

How to Take Notes Effectively in 2017 (for University Students)

The central idea is to go digital.

Requirement

BIG

Nice writing experience

Stay distraction-free

Mute it

Refrain from installing games on it. I know it's got a nice screen.

It should allow for easy moving&scaling of your scribbles.

To replace your notebook :)

Solves the pain of running out of space when jotting on a piece of paper.

Load electronic copies of textbooks into it.

Easy searching through the text

Much lighter than carrying physical books

Go get a big tablet with a decent stylus.

apps

Get a sketching app

Get a PDF annotation app

advantage

Print out reference tables/data sheets that you need to refer to so often that firing up a separate window for them is becoming a tedious time-waster. e.g., tables of physical constants, Periodic Tables, History Timelines, etc.

I realize that not all students can afford a big tablet for school. Here are some factors to consider before deciding whether or not a purchase is worth the money:

Does the combination of electronic copies of your textbooks and a tablet beat the price of physical textbooks used in your university?

Do you value the potential of spreading out sheets of papers all over a table? Remember that a tablet cannot extend its screen real estate easily, which can be a huge annoyance compared to old-fashioned paperback notebooks.

What should stay the old-school way

Reasons to NOT buy a tablet.

One for stripping out the textual content of the webpage and saving it to somewhere. You should have a local repository of full-length articles that you may come back to at some time.

One for clipping or highlighting only part of the webpage you are reading, because sometimes what makes sense to you may only be a small portion of the whole thing.

Another for merely bookmarking the webpage, because sometimes you need non-textual information.

You need a browser extension that saves journal articles to your paper repository.

Web clipping — you should have browser extensions/buttons/bookmarklets that do the followings:

In the next post I plan to talk about time management.

use specific editors for different types of tasks

Say you are a science student working on some formula derivation or data visualization for a project: use Mathematica, for it's formatable like Microsoft Word and computable like MATLAB.

For the same reason, use Jupyter Notebook if you are in Computer Science and working on some data science with Python.

Mathematica and Jupyter should meet most of the standards demanded by your assignments. In more formal projects, however, you may be required to hand in a LaTeX-formatted document, such as a thesis. In this case, I highly recommend LyX as your LaTeX editor.

Mindmap is an essential tool for students nowadays. A decent mindmap editor seems to be a necessity.

Keep one or two text editors around. They should be your default go-to word processor when you are not sure in which note app to store your next piece of work. Choose an editor that does not store stuff — the absence of a note list panel will make you less stumbled by the feeling of having to keep notes organized and consistent. Just focus on writing :)

Personally, I use Sublime Text for everything that does not requires any formatting. Otherwise, I go for Typora, which is a minimal yet robust Markdown editor.

Keep different types of notes in different apps

Use an open-and-type To-Do app to jot down brain sparks.

I collect interesting ideas and funny conversations with my friends as life goes. It is my personal repository of original puns and awesome plots.

When it comes to the time that I sit down for writing my novel, I can easily come back to this app and make use of these ideas.

I can then strike entries out as I go.

Use another open-and-type, but password-protected by default, note-taking app for dream diary

You want to keep it to yourself when the dream went erotic or too politically incorrect.

This is for practicing lucid-dreaming, which I haven't succeeded in.

open-and-type, distract-free, so that you can grasp the lingering last frames of your dream.

Use a reference manager to index papers that you have read.

This is perhaps more relevant to senior students.

The pros about using a reference manager is that you can easily cite from your personal library as you write your thesis/paper/essay, etc., and you can easily generate a bibliography from the app.

The cons can be that annotating a paper can be frustrating, or even impossible if you are a Zotero user like me.

Use a plain-text note app to take clippings from the web.

Use a note app that only supports plain-text, because most likely you wouldn't like your notes in various fonts and colors.

It would be sweet if this app has a web clipper addon for your browser.

I use

nvALT

SimpleNote

For syncing

Use a journaling app to take diaries.

Password-protected, of course ;)

I would not recommend using the same app for dream-journaling, for I don't want to risk 78-year-old me mistaking a dragon-slaying fantasy as an actual heroic past.