



High-tech Note Taking

By Andrew Leibs

The ability to take notes is crucial for college success, whether it's capturing words a teacher says or writes during class, or gathering content from library references, periodicals, and online resources.

Yet the inconsistency of environments can cause some students – especially those with a vision or learning disability – to struggle with some or all of their note-taking tasks.

Fortunately, technology offers a variety of methods to help insure you don't miss a word and that you're able to access and organize the information you secure.

Such solutions may offer a more efficient means for gathering information without you needing a personal note taker – a standard approach of many disability service offices.

Tip: If you have a documented disability, ask teachers for print or digital copies of class notes, suggesting them as a reasonable accommodation (use that phrase) for participation.

Capturing Spoken Words

The surest way to miss nothing in class is to record the entire lecture. You can do this using any device with a built-in microphone. Convenient options include the “Voice Memos” iOS app (located under Utilities on the home screen) and pocket media players such as the Victor Reader Stream, which has a tactile keypad and stores recordings in a separate Notes directory.

Though they provide peace of mind, such recordings also require replay and

transcription to access and make use of notes – two time-consuming tasks.

Tip: Plug the iOS device into your computer to open voice memos in iTunes – a more efficient interface for transcription’s many starts and stops.

Automatic Transcription

A more efficient way to turn lectures into written notes is to use speech recognition software such as Dragon Dictate 4, which can transcribe what a teacher says once you create a voice profile.

To do this, you record (preferably at close range) a teacher speaking for at least 90 seconds. When you open that audio file in Dragon, it will immediately transcribe the first part of the recording and display the results as text in a blank document.

Use the Correction Window to edit text so it matches the audio. When enough correct text is matched to the recorded speech, Dragon creates a voice profile enabling you to transcribe new recordings immediately.

Capturing Written Words

In many classes, notes are handwritten on whiteboards or projected onto a screen. You must be able to see, decipher, and write quickly and legibly enough to reread these words later – three tasks that many disabilities make difficult or impossible.

If notes are too small or far away for you to see, a portable video magnifier is one way to bring it closer. The Transformer from Enhanced Vision is a digital camera that captures and enlarges distant text and images for display on a laptop or tablet PC. It supports magnification programs such as Ai Squared's ZoomText, weighs 2.5 pounds, and comes with a padded carrying case.

Tip: A less expensive solution that may suffice would be a handheld scope, such as the Ultimate Survival Technology Field Scope Monocular.

Write & Record Notes Simultaneously

If you’re a good note taker, but want back up, the Livescribe Echo smartpen can help. This high-tech pen records and synchronizes spoken words with notes written on special paper. You can thus record everything a teacher says and later replay what you heard as you wrote by tapping directly on your printed words.

Though it writes like an ordinary pen, the Echo is a multimodal computer with an ARM-9 processor and OLED display. It comes with an interactive brochure with information “bubbles” you tap on for a text-to-speech tutorial on setup and use.

Turn it on at the beginning of class and write as you would with any other pen using a Livescribe notebook. Each sheet of this special paper contains a microdot grid. The pen reads the patterns with its infrared camera and digitizes the text for audio synchronization. The Echo has a headphone jack for private listening and a USB port to connect to a computer to upload lectures.

Another model, the Livescribe 3, when combined with the Livescribe+ mobile app, lets you write directly on your iPad and converts handwritten words into typed text.

A similar iPad solution is Notability, an app that combines audio recording, handwriting, typing (on a full-featured word processor), and photos – including the ability to add a snapshot of a classroom whiteboard to your notes, and annotate lecture slides, pictures, and PDFs. Tap a word, drawing, or a picture to hear what was said when you added it. You can also access notes on your iOS device anywhere using iCloud or post them to Dropbox or Google Drive.

Tip: Smartpens and handwriting apps take some getting used to and may not be for you, so try before you buy.

Type Faster on Tiny Keypads

If poor penmanship prevents you from reading your own notes, one option may be to type them into a Word document using a laptop, tablet, or smartphone. While mobile device keypads can be tiny and hard to type on, iOS apps can make text entry more efficient.

