How To Use Obsidian as Your Companion for Ultimate Creativity
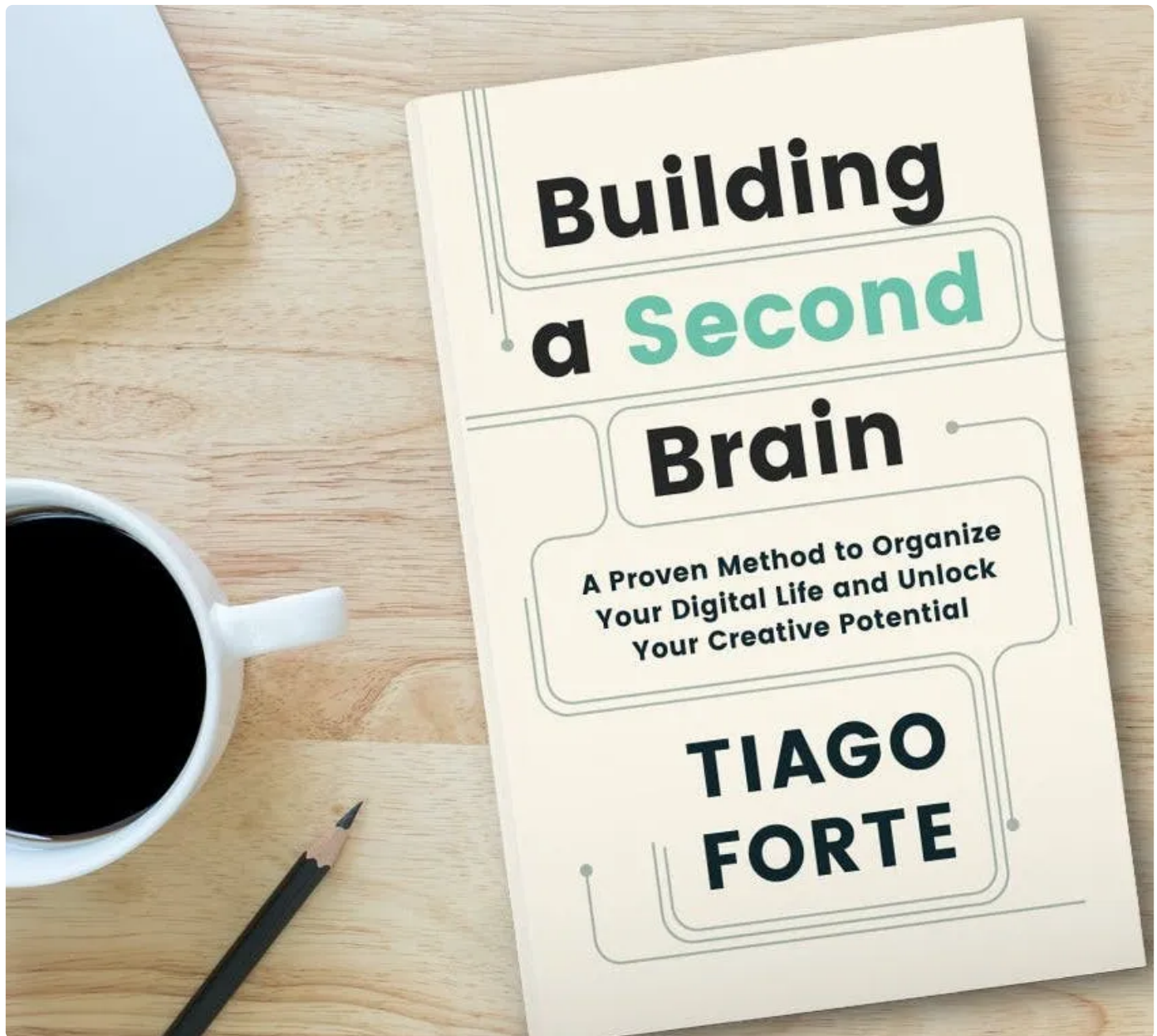
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Building a second brain in Obsidian that works for you ...

What is a 'Second Brain'?

