Want Extraordinarily Useful and Timeless Notes? Build a Personal Knowledge Encyclopedia.

[Geet Duggal](#) • 9 mins   [Jul 24th](#)

My low-maintenance approach to de-clutter, cultivate, and revisit meaningful notes across timescales.

(Image [source](#): Wikimedia Commons)

Think about your Personal Knowledge Encyclopedia (PKE) as your own Wikipedia designed for you, by you.

You're on a walk and jot down an idea. You're reading a book, something resonates with you, and you highlight the relevant passage. You're on a vacation. During a delightful and immersive exploration, you attempt to capture its essence with a few photos. You've just received a few health-

related documents, and you store them away for future reference.

These are *your* experiences and for each of them you want to preserve something for your future. They are a disparate set of experiences, yet the desire to preserve this kind of information is common to most of us. Over the years, I have struggled with where to put this information and how to efficiently reference it when it's most useful.

That struggle has largely come to a close and culminated in a post I made over a half a year ago.

Capture To Do. How I Manage Literally All My Tasks in Obsidian

### Unlock the simple, satisfying, and energizing secret to task management 'productivity'

medium.com

In it, I describe how I capture a wide variety of fleeting thoughts in a daily log as well as subsequently review and sort them first into action-able projects and then "spaces". Spaces are generally larger categories of topics that interest me. They encompass anything from personal areas of responsibilities (eg. personal finances) to topics as abstract as medita-tion, for example.

I find that my notes are most useful when I consider them across three broad time scales:

- **Days to Week (Log)**: here is where I jot down fleeting notes. These are a heterogeneous mixture of notes that encompass any-

thing that crosses my mind that might be useful later. Examples include an item I want to get from a grocery store, a sentence or two I have brainstormed for an email, and an image I would like to save.

- **Weeks to Months (Projects)**: Some notes may directly service a project that I actually want to complete on a relatively tight timescale. The start-to-finish time can range anywhere from a week or so (eg. replace fridge, create presentation) to a quarter (eg. complete reservations for a wedding, take notes on a course).

- **Years (Spaces):** These are notes I want to visit, revisit, and curate over large scales of time. For example, I may want to refer to a document my employer gave me a few years ago, or quickly recall information on how to use an app (eg. Adobe Photoshop) I used in the past.
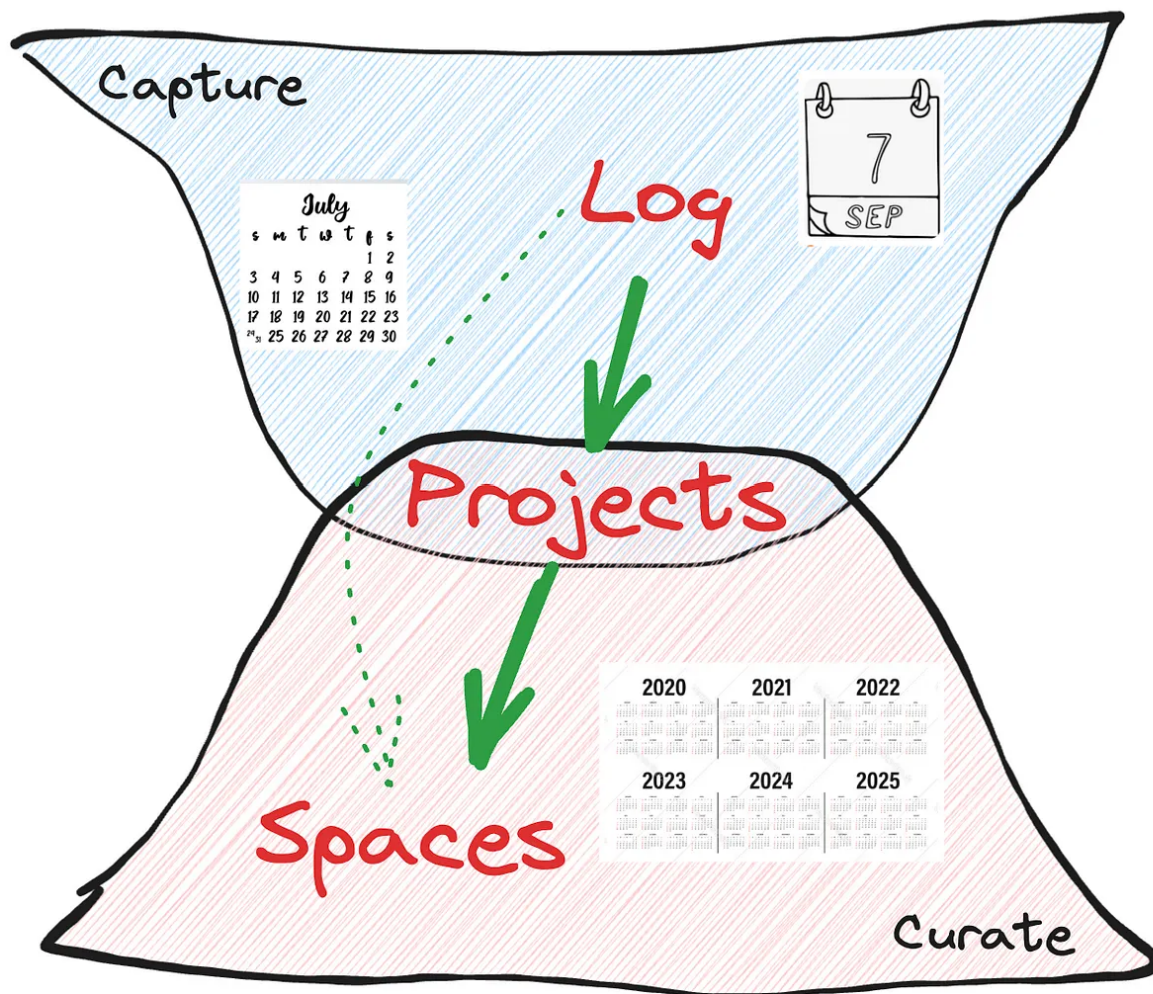
Capture tends to happen more at the days to week scale and curation at the scale of years. Projects are a natural sweet spot of deliberate, meaningful action in-between these time scales.

