHAPTER 5

HOW TO EXCEL IN CLASS

Whatever your grade level, whatever your grades, whatever your major, whatever your ultimate career goal, we all have one thing in common: the classroom experience.

Most teachers utilize the classroom setting as an opportunity to embellish and interpret material covered in the text and other assigned readings. If you always complete your reading assignments before class, you'll be able to devote your classroom time to the new material the teacher will undoubtedly cover.

You've Got to Have Class

Exactly how you'll use the skills we'll cover in this chapter will be influenced by two factors: the type of classroom setup and the particular methods and styles employed by each of your teachers.

Each of the following general class formats will require you to make adjustments to accomplish your goals.

Lectures: Podium Pleasantries

Pure lectures are quite common from the college level up, but exist only rarely at the high school level. Lecture halls at larger colleges may fill up with hundreds of students for some of the more popular courses (or introductory classes, particularly in the sciences).

Primary emphases: listening; note taking.

Discussions: Time to Speak Your Mind

Also called *tutorials* and *seminars*, discussion groups are, again, common on the college level, often as adjuncts to courses boasting particularly large enrollments. A typical weekly schedule for such a course might consist of two lectures and one or more discussion groups. Often led by graduate teaching assistants, these discussion groups contain fewer students—usually no more than two dozen—and give you the chance to discuss points made in the lecture and material from assigned readings.

Such groups rarely follow a precise text or format and may wander wildly from topic to topic, once again pointing out the need for a general mastery of the course material, the “jumping off” point for discussion.

Primary emphases: asking/answering questions; analyzing concepts and ideas; taking part in discussion.

Combination: The Best (or Worst) of Both

Some postsecondary courses are, for want of a better term, combination classes—they combine the lecture and discussion formats (the typical kind of precollege class you’re probably used to). The teacher prepares a lesson plan of material he or she wants to cover in a specific class. Through lecture, discussion, question and answer, audiovisual presentation, or a combination of one or more such devices, the material is covered.

Your preparation for this type of class will depend to a great extent on the approach of each individual instructor. Such classes also occur on the postsecondary level—college, graduate school, trade school—when class size is too small for a formal lecture approach.

Primary emphases: note taking; listening; participation; asking and answering questions.

Handson: Getting Your Hands Dirty

Classes such as science labs and various vocational education courses (industrial arts, graphics, and so forth) occur at all levels from high school up. They are concerned almost exclusively with *doing* something—completing a particular experiment, working on a project, whatever. The teacher may demonstrate certain things before letting the students work on their own, but the primary emphasis is on the student carrying out his or her own projects while in class.

On the college level, science labs are usually overseen by graduate assistants. Trade schools may use a combination of short lectures, demonstrations, and handson workshops; you can't become a good auto mechanic just by reading a book on cleaning a distributor.

Primary emphasis: development and application of particular manual and technical skills.

Exceptions to the Rule

Rarely can a single class be neatly pigeonholed into one of these formats, though virtually all will be primarily one or another. It would seem that size is a key factor in choosing a format, but you can't always assume, for example, that a large lecture course, filled with 200 or more students, will feature a professor standing behind a rostrum reading from his prepared text. Or that a small class of a dozen people will tend to be all discussion.

During my college years, I had a religion teacher who, though his class was one of the more popular on campus and regularly drew 300 or more students to each session, rarely lectured at all. I never knew *what* to expect when entering his classroom. One week it would be a series of musical improvisations from a local jazz

band, with a variety of graduate assistants talking about out-of-body experiences. Another session would consist entirely of the professor arguing with a single student over one key topic...which had *nothing* to do with that week's (or any *other* week's) assignment.

In another class of merely 20 students, the professor teaching us physical chemistry would march in at the sound of the bell and, without acknowledging anyone's presence or saying a word, walk to the blackboard and start writing equations. He would wordlessly work his way across the massive board, until, some 20 or 30 minutes later, he ran off the right side. Slowly, he would walk back to the left side...and start writing all over again. He never asked questions. Never asked *for* questions. In fact, I'm not sure I remember him uttering *anything* for three solid months!

Know Your Teacher

You must know and understand the kind of teacher you've got and his likes, dislikes, preferences, style, and what he expects you to get out of the class. Depending on your analysis of your teacher's habits, goals, and tendencies, preparation may vary quite a bit, whatever the topic or format of the class.

