

# Building a Second Brain

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## Summary

## Introduction

## Second brain as a digital archive



The central concept of the second brain is to create a digital archive of information that you are faced with every day.

- This information will allow you to create innovative ideas, track your day to day, and manage your life.

Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them. —David Allen, author of Getting Things Done...

- In the digital realm, apps allow you to capture and mold information into a standardized way, that can be optimized for effective retrieval down the line.
- Every bit of energy we spend straining to recall things is energy not spent doing the thinking that humans are optimized to do.
- This will act as an extension of yourself.
- The approach of notetaking in school is not applicable to the real world, there are no exams, and you are not sure what information may be valuable. A solution to this is to store all data relevant to your interests and use cases in a standardized format.
- Patterns and links between concepts will become more apparent with time.



Note: a piece of content has been interpreted through your lens, curated according to your taste, translated into your own words, or drawn from your life experience, and stored in a secure place

- Once you begin using this system, with enough time your thought patterns change and you start to rely on your second brain to expand your knowledge and remember more than you ever could on your own. Your brain is no longer the bottle neck of your endeavours.

### Essential capabilities that we can rely on a Second brain to perform:

1. Making our ideas concrete

2. Revealing new associations between ideas
3. Incubating our ideas over time
4. Sharpening our unique perspectives



**Recency bias:** Tend to favor ideas, solutions and influences that occurred to us most recently, regardless of their value. Second brain allows us to take a holistic view at all relevant content accumulated over years.

## Capture



Any information that is of value to you, whether it is applicable today should be captured by several means, organized and stored for future use.

The idea is that information can only become knowledge when it is put to use, and being captured will enable that process to happen.

### “Everything not saved, will be lost” - Nintendo



The meaning of information we are faced with, whether it is a thought, memory or content isn't immediately clear. We must revisit them with different perspectives throughout time to extract the most amount of knowledge and value from them. Hence it should be captured.

- Knowledge can appear everywhere, whether it's snippets of text, screenshots, podcast moments or journal thoughts.
- Value in any piece of content is not evenly distributed, only roughly 10% of content, whether it is a video, article, or book is applicable and should be captured.

## Favorite problems



Keep open-ended questions in your mind that you are curious about, and use them as a reference for the value of information you are presented with.

“You have to keep a dozen of your favorite problems constantly present in your mind, although by and large they will lay in a dormant state. Every time you hear or read a new trick or a new result, test it against each of your twelve problems to see whether it helps. Every once in a while there will be a hit, and people will say, “How did he do it? He must be a genius!” - Richard Feynmann

- Keep the questions open-ended
- ☐ Write down a list of open ended questions I am interested in.
- ☐ Expand on them and use as the basis for Areas in the PARA method.

## Criteria for import information

1. Does it inspire me
  - a. Inspirational content can be useful for future use, if you are in a gully
2. Is It useful?
  - a. Does it relate to your 12 questions?
3. Is it Personal
  - a. Your own thoughts, memories, reflections
  - b. Can be captured using voice memos to text
4. Is it surprising?
  - a. If content is surprising then it implies that it was not to our expectation and that we are learning something new
  - b. If it doesn't fit neatly into our current understanding, it has the potential to change how we think



**Confirmation bias:** Seek out information that confirms what we already believe.

- Ultimately keep what resonates
- Trust your inner monologue



**Emotions:** Emotions organise rather than disrupt-rational thinking, when something resonates it is our emotion-based mind telling us it is interesting before our logical mind can explain why.

## Organise



As knowledge workers we are faced with a lot of content from several digital environments, unless we take control of those virtual spaces and shape them to support the kinds of think we want to do, the effort made will feel taxing.

The next step, is to take the captured information and organise them in a space where you can enable your best thinking.

- Organisation systems that require a series of elaborate rules take time away from other priorities and become quickly outdated



**PARA:** Projects, Areas, Resources, and Archives: They are universal and encompass any kind of information, from any source for any purpose.

- PARA organises information based on how actionable it is
- Instead of organising notes in a complex series of hierarchy of topics, you must only answer “In which project is this the most useful?”
- The PARA method assumes you are currently working on a certain set of projects, and that the information should be organised in a way to support them

**Projects:** Short-term efforts in your work or life that you're working on now.

**Areas:** Long-term responsibilities you want to manage over time.

**Resources:** Topics or interests that may be useful in the future.

**Archives:** Inactive items from the other three categories.

## Projects



Projects are an ideal way to organise modern work. They have a beginning and an end; they take place during a specific period of time and then they finish. Second, they have a specific, clear outcome that needs to happen to complete them.

Examples:

- The second brain project
- Reonomy ETL pipeline

## Areas



In our lives, we have various ongoing areas we're responsible for. These are the job responsibilities that we were hired to take on, sometimes there are others that we officially or unofficially have taken owner of over time.

Examples:

- Cooking
- Travel
- Health
- Finances
- Personal Growth

## Resources



Similar to the class notebooks you kept in school, they act as a catchall for anything that doesn't belong to a project or an area and could include any topic you're interested in gathering information about.

Examples:

## Archives



Important part of PARA as they allow a place for cold storage that doesn't clutter your workspace, while keeping it in safekeeping forever just in case.

## Organising information



It is important to separate capturing information and organizing into two distinct steps. Keeping what resonates separate from deciding where to save it in the long term.

Steps:

1. In which project will this be most useful?
2. In which area will this be most useful?
3. Which resource does this belong to?
4. Place in archives

Organise information based on the outcomes that they can help you realize. The true test of whether something is properly organised is not whether it is perfectly labeled, but whether it can have an impact on someone or something that matters to you.



We cannot do our best thinking when all the stuff from the past is crowding and cluttering our space. Get it out of your mind. Whether through organisation or journaling.

“Move quickly and touch lightly” - Mentor

Look for the path of least resistance and make progress in short steps. Do not plough ahead without first strategising, and always find the easiest step to take on first.

## Actionable

- ☐ Create a folder for each of my active projects and begin to fill them with the content related to those projects
- ☐ Start just with a notes app for now and then expand



Your goal is to clear your workspace, and gather all items related to each active project in one place. Once you do that you'll gain the confidence and clarity to take action on those ideas.

## Distill

To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day. - Lao Tzu





When you first capture notes, there are unfinished pieces of raw material. They require a big more refinement to turn them into truly valuable information assets.



Notes are things to use, not things to collect, if you consume a lot of information wether it is books, articles, videos or posts, what are the chances that you could put them to use in that instant?

- Something that sparks our interest will only last around for a few hours to days, we will soon forget it, and unless properly utilized and created into an informational asset. It will be forgotten forever
- Distillation is at the heart of effective communication, the more important something is for your audience to hear, the most distilled it should be. Then you can focus on the details later.



Your primary job is to preserve the notes you're taking on the things you discover in a way that it can survive the journey into the future.

## Discoverability



**Discoverability:** The degree to which a piece of content or information can be found in a search of a file, database, or other information system.

- Discoverability is the element most often missing from people's notes. It is easy to save tons of content, but turning it into something accessible is another matter

## Progressive summarization technique: Highlighting 2.0



**Progressive summarization** is the simple process of taking raw notes you've captured and organized and distilling them into usable material that can directly inform a current project.

- Progressive summarization helps you spend time on the presentation and content of your notes as opposed to labeling, tagging or linking



You highlight the main points of a note, and then highlight the main point of those highlights and so on, distilling the essence in several layers. Each layer is formatted differently to easily tell them apart.

