My notebook & organizer journey
All things digital and analog

KemoNine

Contents

What's Within?

Within is a walk through of all things analog and digital that I put together to be effective with notebooks and organizers. Things I've cataloged, setup, used, tinkered with and more. It even includes the how and why of my personal needs, preferences and opinions.

In short: it's a very long breakdown of everything that actually works for me as well as many things that didn't work for me. Think "Kemo's Notebook & Organizer Autobiography".

Permalink

This page is also available at https://blog.kemonine.info/my-notebook-and-organizer-journey

Preface

I regularly find myself in discussions about notebooks and organization systems. Both digital and analog. The kind of discussions where I'm gaining insights into others approaches and articulating my current and prior approaches. If you go back through my blog posts you'll see a very strong interest in organizers and notebooks. The posts are pretty open ended, are focused on specific areas of how I've put together things and generally paint a picture of someone who doesn't faff about when it comes to keeping a "notebook" or "organizer".

I've kept some form of notebook and/or organizer for over 25 years. They have been critical for me as I need to manage AuDHD (Autism + ADHD) and I have some memory "hassles". I don't think in "normative" terms, I struggle with active recall and struggle with working memory. These aren't the easiest things to manage, especially as I've gotten into my 4th decade of life and have A Lot to stay on top of when it comes to activities of daily life.

This post lays *everything* out. All the success, failure and some oddities that I've found related to notebooks and organizers. I've tried to layout the post in roughly chronological order. I've also included how I have things setup as of the writing of this blog post. This is truly *everything* I'd put forth in a discussion about notebooks and/or organizers.

I've even included a section at the very end with links to most of what I discuss in this post. Rather than scattering links across the post, they are all at the end. Scroll to the bottom if you're looking for links.

Fundamentals

Around age 12 I started to develop my notebook and organization layout. A layout that's benefitted me for the last 28 years.

It's bold to suggest 28 years ago, at age 12, I hit on something that'd prove to be critical for my daily life. I acknowledge and respect that.

However, notebooks and organizers are models of an individual mind and, at their core, are a mind model of sorts. Some will be rigid, others loose, some wholly scattered and some setup for specific needs and purposes.

At age 12 I setup my first notebooks. I spent time to put together a notebook so I could track my assignments, setup notebooks for each class I took and, in general, I chopped up my paper into different zones of focus. This proved to be a critical approach. I may not have had 'the words' to describe what I was doing but I hit on the most important aspect of notebooks and organizers for my brain. The kind of thing that, without, I'd be wholly fucked and unable to function.

I even setup my back pack so my todo notebook was easy to get to, my writing supplies were in easily accessed places and my coursework was setup as sections of a larger 3 ring binder (read: trapper keeper) and/or in dedicated notebooks (spiral bound if my memory hasn't failed me).

If you squint lightly, it looks like a Bullet Journal in layout, ethos and daily use. It was just the size of a child's backpack, not something you could toss in a purse which is more common for bullet journals.

Schooling

All through my schooling (primary / secondary school, grade school, high school, whatever you want to call it) I kept multiple binders (notebooks) and a todo tracker (small notebook setup as an organizer). This approach served me incredibly well and allowed me to focus on specific topics while staying generally organized and on top of what I needed to accomplish day to day.

I also honed in on my general preference in writing supplies (at the time) to further round out my day to day notebook and organizer needs. Notably this is when I settled on a 0.5mm HB lead pencil and ballpoint pens (red, black and green colors in particular). I still used whatever paper was available and didn't have a real preference at this time other than "college ruled" and "graph" for the lines on the page.

This was a time before laptops were affordable or acceptable for use in a school environment, before pda's, before smart phones. All we had at the time that was accessible, affordable and usable was analog. I made great use of analog, so much so it wasn't until I entered Uni (university / college / undergraduate work) that I even bothered to look at a digital system.

I went from age 12 to age 17 without digital and used the same general approach to notebooks and organizers the entire time. Clearly I hit upon something very useful for my brain very very early in my journey through life.

Uni

The Core

At age 18 (Editors note: Kemo has a summer birthday and went from 17 -> 18 just before entering Uni) I started Uni and my prior approach to notebooks and organizers started to show its limits. I almost instantly needed to make major adjustments and "level up" my approach to notebooks and organizer. It was really bad and I struggled *hard* during my early time at Uni when it came to staying on top of my studies and more.

Before I get into some specifics: it should be noted I went to Uni 10 hours from home, with minimal access (aka: the middle of nowhere) and I was living 'on my own' for the first time ever. Between the culture shock of Uni, learning how to live on my own and more, I struggled greatly at the beginning of my time at Uni.