In this context, a 'second brain' refers to the methodology that Tiago Forte describes in his recently released book and long-running course: *Building a Second Brain.* This is my favorite method of interacting with my notes so they are actually useful. It's simple without being simplistic, powerful, and personal.

The primary idea is that your biological 'first brain' should delegate remembering things and some of the burdens of creative work to your second brain. Your first brain's job is to be the "CEO of your life" Your second brain — your biological brain's digital companion — is the place your first brain gets to rely on to actually get work done. What is "work" in this context and why does it matter to be productive at it?

What I really like about this book is that, at its core, it recognizes that humans fundamentally have a drive to create and express ourselves to each other. However, our current world is more full of information than ever before. We therefore tend to consume information way more than we create. This creates an imbalance that ignores this very important aspect of what humans need. Your "work" is what you create to express yourself to others and it's something you innately need to do. Here are some (perhaps counter-intuitive) examples of what could be your work:

- a chat or email you write to family, friends, or at work

- a craft project you are working on

- an article you want to publish

- create a video for youtube

- a document you create at work
- a document you create when planning to buy a house
- a home project to replace or add furniture

I like to think of all the little projects I work on as my work and I often create notes specifically for them. Your digital second brain is essentially a collections of notes you interact with with the end goal of helping you finish projects, create, and express your self as frictionlessly as possible. More broadly, your notes are:

> *content has been interpreted through your lens, curated according to your taste, translated into your own words, or drawn from your life experience*

The methodology described in the book (key concepts covered below), teach you how to interact and evolve with your notes to help you on this endeavor of creativity.

A second brain is not only an amazing companion for creative expression. When you relinquish the responsibility for remembering things and re-thinking how to organize your information you will end up in a much calmer state of mind. You're not constantly worried about whether your thoughts are being remembered and managed well. You're trusting that to a system you have committed to in collaboration with your digital second brain. This is spiritually very similar to the 'mind like water' state David Allen describes in *Getting Things Done* where your mind can operate unencumbered with distractions.

Key Concepts in the Book

The book is really an amazing read and I highly recommend you take a look at it for yourself and interpret it through your lens, but here are the key takeaways from my perspective:

They key acronym is: CODE

- Capture

- Organize

- Distill

- Express

The first two letters refer to a 'divergent' phase of the creative process. In this phase you are almost manically searching around for creative solutions to the project and/or problem you are working on. You're open to all possibilities and want to capture and organize everything you can.

The second two letters refer to a 'convergent' phase of the creative process. In this phase, you are (and even force yourself to be) no longer searching. Rather, you are laser-focused on taking all the knowledge you have acquired and distilling it down to the core of what resonates with you and expressing yourself.

- CO: Divergence

- DE: Convergence

For each of these phases, a key idea is to use small moments of time you have to make progress. Most of us are busy with obliga-

tions to family, work, and friends and can easily make the excuse that we can't double-down on nurturing the part of ourselves that need to create. It is a game-changing mentality to not think that you have to always have large chunks of time for Deep Work. It is great when you have those longer spaces of time to focus, but you can most certainly make progress in interstitial periods between tasks that you perform naturally every day. The book gives a number of examples of this ilk. I will soon describe below how that interacts with a type of journaling I do basically every day.

The following subsections drill into CODE in a little more detail, summarizing each activity's main points.

Capture what resonates

When capturing notes, you should rely on your immediate reaction and intuition when consuming content. You shouldn't capture information that fundamentally doesn't resonate with you at the moment since it will likely be not useful in your creative pursuits. Our subconscious is often a great guide to our conscious on what topics we really enjoy and and want to pursue in more depth.

Tiago further provides a few categories that can help you determine more specifically how content you consume resonate. Is it:

- Inspiring?

- Useful?

- Personally valuable?

- Surprising?

Organize for action

It doesn't really matter if you capture what resonates with you if you don't actually do anything about it. Even though the organization activity is still in the divergent phase of the creative process, it is absolutely essential for you to feel at home and at peace with the information you have gathered.

