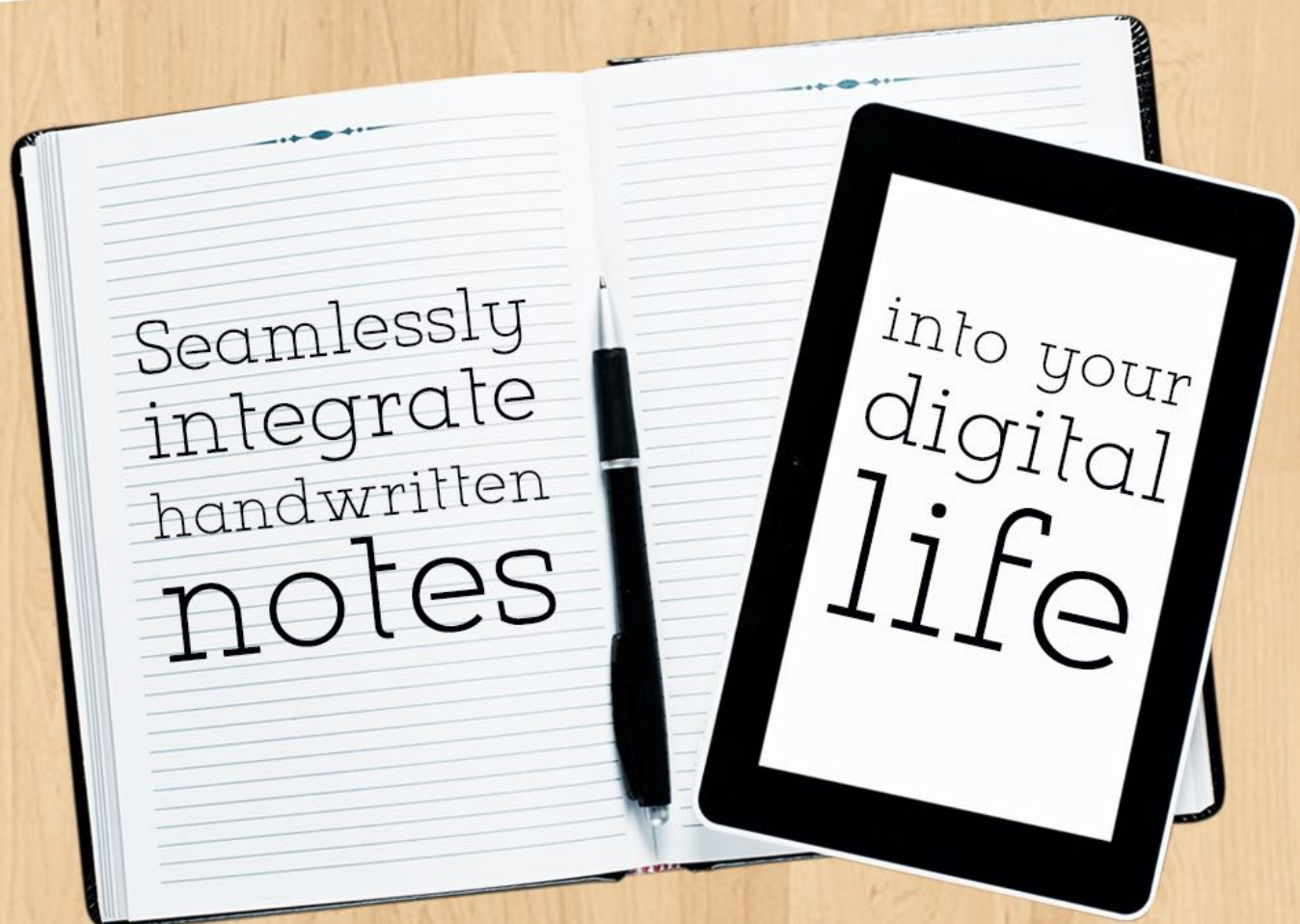


SUPERCHARGED NOTES



JOHN SCULLEN

Supercharged Notes

Seamlessly integrate handwritten notes into your digital life

John Scullen

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Table of contents

Part I: Overview.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Process overview	2
You will need.....	4
Part II: Using the system.....	5
Setting up a new notebook.....	5
Note-taking symbols	7
Updating the table of contents.....	9
Linking related sections.....	11
Part III: Review.....	12
The review process.....	12
Getting your stuff into Evernote.....	13
Tips.....	16
What next?.....	18
Supercharged Notes Cheat Sheet	19

Part I: Overview

Introduction

Digital note taking can be a real time saver, but many people (myself included) prefer to take notes with a pen and paper. You might do it to improve recall, stay more engaged with the subject, create diagrams easily or just because you enjoy the experience of writing with a quality pen and paper. Digital alternatives are yet to match these benefits of the more traditional approach.

The medium has some inherent downsides though. There are no automated action reminders, sharing your notes means extra work and there's no search function to help you locate information. I've tried to go completely digital a few times but I keep coming back to pen and paper as the fastest and easiest way to capture information. But I wanted the benefits of digital systems too.