1. Captured notes
2. Bolded passages
3. Highlight passages
4. Executive summary

### **Layer one - Captured notes**

The chunks of texts that peaked my interest from the raw material. As interesting as these excerpts are they are not distilled enough, I would struggle to find the essence of it, by simply re-reading all of the content. This does not bode well for my future self.

### **Layer two - Bolding passages**

At a later point I re-evaluated the excerpts and bolded the passages that are most interesting. While this could be enough it is sometimes worth adding a third layer because the executive summary.

### **Layer three - Highlighted passages**

This should be very short and convey the main message in the content, and is highly distilled which should take a few seconds to grasp.

#### Layer four - Executive summary

This layer is only needed if you find yourself looking at the note again and again. Make the executive summary succinct that nails down the main points in your own words. Use bullet points.



Example of progressive summarization from Pablo Picasso

Picasso illustrates progressive summarization by breaking down the bull one by one and stripping away the unnecessary until only the essential remains. He couldn't have started with a single line drawing, he had to go through each layer. The result is a simple one line drawing that captures the essence of a bull.



Progressive Summarization is not a technique to remembering as much as possible but to forget as much as possible.

## Mistakes to avoid

1. Over-Highlighting - Only keep what interests you, less is more.
  - a. Each layer should include a max of 10-20 % of the previous layer
2. Highlighting without a purpose in mind.
  - a. Highlight when you're ready to create something, or that you have something that is actionable.
3. Making highlighting difficult
  - a. Rely on your intuition



**RULE:** Leave it better than you found it. Everytime you touch a note, make it more discoverable for your future self. Add highlights, some bullet points or notes.

- ☐ Go through a progressive summarization exercise with some content that you have captured



**The true test of whether something is discoverable is whether you can get the gist of it at a glance. No more than 30 seconds.**

## Express



Professional creative constantly draw on outside sources of inspiration. If there is a secret to creativity, it is that it emerges from everyday efforts to gather and organize our influences.



For knowledge workers, attention is our most scarce and precious resource. For that reason it is imperative that we recycle the knowledge we produce back into our systems so they can be useful again.

- If we focus too much on the end goal and result, we lose appreciation for the intermediate work, the notes, drafts and outlines



The final stage of the creative process consists of expressing our ideas earlier, more frequently and in smaller chunks to test what works and get feedback from others.

## **Intermediate Packets: The power of thinking small**



It is not enough to simply divide tasks into smaller pieces-you then need a system for managing those pieces. Otherwise, you are wasting a lot of time trying to keep track of them.



Intermediate packets: The concrete, individual building blocks that make up your work.

ie. notes from a team meeting, relevant research findings, any note that can be used towards another project or goal.



The more pieces you have the easier it is to build something interesting (like lego).

Imagine that instead of starting your next project with a blank slate, you start with a set of building blocks.

- Our time is scarce, we should treat the things we invest in as knowledge assets that can be packaged and reused instead of reproducing them from scratch.
- This will require a long term view and perspective before paying off, but over time the value would increase exponentially.

### **Types of intermediate packets:**

1. Distilled notes: Books and articles you've read and distilled
2. Outtakes: the material or ideas that didn't make it into a past project, but could in future ones
3. Work-in-process: Documents, graphics that you used in past projects
4. Final deliverables: Concrete pieces of work you've delivered as part of past projects, which could become components of something new
5. Documents created by others: Knowledge assets created by people you know

### **Advantages of intermediate packets:**

1. Interruption-proof because you are only focusing one on small packet at a time, instead of loading up the entire project in your mind all at once.
2. Progress can be made in any span of time. You can do work on IPs at any time for a few minutes.
3. Increase the quality of your work by getting feedback more often, you can show one small block at a time and get outside input
  - a. Think of the agile method
4. Finally, eventually you'll have so many IPs at your disposal that you can execute entire projects just by assembling IPs



The idea of starting something from scratch will become foreign to you. You will always hit the ground running, with applicable IPs.

- Big projects and goals become less intimidating because you can just break them down into smaller goals

## **Assembling building blocks: Secret to Frictionless output**



Breaking down projects into concrete chunks, then provides you with components that will become clear. You can then ask yourself, where can I acquire each of these components or assemble them?



If the burden of producing new good ideas rests solely on your fickle biological brain, things will not bode well for you.

- Ideas are just connections across other ideas or subjects that cannot be planned or predicted, having all your IPs collected, tagged and cataloged could cause those connections to emerge

Four retrieval methods:

1. Search: When you know what to look for, go to the folder and extract it using search functions on notes
2. Browse: Start with the general and getting more and more specific
3. Tags: Can overcome the issue of folders by removing the silos of limitations and expose relationships
4. Serendipity: Just think it up in your own time



We are creating a soup of creative DNA by jumbling up all kinds of material on many subjects in diverse formats in our Second brain.

## **Stages of expressing: What does it look like to show our work?**

1. Remember: Retrieve an idea exactly when it's needed
  2. Connect: Use notes to tell a bigger story
  3. Create: Complete projects and accomplish goals
- Creativity is inherently collaborative
    - Smaller chunks are more shareable and collaborative
  - We often get too close to our work to see it objectively, it is important to get feedback by borrowing someone else's eyes.
    - You will change the way you work if you do it with the intention of getting immediate feedback

## REMIX



The CODE method is based on an important concept of creativity: that is always a remix of existing parts. Borrow parts of other people's work, use your ideas, and capture other influences then mix them together.



Instead of thinking of your job in terms of tasks, start to think in terms of **assets and building blocks you can assemble.**

| We only know what we make. Verum ipsum factum



We learn by making concrete things, thoughts are fleeting, and should be put into action to work.





You have to value your ideas enough to share them. You have to believe that your smallest thought can have the potential to change people's lives. Capture everything.

## The art of creative execution



Building a second brain is about **standardizing** how we work, by simply capturing ideas organizing them into groups, distilling the best parts and assembling them to create value for others we are practicing the basic moves of knowledge in a way that we can improve them over time.

## Divergence vs Convergence



The **creative process** alternates back and forth between divergence and convergence.

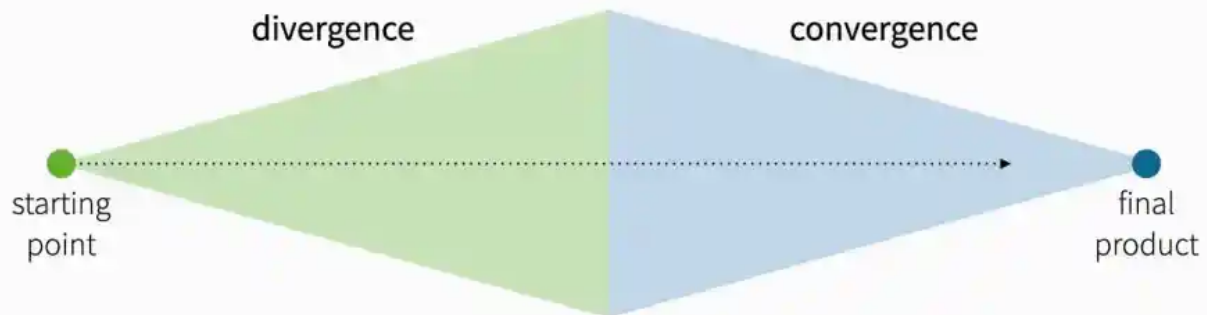


**Divergence:** Every creative endeavor begins with the act of divergence, opening up as many options as possible, gather information from all available sources, expose yourself to new influences, explore new paths, and talk to other about what you're thinking. You are diverging away from the starting point.



