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I Ranked the 5 Best Free AI Note-Takers. The Winner Isn't Even Close

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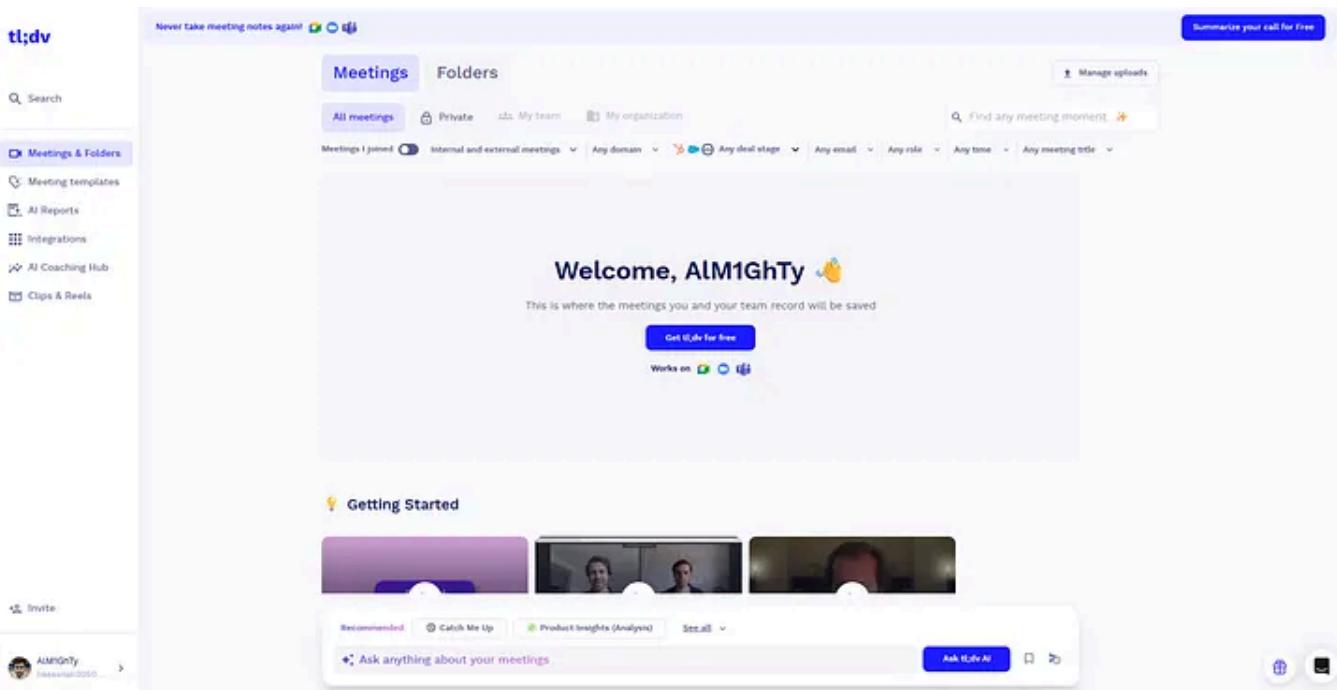
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I'm on a mission to automate the most annoying parts of my workday, and taking notes during meetings is at the top of that list. For the last month, I've been living with the top 5 *completely free* AI note-taking apps to answer one question: which one is *actually* worth your time?

The "free" part is key. Lots of tools offer a free plan that's really just a useless demo, crippled with absurdly low limits designed to force you into a paid subscription.

But after countless meetings, transcriptions, and AI summaries, I've found the ones that deliver real value without asking for a credit card. Here's the detailed breakdown of each contender.



screenshot of tl;dv homepage

1. tl;dv

- **Type:** Meeting-focused AI note-taker for video conferences.
- **Best For:** Teams and individuals who need a powerful, feature-rich meeting assistant without paying a cent.
- **My Take:** Honestly, this is the one to beat. The free plan is so absurdly generous it feels like a mistake. It does everything you'd expect from a paid tool, but for free.

The Good (Pros):

- It's truly unlimited on the core features. You get **unlimited video recordings** and **unlimited transcripts** in over 40 languages — things most competitors charge for.
- The AI allowance is the best in class. You get **10 advanced AI summaries/notes per month**, which is double what Fathom offers.
- You don't even have to show up. The bot can **join meetings for you** when you're absent, which is a lifesaver for packed schedules.
- The **multi-meeting intelligence** is a killer feature. It can analyze patterns *across multiple meetings* and create recurring reports, a capability its free competitors completely lack.

The Bad (Cons):

- The free plan archives your recordings after 3 days, so you need to be on top of reviewing them.
- It's not compatible with some platforms like Webex or BlueJeans yet.
- You only get a few basic integrations (Slack, email) on the free plan; the 5,000+ CRM integrations require an upgrade.

User Rating: 4.63/5 from 1,116 reviews.

screenshot of notebooklm homepage

2. NotebookLM (Google)

- **Type:** Document analysis and study-focused AI assistant.
- **Best For:** Students, researchers, and anyone who needs to analyze and summarize existing documents, PDFs, or videos.
- **My Take:** This isn't a meeting bot, but it's so good it had to be on the list. It's a secret superpower for anyone who does research.

The Good (Pros):

- It is 100% completely free. There is no paid plan for individuals, so you get the full experience without any upsell nagging.

