

Chapter 4: How to Use Notebooks - Techniques

Simplicity is best. Choose techniques that suit you. There are many books about notebooks in the world that introduce effective techniques. However, I believe that techniques are not the most important thing. I love books about notebooks. I read every book about notebooks and planners I can find. They contain many interesting techniques on how to use them.

For example, dividing the notebook into sections before writing, making your own templates, using a vertical notebook sideways, or intentionally writing from the right page. I actually tried all of them. When I tried them, some felt effective in the short term. However, almost none of them became a habit. Every technique was too troublesome or too complex to continue.

After writing in dozens of notebooks and thinking deeply, I removed the unnecessary parts. I reached a very simple style. That is what I explain in this book: "Use only black ink. Write the date and title, and use bullet points."

In conclusion, this is the best way. Heavy users of notebooks probably feel that this simple usage is actually the best. However, people generally do not like simple and essential advice. It is like saying, "If you work hard, you will succeed, so work hard." If a book like that was in a bookstore, nobody would buy it, right? That is why there are no books about simple notebook usage.

This book combines this simple method with the unusual idea of a "Solo Retreat." That is why this simple, essential way of using notebooks has come to light. So, you do not need to study techniques desperately. However, because I learned some techniques, I truly understood the value of the simple style. In the world of traditional arts, there is a concept called "Shu-Ha-Ri" (Learn, Break, Create). Perhaps you need to learn first, apply it, and then you can freely master the notebook without thinking.

With that in mind, in this chapter, I will share carefully selected techniques that I found effective. Techniques depend on compatibility with the person rather than being good or bad. If you are interested, please try various things and use what suits you.

Visualizing Your Thoughts with Mind Maps "The Mind Map Book" (by Tony Buzan and others) is a masterpiece, so you should keep one copy in your home. There are many other books about mind maps, but the original book is easy to understand, so this one is enough.

For a mind map, first, write the main theme (and a related picture) in the center of the paper. Then, connect related keywords with lines like dividing tree branches. You write these radially. You can draw pictures or use different colors to visualize your thoughts.

The main theme corresponds to the "theme" or "topic" in this book. Depending on the main theme, ideas may flow out easily, or they may get stuck. So, the theme is important. If you get stuck, just change the theme and try again.

When you try it, you will see it is effective for thinking without missing anything. Because you visualize the contents of your brain on a map, it becomes easier to notice missing perspectives.

The work feels like drawing, so it is easy. As you write, keywords that happen to be close to each other might connect and create new ideas. It is fun to do. This applies to all notebook usage, but having fun is important to increase the effect.

Writing mind maps feels like it activates the right brain. If you feel stuck thinking only with words, it is good to use this to relax your brain. The "Logic Tree" mentioned later is for the left brain (logical), and the mind map is for the right brain (sensory). (Strictly speaking, this clear division of brain roles is denied by recent science, but I am using it here as an easy-to-understand metaphor.)

There are also mind map apps for smartphones and computers. They look clean and are easy to edit, and they are much easier than using PowerPoint. However, to get the best out of mind maps, I think handwriting is better.

I sometimes use mind maps when thinking about themes for my Solo Retreat. I write "Life" or "Business" in the center to grasp the whole picture. Then, from the surrounding areas, I decide on the specific themes to handle during the retreat.

Controlling To-Dos with Bullet Journal Since I love notebooks, I was very excited when I read the book "The Bullet Journal Method" (by Ryder Carroll). A Bullet Journal combines the functions of a schedule, diary, memo, to-do list, and sketchbook into one notebook.

"Bullet" refers to the bullet points (black dots). You write your thoughts and to-dos in the notebook using bullet points. You use various symbols like "x" or ">" to express the status of what you wrote.

This provides the effect of organizing your brain, which I advocate. Also, by being creative with page formats called "Collections," you can achieve many things, just like using a system planner.

"The Bullet Journal Method" states that writing by hand makes you smarter and improves your mental state. This is the same as what I say in this book. I read dozens of books related to notebooks before writing this one, and this point is common in almost all of them.

Therefore, based on my own experience, I have absolutely no doubt about the question, "Do notebooks really have a good effect?" In this book, I am only pursuing how to reproduce that effect. The purpose of this book is for you to find a notebook usage method that fits you.

The Bullet Journal is a refined notebook technique. I think it is very effective if used together with the Solo Retreat. However, considering the habit of writing every day and the effort of monthly maintenance, I think starting casually with the Solo Retreat will help you like notebooks more at first.

Using Time Effectively with the Pomodoro Technique The Pomodoro Technique is not a notebook technique but a time management or work technique. However, since it goes very well with the Solo Retreat, I will introduce it.

"Pomodoro" means tomato in Italian. The creator, Mr. Cirillo, loved using a tomato-shaped kitchen timer, which is how it got its name.