**Convergence:** This act focuses on eliminating options, make trade offs and decide what is truly essential. It is about narrowing the range of possibilities so that you can make future progress and end up with a final result.

## The creative process



Building a Second Brain

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- Engineers diverge by researching all possible solutions, testing the boundaries of the problem and tinkering with new tools
- Engineers converge by deciding on a particular approach, designing the implementation details and bringing their blueprints to life

### CODE process role in the creative process



**Capture and Organise**, make up divergence. They are about gathering the seeds of imagination carried on the wind and storing them in a secure place. This is where you research and explore ideas.



**Distill and Express**, make up convergence. They help us shut the door to new ideas and begin constructing something new out of the knowledge building blocks we've assembled.

- You can look at it as being in two modes of thought, one where you open up your horizons and explore every possible option, click every link, capture and organise all that information

- Another is where when you enter convergence mode, sit down, focus and chase the reward of completion
- Convergence is hard for creative people as there are a lot of ways to explore new areas, this may feel like it is work but it is not contributing to your final goal

## How to converge properly

### 1. The archipelago of ideas: Give yourself stepping-stones

- Gather all relevant information to a given project
- Once you have all the ideas, switch to convergence mode and link them together in an order that makes sense
- Links should lead to notes within your second brain and not external links
- Points regarding a concept that is attributable to this project



**The archipelago of ideas:** separates the two activities your brain has the most difficulty performing at the same time: choosing ideas (selection) and arranging them into a logical flow (sequencing).

The reason both of these activities are so difficult to complete in tandem is because they require two states of mind to perform.

### 2. The Hemingway Bridge: Use yesterday's momentum today

- You can think of a hemingway bridge as a bridge between the islands in your archipelago of ideas
- End a writing session only when you know what comes next and make that clear so that it can be picked up on later



**The Hemingway Bridge:** Instead of burning away every last ounce of energy in a writing session, use the last few moments to write down the follow things:

- Ideas for the next steps
- What is your current status
- Any details you have in mind that will be forgotten when you step away
- Your intention for the next work session

### 3. Dial down the scope: Ship something small and concrete

- Dial down complex projects instead of postponing it to a more manageable size



**Scope:** The full set of features a software program might include.



Dialing down the scope recognizes that not all parts of a project are equally important. By dropping or reducing or postponing the least important parts, we can unblock ourselves and move forward, even when time is scarce.

- ☐ Make an outline with your goals, intentions, questions and considerations for the project.
- ☐ Write anything already on your mind
- ☐ Peruse PARA categories for related notes and Intermediate Packets
- ☐ Your only goal is to move all related information into one place

## The essential habits of digital organizers

Habits reduce cognitive load and free up mental capacity, so you can allocate your attention to other tasks... It's only by making the fundamentals of life easier that you can create the mental space needed for free thinking and creativity. - James Clear, Atomic Habits



The second brain is a system for enhancing productivity and creativity. While these domains are viewed as mutually exclusive, they can be seen as complementary. When we are organised and efficient that creates space for creativity to arise. This balance between order and creativity is something that can be built into the second brain. Developing certain habits can help maintain the tools in your second brain by easily applying order in the creative process.

- Being organised is not something you are born with, it is a habit, a repeated set of actions you take as you encounter, work with and put information to use. If we are constantly scrambling for notes, drafts and brainstorming we sabotage our momentum.
- Each step of CODE comes with habits that help us be more organized

## The mise-en-place way to sustainable productivity



Mise-en-place: A culinary philosophy used in restaurants. It is a step by step process for producing high quality food efficiently. Chefs learn to keep their workspace clean and organised in the **flow of the meals they are preparing** as they do not have the time to stop the whole workplace to clean up.

- There is no time to stop everything you are doing for the sake of maintenance. This will not be applicable in the business world
- We tend to notice our systems need maintenance only when they break down



Building a second brain is not only about getting organised through a piece of software in time, it is about adopting a dynamic, flexible system and set of habits to continually access what we need without throwing our environment into chaos.

There are three kinds of habits that can be integrated into your routine to ensure your second brain remains functional and relevant:

1. Project Checklists
2. Weekly and Monthly Reviews
3. Noticing Habits

These habits can be thought as your maintenance schedule

## **The Project Checklist Habit: The key to starting your knowledge flywheel**



Your attention should be treated as an asset that gets invested and produces returns. Like any asset you should be able to use the returns of your investment to be reinvested leading to compounding returns.

- When a project starts and finishes are two opportunities to do something different than you've done before

### **When a project starts: The project kickoff checklist**



Considering projects as our biggest investments of attention it's worth adding a little bit of structure to properly undertake them:

1. Capture my current thinking on the project
  - Blank note and doing a brainstorm of anything that comes to mind, then store into the project folder.

- Questions to answers:
  - What do I already know about this project?
  - What don't I know that I need to find out?
  - What is my goal or intention
  - Who can I talk to who might provide insights?
  - What can I read or listen to for relevant ideas?
- 2. Review folders that might contain relevant notes
  - Look at the progressive summaries of relevant notes
- 3. Search for related terms across all folders
  - a. Search for notes I may have missed
- 4. Move relevant notes to the project folder
  - a. Any notes from previous steps are moved into the project folder
  - b. The important thing isn't where a note is located but if it is referencable
- 5. Create an outline of collected notes and plan the project
  - a. Pull together the material you've gathered and create an outline (Archipelago of ideas) for the project
  - b. End up with a formulated logical progression of steps that make it clear what I should do next

Other questions you may want to ask:

- Premortem questions
  - What do you want to learn?
  - What is the greatest source of uncertainty
  - most important question you want to answer?
  - What is most likely to fail?
- Communicate with stakeholders
  - Explain what the project is and get insights

- Define success criteria
  - What needs to happen for this project to be considered successful
  - Minimum results to achieve or stretch goals
- Have an official kickoff
  - Schedule a time, budget or timeline

### **When a project ends: The project completion checklist**



The only way the project kickoff is feasible is if we've previously taken the time to save and preserve material from past projects. We use the completion checklist to do so:

1. Mark project as completed
2. Cross out project goal and move to completed section
3. Review intermediate packets and move to other folders
4. Move project to archive
5. IF project is becoming inactive: Add a current status note and hemingway bridge

1. Mark project as completed
2. Cross out project goal and move to completed section
  - a. Have I achieved the goals in this project?
  - b. What lead to that success?
  - c. Can I repeat or double down on those strengths?
  - d. What can I learn to avoid future mistakes?
  - e. This may take hours of in depth analysis based on the size of the project
3. Review intermediate packets and move to other folders
  - a. Synthesize and move IPs to relevant areas or resources
4. Move project to archive



5. IF project is becoming inactive: Add a current status note and hemingway bridge

a. A bridge could help you pick it up again down the line

Other questions you may want to ask:

- Postmortem questions
  - What did you learn?
  - What did you do well?
  - What could you have done better?
  - What can you improve next time?
- Communicate with stakeholders
- Evaluate success criteria
  - Were the goals achieved
  - Why or why not?
  - What was the return on investment?
- Officially close out project and celebrate

## The review habit: Why you should batch process your notes (and how often)



**A weekly review:** Is a regular check-in, performed once a week where you reset and review your work and life. Weekly tasks should be written down, review active projects and decided on upcoming weekly priorities.



Our weekly review adds one more step: Batch processing the notes we have made from the previous week. Give them succinct titles, and sort them into the appropriate PARA folders. Need an inbox for notes.