- It handles a ton of sources. You can feed it PDFs, Google Docs, websites, and even YouTube videos.
- The study-aid features are brilliant. It can automatically generate **summaries, quizzes, and flashcards** from your documents.
- It can turn your notes into a podcast. The **audio generation** feature creates AI-voiced summaries of your material, which is amazing for reviewing on the go.

The Bad (Cons):

- Let's be clear: this is **not a tool for your live Zoom or Teams calls**. It lives in a document-first world, so don't expect it to pop into your next meeting and start taking notes.
- There are some daily usage caps, like **50 chat queries per day**.
- Documents aren't live-synced. You have to **manually re-upload** or sync sources if they change.

User Rating: Not rated, as it's a Google Labs product.

screenshot of fathom homepage

3. Fathom

- **Type:** Individual-focused meeting transcription tool.

- **Best For:** Alright, let's talk about Fathom. This is the one you've probably seen everywhere, and it's built for one person: the solo user who just wants unlimited recordings without a complicated setup.
- **My Take:** Fathom is incredibly popular and its interface is clean. If all you need is a video library of your past meetings, it's a fantastic choice. But the "AI" part of its free plan is extremely weak.

The Good (Pros):

- It offers **unlimited meeting recordings and unlimited storage** for free for individuals, which is a huge perk.
- You can create and share **shareable highlight clips** from your calls, which is great for pulling out key moments.
- The user reviews are stellar, though there's a reason for that (see cons).

The Bad (Cons):

- The AI is almost non-existent. You are severely limited to just **5 AI-assisted calls per month**. That includes summaries, action items, and follow-up emails.
- You **must attend the meeting** for it to be recorded. You can't send a bot on your behalf like you can with tl;dv.
- The glowing reviews are questionable. Fathom ran **incentivized reward programs** for positive feedback, which has likely inflated its near-perfect score.

User Rating: 4.99/5 from 7,167 reviews (with the caveat above).

A screenshot of the Fireflies.ai homepage. The page features a dark header with the brand name in white. Below the header, there's a large, light-colored input field for audio file uploads. To the right of the input field, there's a prominent green button labeled "Upload". Further down the page, there are sections for "Recent Transcripts", "Upcoming Meetings", and "Ask Fred".

Screenshot of fireflies.ai homepage

4. Fireflies.ai

- **Type:** Meeting transcription with a focus on audio uploads.
- **Best For:** I'd say this is for people who have a lot of existing audio files, like voice memos or interviews, that they need transcribed.
- **My Take:** Fireflies feels like a professional tool that's trying to trick you with its free plan. It promises a lot, but the one thing you actually *need* — the video recording — is completely missing. It feels a bit like a bait-and-switch to me.

The Good (Pros):

- The free plan offers **unlimited meeting transcripts**, which is very generous.
- It's particularly strong at **uploading and transcribing audio files**, a feature where it stands out.
- It offers more "**Ask Fred**" AI chat queries on its free plan compared to some of the others.

The Bad (Cons):

- Here's the deal-breaker: the free plan has **no video recording**. At all. You get a transcript, but you can't re-watch the meeting. This is a huge miss.

- In a head-to-head feature comparison, it scores significantly lower than tl;dv across almost every category.
- The part that gives me pause, though, are the user reviews mentioning surprise billing charges and a confusing downgrade process. That's a huge red flag for me, and honestly, it makes me nervous to even think about trying a paid plan.

User Rating: 4.63/5 from 1,117 reviews.

screenshot of otter.ai homepage

5. Otter.ai

- **Type:** In-person and lecture-focused transcription tool.
- **Best For:** Students in a lecture or professionals at an in-person meeting who need real-time transcription on their phone.
- **My Take:** Otter is a household name in transcription, but its free plan has become so restrictive that it's almost unusable for anyone with a regular meeting schedule.

The Good (Pros):

- It is still the best tool for live, in-person transcription via its mobile app. This is its standout feature.

- You can collaborate live during a meeting, chatting with teammates and the Otter AI to get real-time answers.

The Bad (Cons):

- The limits are brutal. You only get 300 total transcription minutes per month, with a cap of just 30 minutes per meeting.
- You can only upload 3 audio or video files in your entire life.
- It doesn't record video on the free plan. Unbelievably, video playback is paywalled all the way up to the Enterprise tier.
- Its AI capabilities feel outdated; it transcribes what was said but lacks the deeper contextual understanding of newer tools.

User Rating: 4.07/5 from 922 reviews (the lowest of the group).

Final Recommendation

After a month of testing, the choice is clear.

- For meetings, the winner is tl;dv, and it's not even close. It offers the most generous free plan by a wide margin, providing the unlimited core features you need with the most useful AI capabilities on top.
- For studying and research, NotebookLM is in a class of its own. The fact that it's completely free and can create study guides and audio summaries from your documents is genuinely incredible.

If you just need to record yourself in meetings and don't care about AI summaries, Fathom is a decent option. But for anyone who wants a truly powerful, free AI assistant for their meetings, my clear recommendation is to start with tl;dv.

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Written by Muhammad Hassan Ali

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Responses (2)



Bgerby

What are your thoughts?



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17 hours ago

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My experience with Notion's notetaking has been superior, but unfortunately, it requires a paid subscription. It's good to know that there are good free alternatives available.

Additionally, I agree that NotebookLM is an exceptional product. I cannot stop praising this tool.



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1 reply



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Jgraybeal
2 days ago

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Great summary! Might you comment on the policies each of these have for ensuring your meeting video and/or notes aren't inadvertently shared by the AI, or intentionally analyzed and/or shared by the company?



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