Take something as simple as asking questions during class, which I encourage you to do whenever you don't understand a key point. Some teachers are very confident fielding questions at any time during a lesson; others prefer questions to be held until the end of the day's lesson; still others discourage questions (or any interaction for that matter) entirely. Learn when and how each one of your teachers likes to field questions, then ask them accordingly.

No matter how ready a class is to enter into a free-wheeling discussion, some teachers fear losing control and veering away from their very specific lesson plan. Such teachers may well encourage discussion but always try to

steer it into a predetermined path (their lesson plan). Other teachers thrive on chaos, in which case you can never be sure what's going to happen.

Approaching a class with the former type of teacher should lead you to participate as much as possible in the class discussion, but warn you to stay within whatever boundaries she has obviously set.

Getting ready for a class taught by the latter kind of teacher requires much more than just reading the text—there will be a lot of emphasis on your understanding key concepts, interpretation, analysis, and your ability to apply those lessons to cases never mentioned in your text at all!

Some teachers' lesson plans or lectures are, at worst, a review of what's in the text and, at best, a review plus some discussion of sticky points or areas he feels may give you problems. Others use the text or other assignments merely as a jumping-off point—their lectures or lesson plans might cover numerous points that aren't in your text at all. Preparing for the latter kind of class will require much more than rote memorization of facts and figures—you'll have to be ready to give examples, explain concepts in context, and more.

Most of your teachers and professors will probably have the same goals: to teach you how to think, learn important facts and principles of the specific subject they teach, and, perhaps, how to apply them in your own way.

In math or science classes, your ability to apply what you've learned to specific problems is paramount.

Other classes, such as English, will require you to analyze and interpret various works, but may emphasize the "correct" interpretation, too.

Whatever situation you find yourself in—and you may well have one or more of each of these "types"—you will need to adapt the skills we will cover in this chapter to each.

Adapt to Your Teacher's Style

All instructors (perhaps I should say all *effective* instructors) develop a plan of attack for each class. They decide what points they will make, how much time they will spend reviewing assignments and previous lessons, what texts they will refer to, what anecdotes they will use to provide comic relief or human interest, and how much time they'll allow for questions.

Building a note-taking strategy around each teacher's typical "plan of attack" for lectures is another key to academic success. Why do some students just seem to know what's important and what's not? How do they ferret out exactly the information that's "test-worthy" while not even glancing at the material that isn't?

What these students innately know is that items discussed during *any* lesson can be grouped into several categories:

- Information not contained in the class text(s) or other assigned reading.
- Explanations of obscure material covered in the text but with which students may have difficulty.
- Demonstrations or examples to further explain a concept, process, or subject.
- Background information to put course material in context.

As you listen to your teacher, try to figure out which category his remarks fall into. This will help you determine how detailed your notes on that segment of the lecture should be.

How to Prepare for Any Class

In general, here's how you should plan to prepare for any class before you walk through the door and take your seat.

Complete All Assignments

Regardless of a particular teacher's style or the classroom format she is using, virtually every course you take will have a formal text (or two or three or more) assigned to it. Though the way the text explains or covers particular topics may differ substantially from your teacher's approach to the same material, your text is still the basis of the course and a key ingredient in your studying. You *must* read it, plus any other assigned books, *before* you get to class.

You may sometimes feel you can get away without reading assigned books beforehand, especially in a lecture format where you know the chance of being called on is slim to none. But fear of being questioned on the material is certainly not the only reason I stress reading the material that's been assigned. You will be lost if the professor decides—for the first time ever!—to spend the entire period asking the students questions. I've had it happen. And it is not a pleasant experience for the unprepared.

You'll also find it harder to take clear and concise notes in class when you don't know what's in the text—in which case you'll be frantically taking notes on material you could have underlined in your books the night before. You'll also find it difficult to evaluate the relative importance of the teacher's remarks.

If you're heading for a discussion group, how can you participate without your reading as a basis? I think the lousiest feeling in the world is sitting in a classroom knowing that, sooner or later, you are going to be called on and you don't know the material.

Remember: Completing your reading assignment includes not just reading the *main* text but any *other* books

or articles assigned, plus handouts that may have been previously passed out. It also means completing any nonreading assignments—turning in a lab report, preparing a list of topics, or being ready to present your oral report.