In this post, I dig deeper into spaces. I explore how spaces can accommodate your needs on the largest scales of time. I encourage you to flirt with the idea that the journey your notes take should be destined towards "Wikipedia-like" articles in your PKE.

At Jimmy Wales' wedding, one of the maids of honor toasted him as

the sole internet mogul who wasn't a billionaire. The site has helped its fellow tech behemoths, though, especially with the march of AI. Wikipedia's liberal content licenses and vast information hoard have allowed developers to train neural networks much more quickly, cheaply, and widely than proprietary data sets ever could have. When you ask Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa a question, Wikipedia helps provide the answer. When you Google a famous person or place, Wikipedia often informs the "knowledge panel" that appears alongside your search results.

— Richard Cooke, Wikipedia Is the Last Best Place on the Internet

The quote above comes from a particularly well-smithed article written about Wikipedia:

Wikipedia Is the Last Best Place on the Internet

People used to think the crowdsourced encyclopedia represented all that was wrong with the web. Now it's a beacon of so...

www.wired.com

As I read it, I couldn't deny the potential value of cultivating my notes spiritually in the way Wikipedia articles are. With Wikipedia, there are many individuals in the world helping to crowdsource a comprehensive collection of human knowledge. With your PKE, the many parts of you can crowdsource knowledge that is most beneficial to you.

As a rule of thumb, I ask myself: what if I were writing this note for

Wikipedia?

An obvious benefit of maintaining your own Wikipedia-like PKE (potentially coupled with AI tools) is that you can access your personal knowledge as you would general knowledge on the Internet. However, as I have been maintaining articles in my own PKE, I've found that there are benefits that go *way* beyond a "what is this useful for?" sentiment.

There's something deep about maintaining your own PKE articles that I'm still trying to put my finger on. It is as if the act of simply cultivating these notes is self-satisfying. I believe this is because **your PKE is a place to**

- **create personal articles.** When you create your own articles in your own words you are engaging in a form of active learning. you can be very honest with yourself. The audience is you. It is as if you are teaching yourself a topic in a way that is suited perfectly for you. You can also think of these as lecture notes you would use to teach future you or others. I suggest to use "[Wikipedia: The perfect article](#)" as a rough guide. This will help provide a consistent format to create notes of appropriate length and substance for you to repeatedly engage with. They may not be perfect but they strive to be polished akin to Wikipedia articles.

- **identify topics of personal notability.** It is arguably a waste of time to classify and categorize all of your notes. Double-clicking on the "what if I were writing this for Wikipedia" guideline, I have found it incredibly useful to only create long term notes in my PKE that I deem are personally notable. I even adopt criteria from "[Wikipedia: Notability](#)" in the process. For example, if I'm inter-

ested in curating notes on a more general topic, I always first check to see if the topic is an existing Wikipedia page (refer eg. to the screenshot of my PKE articles for "Dijkstra's Algorithm" and "Ambient Video" below). If it is not already a Wikipedia page, I ask myself whether this topic, person, place, etc. is indeed *personally notable* and sometimes even use "Wikipedia: Article titles" as a guide.

- **create personal collections or lists.** As you accumulate PKE articles, it is natural to group them. Wikipedia also provides some guidelines for creating lists: "Wikipedia: Viability of lists". You may be surprised how a little upfront care when creating lists helps to provide clarity and reduce mental clutter downstream.