The Pomodoro Technique uses a kitchen timer. A simple one is fine. It is convenient if it has a function to add 5 minutes with one button press. If you use it in a cafe, choose one that notifies you with vibration or light instead of sound.

In the Pomodoro Technique, you treat 30 minutes as one unit. You assign one task to it. Once you press the timer and start working, forget everything else and focus on that task for 25 minutes.

When that is done, take a 5-minute break. Even if the task is not finished, you must take a break forcefully when 25 minutes pass. This is quite difficult to execute. You might want to continue because you are "in the zone," but please strictly interrupt it.

If you focus and work for 1 or 2 hours, you will get tired. You won't be able to focus on subsequent work. The idea of the Pomodoro Technique is that by taking forced breaks and focusing for 25 minutes at a time, you eventually complete more tasks.

During the break, going to the restroom is fine, but do not check emails. Do not touch your smartphone; just relax completely. This 30 minutes is one "tomato." You line up 4 tomatoes and process them continuously. This means repeating "25 minutes focus, 5 minutes break" four times. Since it is four 30-minute tomatoes, that is 2 hours. Here, you take a long break of 30 minutes. It is easy to understand if you think of using one tomato for a break.

The Pomodoro Technique is effective when you want to focus within a limited time. If you use this, your desk work will progress dramatically. If I dare to mention a weakness, working at this density all the time becomes exhausting. You will want to be lazy.

The Solo Retreat has topics lasting 30 to 60 minutes. It is a special situation where you only need to focus for 3 hours (6 tomatoes). So, it works very well with the Pomodoro Technique. If it is 3 hours, it is possible to run through without a long break. There is compatibility, so please try it out.

I sometimes use the Pomodoro Technique to clear tasks at once during the morning of the first day of a retreat, or when I have too many tasks. I only use it occasionally. If I do this all the time, I get tired.

Link Your Schedule with Sticky Notes, Smartphones, and Notebooks It sounds very catchy to say, "Manage work and private life schedules all in one notebook!" However, in this era full of digital devices and convenient tools, there is no need to force everything into just a notebook. Each tool has strengths and weaknesses, so it is more efficient to combine them.

The work of listing tasks for a large unit like one month or one year is done in the notebook. Write down everything, including private tasks like "buy shampoo." If possible, estimate the time for each task and set a deadline. By setting a deadline, it becomes clear which task needs to be done when. Just doing this reduces the feeling of being busy.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, sticky notes are convenient for daily To-Do management. Some people write each task on a separate sticky note and paste them on their computer, but this creates too many sticky notes and causes stress. Also, it is scary if a sticky note peels off and gets lost.

Also, if you paste too many sticky notes on your computer, you get too used to that environment, and the sticky notes become "invisible." The reminder effect disappears. Therefore, I recommend summarizing one day's To-Dos on one large sticky note.

At the beginning of the day, in the morning, transfer all tasks for that day from your notebook to a large sticky note. Then, every time you finish a To-Do, cross it out with a double line. Please enjoy the refreshing feeling of tasks disappearing. Even if tasks remain, make a new sticky note for the next day, transfer the remaining tasks, and throw away today's note.

Setting the "Highlight" mentioned in Chapter 1 is also done when making this sticky note every morning. If you make it your goal to finish all tasks, it becomes painful. But if you decide, "I will at least do the Highlight today," your mind becomes much lighter. Your happiness level will rise, so please try it.

Transfer long-term To-Dos to your smartphone calendar or schedule app. Smartphones are suitable for schedules and long-term To-Do management. Many people manage these in paper planners or notebooks, but smartphones are overwhelmingly more convenient because you can set "recurring" events.

In any case, centralizing your schedule in one place is the most basic rule. Absolutely avoid double management, like using both a smartphone and a paper planner. Double bookings will definitely occur. Think of the notebook as the "mothership" and the sticky notes or smartphones as "aircraft" to use flexibly.

Mastering Frameworks For those who want to "think of ideas without missing anything" or "organize written thoughts clearly," I will introduce five useful frameworks. Like mind maps, think of frameworks as "special tools" to use when you want to generate or organize ideas from a different angle. Of course, you can use them in your Solo Retreat.

The five frameworks are: Logic Tree, Decision Tree, SWOT Analysis, Matrix Analysis, and Flowchart.

A **Logic Tree** is a method to break down a proposition. For example, for "How to increase sales," you break it down into "Increase customer count," "Increase price per customer," and "Increase purchase frequency." Then you break those three down further. You think in a way that is "Mutually Exclusive and Collectively Exhaustive" (MECE).

Thinking only in your head or making bullet points creates gaps in your perspective. You might focus on "customer count" and "price," but miss the perspective of "purchase frequency." Using a Logic Tree helps eliminate such omissions.

