

How to take Smart Notes

Author	Goodreads Link	Rating
Sonke Ahrens	https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34507927-how-to-take-smart-notes?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=zklTJVZ8qp&rank=1	*

Favorite Quotes

If there is one thing the experts agree on, then it is this: You have to externalise your ideas, you have to write. Richard Feynman stresses on it as much as Benjamin Franklin. If we write, it is more likely that we understand what we read, remember what we learn and our thoughts make sense. And if we have to write anyway, why not use our writing to build up the resources for our future publications

Become an expert rather than a planner

People say that it is wise to learn from experience but life is too short to experience everything so it is wise to learn from others experience as well.

Overview

In today's world, note-taking has become essential for any knowledge worker. It doesn't matter whether you are a writer, engineer or in a creative role. If your life involves handling information and extracting knowledge from it, you must take notes.

The mind is for having ideas, not holding them - David Allen

Almost all of us take notes now, but most are not very smart about it. Not our fault, but nobody told us there could be another way. It is where this book comes, and it has been a life-changing book for me. I also wrote an [article](#) about it. These notes are the foundation on which my article was built.

This book introduces the English reading audience to the slip-box system (known as zettelkasten in German, invented by Nicolas Luhmann). Nicolas was one of the prolific overachievers of his time. He attributed his success to his revolutionary index card system of notes, which he called zettlekasten, which in English means slip-box. In this book, Ahrens shows us how to adopt that method to today's digital world.

My Summary

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Key Takeaways

1. **Write and write more.** Use notes as a vehicle for writing. It is an essential skill we don't develop much apart from college days (for me, not even then :P). In a nutshell, get into the habit of writing everything
2. **Don't just stop at the initial notes you have taken. Refine them.**
There are three basic types of notes as per Ahrens.
 1. **Temporary Notes** - Your in-tray for everything and foundation for your evergreen notes which you can discard later on.
 2. **Literature notes** - Reference notes, book notes, article highlights, podcast notes. This book summary is a literature note.
 3. **Evergreen notes** - Permanent notes as per Ahrens. These are atomic notes, complete ideas in themselves. Please don't make them too specific, or they will lose the context. Also, please don't make them too broad; they will become generic. These are your notes gold mine which goes into your slip box.
3. **Most of our notes initially are Temporary notes.** If we stop there, we are not utilizing the notes' power.
4. **After taking various notes, please go through them periodically and connect the dots.** This is where the magic happens, and you get new ideas and connections that were not obvious initially.
5. **Don't stop at just writing for yourself. Publish it out, and share knowledge with others.** This blog post is a step in that direction.

Notes

Note-taking steps

Three steps process - the first type gets discarded, the second one is used for reference, and the third one goes to the slip box

- make fleeting notes
- make literature notes (bibliographical notes)
- make permanent notes in the slip box

Nothing motivates us more than getting better at what we do

Ahrens firmly believes that reading with pen in hand forces us to think about what we are reading as we try to understand what we write later. However, this [study](#) has proven otherwise. Hence I would suggest it doesn't matter whether you use pen and paper or a digital medium. The impact will be similar.

I would advise you to read with a pen in hand and enter in a little book, short hints of what you feel is common or that may be useful, for this will be the best method of imprinting such portcullis in your memory' - Benjamin Franklin.

It is challenging to learn in isolation, and also it becomes more difficult with age. However, if the facts are neither learned in isolation nor kept there. Instead, if they are made part of a network of ideas, they are much easier to recall. Hence it is essential to connect notes to make them part of a network.

Become an expert rather than a planner

Flyvbjerg 2001, Study shows how the paramedic teachers were worse at spotting the expert paramedics than beginners while looking at videos of both. Expert paramedics obviously did a much better job identifying the same - 90% accuracy, whereas beginners did the same with 50% accuracy. The teachers were worse than beginners and often identified experts as beginners and beginners as experts.

The reason is that expert paramedics have been in similar situations and adapted to the need. So they were able to spot such adaptations. Teachers, though, looked at the videos and saw these adaptations as deviations from bookish knowledge and thus leading to incorrect identifications. Hence don't focus too much on the process to become the best planner.

Ahrens strongly advocates Ziegarnik Effect - The brain cannot really differentiate between a done task or a task taken out of the short-term memory by writing it down. Hence it is generally advised to write down

tasks to take them out from short-term memory and free up your mental cabinet. However, this [effect has not been proven](#) and is now considered more of lore rather than a truth.

At the same time, you can decide to keep up a few of the key concepts or problems in your short-term memory so that you can ponder on them when you are doing everyday chores. Such as - taking a shower, toilet, or taking your dog for a walk.

Reading a text, specifically rereading, can fool us into believing that we really understand a text. It is a lie. We feel a bit smarter due to overexposure to the texts. We should hence always write our understanding of it.

Rereading or cramming can help you probably pass the exam in the short term but will never help you learn. Instead, elaboration (writing notes, interconnecting and driving inferences) helps learning. So use the slip box technique to record these facts. Interconnection and let your brain free to focus and do deep and creative thinking.

Creativity is another name for seeing interconnections or patterns and thus making them visible to others. That is why creative folks feel a bit guilty when you will ask them how they did something? Because in their mind, they didn't do much really, they just saw something - Steve Jobs.

Ahrens suggests that writing by hand vs. typing has a very significant difference. Since it will be challenging to write verbatim notes, hence you will try to understand the gist of what you are listening to or reading and then write it. However, in the case of typing, the focus would be on trying to make complete notes by typing faster, and thus it circumvents true understanding of the material at hand. It is true if you try to type while listening to the source in parallel. If that is not the case, then typing could have the same impact as writing by hand. I still believe that both methods are equally beneficial.

If there is one thing the experts agree on, then it is this: You have to externalize your ideas. You have to write. Richard Feynman stresses it as much as Benjamin Franklin. If we write, it is more likely that we

understand what we read, remember what we learn, and our thoughts make sense. And if we have to write anyway, why not use our writing to build up the resources for our future publications.

Why slip box system is better

- It requires you to write at every stage of the process. Ahrens points out that traditional note-taking methods focus on capturing others' ideas instead of thinking extensively about them. So even if you've taken lots of notes by the time you sit down to write, you still haven't thought about or developed your argument. You only do that when you sit in front of your blank screen, and that's what intimidates you, not the writing itself. Ahrens also argues that by making you write at every stage, the slip-box system moves this thinking work far earlier in the process. So by the time you face the blank screen, you've already thought extensively about what you're going to say and no longer feel intimidated by it.
- The slip box method forces us to use a bottoms-up approach (connecting, building up an argument based on research) rather than the top-down method that we usually follow, i.e., decide the topic, then break it into subtopics. It also avoids the challenge of confirmation bias which the top-down approach easily succumb to. As we naturally tend to find the information which supports our hypothesis.
- It provides immediate feedback. E.g., a note generating a lot of connections is a good idea vs. a note that cannot do so.
- A slip box mimics your brain. The whole connected note ecosystem is based on the fact that it is how our brain works. All those "improve your memory guides" ask us to connect new things with what we know. More connections, easier to recall.

Have the courage to use your own understanding is therefore the motto of enlightenment' - Kant, 1784

Survivorship Bias: One of the first people to demonstrate this effectively was the mathematician Abraham Wald (Mangel and Samaniego 1984). During world 2, he was asked to help the Royal Air Force find the areas on

the plane that were most often hit by the bullets so they could cover them with more armor. Instead of counting the bullet holes on the returned planes, he recommended armoring the spots where none of the returning planes have taken the hits. Do you see the pattern? Initially, RAF forgot to consider what was not there to see. All the planes that didn't make it back.

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