

# Window Notes

## What is it?

A tool that makes the note-taking process more engaging by encouraging students to record questions, personal reactions, and interesting connections in addition to facts

## What are the benefits of using this tool?

Note taking is an essential part of classroom life, and it has a significant impact on student achievement (Dean et al., 2012). But ask most students (and most adults) about their experiences with taking notes and you'll probably get a shudder. Window Notes makes the process of taking notes more interesting for students by inviting them to jot down not just factual information but also questions, reactions, and connections they can make with what they're learning. Note that challenging students to generate different types of notes does more than enhance engagement; it stimulates active processing of the content in question, and it facilitates learning and retention as a result.

## What are the basic steps?

1. Tell students that you want them to try making notes in a different way than usual—specifically, that you want them to generate notes that include the following four elements: (1) factual information, (2) questions, (3) feelings and reactions, and (4) connections that come to mind.

*Tip:* Encourage students to record *any* connections that come to mind—for example, personal, real-world, literary, historical, or academic (i.e., connections to things they've learned in school).

2. Review the Window Notes organizer (p. 162) with students. Show them how it has a place for each of the four note types mentioned in Step 1, as well as guiding questions to spur their thinking.
3. Model the Window Notes process for students. Select a topic or text, and make all four types of notes about that topic or text on the organizer. Think aloud as you work.
4. Ask students to generate Window Notes about a specific topic, text, lecture, or other classroom presentation. They can use the Window Notes organizer on page 162, make their own organizers using the one on page 162 as a model, or express their thoughts orally (ideal for younger students).

*Tip:* Before having students create content-related Window Notes, let them practice making Window Notes about a topic that's very familiar to them (e.g., a day in their life). Observe students as they work, and provide guidance or feedback as needed.

5. Invite students to share their notes with the class. Review key ideas and address students' questions if appropriate. Instruct students to add to or revise their notes as they see fit.
6. Encourage students to use the Window Notes technique independently, as a means of making the note-taking process more active, engaging, and personally meaningful. Facilitate the process by making blank Window Notes organizers readily available.

## How is this tool used in the classroom?

- ✓ To promote note taking that includes facts, questions, feelings/reactions, and connections
- ✓ To make the note-taking process an active, engaging, and personally meaningful one

**EXAMPLE 1:** After reading a passage about the bee hummingbird aloud, a second-grade teacher invited students to generate Window Notes as a class. Students shared their ideas orally, and the teacher recorded them (shown below). Notice how the teacher made the four types of notes more distinct by using different symbols for each.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Facts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ The bee hummingbird is the world's smallest bird.</li> <li>☑ They can fly forward, backward, and upside down.</li> <li>☑ Hummingbirds are the only birds that can stay in place while they fly. This is called <u>hovering</u>.</li> <li>☑ Bee hummingbirds beat their wings 80 times in a second.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Feelings and Reactions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☺ Bee hummingbirds are amazing!</li> <li>☺ It must feel really cool to fly upside down.</li> <li>☺ We want to learn more about bee hummingbirds.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>② How do they fly upside down and backward?</li> <li>② Why can't other birds hover?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Connections</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ I saw a nature show on hummingbirds once. I remember that their wings move so fast that you can't see them flapping.</li> <li>☞ It's probably called a bee hummingbird because it's tiny like a bee.</li> </ul>

**EXAMPLE 2:** A high school student's notes from Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" are shown below.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>FACTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The poem goes back and forth between a free bird and a caged bird.</li> <li>• The free bird leaps and floats and flies and "claims the sky."</li> <li>• The caged bird's wings are clipped, and its feet are tired.</li> <li>• The poem is written in free verse.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>FEELINGS &amp; REACTIONS</b></p> <p>The poem makes me feel sorry for the caged bird. It can't fly and longs to be free.</p> <p>I really like the way it repeats the verse about the caged bird singing of freedom. The song can't be stopped.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>QUESTIONS</b></p> <p>Is the caged bird actually triumphant at the end?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CONNECTIONS</b></p> <p>The poem reminds me of a technique they sometimes use in movies where they keep cutting back and forth between two different characters.</p>

**EXAMPLE 3:** Here are the notes a fourth-grade student made while watching a video on tornadoes:

FACTS	FEELINGS & REACTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tornadoes are rotating columns of air. They go from a thunderstorm in the sky down to the ground.</li> <li>• They form when warm moist air hits cool dry air.</li> <li>• They can reach wind speeds of 300 miles per hour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tornadoes are really scary! I didn't know how much damage they could cause!</li> </ul>
QUESTIONS	CONNECTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do they measure the wind speed inside a tornado?</li> <li>• Why don't tornadoes keep going? What makes them stop?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I saw something about a tornado on TV when my parents were watching the news. Some of the people were crying because their houses had gotten blown away.</li> <li>• Tornadoes remind me of getting off to school. I am trying to do so many things and I am so rushed that it feels like I am spinning at 300 miles per hour!</li> </ul>

## Teacher Talk

- ➔ Because many students aren't used to being asked how they feel, particularly in a note-taking context, you may need to spend more time modeling and discussing what goes in the Feelings & Reactions quadrant of the organizer. One way to help is to give students a list of feeling stems that might help them—for example, “I really enjoyed \_\_,” “I was impressed by \_\_,” “I was surprised that \_\_,” “I was inspired by \_\_,” “I was confused about \_\_,” or “I’m not sure how I feel about \_\_.”
- ➔ While this tool is typically used to have students take notes on one specific text or presentation, it can also be used to help students reflect on and demonstrate what they’ve learned at the end of a lesson sequence or unit. When used in this way, students’ completed organizers serve as a great tool for assessing students’ learning, interests, open questions, and feelings about the topic or text.
- ➔ Help yourself (and your students) recognize that people have different note-taking preferences by surveying the class to see which of the four note types is each student’s favorite. Explain that it’s fine to have preferences, but that each note type has value—and, therefore, that students should aim to generate all four types of notes, even if some come less naturally to them.
- ➔ Help students appreciate—and encourage them to use—the Window Notes technique by identifying (or challenging them to identify) the value of each note type. Among other things, you might note that recording FACTS helps students extract and summarize key content, generating QUESTIONS allows students to express their curiosity, expressing FEELINGS & REACTIONS lets students connect with what they’re learning on a personal level, and making CONNECTIONS encourages students to tap into their prior knowledge.
- ➔ To promote deeper understanding and retention of the material students took notes on, assign a task that requires students to review, summarize, and/or synthesize their understanding of that material.
- ➔ Some teachers may wonder if this technique is “fluffy.” But, in reality, it promotes deeper understanding than traditional note taking. Why? Because making the four types of notes requires active processing and ensures that students are not simply copying, which can be done mindlessly.