

Taking Notes in a Literature Course

While reading:

- Underline or note passages that interest you.
- Make a note in the text when a new character appears on the scene or when major events occur; this will be an enormous help when you're looking for key passages later (especially when writing papers).
- Make marginal notes (or use a separate notebook or post-its) whenever you identify a possible theme, motif, or recurring idea in the reading. If you are making notes in a notebook, be sure to indicate page numbers.
- Write down questions that you have about the text.
- Look up words that you don't understand. If you're not near a dictionary or a computer, underline those words and be sure to go back and look them up.
- When you have a short reading (such as a handful of poems), read them slowly, and read them more than once before class—especially if they're difficult.
- If you're taking fewer than about two hours to prepare for each class (on average), then you are very likely not reading closely enough.

In class:

- Date all of your notes and handouts; indicate in your notebook what text(s) we're talking about.
- Everything that goes on the board should go in your notes.
- Write down the common threads of discussion; anything that we keep coming back to is probably important.
- Take notes not only about what is said, but about what you think about what is said.
- Make a note of any themes, symbols, or other literary devices that we identify in discussion.
- Any time that we talk for more than a few seconds about a passage or quotation, mark that passage in your book and, if possible, make a note of it in your notebook as well.
- Whenever possible, include the page numbers that are relevant for a note.
- Whenever you are working in a group, make sure that you have your own notes; don't just rely on someone else in your group to take notes.
- As you read and during discussion, write down any possibly interesting ideas that come to you—don't worry at this point about whether they're "good" or not. Brainstorming can take place at any time.