The point of a weekly review isn't to keep myself to a rigid structure but to reset and clear everything from the previous week to avoid being overwhelmed.

#### Weekly review checklist:

1. Clear my email inbox
2. Check my calendar
3. Clear my computer desktop
4. Clear my notes inbox
  - a. Batch process them all and assign to PARA folders
5. Choose my tasks for the week
  - a. Choosing tasks at the end of the review will ensure that you know what needs to be tackled to move forward



**A monthly review:** A chance to evaluate the big picture, consider fundamental changes to your goals, priorities and systems that you might not have the chance to think about in your day-to-day.

#### Monthly review checklist:

1. Review and update my goals
  - a. Review goals for the quarter and the year
  - b. What successes and accomplishments did I have?
  - c. What went unexpectedly, what can I learn from it?
2. Review and update my project list
  - a. Update projects
3. Review my areas of responsibility
  - a. Think about the major areas of my life
  - b. Family

- c. Friends
  - d. Finances
  - e. Health
  - f. Home life
  - g. Decide if you need to take action on any
4. Review someday/maybe tasks
- a. Tasks or projects you may want to do someday
5. Reprioritize tasks
- a. To-dos that were critical last month may no longer be the case

## The noticing habits: Using your second brain to engineer luck



Taking advantage of small opportunities you notice to capture something you might otherwise have skipped over or to make a note more actionable or discoverable

- You have this all the time when you are walking or in the shower. You need to find a way to capture those
- Quick capture and make a note of it, that can be organised later on



Staying organized needs to be done in as little time as possible between the flow of our normal lives. These habits can help you do so if properly integrated. The noticing habits if captured can help you stay organised. **Over time you will make a system that fits your needs more than you ever could have imagined.**

## Closing point



Any system that must be perfect to be reliable is deeply flawed. **Make the system work for you, it has to be easy to upkeep and use.**

## The path of self-expression



This chapter explores how we can shift how we think regarding information. Our attitude toward information profoundly shapes how we see and understand the world and our place in it. Our success in the world place is also dependent on our ability to make use of information quick and better.

- As society gets more complex the emphasis on personal intelligence only grows

## The shift from scarcity to abundance



The biggest shift that starts to occur as soon as you start creating a Second brain is the shift from viewing the world through the lens of scarcity to seeing it through the lens of abundance.

## The shift from consuming to creating



The 1966 book Polanyi's paradox, can be summarized as 'We know more than we can say.' We are incapable of properly describing tacit knowledge, and this has presented a major challenge to the development of artificial intelligence.



Tacit knowledge: Knowledge which is impossible to describe as it resides in our subconscious and muscle memory where language cannot reach.

- The jobs and endeavors relying on tacit knowledge will be the last ones to be automated.
- Meditation might be a possible remedy for that

☐ Look into how to make the subconscious-conscious

## Starting point to get the second brain started

1. Decide what you want to capture

2. Choose your notes app
3. Choose a capture tool
4. Get set up with PARA
5. Get inspired by identifying your twelve favorite problems
6. Automatically capture your ebook highlights
7. Practice progressive summarization
8. Experiment with one IP
9. Make progress on one deliverable
10. Schedule a weekly review
11. Assess your notetaking proficiency

## Highlights

Here's the problem: we can't consume every bit of this information stream. We will quickly be exhausted and overwhelmed if we try. We need to adopt the perspective of a curator, stepping back from the raging river and starting to make intentional decisions about what information we want to fill our minds. ([Location 601](#))

**Tags:** pink

The solution is to keep only what resonates in a trusted place that you control, and to leave the rest aside. ([Location 609](#))

**Tags:** orange

The best way to organize your notes is to organize for action, according to the active projects you are working on right now. Consider new information in terms of its utility, asking, "How is this going to help me move forward one of my current projects?" ([Location 627](#))

**Tags:** pink

There is a powerful way to facilitate and speed up this process of rapid association: distill your notes down to their essence. ([Location 640](#))

**Tags:** pink

Every time you take a note, ask yourself, “How can I make this as useful as possible for my future self?” That question will lead you to annotate the words and phrases that explain why you saved a note, what you were thinking, and what exactly caught your attention. Your notes will be useless if you can’t decipher them in the future, or if they’re so long that you don’t even try. Think of yourself not just as a taker of notes, but as a giver of notes—you are giving your future self the gift of knowledge that is easy to find and understand. ([Location 649](#))

**Tags:** pink

Information becomes knowledge—personal, embodied, verified—only when we put it to use. ([Location 665](#))

**Tags:** pink

The word “productivity” has the same origin as the Latin verb *producere*, which means “to produce.” Which means that at the end of the day, if you can’t point to some kind of output or result you’ve produced, it’s questionable whether you’ve been productive at all. ([Location 699](#))

Everything not saved will be lost. —Nintendo “Quit Screen” message ([Location 712](#))

**Tags:** blue

Software engineers build “code libraries” so useful bits of code are easy to access. ([Location 770](#))

**Tags:** blue

In the digital world we live in, knowledge most often shows up as “content”—snippets of text, screenshots, bookmarked articles, podcasts, or other kinds of media. This includes the content

you gather from outside sources but also the content you create as you compose emails, draw up project plans, brainstorm ideas, and journal your own thoughts. ([Location 778](#))

Highlights: Insightful passages from books or articles you read. Quotes: Memorable passages from podcasts or audiobooks you listen to. Bookmarks and favorites: Links to interesting content you find on the web or favorited social media posts. Voice memos: Clips recorded on your mobile device as “notes to self.” Meeting notes: Notes you take about what was discussed during meetings or phone calls. Images: Photos or other images that you find inspiring or interesting. Takeaways: Lessons from courses, conferences, or presentations you’ve attended. ([Location 790](#))

**Tags:** orange

Stories: Your favorite anecdotes, whether they happened to you or someone else. Insights: The small (and big) realizations you have. Memories: Experiences from your life that you don’t want to forget. Reflections: Personal thoughts and lessons written in a journal or diary. ([Location 801](#))

**Tags:** orange

The meaning of a thought, insight, or memory often isn’t immediately clear. We need to write them down, revisit them, and view them from a different perspective in order to digest what they mean to us. It is exceedingly difficult to do that within the confines of our heads. We need an external medium in which to see our ideas from another vantage point, and writing things down is the most effective and convenient one ever invented. ([Location 806](#))

**Tags:** pink

choose the two to three kinds of content from the two lists above that you already have the most of and already value. Some people favor inner sources of knowledge, some people are biased toward the outer world, but most people are somewhere in between. While you can eventually learn to capture from dozens of different sources, it’s important to start small and get your feet wet before diving into the deep end. ([Location 811](#))

**Tags:** orange

Will it need to be collaboratively edited? Notes apps are perfectly suited for individual, private use, which makes them less than ideal for collaboration. You can share individual notes or even groups of notes with others, but if you need multiple people to be able to collaboratively edit a document in real time, then you'll need to use a different platform. ([Location 824](#))

**Tags:** orange

You have to keep a dozen of your favorite problems constantly present in your mind, although by and large they will lay in a dormant state. Every time you hear or read a new trick or a new result, test it against each of your twelve problems to see whether it helps. Every once in a while there will be a hit, and people will say, "How did he do it? He must be a genius!" ([Location 840](#))

**Tags:** orange

The key to this exercise is to make them open-ended questions that don't necessarily have a single answer. ([Location 875](#))

