By Althea Need Kaminske Cover image by Pexels from Pixabay One of the most common metaphors to describe what the first few years of medical school is like is that it is like drinking water from a fire hose. There is an overwhelming amount of information that students need to learn, and need to learn fast. One of the areas that I help medical students with is in improving their notetaking to help them manage the “fire hose” of information. The way I define notetaking here is probably a little different than how most people think of notetaking. In this context I think of notes as any record of learning that is formatted to improve understanding and long-term retention of material. Ideally this record should be continually updated so that it is a living document of progress towards learning goals. This means that notes could include: handwritten flashcards, typed out charts and tables, annotated diagrams, sketches of flowcharts and mind maps, etc. What makes notes good or effective depends on the goals you have for the notes. For example, a common question is whether it matters if you take notes by hand or typed out on a device. Generally, I would argue that the format doesn’t matter so much as the cognitive processes that you engage in while making the notes (see this post by Megan explaining more). Notes taken by hand tend to be better because it’s harder to take notes by hand - forcing you to be selective about what you write down and to paraphrase things into your own words (1). It’s the selectivity and paraphrasing that’s helpful for memory and understanding, not the physical movement of your hands. Once you know about this, it’s easy to apply the same principles to typed notes. However, if your goals for notetaking are to provide some sort of transcription of the event, then, yes, typing notes will most likely be faster and easier for that goal. Effective note-taking in medical school needs to achieve several goals. First, notes need to be formatted to aid subsequent retention (i.e. spaced retrieval practice). Second, they need to condense the fire hose of information into something more manageable. Third, they need to be done in a way that builds understanding of the material. And finally, they should be a record of learning to help track and monitor learning - a living document that reflects current understanding. Good notes are notes that are: Formatted for spaced retrieval practice Condensing large amounts of information Building understanding Recording and monitoring understanding In the book Study Without Stress by Eugenia G. Kelman and Kathleen Straker (2), the authors cover five different note formats that meet those goals. They cover flashcards, diagrams, flowcharts, charts and tables, and combinations.