After much experimentation I've found a way to fuse traditional methods with the advantages digital systems offer. In this book I'll share the method I use to get more value from my notes and quickly find handwritten entries whether they were made two weeks or two years ago.

This system addresses two problems:

1. You take good notes, but things are slipping through the cracks. You're forgetting to complete tasks or to follow up with others about things they are responsible for.
2. You have trouble locating specific entries. You know it's in a notebook somewhere, but your chances of finding valuable insights from a week, a month or a year ago are slim.

I once dealt with the frustration and negative consequences that these problems created every day. Life became more complex with each extra responsibility until I reached the point where my system broke down. Forgetting to complete tasks I'd committed to was gnawing away at me. Finding notes from past meetings was becoming more important in my job, but I was unable to locate my notes when I needed them.

I experimented with many tools and approaches, but the answer came down to a few critical behaviours:

1. Capture everything. Write down actions, commitments, delegated tasks and anything that has your attention – no matter how trivial it might seem. Don't try to keep it in your head.
2. Use visual cues to identify different kinds of entries. This makes scanning for particular entries easy.
3. Review and clarify the value of new entries at least once per week.
4. Transfer action items, delegated tasks and useful reference information to appropriate digital systems.

Together these practices go a long way to feeling less stressed, being able to quickly locate information and banishing that nagging sense of having forgotten something important. My notes have become way more useful and available when I need them most. I hope you'll find this method just as valuable.

Use this approach as a guide. Take what works for you and discard, tweak or customise the things that don't. Now, let's dive in.

Process overview

The essence of the approach is to use paper to get things out of your head. Later you move information and actions with longer-term value to an appropriate digital system where they are easier to manage. Some simple additions to entries make the most important information easy to find, even in the absence of digital systems.

Paper is a great starting point for getting things out of your head and for activities like:

- capturing ideas and notes;
- brainstorming a problem with a mind map;
- drawing connections between related ideas;
- creating diagrams or sketches; and
- quickly recording actions.

While handwriting is great for externalising and sorting through your thinking, it's not so good for:

- managing tasks and projects;
- handling future events (calendar);
- managing information which changes frequently;
- storing and finding long-term reference information.

In these situations digital systems work best. Ideas or actions might emerge on paper, but transferring these items to digital systems is a better option for longer-term management.

Figure 1 shows an overview of the process:

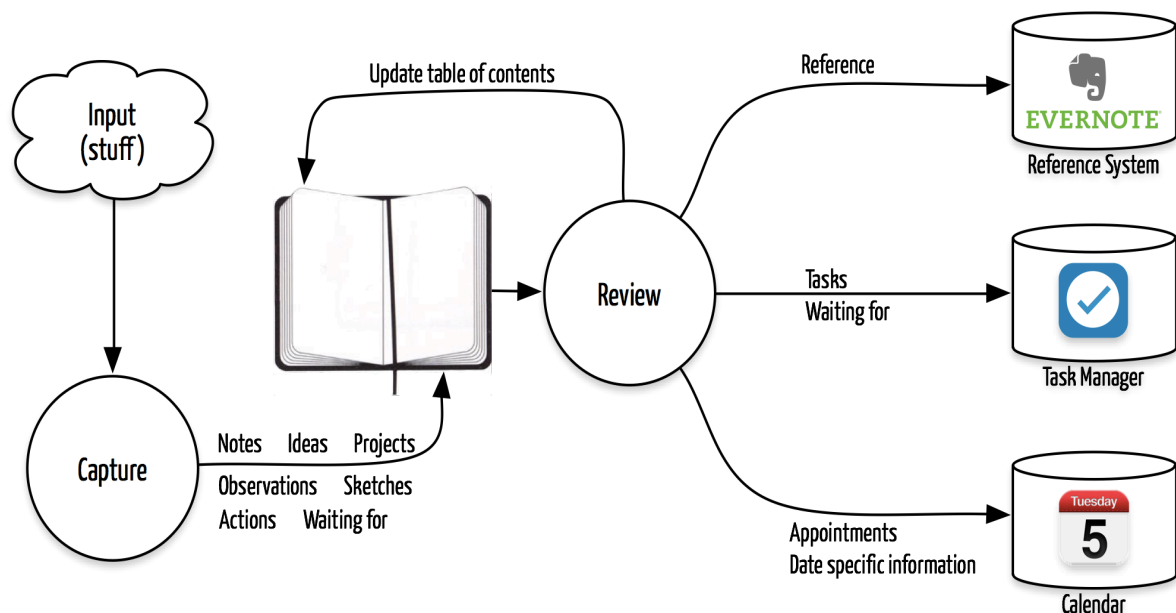


Figure 1: Process overview

Write down all the ideas, observations, actions, delegated tasks, new projects, and notes (collectively referred to as 'stuff') as they show up in your life. Get it all out of your head – even (especially) the stuff that seems trivial. You'll apply visual indicators as you log new entries to make different types stand out and simplify the task of finding them later.

At least once each week (and as often as needed) review entries and decide where they belong.