**Tags:** orange

Ask people close to you what you were obsessed with as a child (often you'll continue to be fascinated with the same things as an adult). Don't worry about coming up with exactly twelve (the exact number doesn't matter, but try to come up with at least a few). Don't worry about getting the list perfect (this is just a first pass, and it will always be evolving). Phrase them as open-ended questions that could have multiple answers (in contrast to "yes/no" questions with only one answer). ([Location 890](#))

**Tags:** blue

Second Brain Resource Guide at [Buildingasecondbrain.com/resources](http://Buildingasecondbrain.com/resources). ([Location 896](#))

**Tags:** blue

It starts with realizing that in any piece of content, the value is not evenly distributed. ([Location 909](#))

**Tags:** orange



Here are four criteria I suggest to help you decide exactly which nuggets of knowledge are worth keeping: Capture Criteria #1: Does It Inspire Me? ([Location 922](#))

**Tags:** orange

Capture Criteria #2: Is It Useful? ([Location 929](#))

**Tags:** orange

Capture Criteria #3: Is It Personal? One of the most valuable kinds of information to keep is personal information—your own thoughts, reflections, memories, and mementos. ([Location 938](#))

**Tags:** orange

Capture Criteria #4: Is It Surprising? ([Location 945](#))

**Tags:** orange

We have a natural bias as humans to seek evidence that confirms what we already believe, a well-studied phenomenon known as “confirmation bias.”<sup>6</sup> ([Location 946](#))

**Tags:** orange

Surprise is an excellent barometer for information that doesn’t fit neatly into our existing understanding, which means it has the potential to change how we think. ([Location 951](#))

Ultimately, Capture What Resonates I’ve given you specific criteria to help you decide what is worth capturing, but if you take away one thing from this chapter, it should be to keep what resonates. ([Location 962](#))

**Tags:** pink

We know from neuroscientific research that “emotions organize—rather than disrupt—rational thinking.”<sup>8</sup> When something resonates with us, it is our emotion-based, intuitive mind telling us

it is interesting before our logical mind can explain why. ([Location 973](#))

No matter how many different kinds of software you use, don't leave all the knowledge they contain scattered across dozens of places you'll never think to look. Make sure your best findings get routed back to your notes app where you can put them all together and act on them.

([Location 1018](#))

**Tags:** blue

First, you are much more likely to remember information you've written down in your own words. Known as the "Generation Effect,"<sup>10</sup> researchers have found that when people actively generate a series of words, such as by speaking or writing, more parts of their brain are activated when compared to simply reading the same words. Writing things down is a way of "rehearsing" those ideas, like practicing a dance routine or shooting hoops, which makes them far more likely to stick. ([Location 1045](#))

**Tags:** pink

One of the most cited psychology papers of the 1990s found that "translating emotional events into words leads to profound social, psychological, and neural changes." ([Location 1055](#))

**Tags:** orange

No one had to read or respond to what these people wrote down—the benefits came just from the act of writing. ([Location 1059](#))

**Tags:** orange

We'll get to that soon, but in the meantime, try out a couple of digital notes apps and capture tools to see which ones fit your style. Don't forget the resource guide I've put together to help you make your choice. ([Location 1083](#))

**Tags:** blue

\* This is called “detachment gain,” as explained in *The Detachment Gain: The Advantage of Thinking Out Loud* by Daniel Reisberg, and refers to the “functional advantage to putting thoughts into externalized forms” such as speaking or writing, leading to the “possibility of new discoveries that might not have been obtained in any other fashion.” ([Location 1102](#))

Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work. —  
Gustave Flaubert, French novelist ([Location 1108](#))

**Tags:** orange

As knowledge workers we spend many hours every day within digital environments—our computers, smartphones, and the web. Unless you take control of those virtual spaces and shape them to support the kinds of thinking you want to do, every minute spent there will feel taxing and distracting. ([Location 1171](#))

**Tags:** pink

The next step in building your Second Brain is to take the morsels of insight you’ve begun to capture and organize them in a space where you can do your best thinking. ([Location 1180](#))

**Tags:** pink

The problem was that none of these systems was integrated into my daily life. They always required me to follow a series of elaborate rules that took time away from my other priorities, which meant they would quickly become outdated and obsolete. ([Location 1192](#))

**Tags:** orange

I eventually named this organizing system PARA,\* which stands for the four main categories of information in our lives: Projects, Areas, Resources, and Archives. These four categories are universal, encompassing any kind of information, from any source, in any format, for any purpose.† ([Location 1199](#))

PARA can handle it all, regardless of your profession or field, for one reason: it organizes information based on how actionable it is, not what kind of information it is. ([Location 1202](#))

**Tags:** orange

Instead of having to sort your notes according to a complex hierarchy of topics and subtopics, you have to answer only one simple question: “In which project will this be most useful?” It assumes only that you are currently working on a certain set of projects, and that your information should be organized to support them. ([Location 1203](#))

**Tags:** orange

The intention here is not to use a single software program, but to use a single organizing system, one that provides consistency even as you switch between apps many times per day. A project will be the same project whether it’s found in your notes app, your computer file system, or your cloud storage drive, allowing you to move seamlessly between them without losing your train of thought. ([Location 1231](#))

**Tags:** orange

With the PARA system, every piece of information you want to save can be placed into one of just four categories: Projects: Short-term efforts in your work or life that you’re working on now. Areas: Long-term responsibilities you want to manage over time. Resources: Topics or interests that may be useful in the future. Archives: Inactive items from the other three categories. ([Location 1239](#))

**Tags:** pink

Projects have a couple of features that make them an ideal way to organize modern work. First, they have a beginning and an end; they take place during a specific period of time and then they finish. Second, they have a specific, clear outcome that needs to happen in order for them to be checked off as complete, such as “finalize,” “green-light,” “launch,” or “publish.” ([Location 1246](#))

**Tags:** pink

In our work lives, we have various ongoing areas we're responsible for, such as "product development," "quality control," or "human resources." These are the job responsibilities that we were hired to take on. Sometimes there are others that we officially or unofficially have taken ownership of over time. ([Location 1269](#))

**Tags:** pink

Examples of areas from your personal life could include: Activities or places you are responsible for: Home/apartment; Cooking; Travel; Car. People you are responsible for or accountable to: Friends; Kids; Spouse; Pets. Standards of performance you are responsible for: Health; Personal growth; Friendships; Finances. ([Location 1281](#))

**Tags:** orange

The third category of information that we want to keep is resources. This is basically a catchall for anything that doesn't belong to a project or an area and could include any topic you're interested in gathering information about. ([Location 1297](#))

**Tags:** pink

These folders are like the class notebooks you probably kept in school: one for biology, another for history, another for math. Any note or file that isn't relevant or actionable for a current project or area can be placed into resources for future reference. ([Location 1307](#))

**Tags:** orange

The archives are an important part of PARA because they allow you to place a folder in "cold storage" so that it doesn't clutter your workspace, while safekeeping it forever just in case you need it. ([Location 1314](#))

**Tags:** pink

PARA is a universal system of organization designed to work across your digital world. It doesn't work in only one place, requiring you to use completely different organizing schemes in each of the dozens of places you keep things. It can and should be used everywhere, such as the

documents folder on your computer, your cloud storage drives, and of course, your digital notes app. ([Location 1319](#))

**Tags:** orange

Setting up folders is relatively easy. The harder question that strikes fear into the heart of every organizer is “Where do I put this?” ([Location 1354](#))