Needless to say, while doing your homework is important, *turning it in* is an essential second step! My daughter, Lindsay, refused to use any organizational system for a short time. As a result, in addition to a host of missed appointments and forgotten assignments, she would often forget to pack the homework she *did* do, or bring it to school but forget to turn it in.

One simple change I made in her routine has made a world of difference: She now has a bright red manila folder, marked “HOMEWORK,” into which she puts every completed assignment the instant it’s done. When she gets to class, she immediately pulls out her folder to see if she has something to turn in. (She’s also given up on her “nonorganizational” system, but that’s another story.)

Review Your Notes

Your teacher is probably going to start this lecture or discussion from the point she left off last time. And you probably won’t remember where that point was unless you check your notes.

Have Questions Ready

This is your chance to find the answers to the questions that are still puzzling you. Review your questions before class. That way, you’ll be able to check off the ones the teacher answers along the way and only need to ask those left unanswered.

Prepare Your Attitude

Don't discount the importance of the way you approach each class mentally. Getting the most out of school in general and any class in particular depends in good measure on how ready you are to really take part in the process. It is *not* sufficient, even if you're otherwise well-prepared, to just sit back and absorb the information. Learning requires your active participation every step of the way.

What to Do in Class

Keep in mind your own preferences and under what circumstances you do best—refer back to the first two chapters and review your skills lists. You'll need to concentrate most on those courses in which you do poorly.

Sit Near the Front

Minimize distractions by sitting as close to the instructor as you can.

The farther you sit from the teacher, the more difficult it is to listen. Sitting toward the back of the room means more heads bobbing around in front of you and more students staring out the window—encouraging you to do the same.

Sitting up front has several benefits. You will make a terrific first impression on the instructor—you might very well be the only student sitting in the front row. He'll see immediately that you have come to class to listen and learn, not just take up space.

You'll be able to hear the instructor's voice, and the instructor will be able to hear *you* when you ask and

answer questions.

Finally, being able to see the teacher clearly will help ensure that your eyes don't wander around the room and out the windows, taking your brain with them.

So, if you have the option of picking your desk in class, sit right down in front.

Avoid Distracting Classmates

The gum cracker. The doodler. The practical joker. The whisperer. Even the perfume sprayer. Your classmates may be wonderful friends, entertaining lunch companions, and ultimate weekend party animals, but their quirks, idiosyncrasies, and personal hygiene habits can prove distracting when you sit next to them in class.

Knuckle cracking, giggling, whispering, and note passing are just some of the evils that can divert your attention in the middle of your math professor's discourse on quadratic equations. Avoid them.

Listen for Verbal Clues

Identifying noteworthy material means finding a way to separate the wheat—that which you *should* write down—from the chaff—that which you should *ignore*. How do you do that? By *listening* for verbal clues and *watching* for the nonverbal ones.

Many teachers will invariably signal important material in the way they present it—pausing (waiting for all the pens to rise), repeating the same point (perhaps even one already made and repeated in your textbook), slowing down their normally supersonic lecture speed, speaking more loudly (or more softly), or even simply stating, “I think the following is important.”

There are also numerous words and phrases that should *signal* noteworthy material (and, at the same time,

give you the clues you need to logically organize your notes): “First of all,” “Most importantly,” “Therefore,” “As a result,” “To summarize,” “On the other hand,” “On the contrary,” “The following (number of) reasons (causes, effects, decisions, facts, etc.).”

Such words and phrases give you the clues to not just write down the material that follows, but also to put it in context—to make a list (“First,” “The following reasons”); to establish a cause-and-effect relationship (“Therefore,” “As a result”); to establish opposites or alternatives (“On the other hand,” “On the contrary”); to signify a conclusion (“To summarize,” “Therefore”); or to offer an explanation or definition.

Watch for Nonverbal Clues

Studies have shown that only a fraction of communication is conveyed in words alone. A great deal of the message we receive when someone is speaking to us comes from body language, facial expression, and tone of voice.

Most instructors will go off on tangents of varying relevance to the subject matter. Some of these will be important, but, at least during your first few lessons with that particular teacher, you won’t know which.

Body language can be your clue. If the teacher begins looking out the window or his eyes glaze over, he’s sending a clear signal: “This won’t be on any test.”

On the other hand, if he turns to write something down on the blackboard, makes eye contact with several students, and/or gestures dramatically, he’s sending an equally obvious signal about the importance of the point he’s making.

