Learning on Steroids:

Flow-Based Notetaking

by Scott Young

Flow-Based Notetaking

Flow-based notetaking is a radical departure from the way most people are taught to take notes. It's a powerful technique for accelerating your learning while listening to audio or in a lecture.

However, since it departs so much from traditional notetaking it can be a bit harder to implement directly. It also has weaknesses (which I'll discuss soon) so its important to integrate it carefully in your studying routine so it won't sabotage your success.

What is Flow-Based Notetaking?

Flow-based notetaking is holistic learning principles manifested in your notes. The best way to describe it is to compare it to its opposite. I'm going to call the opposite of flow-based notetaking, *hierarchy*-based notetaking.

Flow-Based Notetaking

With hierarchy-based notes you strive to:

- Record every detail of the lecture, regardless of its significance
- Write down notes, in the order they were spoken
- Transcribe information exactly the same way it was presented
- Create a perfect duplication of the lecture, except in paper form

Now contrast this to flow-based notetaking, where you strive to:

- Emphasize the important details, omit or downplay the irrelevant
- Write down notes according to your mental picture of the subject, going back to add details and departing into new sections as you learn

Flow-Based Notetaking

- Transcribe information in a completely original way from its presentation
- Create a new set of ideas and understandings, based on the original lecture

With flow-based notetaking, your goal isn't transcription it's learning. This may sound obvious, but that isn't how most people take notes. When most students take notes, they take them with the goal of learning the material later. When you take flow-based notes, your goal is to learn it, while in the class.

Here are some of the principles underlying flow-based notes:

Learn it Once

A recurring theme in all my rapid-learning discussions will be an emphasis on learning things properly the first time. The biggest waste in time and energy in the learning process isn't in the initial understanding. It's in forgetting and later confusion.

Flow-based notes fit into this paradigm because they are about accelerating your learning, not transcribing exactly what was said.

Now, as I'll discuss later, this comes with some disadvantages as well as benefits. I'll try to show you how you can find the ideal style for you to minimize the costs while still getting the benefits of this learn-it-once principle.

Parroting Isn't Knowing

Some people confuse being able to spit out a professor's lecture notes with actually knowing the subject. But, just as a parrot isn't producing actual speech, regurgitation isn't actual knowledge.

Flow-based notetaking is creative process, not a recording process. Instead of just writing down what the professor argues, you're also going to come up with your own ideas, examples and connections.

Listening Isn't a Passive Activity

People like to draw lines between listening and practice. As if, in a lecture, they are passively absorbing knowledge, and when

writing an essay or doing problem sets, they are actively practicing it.

Flow-based notetaking turns this formula on its head, by putting the listener in an active role, creating connections instead of just absorbing them.

How the Heck Do You Take Flow-Based Notes?

Enough talk about the principles, *how do you actually do it?*

The simplest form of flow-based notes is just to write down all the information, except instead of recording it into a bulleted list, you organize it spatially with arrows connecting ideas.
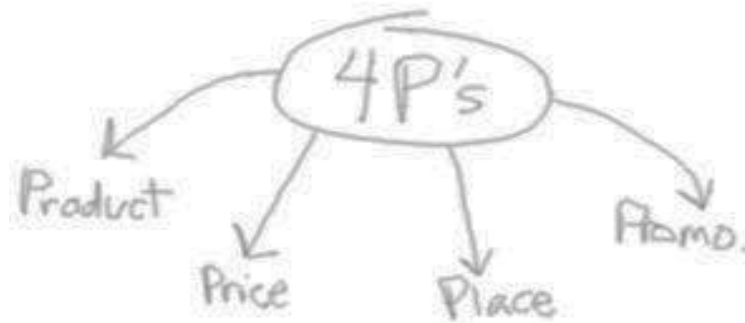
Flow-Based Notetaking

So if your professor wrote down:

The 4 P's of Marketing are:

-Product
-Place
-Price
-Promotion

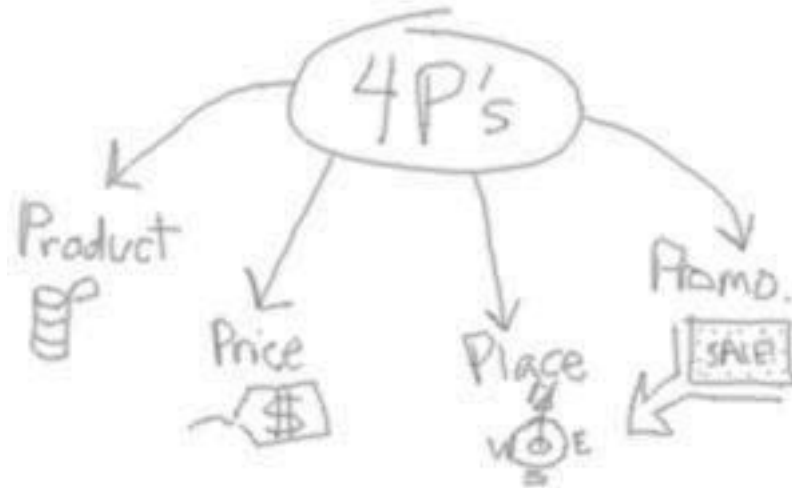You could start with a central bubble for the topic, with arrows connected to each of the 4 P's:

Flow-Based Notetaking
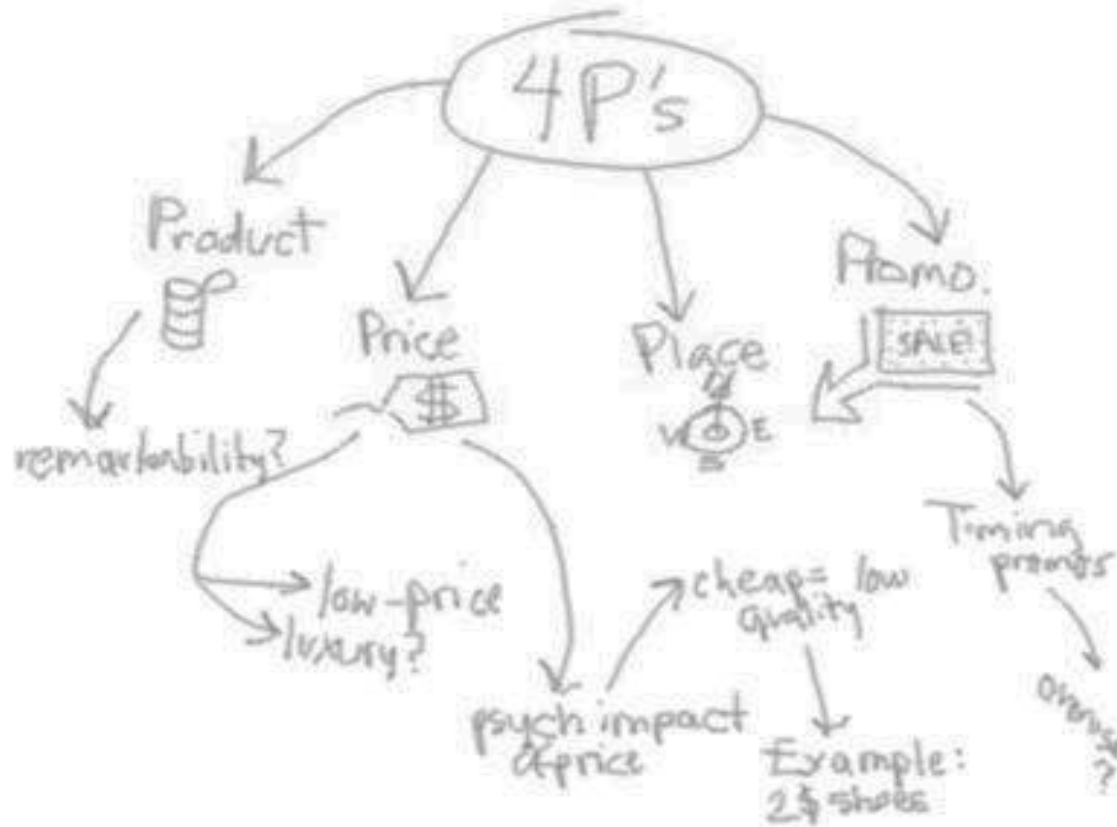
Images, diagrams and your own ideas should help embellish the notes:

From there, when the lecturer expands on each of these ideas, you can create more arrows connecting these ideas together.

Flow-Based Notetaking

Now with links between new ideas:

Flow-Based Notetaking

However, mapping out the ideas is only the most basic part of flow-based notetaking. In addition to that, you should strive to:

- Write things **in your own words**, not the lecturers. If you can't describe something in alternate terms, you probably don't adequately understand the original terms.
- Write down **new ideas**. If any connections come to your mind while mapping out the notes, draw another arrow and connect. Your notes should be your thoughts, not just the lecturer's.
- Connect ideas **backwards**. When you hear a new idea that relates to an idea earlier in your set of notes, go back and link it there. *Backlinking* is an easy way to create more connections in your writing.

The Weakness of Flow-Based Notes

The principle weakness of flow-based notes is that your transcription typically won't be as rigorous as with hierarchical notes. When you're making connections, it is difficult to write down exactly what the instructor said in a lecture.

Normally this isn't a problem. If you learned the ideas in the class, then your notes should only provide a backup. However, if you are completely confused during the class, flow-based notes make it harder to completely relearn the material from your transcription.

There are a few solutions to this approach:

Flow-Based Notetaking

1. In courses that rely heavily on textbooks, with lectures only as support, this shouldn't be a problem. You can always read your textbook for a more complete description of ideas you need to relearn.

2. If a course is truly confusing, in class, you can take traditional hierarchical notes in class and then convert them to flow-based notes afterwards. I dislike this approach because it creates more work, but it may be necessary for some classes.

3. Where it is allowed, you may want to take an audio recorder and record the lecture. This way, if you don't understand notes, you can listen to the parts again from your professor's instruction.

Implementing Flow-Based Notetaking

Flow-based notetaking can take awhile to implement fully. Don't worry about that. Even taking baby steps to taking more flow-oriented notes or translating your notes into a flow-based format can have a powerful impact on your learning.

These are the intermediate stages I'd recommend attempting before diving in completely:

Flow-Afternotes

Leave a 1/3 margin in every page you take for notes. After you finish taking hierarchical notes, write your flow based connections in the margin. You can do this in pauses of the class, or after the class in your spare time..

Viscous-Flow Notes

When taking regular notes, try to draw arrows and connections off the regular notes. You don't need to write them in a non-linear format or use the other advanced components of flow-based notetaking. This method is a bit slower than regular flow-based notes, but it is a good middle step.

Putting it Into Practice

Once again, the implementation guides are probably the least important part of this program. The real value comes in going through the ass-kicking emails you've received and actually starting your first 30-Day Trial to put this into practice. Ideas are nothing without execution.

Flow-Based Notetaking

Here are a few template 30DTs you could use:

- Commit to doing 30 minutes of flow-based afternotes every day.
- Picking an easier class and doing flow-based or viscous-flow notes for one month.
- Recording the audio from one class and spending 15 minutes, re-listening to it while creating flow-based notes.

Good luck with this technique, and I'll see you on the other side!