TextExpander, for example, enables you to create abbreviated “snippets” to replace frequently used words, phrases, text blocks, and rich text attributes such as special fonts, symbols, and images.

Co:Writer also cuts keystrokes by letting you tap to enter words from a line of choices displayed after typing just a letter or two.

For word prediction on steroids, try Fleksy, which has a next-generation auto-correct engine that deciphers intended words, even if you mistype every letter.

Your fingers need only be close enough: keystroke pattern analysis does the rest. The app also provides a QWERTY keyboard that is 114% larger than the iPhone keypad.

Handy Options for Spot Note Taking

The camera on your smartphone or tablet is a great tool for taking quick notes without fumbling for pen and paper. You can snap what's on the whiteboard, capture journal articles in the library stacks, or even copy a friend's notes.

If you want to enlarge text before you capture it, a handheld video magnifier such as the Pebble HD is highly efficient. It has a high-definition camera, a 4.3-inch display with adjustable brightness, and can magnify text and images up to 13.5 times.

Its most useful note taking feature, however, is its "freeze frame" function that lets you snap and save up to 200 images and download them to a PC – perfect for gathering reference and bibliographic entries.

Disability Specific Options

Braille users have options for quick and quiet note taking. AccessNote from the American Foundation for the Blind and FloCo Apps let users enter braille characters into iOS devices from a wireless keyboard such as Freedom Scientific's Focus 14 – a far cheaper alternative to braille note takers (e.g., the BrailleNote Apex).

Resources

Here are the products, prices, and manufacturer links. When possible, try before you buy and search online for the lowest possible price.

HumanWare Victor Reader Stream with Wi-Fi (\$313.65)

http://www.humanware.com/en-usa/products/blindness/dtb_players/compact_models/why_upgrade_to_a_new_stream

Nuance Dragon Dictate 4 for Mac (\$149.99)

<http://shop.nuance.com/store/nuanceus/Custom/pbpage.dragon-dictate-4-resp->

[landing/&kpid=PLA_Nuance_Dragon_Dictate_for_Mac?kpid=PLA_Nuance_Dragon_Dictate_for_Mac&gclid=CLiWvq-g18ECFeRj7Aod2DEAnw](http://www.enhancedvision.com/low-vision-product-line/transformer-usb-computer-compatible-portable-electronic-magnifier.html?kpid=PLA_Nuance_Dragon_Dictate_for_Mac&gclid=CLiWvq-g18ECFeRj7Aod2DEAnw)

Enhanced Vision Transformer (\$2,145.00)

<https://www.enhancedvision.com/low-vision-product-line/transformer-usb-computer-compatible-portable-electronic-magnifier.html>

Ultimate Survival Technology Field Scope Monocular (\$9.95)

<http://www.batteryjunction.com/ust-20-4424.html?gclid=CPnQu5Kh18ECFQMT7AodrBYAVQ>

Livescribe Echo Smartpen (\$119.95)

<http://www.livescribe.com/en-us/smartpen/echo/>

Livescribe 3 Smartpen (\$149.95)

<http://www.livescribe.com/en-us/smartpen/l3/>

SmileOnMyMac TextExpander 3 iOS app (\$4.99)

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/textexpander-3-+-custom-keyboard/id917416298?mt=8>

Don Johnston Co:Writer app (\$19.99)

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/co-writer/id674099732?mt=8>

Fleksy (iOS & Android), (\$0.99)

<https://www.enhancedvision.com/low-vision-product-line/pebble-hd-hand-held-portable-electronic-magnifier.html>

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.syntellia.fleksy.keyboard&referrer=utm_source%3Dfleksy.com%26utm_medium%3DButtons%26utm_campaign%3DFleksyBird

Enhanced Vision Pebble HD (\$595.00)

<https://www.enhancedvision.com/low-vision-product-line/pebble-hd-hand-held-portable-electronic-magnifier.html>

AFB AccessNote iOS app (Free)

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/accessnote/id591287188?mt=8>

Freedom Scientific Focus 14 Blue (\$1,295)

<http://www.freedomscientific.com/Products/Blindness/Focus14BrailleDisplay>