Tiago has another acronym for us here: PARA

1. Projects
2. Areas
3. Resources
4. Archive

The idea here is that when it comes to categorizing and organizing your notes, you first see whether a note belongs to any active project. There may be only on the order of ten or so of these at any given time, but a note may likely relate to one if you have a few key projects on your mind. The beauty of first going to projects, is that you are associating a note where it will be most useful to a creative output immediately.

If a note doesn't fit well within an active project, you can then store it in an area of responsibility you maintain (e.g. finances, work, creative writing, health …). Resources are a 'catch-all' for content that may be interesting but doesn't fall in an area of responsibility (e.g. recipies, shoes, gadget news).

Finally, the archive category simply represents everything that shouldn't be in the 'active' part of your second brain: old projects, areas and resources no longer relevant.

The key idea here IMHO is that most notes should be in Archives and the 'PAR' part of PARA should be a relatively manageable and clean space for you to roam around. In fact, the idea of a manageable 'space' I think is the most important benefit of thinking in terms of PARA. In the book, Tiago gives an example of someone who literally managed her projects in containers:

> *Twyla Tharp's box reveals the true value of a simple container: it is easy to use, easy to understand, easy to create, and easy to maintain. It can be moved from place to place without losing its contents. A container requires no effort to identify, to share with others, and to put in storage when it's no longer needed. We don't need complex, sophisticated systems to be able to produce complex, sophisticated works.*
>
> *...*
>
> *This kind of browsing uses older parts of the brain that developed to navigate physical environments, and thus comes to us more naturally.*

So many note taking tools are selling us on the fact that tags, backlinks, search, and AI will help us magically get what we need to done. Those tools are all great, but we need to square that with the fact that we can be most comfortable and creative when we organize and categorize things for ourselves in a manner that gives us a sense of clarity, manageability,

and peace.

Distill for the core of what resonates

The key idea of the distill step is to use a technique Tiago calls 'Progressive Summarization'. In this stage you really want to use your note taking environment as a 'working' environment where you spend time, focus on the content of what you've captured, and begin the early stages of using this environment as a place for creative expression.

> *When you make your digital notes a working environment, not just a storage environment, you end up spending a lot more time there. When you spend more time there, you'll inevitably notice many more small opportunities for change than you expect. Over time, this will gradually produce an environment far more suited to your real needs than anything you could have planned up front.*

I think progressive summarization is actually a great way for you to interact with what you've captured. In the same way you capture what resonates with you when consuming content, you can progressively distill what resonates with you most when reviewing what you've captured. This makes it easy quickly re-visit a book you read and see the essence of what resonates with you. Crucially, you can rely on your second brain to remind you of this as you'll likely forget even the essence of what resonates with you.

Tiago suggests first placing in bold what resonates with you from what you've captured and then highlighting the essence of those bolded phrases. This is obviously just one method, but I think it has some nice visual

properties. For example, here are a few examples from reading the book and my progressive summarization (they conveniently happen to apply to Distill 🙂):

- **Progressive Summarization** is not a method for remembering as much as possible—it is a method for **forgetting as much as possible**. ([Location 1670](#) ⤢)
- **Just as you listened for a feeling of internal resonance in deciding what content to save in the first place, the same rule applies for the insights within the note.** Certain passages will move you, pique your attention, make your heart beat faster, or provoke you. Those are clear signals that you've found something important, and it's time to add a highlight. ([Location 1708](#) ⤢)
- **When the opportunity arrives to do our best work, it's not the time to start reading books and doing research. You need that research to already be done.** ([Location 1724](#) ⤢)

Express using your unique perspective

The final stage is Express, and I think this is actually the key stage. Tiago goes as far as to say:

> *What is the point of knowledge if it doesn't help anyone or produce anything?*

The idea is to spiritually shift your energy from consuming to creating. Constantly ask yourself: "how can what you're consuming assist in a creation?" To reiterate a point I made earlier: these creations can be something as simple as a chat message or email to someone or a group of

people. It's about what you can do to express, contribute, and serve from your perspective.

> *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." 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.*

> *As Ryder Carroll says in The Bullet Journal Method, "Your singular perspective may patch some small hole in the vast tattered fabric of humanity."*

...