One of the first things I did to level up was buy a Sony Clie. The Sony Clie is a Palm OS compatible device with a color screen and stylus. I basically bought a fancier Palm Pilot to help me manage my life. I instantly started using the calendar on a near religious level, I almost instantly started using the standard todo features near religiously for activities of daily life, I found a "homework tracker" app that I used to track all of my coursework deadlines, and I even spent time setting it up as a very early form of e-book reader.

The Sony Clie became the keystone and lynchpin of my organization system almost overnight. Without that little hunk of electronics, I would never have survived Uni, let alone 'the real world'. The best part was it used Grafitti and the stylus for text input. Grafitti is very similar to printed writing and it instantly "clicked" for my brain. Grafitti was *perfect* for my brain at bridging the analog and digital at the time.

Beyond the Sony Clie I also settled on using 3/4" 3 ring binders with "engineering paper" (ie. thin, cheap paper with 3 holes and a grid on it) for my actual coursework. I'd take notes, write out homework, plan projects and all kinds of "stuff" in these

binders. I generally treated these as topical and they look a lot like a "lab notebooks" or "project books" and similarly styled notebook setups. When I filled these binders I'd pull out any useful pages that I wanted to archive and put them in larger 3 ring binders that I stored in a safe place. This allowed me to stay on top of the "now" and retain an archive of information I may need or want to go back and review at a later time.

If you squint lightly: my approach still looks a lot like a Bullet Journal. Just bigger and with the "daily churn" setup on an electronic device instead of paper.

Creating a Common Book

Beyond the above, there is one other thing that I setup during my time at Uni that's proven critical to my daily life: I setup what I've come to call my "2nd Brain", a form of Common Book.

Specifically, I setup Voodoo Pad which, at the time, was a very simple desktop app that acted as a personal wiki (ie. Wikipedia but my own) and was backed by plain text files. I was able to setup a digital form of a "common book". Which is to say I setup what would become a dumping ground for cataloging anything I found interesting. Literally: I used it to catalog recipes, digital coursework I wanted to save for posterity, personal how-to guides for setting up difficult things (ie. Xen virtualization on a SMP Pentium 3 host) and a hell of a lot more.

I setup Voodoo Pad as a common book because I had a growing digital footprint. I studied Computer Science and Programming at Uni with a hobby of "all things server and IT stuff". I generated a *ton* of digital documents (I still do). I also got in the habit of typing my hand written notes and hand written assignments to help with memorization. The sheer volume of digital output was enough that simply creating folder for files on my computer wasn't enough. I also needed some amount of useful metadata and/or notes around a lot of the content (ie. the Literate Programming paradigm) in order to find my head from my ass.

I've kept up this style of Common Book (2nd Brain) ever since I setup Voodoo Pad roughly 20 years ago. I even have files that were created by Voodoo Pad safely stored away on my current computer. My 2nd Brain has always been with me and I *still* use it heavily, even if the software I use has changed over the years.

Personal Information Management (PIM)

At Uni I did get introduced to the concept of PIM by way of my Sony Clie. This term generally refers to a person's contacts, calendar, todo list and simple notes. I didn't hesitate to use the calendar and todo list aspects of this system. Contacts I'd move to digital much later and after the Blackberry kicked off the smart phone revolution. You can assume I've managed a digital calendar, non-stop since this point. Also, when I needed digital contacts, I set it up and have managed them non-stop since that point forward. I will not be calling attention to these further.

The digital todo list that comes with the concept of PIM turned out to be very important for me. Despite using a calendar religiously, I struggled with blending any todo items for the day with my calendar. I ended up discovering I require a calendar to be *only* "dedicated, focused blocks of time" and nothing else. Basically I need my calendar to tell me when I need to be focused on something specific and structured. Things like when my courses happened, when I was supposed to be "out with friends" and similar. The todo list on my Cile solved this issue of needing things separate. I used digital todo's as a way to track activities of daily life that weren't "blocked time" and needed addressing at some point during the day but had flexibility for the when. Combined with a homework tracker I was able to have the blocked time (calendar), the shit list for the day (todo list) and my coursework (homework tracking app) setup in a way that allowed me to avoid getting overwhelmed or annoyed by information density. It's safe to assume that I've kept up this paradigm ever since I set it up initially and I won't be discussing it much until a later point below. In particular: You can safely assume I've always maintained a "daily churn" digital todo list unless otherwise noted.

I never took to basic note systems, they are always too limited. They just don't do what I need and I had better options setup already (notebooks and a digital common book). That said: simple note taking systems *are valid* and I've known more than one person who used simple notes with great success.

Open Source

During my days at Uni I got involved with some open source work and was exposed to things like source code management (version control), various wiki software, documentation systems, issue trackers and more. I basically got exposed to the wide array of software used to manage software projects over time.