Teachers like to see students take notes. It shows you are interested in the topic and that you think enough of what is being said to write it down. (And, if you’ve ever stood at the front of the room, you can usually tell who’s

taking notes and who's writing a letter to a friend in Iowa.)

Ask Questions

No, don't raise your hand to ask or answer a question every 90 seconds. Being an active listener means asking *yourself* if you understand everything that has been discussed. If the answer is no, ask the instructor questions at an appropriate time or write down questions that you must have answered to fully understand the subject.

Challenge yourself to draw conclusions from the things the instructor is saying. Don't just sit there letting your hand take notes. Let your mind do something, too. Think about the subject matter—how it relates to what you've been assigned to read and other facts to which you've been exposed.

Learn How to Be Selective

I'm sure you've observed in your classes that some people are constantly taking notes. Others end up with two lines on one page. Most of us fall in between.

The person who never stops taking notes is either writing a letter to that friend in Iowa or has absolutely no idea what *is* or is *not* important.

Taking concise, clear notes is first and foremost the practice of discrimination—developing your ability to separate the essential from the superfluous, to identify and retain key concepts, key facts, and key ideas, and ignore the rest. In turn, this requires the ability to listen to what your teacher is saying and copying down only what you need to understand the concept. For some, that could mean a single sentence. For others, a detailed example will be key.

Just remember: The quality of your notes usually has little to do with their *length*—three key lines that reveal the core concepts of a whole lecture are far more valuable than paragraphs of less important data.

So why do some people keep trying to take verbatim notes, convinced that the more pages they cover with scribbles the better students they're being? It's probably a sign of insecurity—they may not have read the material or have a clue about what's being discussed, but at least they'll have complete notes!

Even if you find yourself wandering helplessly in the lecturer's wake, so unsure of what she's saying that you can't begin to separate the important, noteworthy material from the nonessential verbiage, use the techniques discussed in this chapter to organize and condense your notes anyway.

If you really find yourself so lost that you are just wasting your time, consider adding a review session to your schedule (to read or reread the appropriate texts) and, if the lecture or class is available again at another time, attend again. Yes it *is*, strictly speaking, a waste of your precious study time, but *not* if it's the only way to learn and understand important material.

Take Notes on What You Don't Know

You *know* the capital of Germany. You *know* the chemical formula for salt. You *know* who's the current U.S. Secretary of State. So why waste time and space writing them down?

Frequently, your teachers will present material you already know in order to set the stage for further discussion or to introduce material that is more difficult. Don't be so conditioned to automatically copy down dates, vocabulary, terms, formulas, and names that you mindlessly take notes on information you already know. You'll just be wasting your time—both in class and later, when you review your overly detailed notes.

This is why some experts recommend that you bring your notes or outline of your textbook reading to class

can't begin to separate the important, noteworthy material from the nonessential verbiage, use the techniques discussed in this chapter to organize and condense your notes anyway.

If you really find yourself so lost that you are just wasting your time, consider adding a review session to your schedule (to read or reread the appropriate texts) and, if the lecture or class is available again at another time, attend again. Yes it *is*, strictly speaking, a waste of your precious study time, but *not* if it's the only way to learn and understand important material.

Take Notes on What You Don't Know

You *know* the capital of Germany. You *know* the chemical formula for salt. You *know* who's the current U.S. Secretary of State. So why waste time and space writing them down?

Frequently, your teachers will present material you already know in order to set the stage for further discussion or to introduce material that is more difficult. Don't be so conditioned to automatically copy down dates, vocabulary, terms, formulas, and names that you mindlessly take notes on information you already know. You'll just be wasting your time—both in class and later, when you review your overly detailed notes.

This is why some experts recommend that you bring your notes or outline of your textbook reading to class and *add your class notes to them*. I think it's an effective way to easily organize all your notes for that class.

Remember, taking effective notes requires five separate actions on your part:

1. *Listening* actively.
2. *Selecting* pertinent information.
3. *Condensing* it.



4. *Sorting/organizing* it.
5. *Interpreting* it (later).