- Transfer appointments and other time specific entries to your calendar.
- Move any outstanding actions and tasks you are waiting for others to complete to a digital task management application. Mark off tasks you've already done or which no longer have relevance.
- Transfer reference material (non-actionable entries) that you think have future value to Evernote (a free, cross-platform system for storing just about any kind of reference information).

You will need

Chances are you've already got everything you need. You'll just need a few essential items:

1. **A notebook and pen.** Anything will work but I encourage you to find a pen and a notebook that you enjoy writing with. If the experience is terrible, you'll resist using it. Good quality gear you enjoy using will dramatically improve your chances of building new habits. Life is too short to use a cheap and nasty pen.
2. **A calendar application.** Stick with what you're already using – even a paper planner is fine.
3. **A task manager application.** You'll need a way to track actions and probably want to synchronise information between your computer and mobile devices. There are hundreds of these to choose from. Start out with free tools or solutions which offer a free trial period. Many people need to try out a few different options before they find one that clicks with their way of working.
4. **A reference system.** If you don't already have a system it's hard to go past [Evernote](#). It's cross platform, stores nearly any kind of information and synchronises with mobile devices so your notes are always available. Start with a free account which will be more than adequate for most. Premium accounts offer more storage and extra features but you won't need these to begin with. New users will get a free one-month premium subscription if you use the link above.

Part II: Using the system

Setting up a new notebook

1. Leave space for a table of contents

As you capture actions, ideas, conversations and notes, there's sure to be some valuable ideas you'll want to refer back to. But finding past entries is challenging with paper-based systems. The solution is to log useful reference material in a table of contents for faster retrieval.

Don't start writing on the first page of a new notebook – leave the first single page and the first two spreads empty for now. You might also want to leave the third spread empty until you get a feel for how much you log. The size of your writing, whitespace, and how much content you deem has longer-term value all affect how much space you need. Once you've filled a few notebooks you'll get a feel for how much space to reserve.

The section called “Updating the table of contents” on page 9 explains how to log entries to the table of contents.

2. Number the pages

If you're using a notebook with numbered pages like the [Leuchtturm 1917](#) notebooks, skip this step. Otherwise number each spread in the bottom right-hand corner beginning with the first spread after the pages you've reserved for the table of contents. Number ten or twenty pages at a time while you're on hold on a phone call or doing some other task which doesn't need your full attention.

3. Daily pages

Start each new day on the next blank page. Log whatever seems relevant. Daily pages typically include:

- The day and date
- Start time, break times, finish time, extra hours worked
- Appointments
- Most important tasks for the day
- Notes from meetings, ideas, exercise, or journal entries

Other than dating each page, there are no rules. Customise the layout and entries to work for you. Figure 2 shows an example of one of my typical daily page layouts. The next section explains the purpose of the different bullet marks and symbols.

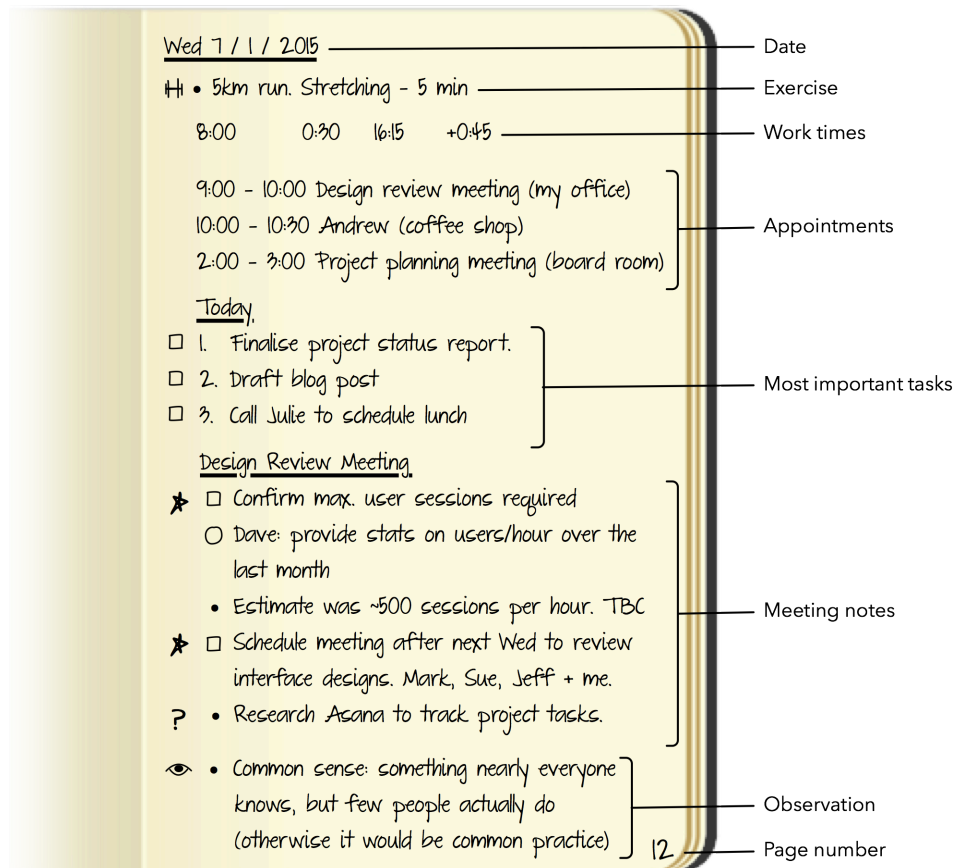


Figure 2: Example daily page

Note-taking symbols

Your notes become way more useful if you can quickly identify different entry types like action items or important points. A few different bullet points and status marks make this simple.