A **Decision Tree** looks similar to a Logic Tree. It is a method to search for the best option by writing down merits, demerits, and probabilities for possible scenarios. It is used in AI programs and financial decision-making.

SWOT Analysis is a method to think about four elements without omission: Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat. Strength and Weakness are internal environments, while Opportunity and Threat are external environments. It is easy to think about your own

strengths and opportunities, but we tend to look away from weaknesses and threats. SWOT prevents this oversight.

Chapter 5: Experiments and Baby Steps

1. Value the "Experiment Mindset" Writing in a notebook changes your life. That is not a lie. However, it does not mean you do not have to do anything else as long as you write. Writing in a notebook changes your consciousness, which changes your thinking, which changes your actions. As a result, your life changes.

What is important is the "Experiment Mindset." Turn the insights gained from the notebook into action. Then, you will get reactions (feedback) from your boss, colleagues, and friends. Based on that, you return to the notebook to think again. In this way, you gradually improve the quality of your thinking and actions.

For example, in the world of entrepreneurship, no matter how deeply you think about a business idea, 100% success is impossible. Notebooks deepen your thinking, but unfortunately, without action, it is just "desk theory" or a "hypothesis."

It is important to actually test that hypothesis and think again using the feedback returned from the world. You only understand the value of an idea after acting on it.

This does not mean "Act instead of thinking!" Acting without thinking is very inefficient, so thinking thoroughly is important. However, if you keep thinking and do not move at all, naturally, nothing will happen.

Once you have thought through a theme using a notebook in a Solo Retreat, take action the very next day. This speed is optimal. Things you cannot understand even after spending time concentrating and thinking can only be understood by taking action. Clarifying that fact is the effect of thinking thoroughly.

And if you act, "data" called feedback returns. Rarely, things go exactly as thought, but mostly, they will not go as expected. Then, based on that precious "data," do a Solo Retreat again and correct the plan.

I still secure two days every month for a Solo Retreat. In addition, I set every Monday as a "Creative Day" where I do not do task work but secure time mainly to think using a notebook. Think for 2 days, experiment for 1 month. Think on Monday, experiment for 1 week. I rotate such cycles. As a result of trial and error, I feel this balance of thinking and experimenting is good for me.

Business and life are experiments. Let's think of them that way.

2. Running PDCA with a Notebook PDCA is a method that is so common in business that it is sometimes called outdated, but it is the absolute basic for producing long-term results.

"Plan," "Do," "Check," "Action." Taking the first letters makes PDCA. As mentioned before, after thinking thoroughly and making a plan, you execute it. When you get an evaluation, verify that data, improve, and make the next plan. You spin this flow round and round as fast as possible.

To run PDCA simply, it is good to write answers to the following questions in your notebook regarding the theme you want to think about: [P] What goal did you have? [D] What did you do? [C] What is your insight? [A] What will you do for the next goal?

Just answering these rotates the PDCA cycle once. For example, if you think about a diet: First, **P (Plan)**. "What goal did you have?" Example: "Do not snack for one month." Next, **D (Do)**. "What did you do?" "I often snacked saying 'just a little.' I gained 1 kilo." Then, **C (Check)**. "What is your insight?" "I do not grasp how much I am eating." Finally, **A (Action)**. "What will you do for the next goal?" "Next month, I will record what I eat every day and lose 3 kilos."

In this way, the PDCA cycle starts turning by knowing the current situation. At this time, if you don't record when you ate cake, you cannot remember how much cake you ate. Conversely, just recording raises your awareness of eating cake and has a diet effect. This is the "Recording Diet." Here too, the notebook plays an active role.

Notebooks have a very important position in the PDCA cycle. Even if you think of what to do, you will forget if you do not write it down. If you do not know where you wrote it, it is meaningless.

You have probably thought of "This year's resolution" at the beginning of the year. Originally, this is also a type of annual PDCA. But do you remember that resolution until the end of the year? In fact, once the New Year holidays end and work begins, you probably forget it. Unless you write it on paper and post it, it is natural to forget.

In that respect, since you always carry a notebook, you never forget where you wrote it. The sense of security that "Everything important is written in this notebook" is significant. You can save data in the external memory device called a notebook and usually empty your head with peace of mind.

When you actually act or verify, you can recall everything by glancing at the relevant page. Important things are remembered without writing, but the brain does not yet recognize a newly made plan as "important." Do not hesitate to borrow the power of the notebook.

3. Borrowing the Power of Community and Coaches If you use a notebook, it becomes possible to continue acting alone eventually. However, humans are weak. As long as the brain has the nature of slacking off, it is not easy to keep winning against that nature with willpower alone. Actually, it is impossible with just willpower.

To win against this resistance of the brain, you need the power of community, coaches, and habit formation. Just having high consciousness and "trying hard" will make you run out of breath quickly.