Develop Your Shorthand Skills

Here are five ways to streamline your note taking:

1. Eliminate vowels. As a sign that was ubiquitous in the New York city subways used to proclaim, “If u cn rd ths, u cn gt a gd jb.” (If you can read this, you can get a good job.) And, we might add, “u cn b a btr stdnt.”
2. Use word beginnings (“rep” for representative, “Con” for Congressperson) and other easy-to-remember abbreviations.
3. Stop putting periods after all abbreviations (they add up!)
4. Use standard symbols in place of words. The following list, some of which you may recognize from math or logic courses, may help you:

≈	approximately
w/	with
w/o	without
wh/	which
→	resulting in
←	as a result of/consequence of
+	and or also

*	
cf	compare; in comparison; in relation to
ff	following
<	less than
>	more than
=	the same as
↑	increasing
↓	decreasing
esp	especially
Δ	change
⊂	it follows that
∴	therefore
b/c	because

5. Create your own symbols and abbreviations based on your needs and comfort level.

There are three specific symbols I think you'll want to create—they'll be needed again and again:

- W** That's my symbol for "What?" as in "What the heck does that mean?"; "What did she say?"; or "What happened? I'm completely lost!" It denotes something that's been missed—leave space in your notes to fill in the missing part of the puzzle after class.
- M** That's my symbol for "My thought." I want to separate my thoughts during a lecture from the professor's—put too many of your own ideas (without noting they *are* yours) and your notes begin to lose serious value!

too many of your own ideas (without noting they *are* yours) and your notes begin to lose serious value!

T! My symbol for “Test!” as in “I’m betting the farm this point is probably on the test, dummy, so don’t forget to review it!!!”

Feel free to use your own code for these important instances; you certainly don’t have to use mine.

You may also want to create specific symbols or abbreviations for each class. In chemistry, “TD” may stand for thermodynamics, “K” for the Kinetic Theory of Gases (but don’t mix it up with the “K” for Kelvin). In English, “Sh” is the Bard, “LB” is Lord Byron, and “RP” are the Romantic Poets.

How do you keep everything straight? Create a list on the first page of each class’s notebook or binder section for the abbreviations and symbols you intend to use regularly through the semester.

Just be careful—in your fervor to adopt my shorthand system, don’t abbreviate so much that your notes are absolutely unintelligible to you almost as soon as you write them!

You may certainly choose to abbreviate less and write a little more. Whatever system you develop, just make sure it serves the right purpose: giving you the time to really *listen* to your instructors, rather than just furiously scribbling down what they say.

The Cornell System

Here’s a well-known note-taking system many college students are taught. If it works for you, use it.

Start by drawing a vertical line two to three inches from the left side of your notebook paper. Take notes to the *right* of this line.

During the lecture: Take notes as you normally would—in paragraph form, outline, or using your own shorthand.

After the lecture: Reread your notes and reduce them to the key words that will help you recall the important points of the lecture. Write those key words and phrases in the *left*-hand column. As you get better at this, you will find that reviewing for a test will only require studying the left-hand column—short and concise—not the right.

Draw Your Way to Good Grades

The one problem with this whole note-taking system I've discussed is that many people find it more difficult to remember words rather than pictures, especially those who, on the “My Ideal Study Environment” chart in [Chapter 2](#), claimed they received information best visually rather than orally.

Mapping is another way to take notes that stresses a more visual style—drawing or diagramming your notes rather than just writing them down.

Let me show you how to map the first few pages of this chapter as an example. Start with a clean sheet of paper and, boxed or circled in the center, write the main topic.

After deciding on the first major topic (“Utilizing skills depends on class format”) and placing it on your map, add the detail:

Lectures (emphases: listening, note taking)

Discussions (emphases: asking/answering, analyzing, discussing)

Combination (emphases: as above)

Hands-on (emphasis: development/application of pertinent skills)