> *Self-expression is a fundamental human need*

And possibly my favorite high-level message in the book, beautifully put:

> *Some of what you say might not resonate with others or provide value to them, but occasionally, you will strike on something — a way of seeing, a perspective, a story — that blows people's minds and visibly transforms how they see the world. It could be someone you're having coffee with, a client or customer, or your online followers. In those moments, the vast chasm that separates us as humans is bridged. For a brief moment, you get to feel in your bones that we are all in this together. We are all part of a vast tattered fabric of humanity, and your highest calling is simply to play your part in it.*

Once you get to this stage, your research should already be done from the

previous stages and it's just a matter of putting the pieces together to help you complete the project. I like Tiago's approach of adopting an 'archipelago of ideas'. When creating this archipelago, you go into divergent mode to collect ideas that resonate for a particular project and don't worry about the particular order. Just collect all the useful stuff you think you'll need. This is a divergent activity that, to me, is a part of the "Express" stage which is generally more convergent in nature.

After listing these ideas, you go back into a convergent mode and link them together in a logical order. I like how he suggests to create a first draft purely from your notes and avoid further research. You can rely on your second brain and the (sometimes years) of capturing and distilling you have already done to work in the service of a creative project.

Building Your Second Brain in Obsidian

While it makes sense to use many tools in your workflow to as efficiently help you get to the end goal of a completed creation as possible, it seems that there are maybe 1–3 key tools that really serve as a companion in the creative process: either a more personally-focused note-taking app (think Evernote, Apple Notes, Obsidian, …) or, for teams, a more collaborative medium (think Google Docs, Notion, …).

For me, Obsidian is the app. Note taking and building a second brain is really personal experience. It provides simplicity for every day use, but also flexibility and power to really help me trust it as my second brain. Obsidian lets you group a collection of notes into what they call a 'Vault' which is a bit paradoxical from a "second brain" point of view. A vault is

often interpreted something more like this definition in the New Oxford Dictionary:

> *a secure room in a bank in which valuables are stored: the master-pieces were deposited in the vaults of Swiss banks.*

That definition implies that you put valuables in a safe place for storage, maybe occasional access. In contrast, you really want your vault to be a digital companion on a daily, even hourly, basis. In this section, I'll describe how I set up my vault as a second brain and also enhanced it to work with a method I use on the daily called 'Interstitial Journaling'.

[This Simple Journaling Method Could Change Your Life](#)

[I am using a journaling technique that I can honestly say has changed my life and I've also been sticking with it like...](#)

[medium.com](#)

With daily notes, I have had years of use, but using Obsidian as a Second Brain in the particular way described below is more of an experiment. So I would like to think of this as the first of a series of articles that chronicles my journey from Obsidian Second Brain newbee to (hopefully) Obsidian Second Brain expert.

Paradox of choice

One of the key issues when working in Obsidian is that it is so flexible and powerful, you have no constraints that really help guide you on how

to organize your second brain.

For example, Obsidian is inherently file-based so you can literally organize your notes by directory using the PARA scheme. On the other hand, you can organize your notes using a 'higher order note'. In this scheme, you browse your notes using another note as opposed to your file system, but constrain yourself to the PARA scheme for organizational purposes. In that sense, PARA prescribes a specific structure for a higher order note that is simple and conducive to making progress on creative projects. So which should you use? I think either approach can work well depending on the context and personal preference. Here are a few pros and cons of either approach:

- **Folder scheme**: *Pros*: Can easily see and organize other files other than notes related to project, area, resources or archive, All notes and files relative to a project are self-contained in a directory, More literally virtual analog to the 'container' approach quoted earlier. *Cons*: Forces you into an 'inbox' approach where you throw items into an inbox and then process later for sorting into folders, Need to think too much on where a file belongs vs. where it can be linked to and relevant.

- **Higher order note:** *Pros*: If a note applies to multiple projects, areas, or resources, you don't have to pick just one, You can visually organize and lay out your notes and other related files using the note itself the way you like. *Cons:* If a project is relatively file-centric (e.g. lots of video/audio clips, drawings, etc), a directory / folder is a great way to keep track of all of that content vs. links in a higher order note.