Management consultant Kenichi Ohmae says: "There are only three ways for a human to change. First, change time allocation. Second, change where you live. Third, change who you associate with. Only these three elements change a human. The most meaningless thing is to 'renew your determination.'"

It is said, "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with." This is truly so. If you join a group that complains, you will naturally start complaining. If you spend time with positive people, positive ideas come out easily.

Choose a high-quality community with will. A high-level community might feel a bit uncomfortable at first. But that is proof that you are growing.

A coach is a professional supporter for goal achievement. They have specialized communication skills and believe in your success. If you have such a person, naturally, your goal becomes easier to achieve.

If there is a high-quality community around you and a reliable coach, actively use them. Goal achievement will come much closer.

4. Habit Formation is Important in the Long Term The Solo Retreat claims to "Change your life in 30 minutes." That is not a lie. If you secure 30 minutes and face your notebook, your life truly begins to change.

However, if you do not take any action after that, your life will return to normal. Essentially, continuing action—habit formation—is important.

When hearing "habit formation," many people frown and say, "I am bad at habits!" Such people seem to think of habit formation as "continuing effort." That thinking is backward. The correct idea is to borrow the power of habit so that you *do not have to continue effort*.

Indeed, a little effort and willpower are needed at first. But no human can continue things for a long time with just that power. I express this as "The brain is lazy." It is not because I am lazy, but because the organ called the brain structurally wants to be comfortable. So, willpower does not last.

Habit formation is changing a "new thing" into a "usual thing" so you can continue it without using energy. It is a means to be lazy. I recommend the mindset of borrowing the power of habits to avoid effort as much as possible.

5. Baby Steps: First, Buy a Notebook and a Pen An achievable small step is called a "Baby Step." If you decided, "Alright! I will do a full 4-day Solo Retreat!" I am very happy. But securing 4 days is a high hurdle.

Planning big is important, but first, move forward with small steps. In this book, I recommend writing in a notebook for 30 minutes of free time. But for people who feel "busy," even that might feel difficult. When you feel busy, you tend to think, "I could do other work in that 30 minutes."

In that case, break the task down smaller. Why not first just buy a notebook and a pen? Or, I recommend telling an acquaintance or declaring on social media, "I'm going to do a Solo Retreat!" It is important to take such a small first step.

Even for big goals, break them down as small as possible and execute them one by one. As the proverb says, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

I want you to pick up the notebook and pen in a store if possible. Stopping by a stationery store during lunch break is a sufficient baby step.

In this book, I recommended the A4 Tsubame Note, but that is just what is optimal for me. Whether it is a 100-yen notebook or a luxury notebook, choosing one that feels right when you hold it is best.

Tools are just tools, so you can change them while using them. I get bored easily, so I tried various tools and methods at first. As a result, I just settled on my current tools and methods.

Have a little playful spirit, go to a stationery store, and buy a notebook and a pen!

6. Take Your Notebook to a Cafe! You who have read this book this far already know everything necessary for a Solo Retreat. If you think, "Solo Retreat looks fun," or "I'll try using a notebook right away," then the purpose of this book is achieved.

Now, only action remains. Open your schedule book and find a 30-minute opening. Write in the schedule for a Solo Retreat. Write a "Promise with yourself" there.

If a schedule seems likely to come in later, just say, "I have plans at that time." Solo Retreats are the same as vacation plans. Schedules are not decided by others. You can decide them with your own will. Even 30 minutes can definitely be secured.

"I am too busy to have time to think" is a false assumption. Rather, when you are busy and your head is cluttered, there is value in stopping to think thoroughly. I don't say a month, but please take even 30 minutes to think using a notebook. And please, take your notebook and go to a cafe.

Once you decide the date and write it in your schedule, it is a "promise" with yourself. Keeping a promise with yourself is more important than keeping promises with others. From there, your life will change.

Afterword: Let's Change Your Life! Thank you for reading this book to the end. I never thought the day would come when I would write a book about notebooks and Solo Retreats.

I have written books on entrepreneurship and side businesses and consulted with many people. Most people say they want to know the "how-to" or know-how. However, as we dig deeper, we realize that is not the real issue.

Most people do not even know what they want to do. They have a sense of crisis but don't know what to do. They are just busy, have no room, and their heads are cluttered.

Telling such people to "make a product" or "write a blog" is useless. Their thinking always stops before taking action. What I found effective to break through this is the Solo Retreat using a notebook.

There must be many people in the world who, like my past self, are desperately enduring and working hard for their families or public appearance, even though being a salaryman does not suit their nature. I wrote this book with a sense of mission that the Solo Retreat might be able to save such people.

"Creating a world where everyone can live freely and full of curiosity." This is my mission. Wishing that the power of notebooks enables even one more person to live a life full of freedom and curiosity, I put down my pen.

Osamu Yasuda