Bullets

These markers are the backbone of the system and separate reference information from actions. This makes it simple to scan your notes for actions at review time. Leave a ½ inch (12mm) margin to the left of any bullet marks – I'll explain why shortly.

- start each new point with a bullet. This is the default bullet point marker used for reference information.
- actions you are responsible for. Remember to record the due date too.
- actions others are responsible for. Also include the name of the person the task is assigned to and a due date.

Indent sub-points to help provide structure to your notes. Figure 3 demonstrates how these bullets are used.

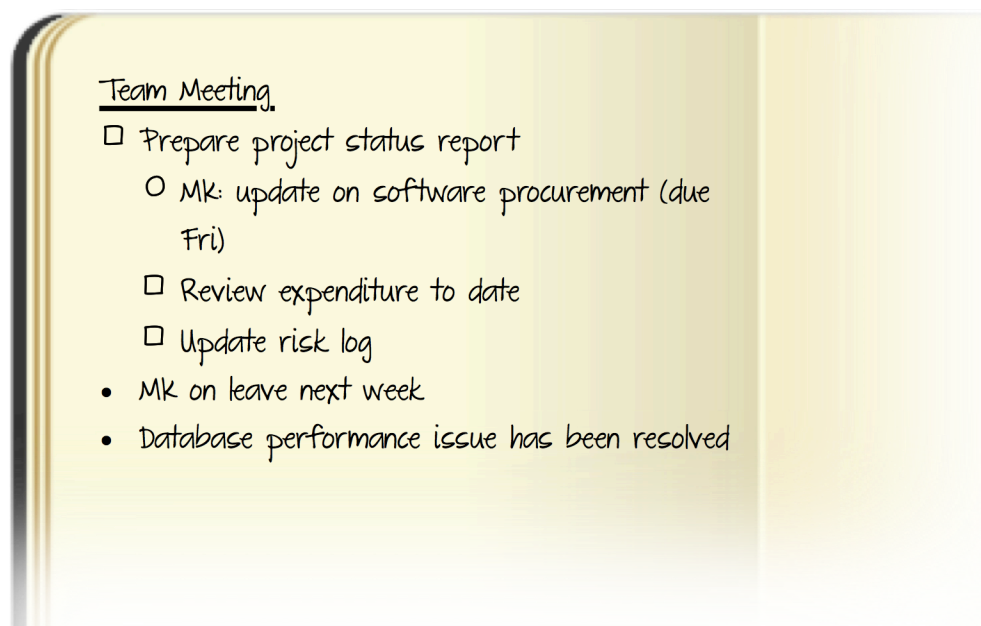


Figure 3: Bullet marks

Status marks

Status marks track whether actions have been completed, transferred into another system or dropped. This makes it easy to scan your notes for items that you still need to deal with and skip the ones you've already processed. You only need to look for open boxes or circles.

Use the following symbols to indicate task status:

- ✓ task completed.
- ✗ cancelled. The task is no longer required and has been dropped.
- the task has been moved forward in your notebook or transferred to your task management system.

Place the appropriate status mark inside the actionable bullet marks as shown in Figure 4.