- **discover meaningful connections.** Wikipedia's approach to help you discover meaningful connections is essentially the links to other articles in the article and within the "See Also" section often appearing towards the end of an article. I think this is a great way to help motivate you to make meaningful connections. You can contrast this approach with The "Zettlekasten method". This method encourages creating notes that are more granular than an entire Wikipedia-like article. You create connections by linking these "atomic notes" together. The Zettlekasten method is by far the most famous note-taking method to create meaningful connections. My first introduction to Zettlekasten was maybe 6–7 years ago from the book *How to Take Smart Notes*. It's probably one of the most (if not the most) thoughtful books written on the subject and, for me, a canonical reference for the Zettlekasten. Tiago Forte wrote an excellent post covering some of the terminology and core ideas. He well-articulates a set of principles underlying this kind of note taking.

[This Medium post](#) circa 2022 briefly discusses the idea of a personal knowledge encyclopedia in the context of Zettlekasten. The idea behind the Zettlekasten approach is, on the surface, very appealing but it can be hard to maintain and it may not be a natural way to express a more comprehensive understanding of a particular topic. I argue that creating very granular notes can, perhaps unintuitively, be *less* conducive to making connections. For example, I have found that the linearity introduced by creating a longer PKE article helps me to better form connections because it is more motivating for me to browse my PKE than it is a web of connected, granular notes.

- **play the infinite game**. As mentioned above, I take my notes at different times scales. Notes taken at more granular timescales may never end up in a PKE article and that's OK. However, they can — and often will — inform these articles. Your PKE is a pun-intended space to play a longer game. In Simon Sinek's book *The Infinite Game,* he distinguishes between finite and infinite games. "In finite games, like football or chess, the players are known, the rules are fixed, and the endpoint is clear. The winners and losers are easily identified. In infinite games, like business or politics or life itself, the players come and go, the rules are changeable, and there is no defined endpoint." PKE articles are also your chance to identify the important things in your life that don't have a well defined endpoint: areas you want to maintain in Tiago Forte parlance. When maintaining a PKE, these are articles you want to constantly revisit in the context of potentially many other articles or projects. Visiting them allows you to step back and see the bigger picture. Writing in them empowers you with a sense of agency that will feel like moving

mountains in comparison to working on tasks and projects at smaller timescales. For example, if woodworking is one of your hobbies, imagine you have a PKE article dedicated to it. As you revisit it, you are in the right frame of mind to write about your current capabilities, deficiencies, desires, etc. This level of more explicit and reflective thinking may help steer the ship in a more meaningful direction than you ever anticipated had you not worked on the PKE article.

- **express your idiosyncrasies**. From the *Wired* article on Wikipedia linked to above: "Wikipedia has eccentricity, elegance, and surprise in abundance, especially in those moments when enthusiasm becomes excess and detail is rendered so finely (and pointlessly) that it becomes beautiful. ... This remains the single most underestimated and misunderstood aspect of the project: its emotional architecture. Wikipedia is built on the personal interests and idiosyncrasies of its contributors." The beauty of keeping a bunch of PKE articles is that you are free to *ignore* some of the suggested ettiquite of an actual Wikipedia page in favor of just being yourself. The way you use, play with, and even abuse language can help you discover and craft your own voice with unprecedented precision.

- **have fun**. This is probably the most important aspect for me. Aside from drawing or [using my Bujo](#), this is the only way of taking notes that I have truly found pleasure in. It turns out maintaining encyclopedia articles, whether personal or not, is actually fun!? Also from the *Wired* article: "It's a misconception people work for free," Wales told the site Hacker Noon in 2018. "They have fun for free." A 2011 survey of more than 5,000 Wikipedia contributors listed "It's fun" as one of the primary reasons they edited the site."

- **choose your medium.** One thing I love about the idea of keeping a PKE is that it's well suited for many formats and mediums. I choose plain text Markdown with attachments typically in combination with Obsidian. However, you can imagine using a range of other options such as a directory of Google Docs, Notion, or even physical paper. The only requirement is that you have a consistent approach to write PKE articles. Around 20 years ago I was literally experimenting with using the software Wikipedia uses (MediaWiki) to maintain a personal encyclopedia. I didn't stick with that software because it required a web server: more infrastructure than I would like for my own personal knowledge. Markdown has remained a consistently useful format and makes it very easy for me to maintain my PKE without being locked-in to any particular software.

Example of two very different articles in my PKE (center) as visualized using the Obsidian app. The content of each article is designed specifically so it's meaningful to me, but I generally follow the rule of thumb that the topics should be notable (both are actually Wikipedia articles too!) and that the articles should be meaty enough to warrant writing a reasonably self-contained note. (The right most column is the 'Thino' plugin I use for me "me feed" which I describe more [here](.).)

I've thoroughly enjoyed creating and using my own PKE and could dig deeper in this post, but I want to keep it short. I hope I've convinced you that a PKE-like approach could be useful to you. It satisfies a very natural and human need to categorize personal information comprehensively, and it does so with just enough structure so that taking notes in this way can result in a very appealing and useful product.

In the end, the best way to find out if something like this approach could be worth your while is to just give it a quick try. My suggestion is that whenever you need to place a note in the context of a more notable topic, think about Wikipedia for a second. Start out simple and expand articles organically as needed. You may be surprised at how fun it can be!