**Tags:** pink

The temptation when initially capturing notes is to also try to decide where they should go and what they mean. Here’s the problem: the moment you first capture an idea is the worst time to try to decide what it relates to. First, because you’ve just encountered it and haven’t had any time to ponder its ultimate purpose, but more importantly, because forcing yourself to make decisions every time you capture something adds a lot of friction to the process. This makes the experience mentally taxing and thus less likely to happen in the first place. ([Location 1358](#))

**Tags:** orange

This is why it’s so important to separate capture and organize into two distinct steps: “keeping what resonates” in the moment is a separate decision from deciding to save something for the long term. ([Location 1363](#))

**Tags:** orange

Projects are most actionable because you’re working on them right now and with a concrete deadline in mind. Areas have a longer time horizon and are less immediately actionable. Resources may become actionable depending on the situation. Archives remain inactive unless they are needed. ([Location 1370](#))

**Tags:** orange

In which project will this be most useful? If none: In which area will this be most useful? If none: Which resource does this belong to? If none: Place in archives. ([Location 1374](#))

**Tags:** orange

The goal of organizing our knowledge is to move our goals forward, not get a PhD in notetaking. Knowledge is best applied through execution, which means whatever doesn't help you make progress on your projects is probably detracting from them. ([Location 1386](#))

**Tags:** orange

Imagine how absurd it would be to organize a kitchen instead by kind of food: fresh fruit, dried fruit, fruit juice, and frozen fruit would all be stored in the same place, just because they all happen to be made of fruit. ([Location 1395](#))

**Tags:** orange

I recommend organizing them according to where they are going—specifically, the outcomes that they can help you realize. The true test of whether a piece of knowledge is valuable is not whether it is perfectly organized and neatly labeled, but whether it can have an impact on someone or something that matters to you. ([Location 1399](#))

**Tags:** pink

It is about identifying the structure of your work and life—what you are committed to, what you want to change, and where you want to go. ([Location 1420](#))

**Tags:** orange

Everything else was just an obstacle to get past on the way to their goal. ([Location 1437](#))

**Tags:** orange

They had repeatedly postponed their creative ambitions to some far-off, mythical time when somehow everything would be perfectly in order. Once we set that aside and just focused on what they actually wanted to do right now, they suddenly gained a tremendous sense of clarity and motivation. ([Location 1441](#))

**Tags:** orange

The first is that people need clear workspaces to be able to create. We cannot do our best thinking and our best work when all the “stuff” from the past is crowding and cluttering our space. ([Location 1453](#))

**Tags:** orange

That’s why that archiving step is so crucial: you’re not losing anything, and it can all be found via search, but you need to move it all out of sight and out of mind. ([Location 1454](#))

**Tags:** orange

A mentor of mine once gave me a piece of advice that has served me ever since: move quickly and touch lightly. She saw that my standard approach to my work was brute force: to stay late at the office, fill every single minute with productivity, and power through mountains of work as if my life depended on it. That wasn’t a path to success; it was a path to burnout. Not only did I exhaust my mental and physical reserves time and again; my frontal assaults weren’t even very effective. I didn’t know how to set my intentions, craft a strategy, and look for sources of leverage that would allow me to accomplish things with minimal effort. ([Location 1463](#))

**Tags:** pink

My mentor advised me to “move quickly and touch lightly” instead. To look for the path of least resistance and make progress in short steps. I want to give the same advice to you: don’t make organizing your Second Brain into yet another heavy obligation. Ask yourself: “What is the smallest, easiest step I can take that moves me in the right direction?” ([Location 1469](#))

**Tags:** orange

When it comes to PARA, that step is generally to create folders for each of your active projects in your notes app and begin to fill them with the content related to those projects. ([Location 1472](#))

**Tags:** blue

Although you can and should use PARA across all the platforms where you store information—the three most common ones besides a notetaking app are the documents folder on your



computer, cloud storage drives like Dropbox, and online collaboration suites like Google Docs—I recommend starting with just your notes app for now. ([Location 1489](#))

**Tags:** blue

Practice capturing new notes, organizing them into folders, and moving them from one folder to another. Each time you finish a project, move its folder wholesale to the archives, and each time you start a new project, look through your archives to see if any past project might have assets you can reuse. ([Location 1492](#))

**Tags:** blue

Your goal is to clear your virtual workspace and gather all the items related to each active project in one place. Once you do, you'll gain the confidence and clarity to take action on those ideas, rather than letting them pile up with no end in sight. ([Location 1498](#))

**Tags:** blue

Distill—Find the Essence To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day. —Lao Tzu, ancient Chinese philosopher ([Location 1511](#))

**Tags:** pink

Our notes are things to use, not just things to collect. ([Location 1564](#))

**Tags:** pink

When you first capture them, your notes are like unfinished pieces of raw material. They require a bit more refinement to turn them into truly valuable knowledge assets, like a chemist distilling only the purest compound. ([Location 1566](#))

**Tags:** pink

You probably consume a lot of books, articles, videos, and social media posts full of interesting insights, but what are the chances that you'll be ready to put any given piece of advice into action right at that instant? ([Location 1571](#))

**Tags:** pink

There is a key idea that catches our attention in the moment. We feel enraptured and obsessed with it. It's difficult to imagine ever forgetting the new idea. It's changed our lives forever! But after a few hours or days or weeks, it starts to fade from our memory. Soon our recollection of that exciting new idea is nothing but a pale shadow of something we once knew, that once intrigued us. ([Location 1579](#))

**Tags:** orange

Your job as a notetaker is to preserve the notes you're taking on the things you discover in such a way that they can survive the journey into the future. That way your excitement and enthusiasm for your knowledge builds over time instead of fading away. ([Location 1583](#))

**Tags:** pink

discoverability—how easy it is to discover what they contain and access the specific points that are most immediately useful. ([Location 1586](#))

Discoverability is an idea from information science that refers to “the degree to which a piece of content or information can be found in a search of a file, database, or other information system.”\* ([Location 1587](#))

Discoverability is the element most often missing from people's notes. It's easy to save tons and tons of content, but turning it into a form that will be accessible in the future is another matter. ([Location 1591](#))

**Tags:** orange

Distillation is at the very heart of all effective communication. The more important it is that your audience hear and take action on your message, the more distilled that message needs to be. The details and subtleties can come later once you have your audience's attention. ([Location 1608](#))

**Tags:** orange

Progressive Summarization is the technique I teach to distill notes down to their most important points. It is a simple process of taking the raw notes you’ve captured and organized and distilling them into usable material that can directly inform a current project. ([Location 1613](#))

you highlight the main points of a note, and then highlight the main points of those highlights, and so on, distilling the essence of a note in several “layers.” Each of these layers uses a different kind of formatting so you can easily tell them apart. ([Location 1617](#))

**Tags:** pink

This is what I call “layer one”—the chunks of text initially captured in my notes. Notice that I didn’t save the entire article—only a few key excerpts.\* ([Location 1627](#))

**Tags:** orange

As interesting as this content is, it’s not nearly succinct enough. Once again, in the midst of a chaotic workday, I would be hardpressed to find the time to casually look through multiple paragraphs of text to find the relevant points. Unless I highlight those points in a way that my future self can instantly grasp, I’ll likely never see them again. ([Location 1631](#))

**Tags:** orange

Looking at the note above, can you see how those few highlighted sentences jump out and catch your eye? They convey the main message of this article in a highly distilled form that takes just seconds to grasp. ([Location 1649](#))

**Tags:** orange

The best sign that a fourth layer is needed is when I find myself visiting a note again and again, clearly indicating that it is one of the cornerstones of my thinking. ([Location 1655](#))