I also demonstrated a ridiculous aptitude for implementing and using such systems for software projects. To the point folk who had far more "industry experience" would sometimes seek me out for insights and suggestions.

This was all digital and I did try to adapt my personal setup to these systems a few times but they never found success. On the plus side: this exposure helped me become something of a "resident expert" at a summer job and my first job after Uni.

Unfortunately, this exposure would ultimately bite me in the ass years later.

Summer Jobs

While at Uni I held two types of summer jobs. For the first two summers I worked in the trades. Specifically cement and rough carpentry. For the second two summers I worked in IT. The approaches I used for my course work held up during my non-trades summer jobs nicely and I didn't have to do anything special for my summer jobs.

A Quick Deviation

There a few semi-subtle items that popped up for me during my time at Uni. These deserve a bit of their own expansion as they become critical to my successes and failures later.

Memorization

Succinctly: I have memory hassles. The kind that make it so my active recall isn't great and my ability to "hold stuff in my head" isn't great either. It's a one-two punch of suck some days. Additionally, I can type 120 to 140 words per minute (two handed) which is roughly the speed of human speech. In the beginning of my time at Uni, I ended up playing scribe and would transcribe everything said during class. This approach did nothing for me and I really struggled. After being very honest with myself and trying a bunch of other options I discovered if I handwrite notes, type them using a markup language and proof the typed notes; I have significantly better retention. I've kept this approach up ever since my initial discovery and successes. It's a critical concern for me.

Years later I found out this is very common and there is a whole area of science research dedicated to handwriting vs typing of notes. If you're struggling with note taking, definitely look into this topic. There is a lot of great information available and quite a bit is not at all intuitive.

Markup Languages

During my time at Uni I discovered LaTeX. It's one of the original markup languages and I used it heavily to type up everything. So much so a few professors pulled me aside to ask how I had managed to type up my math homework or computer science work in such a nice format. They knew of LaTeX and were baiting me to see if I had gone down the path and to see if it was impeding my studies. After explaining that typing things in LaTeX *helped* my studies, the conversation shifted and I got some great insights and pointers from my professors.

This also sparked my interest in markup languages as well as the concept of separating content from presentation for written works.

Over time I'd go on to learn LaTeX, HTML, docbook, markdown, org-mode syntax and others. I *still* use markup languages for my writing and I'm glad I got introduced to LaTeX during my time at Uni. It's made a big difference for me over time.

If you dislike how modern word processing programs blend content (your actual writing) with presentation (formatting, etc), definitely consider looking at markdown, LaTeX and pandoc. They are all powerful, common options for generating documents in a manner that separate content from presentation.

Common Books

I only recently discovered the term "common book" despite having kept a digital common book for decades (my 2nd Brain). This is essentially just a notebook of information a human collects over time. If you look into the history of the notebook, one of the first uses of notebooks was the creation of a "common book". It's a well known paradigm and I stumbled upon it by accident and without knowing there was a term for such things.

Keeping a common book is generally regarded as a Very Good Thing and I've seen allusions to the fact keeping a common book can enhance creativity and help with deeper understanding of topics. I know mine definitely helps with creativity and deeper understanding. An example: Da Vinci was an amazing engineer and his notebooks (actually common books) are filled to the brim with insights and knowledge that wouldn't be seen again for centuries.

Literate Programming

I almost left this out but I *do* apply concepts of literate programming throughout my 2nd Brain. Literate programming is two parts: documentation with inline code as well as a set of programs that take the inline code and create source code which can be used to actually create a program. Essentially you're writing documentation and putting code snippets inline with the documentation, not keeping documentation and code separate (the common pattern). Once you have everything written up, you use a program to tease out the source code and turn it into something that can generate a working program. Essentially you use a pre-processor to generate your source code and you edit your source code within your documentation.

I don't "literate program" by the mainstream definitions but I *do* keep a ton of metadata, notes and general information about various topics with attachments. I'll also inline code blocks in my notes as needed. This is particularly pronounced in the area of my 2nd Brain dedicated to "all things tech". I've got more than one page dedicated to a topic and it reads like a programming book, complete with inline code and expansions on the how and why of the code. I don't outright export it to usable sources but I *do* apply the principles of literate programming.

Stated another way: Literate Programming is, essentially, the computer programmer's version of a common book.

If you're into "tech stuff" this can be incredibly powerful and is worth investigating.

Squint and See Bullet Journal

I've stated, multiple times, "if you [lightly] squint you'll see Bullet Journal" in the above. This is hilariously important for me. Come to find out I *require* an open ended Bullet Journal for my organization needs. There is some nuance and I don't use the "official" Bullet Journal approach outright but I do use a system that looks a hell of a lot like Bullet Journal. It's also the *only* system of organization that's managed to tame my Autism and ADHD related quirks enough for me to survive reliably in the modern world.