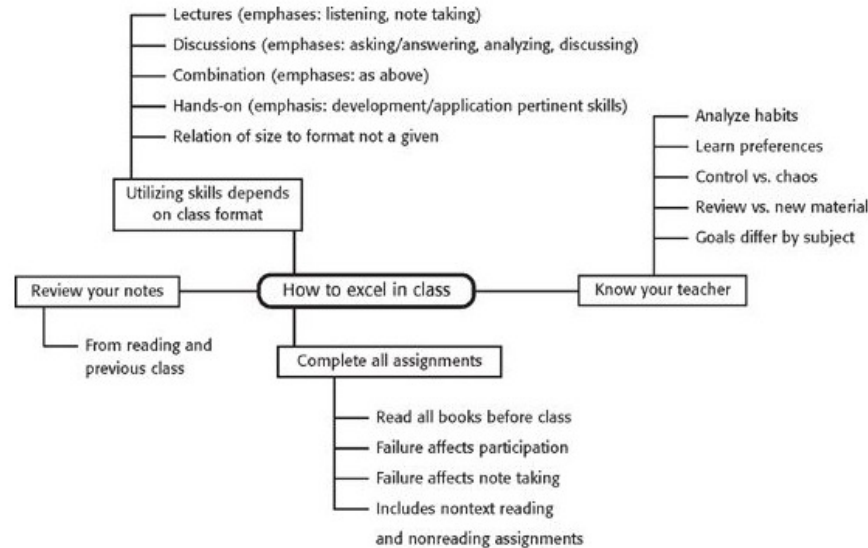
The second major topic (“Know your teacher”) and those that follow take their place in the line or circle you’ve chosen in the direction you’ve chosen. I’ve completed a map containing four major topics on the following page.

Active Participation: A “Grade A” Approach

In many nonlecture classes, you will find that discussion, mostly in the form of questions and answers, is actively encouraged. This dialogue serves to both confirm your knowledge and comprehension of specific subject matter and to identify those areas in which you need work.

Whatever the format in which you find yourself, participate in any discussion to the best of your ability. Most teachers consider class participation a key ingredient in your semester grades. No matter how many papers and tests you ace, if you never open your mouth in class, you shouldn’t be surprised if you get less than an A.

If you’re having trouble following an argument or particular line of thought, ask for a review or for clarification. Based on the professor’s preferences and the class format, ask the questions you feel need answers.



Be careful you don't innocently distract yourself from practicing your now-excellent note-taking skills by starting to analyze something you don't understand or, worse, creating mental arguments because you disagree with something your teacher or a classmate said. Taking the time to mentally frame an elaborate question is equally distracting. All three cause the same problem: You're not listening!

Finally, listen closely to the words of your classmates—you'll often find their comments, attitudes, and opinions as helpful and insightful as your instructor's.

What if you're shy or just get numb whenever you're called on? Ask a question rather than taking part in the discussion—it's easier and, over time, may help you break the ice and jump into the discussion. If you really can't open your mouth without running a fever, consider taking a public speaking course.

Most importantly, prepare and practice. Fear of standing in front of a class or even participating from the safety of your seat is, for many of you, really a symptom of lack of confidence.

And lack of confidence stems from lack of preparation. The more prepared you are—if you know the material backwards and forwards—the more likely you will be able to, even want to, raise your hand and “strut your stuff.” Practicing with friends, parents, or relatives may also help.

If you are having trouble with oral reports, they are covered separately in [Chapter 7](#). I think you’ll find that the hints I’ve included there will eliminate a lot of the fear such talks seem to engender.

What to Do After Class

As soon as possible after your class, review your notes, fill in the “blanks,” mark down questions you need to research in your text or ask during the next class, and remember to mark any new assignments on your weekly calendar.

I tend to discourage recopying your notes as a general practice, since I believe it’s more important to work on taking good notes the first time around and not waste the time it takes to recopy. But if you tend to write fast and illegibly, it might also be a good time to rewrite your notes so they’re readable, taking the opportunity to summarize as you go. The better your notes, the better your chance of capturing and recalling the pertinent material.

It is not easy for most high school students to do so, but in college, where you have a greater say in scheduling your classes, I recommend “one period on, one off”—an open period, even a half hour, after each class to review that class’s notes and prepare for the next one.

If you find yourself unable to take full advantage of such in-between time, schedule as little time between



classes as you can.

“Sleeping in” Isn’t an Option

Even if you diligently apply all of the tips in this chapter, it will all be moot if you regularly miss class. So don’t! It’s especially important to attend all classes near semester’s end. Teachers sometimes use the last week to review the entire semester’s work (what a great way to minimize your own review time!), clarify specific topics they feel might still be fuzzy, and/or answer questions. Students invariably ask about the final exam during this period, and some teachers virtually outline what’s going to be on the test!

If you must miss a class, find that verbatim note taker who hasn’t followed my advice and borrow her notes. That way, you get to decide what’s important enough to copy down. (Some professors might even lend you their notes. It’s worth asking!)