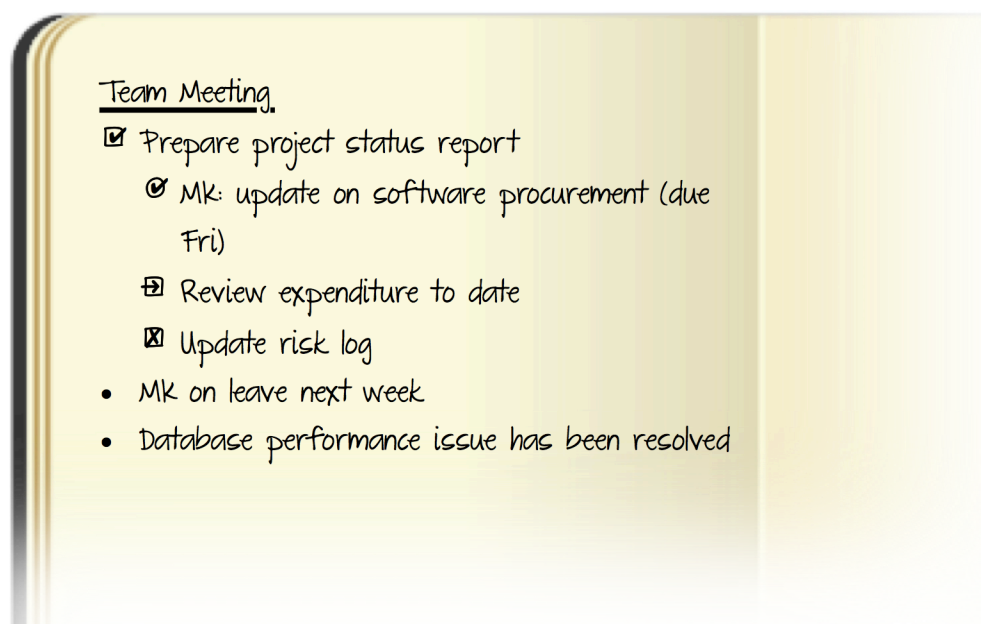


Figure 4: Status marks applied to actions

Caution: When transferring tasks, DO NOT mark them off until AFTER you've transferred them to your digital system. It only takes one interruption or distraction midway through the process before your system starts leaking and you begin overlooking things you still need to do. You need to trust that your system is complete or you'll stop using it.

Qualifiers

Qualifiers add extra meaning to bulleted entries and help specific entries stand out. They work in much the same way as tags in software applications. Insert qualifiers in the margin to the left of the bullet marks. You can add multiple qualifiers to one bullet point if necessary.

- ★ An asterisk helps draw attention to important items. Use it to identify tasks due today or for important reference information.
- 👁 An eye represents an insight or observation.
- ❓ A question mark denotes entries to think about further or do more research on.
- ⚖ This is my dodgy representation of a set of weights. I use it as shorthand for work-out details. Getting more exercise has been a priority for me so using a qualifier lets me easily review progress.

These are just examples of qualifiers that I use regularly. Invent or borrow other qualifiers relevant to your circumstances. Just make them quick and easy to draw.

Updating the table of contents

The table of contents helps you locate information in your notebook just like it does in a technical handbook. There's one small problem though. When setting up your notebook you numbered each spread instead of each separate page. You need some way to refer to entries on the left-hand pages.

Imagine each spread is divided into four zones as shown in Figure 5.

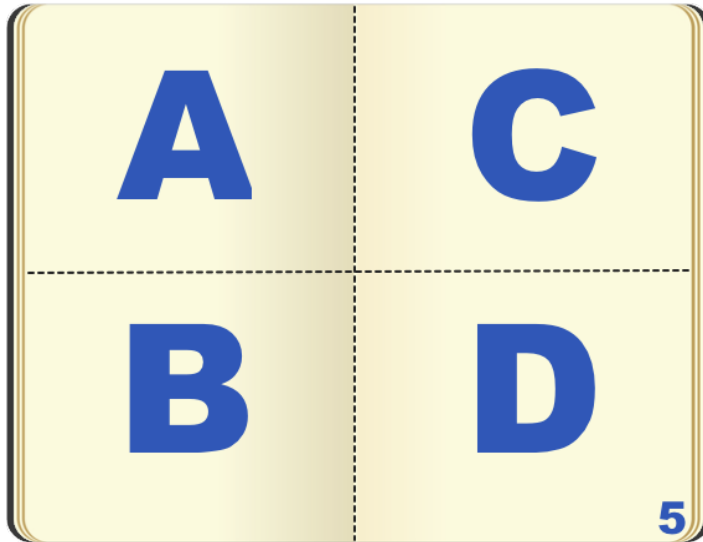


Figure 5: Page zones

This approach halves the work of writing out page numbers and helps pinpoint information on the page. The page number and the zone where the entry starts go into the table of contents. For example, if the entry starts at the top right of spread 5, it is labelled 5C in the table of contents.

Each entry takes the following format:

[page zone] ([date]): [person or meeting] - [topic]

For example:

- 5C (27/11/2014): Mark - goals for web site redesign
- 7B (28/11/2014): Consultant meeting - identified major project risks

This effectively divides the table of contents into columns that you can scan by date or by person/meeting to find what you're looking for. The date helps you home in when you know roughly when a meeting happened without needing to page through your notebook.

Only make a table of contents entry if you think the information is likely to have future reference value. A lot of my notes are transient and most entries don't make the cut.

Linking related sections

Sometimes you'll take notes about related topics several weeks apart. It could be notes from a course you study each Tuesday or the insights you discover reading a book over a few weeks. This approach lets you easily jump to the next or previous topic even when they are scattered throughout your notebook.

1. At the beginning of the second and any subsequent instalments, mark it with ← and the page reference where the previous topic started (eg. ← 3D)
2. At the end of the previous instalment, mark it with → and the page reference where the next related topic starts (eg. → 15C).

Including these references with their table of contents entries is also really helpful when you have a collection of related topics. If you leave too little space when you set up the table of contents use this technique to add some extra pages further on in your notebook.

Part III: Review

The review process

Taking notes is a valuable activity, but regular review is the key habit that will amplify their usefulness and help you avoid missing actions you're responsible for. The review is essential to identify action items to be tracked, and to transfer reference material to a more appropriate long-term storage area. Building the review habit is the key to harvesting your insights and staying on top. Reviewing at consistent intervals is however a difficult habit to build.