**Tags:** orange

Speed is everything when it comes to recall: you have only a limited amount of time and energy, and the faster you can move through your notes, the more diverse and interesting ideas you can connect together. ([Location 1664](#))

**Tags:** orange

You can customize how much attention you spend on a note based on your energy level and time available. ([Location 1671](#))

**Tags:** orange

Progressive Summarization helps you focus on the content and the presentation of your notes,\* instead of spending too much time on labeling, tagging, linking, or other advanced features offered by many information management tools. ([Location 1684](#))

**Tags:** orange

This is actually a great way to filter down the volume of notes you're taking—the best stuff always sticks in your mind for an hour or two. ([Location 1727](#))

**Tags:** orange

This example illustrates how even Progressively Summarizing notes from our own conversations can be immensely useful. Often your own thoughts need some distillation before you can take action on them. ([Location 1751](#))

**Tags:** orange

Picasso's act of distillation involves stripping away the unnecessary so that only the essential remains. Crucially, Picasso couldn't have started with the single line drawing. He needed to go through each layer of the bull's form step-by-step to absorb the proportions and shapes into his muscle memory. The result points to a mysterious aspect of the creative process: it can end up with a result that looks so simple, it seems like anyone could have made it. That simplicity masks the effort that was needed to get there. ([Location 1772](#))

**Tags:** orange

Progressive Summarization is not a method for remembering as much as possible—it is a method for forgetting as much as possible. ([Location 1781](#))

**Tags:** orange

Mistake #1: Over-Highlighting ([Location 1788](#))

**Tags:** orange

Mistake #2: Highlighting Without a Purpose in Mind ([Location 1801](#))

**Tags:** orange

The rule of thumb to follow is that every time you “touch” a note, you should make it a little more discoverable for your future self\*—by adding a highlight, a heading, some bullets, or commentary. This is the “campsite rule” applied to information—leave it better than you found it. This ensures that the notes you interact with most often will naturally become the most discoverable in a virtuous cycle. ([Location 1815](#))

**Tags:** pink

Mistake #3: Making Highlighting Difficult ([Location 1819](#))

**Tags:** orange

Instead, rely on your intuition to tell you when a passage is interesting, counterintuitive, or relevant to your favorite problems or a current project. ([Location 1821](#))

**Tags:** orange

If you can’t locate a piece of information quickly, in a format that’s convenient and ready to be put to use, then you might as well not have it at all. ([Location 1837](#))

**Tags:** orange

To put what you've just learned into practice immediately, find an interesting piece of content you consumed recently, such as an article, audiobook, or YouTube video. This could be content you've captured already and organized in one of your PARA folders. Or it could be a new piece of content floating around your email inbox or in a read later app. ([Location 1843](#))

**Tags:** blue

Start by saving only the best excerpts from that piece of content in a new note, either using copy-paste or a capture tool. This is layer one, the initial excerpts you save in your Second Brain. Next, read through the excerpts, bolding the main points and most important takeaways. Don't make it an analytical decision—listen for a feeling of resonance and let that be your guide for what to bold. These bolded passages are layer two. ([Location 1846](#))

**Tags:** blue

Now read through only the bolded passages, and highlight (or, if your notes app doesn't have a highlighting feature, underline) the best of the best passages. The key here is to be very picky: the entire note may have only a few highlighted sentences, or even just one. Not only is that fine, it represents a highly distilled and discoverable note. These highlights are layer three, which is distilled enough for most use cases. ([Location 1849](#))

**Tags:** blue

The true test of whether a note you've created is discoverable is whether you can get the gist of it at a glance. ([Location 1852](#))

**Tags:** pink

Put it aside for a few days and set a reminder to revisit it once you've forgotten most of the details. When you come back to it, give yourself no more than thirty seconds and see if you can rapidly get up to speed on what it's about using the highlights you previously made. You'll quickly be able to tell if you've added too many highlights or too few. ([Location 1853](#))

**Tags:** orange

Express—Show Your Work ([Location 1888](#))

**Tags:** pink

Estelle began her transformation into “Octavia,” whom she thought of as her powerful, assertive alter ego. ([Location 1908](#))

**Tags:** orange

The emerging Octavia made three rules for herself: Don’t leave your home without a notebook, paper scraps, something to write with. Don’t walk into the world without your eyes and ears focused and open. Don’t make excuses about what you don’t have or what you would do if you did, use that energy to “find a way, make a way.” ([Location 1911](#))

**Tags:** orange

“If this goes on . . . it extrapolates from current technology, current ecological conditions, current social conditions, current practices of any sort. It offers good possibilities—as well as warnings.” ([Location 1931](#))

**Tags:** orange

Professional creatives constantly draw on outside sources of inspiration—their own experiences and observations, lessons gleaned from successes and failures alike, and the ideas of others. If there is a secret to creativity, it is that it emerges from everyday efforts to gather and organize our influences. ([Location 1954](#))

**Tags:** pink

As knowledge workers, attention is our most scarce and precious resource. ([Location 1957](#))

**Tags:** pink

This is generally good advice, but there is a flaw in focusing only on the final results: all the intermediate work—the notes, the drafts, the outlines, the feedback—tends to be underappreciated and undervalued. ([Location 1967](#))

**Tags:** orange

If we consider how precious little time we have to produce something extraordinary in our careers, it becomes imperative that we recycle that knowledge back into a system where it can become useful again. ([Location 1972](#))

**Tags:** orange

How can you package up what you know in a form that you'll be able to revisit it again and again no matter what endeavors you take on in the future? ([Location 1976](#))

**Tags:** orange

The final stage of the creative process, Express, is about refusing to wait until you have everything perfectly ready before you share what you know. It is about expressing your ideas earlier, more frequently, and in smaller chunks to test what works and gather feedback from others. ([Location 1977](#))

**Tags:** orange

Intermediate Packets: The Power of Thinking Small ([Location 1980](#))

**Tags:** pink

Here's what most people miss: it's not enough to simply divide tasks into smaller pieces—you then need a system for managing those pieces. Otherwise, you're just creating a lot of extra work for yourself trying to keep track of them. ([Location 1989](#))

**Tags:** pink

“Intermediate Packets.” Intermediate Packets are the concrete, individual building blocks that make up your work.\* For example, a set of notes from a team meeting, a list of relevant research findings, a brainstorm with collaborators, a slide deck analyzing the market, or a list of action items from a conference call. Any note can potentially be used as an Intermediate Packet in some larger project or goal. ([Location 1992](#))



Like LEGO blocks, the more pieces you have, the easier it is to build something interesting. Imagine that instead of starting your next project with a blank slate, you started with a set of building blocks—research findings, web clippings, PDF highlights, book notes, back-of-the-envelope sketches—that represent your long-term effort to make sense of your field, your industry, and the world at large. ([Location 1999](#))

**Tags:** pink

Our time and attention are scarce, and it's time we treated the things we invest in—reports, deliverables, plans, pieces of writing, graphics, slides—as knowledge assets that can be reused instead of reproducing them from scratch. Reusing Intermediate Packets of work frees up our attention for higher-order, more creative thinking. Thinking small is the best way to elevate your horizons and expand your ambitions. ([Location 2003](#))

**Tags:** orange

There are five kinds of Intermediate Packets you can create and reuse in your work: Distilled notes: Books or articles you've read and distilled so it's easy to get the gist of what they contain (using the Progressive Summarization technique you learned in the previous chapter, for example). Outtakes: The material or ideas that didn't make it into a past project but could be used in future ones. Work-in-process: The documents, graphics, agendas, or plans you produced during past projects. Final deliverables: Concrete pieces of work you've delivered as part of past projects, which could become components of something new. Documents created by others: Knowledge assets created by people on your team, contractors or consultants, or even clients or customers, that you can reference and incorporate into your work. ([Location 2006](#))

