Note Taking: Watch for Clues

Be Alert To Repetition
Put a little star beside ideas or phrases that an instructor repeats. Repetition is often a signal that tells you the material is important.

Listen For Introductory, Concluding and Transition Words and Phrases
Words and phrases such as "the next three points...," "the most important idea...," "similarly..." and "in conclusion" signal relationships, definitions, new topics, conclusions, cause and effect, and examples. These words and phrases reveal the structure of the lecture, and are excellent tools to help you organize your notes. The following list includes more common signal words and phrases you should listen for while taking notes:

Main point signal
"And most important..." "Now this is important..."
"A major development ..." "Remember that ...
"There are three reasons why...

Supporting material signals
"As an example..." "Similarly..."
"For example..." "Also..."
"Further..." "For instance..."
"Furthermore..." "As shown by..."

Conflicting material signals
"On the other hand..." "In contrast..."
"On the contrary..." "However..."

Conclusion or summary signals
"Therefore..." "In summary..."
"From this we see..." "In conclusion..."
"Obviously..." "As a result..."
"Clearly..."

Watch the Board
If your instructor takes the time to write something on the board, it is usually a good signal that the material is important. Copy all diagrams and drawings, equations and formulas, names, places, dates, statistics and definitions.
Watch the Instructor's Eyes
If an instructor glances at his notes and then makes a point, it is probably an indication that the information is especially important. Any material that the instructor brings to class in note form is very likely to appear later as a test question.

Write Down Obvious Clues
Instructors will very often tell a class that certain material is likely to be on an exam. Put stars beside this kind of information in your notes. Remember that most instructors do not want to hide the material that is important.

Make Note of the Instructor's Interest Level
If the instructor seems more interested or excited about something, it is very likely that it will appear on any exam the instructor makes up. Pay close attention if he or she appears more alive than usual; it is usually a good signal that the material is important to the instructor.