The review process is what makes it all work. Without regular reviews, the system degrades quickly. It doesn't have to be an onerous, time-consuming task, but you need to stay on top of it.

Review as often as necessary to avoid land mines. Your circumstances will dictate the interval – it could be as often as once per day but shouldn't be any less than once per week.

Start where you left off last time and scan your notes completing the following steps:

1. Create table of contents entries for anything you think may have future value. See "Updating the table of contents" on page 9 for details on logging table of contents entries.
2. Scan for unprocessed actions and 'waiting for' items. These stand out if you are using the symbols described in Part II. Check off items you've completed, drop entries that no longer seem important, and transfer any outstanding items to your task management system. Mark off items you've migrated to your task system (paper or digital) so you don't need to review them again.
3. Capture reference information into Evernote. Retyping is often the quickest way to get short entries in. For longer entries and diagrams, use the document camera in Evernote's mobile app (the next section steps you through this process). Evernote uses optical character recognition (OCR) to automatically index words it recognises in these images. It's like magic!

Provided your handwriting is reasonable, you'll be able to search the content. Type some keywords into the document if you need some extra insurance. Add a descriptive title and you should be able to find any notes without much trouble.

4. Review a subset of reference material in Evernote (optional, but recommended). Evernote is a great tool for capturing all kinds of information, but this can also be its downfall. It's easy to accumulate content which has passed its use-by date. Each time you do a review, pick one folder or tag and look over those notes. Delete items which no longer have value. This helps avoid clutter, makes searching more effective and reminds you about those cool ideas that you stashed away for future reference but have since forgotten about.

Getting your stuff into Evernote

I've always hated typing out handwritten notes. It feels like a huge waste of time. The good news is that Evernote solves this problem by using the camera on your smartphone to capture images of your handwritten notes. Evernote then recognises text within these images so you can use search to find your notes.

Create an Evernote account and download the app

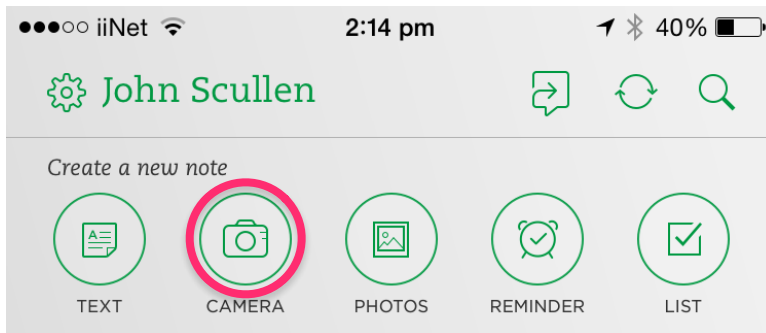
There are a few steps you'll need to complete before you can start:

1. If you haven't already set up a free Evernote account, [do that now](#).
2. Install the free Evernote app from the [Apple App Store](#) or [Google Play Store](#) and log into your account. The app syncs with your Evernote account so your reference material is available where ever you need it.

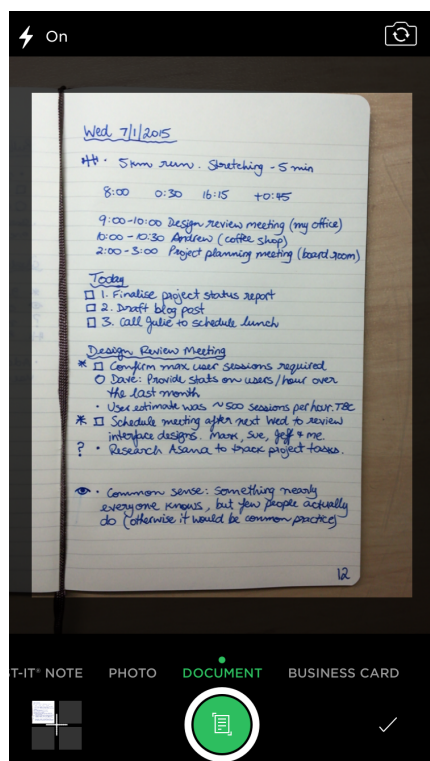
Using Evernote to capture images

Now you're ready to start capturing notes into your digital reference system:

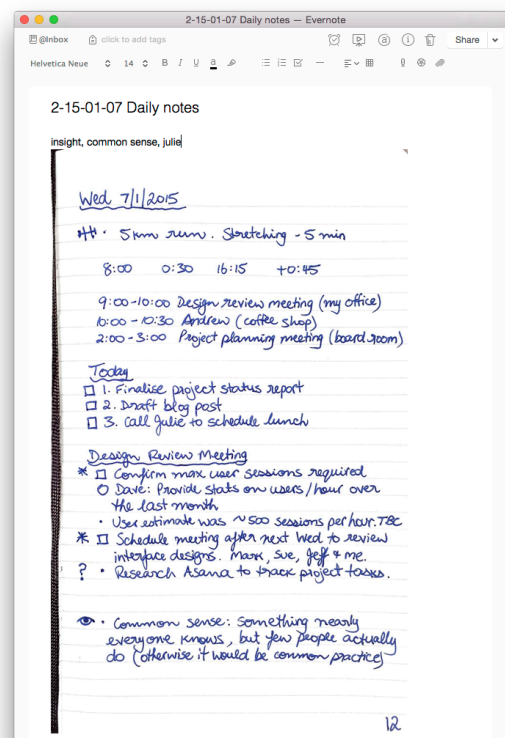
1. From the main screen tap Camera to create a new note using the camera.



