

Two-Column Notes Lesson Plan

Background:

What is the origin of two-column notes? That is hard to say because this strategy seems to have found its way into every literacy book devoted to strategic teaching. Many of us first heard of two-column notes in a class called Project C.R.I.S.S. (Creating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies). However, you can find additional references to two-column notes in the *Write Source 2000* (pp. 362-365) and *Step Up to Writing* (9-1 to 9-21).

Materials:

Two-column notes are a way for students to separate main ideas from detail notes using folded paper. It's really simple. Take a sheet of notebook paper and fold it so there is about 1/3 of the space devoted to a left-hand column and 2/3 of the paper leftover for the right-hand column. Main ideas are usually shorter in length because of their simplicity. Detail notes often require more room. Two-column notes resemble outlining but don't have as many conventions to follow making it a simpler tool for students to use effectively.

Using the Strategy:

Although we hope our students are skilled at finding main ideas, this is often troublesome for them. They need to be shown how to read one paragraph at a time and how to go back to identify the main points within it. Additionally, they need help in determining what truly is important in what they have underlined. I am sure you recognize the disease - yellow highlighter all over the text.

A good beginning step is to provide the main ideas for students in advance. This can give them a purpose for reading and they can concentrate on finding the detail notes that support these main ideas. I especially find this useful in setting students up successfully to listen to a video. Gradually over time you can release the responsibility to them for also finding the main ideas.

Skilled note-takers know the importance of writing down ideas quickly especially if they are relying only on listening. Spend time comparing the abbreviations that students use. With our current lifestyle dependence on text-messaging, instant messaging, and email, students will already have in place a number of these abbreviations.

A good assessment of two-column notes is to use them for self-testing to prepare for a quiz or a test. Model with your own notes from the overhead projector. Show students how to cover up the detail notes and then proceed with a think-aloud demonstrating how to use the main ideas as triggers for what you know on the topic. Uncover the right-hand side and check your detail notes with what you have remembered. Take the time to model

one last step: try to add on information to what you already know or apply the knowledge to other situations. If the detail notes have only been memorized, then you really don't know the information and won't be able to add on to it or connect to it. Another way to self-test using two-column notes is to cover up the main ideas and play Jeopardy with the detail notes. See if the detail notes can trigger the main idea but state it as a question.

Extensions:

Turn two-column notes into Power Notes. Use #1 for all main ideas. Use #2 for all subtopics of the main idea. Use #3 for all details that help explain the subtopics. This certainly moves students closer to formal outlining of notes. Here is an example using the five themes of geography:

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/strat/pto.html>

Two-column notes can also be stretched into three-column or four-column notes. Anything you can do with two-column notes can get better with three or four column notes. Consider adding a column for questions and/or a column for personal responses.