Why take notes? Partly as a simple aid to memory: you may think you'll remember everything you've read or that was said in class and what you thought about it at the time, but you won't. That's just how memory works (or doesn't). Taking notes provides you with a written record you can use to jog your memory when you begin studying for an exam or writing an essay.

More importantly, note-taking is a crucial step—perhaps the crucial step—in turning raw information into useable knowledge. The act of articulating in writing—in however abbreviated and informal a manner—the content and idea relationships among the materials you've encountered via reading and/or class discussion is what transforms undifferentiated masses of words, sentences, and information into a body of knowledge that you truly understand. In other words, note-taking is not a mere rote exercise in recording “facts”; it's an active process of sorting the interesting from the trivial, the important from the irrelevant, the concept from the mere fact, and putting the results into configurations of meaningful relationship. Good note-taking is an act of interpretation and internalization without which all your subsequent work in a course—essays, exams, discussions—will be severely handicapped.

There is no one way of taking notes that is automatically and under all circumstances better than any other. You'll need to make your own judgments about what works best for you and for the materials about which you're taking the notes, adjusting your procedures to the particularities of the situation as you go. Nevertheless, here are some general tips and principles that you may find useful.

It's best to think of notetaking as a multi-stage process. By all means, scribble things down while you're participating in class discussion or reading a novel for the first time. Write your ideas and questions in the margins, and mark passages of text that seem important or problematic in some way so you can find them again. Scribble actively while listening to the instructor or your classmates, and note what you've contributed to a conversation, too. But then do go back and revisit what you've written, preferably within a day or two of having written it. This second stage of notetaking, wherein you revisit what you've marked or written in your first pass, with an eye toward identifying patterns, formulating clearer and more conceptual questions, articulating some preliminary hypotheses, and drawing tentative conclusions, is where you really begin to process raw information into internalized knowledge. Students who discipline themselves to revisit their initial scribbles and rewrite them as processed knowledge have a tremendous leg up when it comes to studying for exams or writing essays about the subject matter in the notes.

Some things to keep special account of in your notes on new readings include some basic facts of the text: What are the major events in the plot? Who are the major characters? Where and when is the narrative set? From whose point of view is it narrated? Where, when, and by whom was it written?
A second pass at notes on literary texts would move further into analysis (how does the text work?) and onward to interpretation (what does the text mean?). Questions you might consider in (informal) writing in your notes include these: What's at stake for the characters and/or the audience? What patterns (of language, events, ideas, images, etc) recur throughout the text? What conflicts or issues drive the plot and/or character relationships? What particular episodes or passages seem particularly important in terms of the ideas or themes of the text, or just seem to present particularly knotty problems for an interpreter?

Be sure to grapple with the big interpretive questions, as well. What seems to you most worthy of discussion in relation to this text? In other words, what do you think this text is really about, what is its purpose, in terms of the ideas or issues or questions or problems with which it grapples? Why did someone write this thing in the first place? What aspects of the text, or ideas or questions generated by the text, seem to you most genuinely worth arguing about? That is, which ones would make a genuine difference in how someone understands the text and the ideas it embodies?

Don't neglect to take notes on your questions, confusions, or puzzlements, too; these often become fertile grounds for some of the best interpretive work, centered as they often are on what's genuinely most problematic about the text at hand. What questions do you have about why things are happening the way they are in the plot, or why characters are doing what they're doing, or why the narrator displays a particular attitude toward his subjects, etc? What parts or aspects of the text seem most puzzling or unusual or disturbing?

For class notes, do keep an on-the-spot record of the basic contours and content of each class session. More importantly, though, take a second pass at those notes, rewriting to organize and hierarchize according to ideas. What aspects and/or specific passages of the texts under study received the most sustained attention in class? What were the key interpretive questions or topics that anchored the discussion? What possible answers to those questions or ways of framing those topics were discussed? Which of these seem most true to you, and how would you articulate them for someone else to understand?

The format of your notes should be whatever best helps you to make sense out of the materials. The general principle, though (to repeat) is to take copious very informal scribbles in a first round, and then to aggregate, sort, and organize those raw materials into a substantially new, concentrated written product—one that communicates to yourself not just facts but how you've transformed those facts into knowledge and into questions for further study. One efficient way to do this is to keep two sets of notes: a handwritten notebook for your first passes, and an ongoing word-processing file for the “processed” or revised version of your notes: the ones you'll actually study or draft an essay from (or, depending on the course, the ones you'll hand in to the instructor for evaluation.)