2. If necessary, select the DOCUMENT camera option.
3. Frame the page you want to capture. It works best if you place the notebook on a contrasting surface and use the bookmark as a guide to help the application recognise the edge of the page. See Figure 6 for an example.
4. Tap part of the image to focus the camera.
5. Hold your mobile device still and tap the capture button.
6. Tap ✓ to save the image to Evernote or X to discard the image.



Frame the image



Add a title and keywords to help you search later

Figure 6: Using the document camera to capture notes

Once Evernote analyses your document you can find written text within your notes – magic! Figure 7 shows an example. This doesn't always happen immediately – premium users go to the front of the queue for this service. It's normally done within a few minutes but can take longer.

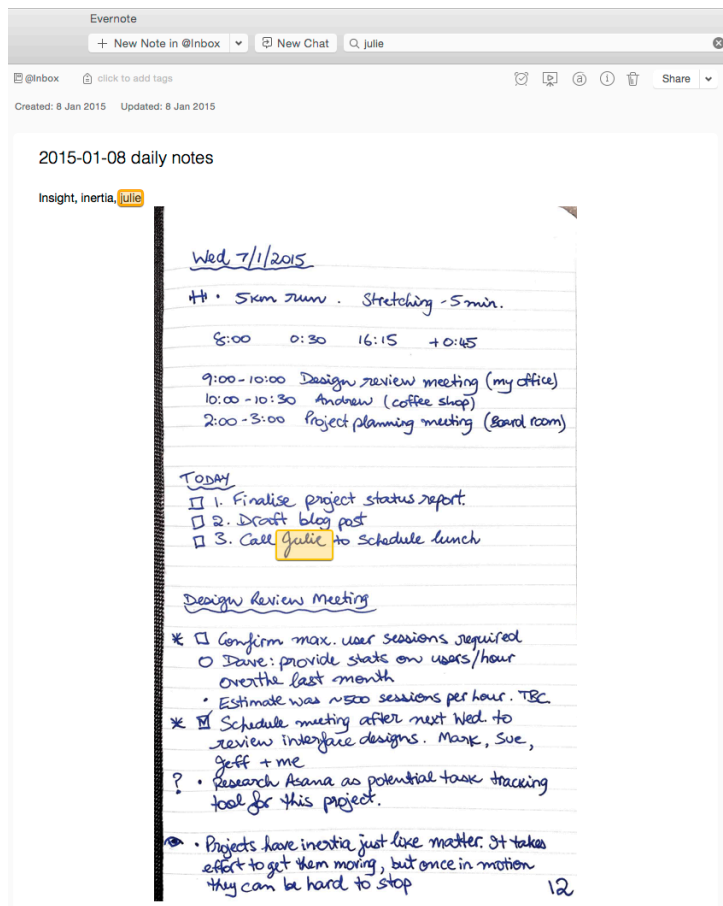


Figure 7: Search finds words within your notes

Handwriting is unique and Evernote's recognition isn't perfect. Give the note a meaningful title and enter a few keywords into the note for extra insurance as I've done in Figure 7. Meeting names, people, project names, topics discussed and places could all be useful keywords. Anything that will help you find the note in three years time is worth including.

It's beyond the scope of this book for me to detail how to get the most out of Evernote. If you want to find out more I can highly recommend Brett Kelly's [Evernote Essentials](#). It's easy to read, provides step-by-step instructions on using Evernote, suggests heaps of uses you hadn't thought of and offers advice on how to set up Evernote to work best for you.

Tips

So that covers the approach. Here's some extra tips I've discovered through using the system over several years.

1. **Use a single notebook.** A different notebook for different parts of your life seems like a good idea on the surface. The problem is that your brain doesn't work like that. You're just as likely to have a brilliant insight about how to redesign your garden while you're at work as you are about how to solve a client issue while you're washing the dishes at home. If you use multiple notebooks for different subjects, projects or areas of your life, it won't be long before you accidentally take the wrong notebook to a meeting or have some great insight when you don't have the "right" notebook available. You'll end up blending different areas of your life together anyway.

I have one notebook that everything is captured into. There's no confusion about which notebook to take – everything is in one place. It's like an inbox for all my ideas, notes and actions. If you need to, invent qualifiers and use them to identify the different parts of your life.