Obsidian also provides you with the option to use both tags and back-links. Tags are discussed in a [bonus chapter](#) of *Building a Second Brain*. Tiago encourages a lot of caution in using tags and suggests using them in very specific ways. My understanding is that tags (and backlinks), from his perspective, encourage you to categorize/group your notes at the capture stage which is a very different mode of thinking than when you want to organize your notes.

> *While tags seem useful on the surface, the most common way I see people using them — tagging every note as it's being created with every topic it might relate to — has serious flaws. For example, a note on urban planning might be tagged with "design," "architecture," "public transit," "neighborhood safety," "local politics," and so on.*

> *…*

> *The problem with this approach is that it requires you to spend a lot of energy upfront making a series of mentally taxing decisions before you even know whether and how a note will be used. This tends to create so much anxiety over making the right decisions that you are likely to abandon your notetaking practice altogether.*

I have a different view. Just like Tiago suggests you capture and distill based on what resonates, I think we (at least me!) often have an idea as to what topic a particular note belongs to / resonates with us the most. My sense is that you don't need to go through an exercise of finding every little topic your note is related to right when you write it down, but I think that if you think there is *one* place where it most intuitively belongs right away, then you should tag/categorize it right away. The forum post I

linked to above describes some of the (subtle) differences between tags and backlinks in Obsidian, and below I'll describe the approach I'm taking specifically. But my main point for this subsection is tags or backlinks, if used appropriately, can be very valuable. More details on this approach below.

Approach I am taking and key enhancement/innovation

The approach I am taking is to use Obsidian in the simplest way possible but also take advantage of the power and flexibility of the tool.

First, I am a *huge* fan of using backlinks and daily notes. In the interstitial journaling article linked to above, I describe how I can quickly capture a thought on a topic and tag it with the (most of the time *one*) topic of relevance (e.g. a person I'm working with or a project I'm working on). I always know that the place where I capture all my thoughts is in my daily note. The beauty of backlinks with daily notes is that when I click on the topic of relevance, I get a history of my notes and exactly when I captured that idea. Any given day can be full of thoughts on a variety of topics. And when I need to, I can focus on a specific one of them and build notes from there.

So here is where it becomes interesting from a *Building a Second Brain* perspective. One of the approaches that least resonates with me from both *Building a Second Brain* and *Getting Things Done* viewpoint is this idea of a 'weekly review' where you go through your inboxes and process your notes. I love the idea in concept but in practice this is a habit that is potentially difficult to keep up with. I really don't like the idea of populat-

ing and inboxes and clearing inboxes. It's already enough of a chore to go through this process for my email and I don't want a handful of other inboxes I need to clear as suggested in the book.

To reiterate idea from above, my feeling is that the moment you capture a thought that resonates, if you have an intuition for what topic it best aligns with, simply add a link with the thought *in your daily log*. With PARA, you can quickly identify if it belongs to a project, then add a link to the associated project. If it doesn't obviously fall in a project, add it to an area or resource that is relevant. My feeling is that 90% of thoughts and notes captured can quickly be tagged/backlinked right away. If you don't have an idea early on then, yes, some weekly or periodic review will help, but I'd rather quickly tag a thought with the *one* most appropriate place it intuitively belongs. If I can't pick one link, then I will just leave it be. As Tiago himself suggests, search and other features of modern note-taking apps will help me down the line if I think something I wrote is relevant down the line.

The key difference between inboxes and daily notes is that a daily note is more of a log of what you have done. You have a history of what you have captured and how it resonates with you like a journal over time. To contrast, an inbox of notes is something you are meant to process sometime in the future. By logging and tagging with intuition immediately (without trying to over-compensate by tagging and linking too much), you save yourself the 'review' step for the most part.

The 'inbox' approach described in *Building a Second Brain* seems over-fitted to tools like the one Tiago uses (Evernote). Roam, Obsidian and other tools that are more daily-note focused encourage you to think more

in terms of *time* rather than folders and inbox. Here is an example of how the practice of using daily notes in Obsidian can intersect well ideas in *Building a Second Brain.*

- You are reading a really interesting book or article and are highlighting all sorts of interesting passages. You know that through a service like Readwise these highlights will be captured in your notes and you suddenly realize that you think it may be useful for a specific project.