**Tags:** orange

Making the shift to working in terms of Intermediate Packets unlocks several very powerful benefits. First, you'll become interruption-proof because you are focusing only on one small packet at a time, instead of trying to load up the entire project into your mind at once. ([Location 2023](#))

**Tags:** orange

Second, you'll be able to make progress in any span of time. Instead of waiting until you have multiple uninterrupted hours—which, let's face it, is rare and getting rarer—you can look at how many minutes you have free and choose to work on an IP that you can get done within that time, even if it's tiny. ([Location 2026](#))

**Tags:** orange

Big projects and goals become less intimidating because you can just keep breaking them down into smaller and smaller pieces, until they fit right into the gaps in your day. ([Location 2028](#))

**Tags:** orange

Third, Intermediate Packets increase the quality of your work by allowing you to collect feedback more often. Instead of laboring for weeks in isolation, only to present your results to your boss or client and find out you went in the wrong direction, you craft just one small building block at a time and get outside input before moving forward. ([Location 2029](#))

**Tags:** orange

Fourth, and best of all, eventually you'll have so many IPs at your disposal that you can execute entire projects just by assembling previously created IPs. ([Location 2033](#))

**Tags:** orange

The idea of starting anything from scratch will become foreign to you—why not draw on the wealth of assets you've invested in in the past? ([Location 2035](#))

**Tags:** pink

Assembling Building Blocks: The Secret to Frictionless Output ([Location 2043](#))

**Tags:** pink

However, if you break down that mega-project into concrete chunks, suddenly the components that you'll need become clear: A conference agenda A list of interesting breakout sessions A checklist for streaming the keynote sessions An email announcing the conference to your

network An invitation for people to be speakers or panelists A conference website  
([Location 2056](#))

**Tags:** orange

Ask yourself: How could you acquire or assemble each of these components, instead of having to make them yourself? ([Location 2062](#))

**Tags:** pink

combine them into something new will make all the difference in your career trajectory, business growth, and even quality of life. ([Location 2076](#))

**Tags:** pink

There is a cost to your sleep, your peace of mind, and your time with family when the full burden of constantly coming up with good ideas rests solely on your fickle biological brain.  
([Location 2079](#))

**Tags:** pink

How to Resurface and Reuse Your Past Work The Express step is where we practice and hone our ability to retrieve what we need, when we need it. It's the step where we build the confidence that our Second Brain is working for us. ([Location 2081](#))

**Tags:** pink

These are some of the most valuable connections—when an idea crosses the boundaries between subjects. They can't be planned or predicted. They can emerge only when many kinds of ideas in different shapes and sizes are mixed together. ([Location 2088](#))

**Tags:** orange

Those four retrieval methods are: Search Browsing Tags Serendipity ([Location 2093](#))

**Tags:** orange

Search should be the first retrieval method you turn to. It is most useful when you already know more or less what you're looking for, when you don't have notes saved in a preexisting folder, or when you're looking for text, but as with every tool, it has its limitations. If you don't know exactly what you're looking for, don't have a preexisting folder to look through, or are interested in images or graphics, it's time to turn to browsing. ([Location 2103](#))

**Tags:** orange

Browsing allows us to gradually home in on the information we are looking for, starting with the general and getting more and more specific. This kind of browsing uses older parts of the brain that developed to navigate physical environments, and thus comes to us more naturally.\*

([Location 2116](#))

**Tags:** orange

The main weakness of folders is that ideas can get siloed from each other, making it hard to spark interesting connections. Tags can overcome this limitation by infusing your Second Brain with connections, making it easier to see cross-disciplinary themes and patterns that defy simple categorization. ([Location 2129](#))

**Tags:** orange

For any useful note you find, apply a tag called "FAQ" while leaving it right where you found it. Once you've found enough material to work with, you can perform a single search—for the "FAQ" tag—and instantly see all the notes you've tagged collected in one place. ([Location 2136](#))

**Tags:** blue

don't recommend using tags as your primary organizational system. It takes far too much energy to apply tags to every single note compared to the ease of searching with keywords or browsing your folders. However, tags can come in handy in specific situations when the two previous retrieval methods aren't up to the task, and you want to spontaneously gather, connect, and synthesize groups of notes on the fly.\* ([Location 2140](#))

**Tags:** orange

This is the main reason we put all sorts of different kinds of material, on many subjects and in diverse formats, all jumbled together in our Second Brain. We are creating a soup of creative DNA to maximize the chance that new life emerges. ([Location 2148](#))

**Tags:** pink

Three Stages of Expressing: What Does It Look Like to Show Our Work? ([Location 2167](#))

**Tags:** pink

Remember: Retrieve an Idea Exactly When It's Needed ([Location 2171](#))

**Tags:** orange

Connect: Use Notes to Tell a Bigger Story ([Location 2183](#))

**Tags:** orange

Create: Complete Projects and Accomplish Goals Stress-Free ([Location 2198](#))

**Tags:** orange

Creativity Is Inherently Collaborative ([Location 2211](#))

**Tags:** orange

The transformation comes from the fact that smaller chunks are inherently more shareable and collaborative. ([Location 2218](#))

**Tags:** orange

The fundamental difficulty of creative work is that we are often too close to it to see it objectively. Getting feedback is really about borrowing someone else's eyes to see what only a

novice can see. It's about stepping outside your subjective point of view and noticing what's missing from what you've made. ([Location 2223](#))

**Tags:** orange

These moments are so important that you will begin changing how you work in order to get feedback as early and often as possible, because you know it is much easier to gather and synthesize the thoughts of others than to come up with an endless series of brilliant thoughts on your own. ([Location 2227](#))

**Tags:** orange

Everything Is a Remix ([Location 2235](#))

**Tags:** orange

The CODE Method is based on an important aspect of creativity: that it is always a remix of existing parts. We all stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. No one creates anything out of a pure void. ([Location 2235](#))

**Tags:** pink

Don't take the work of others wholesale; borrow aspects or parts of their work. The shape of a banner on a web page, the layout of a slide, the style of a song—these are like the ingredients you put in a blender before hitting the button and mixing it into your own recipe. ([Location 2245](#))

**Tags:** orange

Reframing your productivity in terms of Intermediate Packets is a major step toward this turning point. Instead of thinking of your job in terms of tasks, which always require you to be there, personally, doing everything yourself, you will start to think in terms of assets and building blocks that you can assemble. ([Location 2252](#))

**Tags:** pink

Your Turn: You Only Know What You Make My favorite quote about creativity is from the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico: Verum ipsum factum. Translated to English, it means “We only know what we make.” ([Location 2262](#))

**Tags:** pink

To truly “know” something, it’s not enough to read about it in a book. Ideas are merely thoughts until you put them into action. Thoughts are fleeting, quickly fading as time passes. To truly make an idea stick, you have to engage with it. You have to get your hands dirty and apply that knowledge to a practical problem. We learn by making concrete things—before we feel ready, before we have it completely figured out, and before we know where it’s going. ([Location 2265](#))

**Tags:** orange

You have to value your ideas enough to share them. You have to believe that the smallest idea has the potential to change people’s lives. If you don’t believe that now, start with the smallest project you can think of to begin to prove to yourself that your ideas can make a difference. ([Location 2276](#))

**Tags:** pink