2. **One colour is enough.** If you want to carry multiple pens and colour code different types of entries, that's fine. But it's extra complexity you don't need. Splash out on one nice pen that you enjoy writing with and stick with that.
3. **Keep a legend on a post-it note.** It will take some time to get familiar with the bullets, status marks and qualifiers if you haven't used them before. Write them out on a post-it note that you can move from page to page until using them becomes automatic. Alternatively, print a copy of the cheat sheet on the last page of this book and keep it in your notebook for reference.
4. **Avoid loose paper.** Capture new notes, ideas and actions into your notebook rather than on separate pieces of paper. Loose paper has a habit of disappearing under other bits of paper only to resurface after the thing it was supposed to remind you about has already blown up. If you must use

separate sheets of paper, have a physical inbox that you can place them straight into after capturing the idea. Be sure to date each sheet too so you know how long it's been around. Process these into your system every few days at a minimum.

5. **Capturing an idea carries absolutely no commitment to ever doing anything about it.** It's easy to feel that you should act on everything you write down but the point of capturing it on paper is to get it out of your head so you can decide what, if anything, you might need to do about it. The value is in keeping your head clear. When you review it's the chance to decide whether you should act now, transfer the item to your task system, move it to a reference system for future review, or just drop it.
6. **Leave some time between capturing and clarifying.** Have you ever noticed that things that seem really important today can seem almost irrelevant in a few days time? Distance helps put things in perspective. If you can leave an hour or two before deciding what you need to do about items you've captured you might choose to ignore some things that seemed important in the moment.
7. **Keep clear boundaries between actions and reference information.** It's crucial to keep hard edges between your systems. This is what makes email so difficult. It's a blend of actions, triggers for action, requests for others to take action, reference information and junk. This doesn't necessarily mean multiple systems but the categories must be discrete. Don't rely on reference information as a trigger for action. Keep an item in your task list so you're reminded of the project when you review your actions. Most task managers will let you create a link to the reference information in the task to make it easy to access.

What next?

The processes I've outlined in this guide have helped me gain a greater sense of control even though the turbulence and randomness of life keeps accelerating. I'm sure these techniques can do the same for you. But unless you put these ideas into action you've wasted your time. Make a start now – choose one idea from this guide and put it into action right away.

Thanks for taking the time to read this. If you've found any of these ideas useful I'd be grateful if you could share this book with your friends and colleagues. Here's the link so you can spread the word:

johnscullen.com/notes-ebook1

I'd love to hear how you've incorporated these ideas into the way you work. Drop me an email or send me a tweet to let me know how applying these ideas has helped. If you have any questions, ideas to make this book better, or other productivity challenges let me know. I'll do my best to help you out.

Head over to johnscullen.com for more ideas to better manage your work and your life.

Thanks

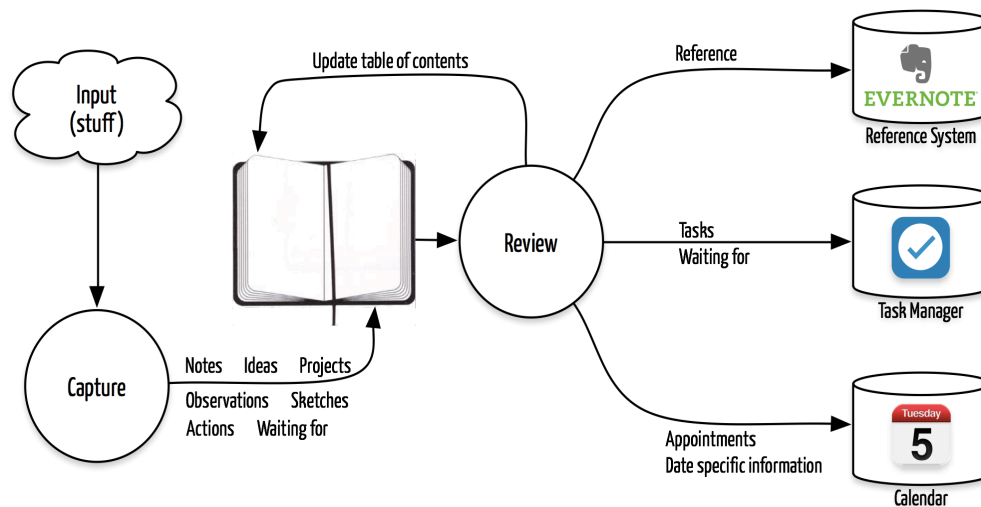
John Scullen

e: john@johnscullen.com

t: [@_JohnScullen](https://twitter.com/_JohnScullen)

Supercharged Notes Cheat Sheet

System overview



Bullet points

Start each new point with one of these bullets. Indent by about half an inch (12mm) to leave space for qualifiers.

- Non-actionable note
- Action for you
- Action for someone else

Status marks

Mark off actions with one of these status marks as they are processed during the review.

- ✓ Task completed
- ✗ Task dropped
- Migrated to another system

Qualifiers

Add one or more qualifiers to the left of bullet points as needed.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ★ Important | ? More research or thinking needed |
| 👁 Observation or insight | # Exercise |

Updating the table of contents

Table of contents entries use the following format:

[page zone] ([date]): [person or meeting] - [topic]

For example:

- 5C (27/11/2014): Mark - goals for web site redesign
- 7B (28/11/2014): Consultant meeting - identified major project risks