- You *immediately* hop into your daily note and create a link to the book and to the project you think it is relevant to. You then turn it into a task to review and summarize in that context and link it by area of responsibility.

Here is an example from my daily journal:

- 11:45
  - Review Building a Second Brain highlights for How to Build a Second Brain in Obsidian (Tech Habits)

This approach is markedly different from the *Building a Second Brain* suggestion. In the book you are encouraged to separate capturing from organizing (hence periodic reviews of inboxes, etc.). What works for me is to organize fast and intuitively and to not overthink it. And if I know I want to review something, simply make a task to do so. During interstitial periods when I'm deciding on the next task, it's there in my To Do list as an option if the mood strikes to work on it. If I decide to further review my projects and areas of responsibility when I have a good intersection of

time and motivation, great! But the overall review is not (yet) a fundamental part of my system.

As far as whether I use folders directly or a higher order note, I decided I like the idea of a higher order note better for my needs. With this approach, I am less worried about moving notes from one project folder to another and focused on linking to what's relevant without worrying where it is on my filesystem. This aligns well with the fact that Obsidian has default places to store notes and attachments in your filesystem. To illustrate, here's how a subset of my higher order second brain note looks:

Capture Criteria

- [Inspire](), [Useful](), [Personal](), [Surprising]()

👁 Dozen Open Problems

- [How Do I Avoid Weekly Reviews?]()
- [How Do I Stay On Top of Things?]()
- [How Can You Use Tech to Maximize Creativity?]()
- [How Do I Find Time to Do Things that Energize Me?]()

🎥 Projects

- ◯ [The Three Principles of Streamlined Tech Workflows]() ([Tech Habits]())
- ◯ [How to Build a Second Brain in Obsidian]() ([Tech Habits]()) 📅 2022-07-13
- ◯ [The Most Useful iOS Shortcut for Obsidian]() ([Tech Habits]())
- ◯ [Replace Island with Dining Table]() ([Home]())

⛰️ Areas

- 👨‍👩‍👧 Family
- 💰 Finances
- 🏥 Health
- ੴ Spirituality
- 🧑🏽‍💻 [Tech Habits](Tech%20Habits)
- 🏦 Work

📚 Resources

🏛️ Archive

- ✅ [Nursery AC Window Mount](Nursery%20AC%20Window%20Mount) (Home) ✅ 2022-07-09
- ✅ [H1 2022 Book Summary for Work](H1%202022%20Book%20Summary%20for%20Work) (Work) ✅ 2022-07-05

It's linked to in all of my daily notes so I can easily hop to my second brain higher order note to explore and figure out what kind of things I want to be working on. I actually have found that links to the capture criteria are helpful. It is fun and sometimes helpful to browse what I've captured by those criteria. You can see I only have a handful of projects, areas, and links in general in the 'PAR' part of PARA. Many of the links don't even have proper content, but I use a plugin that lets me see all the backlinks, so my thought history of what I captured for a project or area is available directly from daily notes. I like this approach because I'm not spending time on the note itself when I'm in a very 'divergent' phase of capturing what resonates. In convergent phases (e.g. progressive summarization), I can spend more time with the notes themselves.

Closing thoughts

The concepts in *Building a Second Brain* are quite foundational and fit better with the way I work compared, for example, to a related method like Zettelkasten. What I like about it is that it really focuses on organizing and taking notes for actionable projects first, then by area of responsibility. The progressive summarization technique I think works really well and helps me understand the essence of a note at a glance while still preserving the raw information of what I've captured.

What's great about using Obsidian with this approach is that there's nothing that stops you from linking notes together and exploring connections between them. The higher order note simply serves as a convenient entry point from which to work and explore. While it is useful for our note taking system to capture *everything*, the way we *browse* through notes needs to be a bit more intuitive and simplified when contrasted with a graph of connections between notes.

I hope introducing the second brain approach and how it can play with Obsidian is useful to you in some way. This is one of the most enjoyable articles for me to write lately and if it was useful in any way, I'd love to hear from you as to how it was useful to you.