I get into the specifics below but there is a theme around Bullet Journal when it comes to my successes.

I highly recommend looking into this topic if you're looking to develop an organization system. Bullet Journal is a loose approach to organizing that provides a ton of wiggle room to tweak and tune it to individual need. There are no end of definitions, hot takes and suggestions available these days and I won't distill all that information here. The only thing I'd say is: there are a lot of options and use what works, ignore what doesn't. Make it your own.

Notably: "Bullet Journal" can easily be seen as meaning "an organization and/or notebook system that uses analog".

Why Important?

These items all form the core of my approach to information management. Without them, as you will see, I start to flounder and quickly end up in a very bad place overall. If I apply these concepts judiciously and consistently over time, I reap great rewards as evidenced by my current approach to notebooks and organizers as well as my early approaches.

Post Uni & Early Career

After Uni is about the time I started learning even more about wiki software, digital documentation systems and digital task management. Beyond what I had picked up during my days at Uni. Useful information but not applicable to my personal organization system or 2nd Brain needs.

When I entered the work force, I just kind of... stopped using all but my 2nd Brain and calendar. My use of my 2nd Brain also dropped significantly, I kept it up but only just.

At my early jobs I had to use existing task management and documentation software, follow business processes and similar which obviated the need for keeping an organizer for work. Because I was generally forced into very specific setups by employers, this put me in the head space of "eh, they force me to use it, I'll use it, whatever". I also was living with my parents during this period and didn't have much in the way of a personal todo list. I had a stronger need for a calendar than a todo list.

My very early post-Uni jobs were interesting and I'm going to skip the details. Succinctly: I started my career in IT and after a shockingly short period, "switched careers" to programming. I have a background in both IT and Programming so I was able to change careers early and easily.

This career change led me to a really good programming job. Unfortunately, things took a horrific turn right about the time I got my first real job promotion past the junior level (read: gained autonomy and trust). My lack of organization system and languishing 2nd Brain caused significant problems and nearly cost me the job. Thankfully I kept the job but only thanks to an amazing mentor who helped me find my head from my ass.

Some practical advice: If you require an organization system and/or notebooks but they begin to languish due to outside factors; Make it a top priority to write down what you've got that works and keep that information safe and easily accessible. You will likely find yourself needing such things again and having a record of what did work previously will be critically useful.

A Quick Note About My Career

The rest of this post will be written as if I've only ever had one programming job. This is mostly true. I had a single, brief hiatus from my job and I've done a lot of work within the open source and open hardware movements. I may have had "only one job" but in truth I've worked in a hell of a lot of different environments and contexts within this job, at other jobs during my hiatus as well as other environments like open source and open hardware.

However, in practical terms, my career is very much defined by a single job and this post will be written with this in mind. It seriously simplifies putting forth information about my organization and notebook setups over time. Even if some things came from other jobs (however brief) or job like environments (open source).

Crash and Burn

I nearly lost what would be my actual "Dream Job" due to the fact I let my organization setup and notebooks languish for a long period of time. While things languished, I also learned a lot about various digital systems that claimed to do the job of an analog notebook and/or organizer which greatly muddied the waters. I essentially put myself in a position where I knew all about the various choices available but had zero understanding of what may or may not work for the problem at hand. This is not a good position to find oneself.

The problem at hand was the fact that the digital systems for organization and documentation at my job just didn't work for my brand of Autism + ADHD (AuDHD). I could barely keep on top of my time sheet, I hopped haphazardly around my assigned work, I had a hard time managing my time, and a lot more. I went from a useful junior to a terrible non-junior. I ended up having some pretty serious conversations that were basically: "What the hell? This needs to be sorted or you're going to be fired." Not Good.

It was at this point I cracked my knuckles and started working on finding a new organization system and a new notebook layout. A setup that would allow me to be successful at my job. This was a shockingly long process and put me on the path of "try all the things".

Putting out the Fire

Two things happened right away when I got put on notice. My primary mentor stopped by to talk about my struggles and, in particular, my timesheet. I also discovered Tiddlywiki. These two things would prove enough of a solution to let me keep my job and ultimately develop a new approach that I could use over time with success.

For the timesheet, my mentor handed me a Moleskin and said: "Write everything down in here, when you start, stop, etc. Just catalog your day from start to finish. At the end of the day, go through and create a tabulation of each client's total time and enter that into your time sheet". They also encouraged me to find an organizer setup that could distill my assigned work in a way that allowed me to stay on top of things over time, even if independent of the "official system". Sage advice that did turn around my timesheet problems.

Little did they know handing me a Moleskin would prove to be an ember that transformed into an inferno years later.

For managing my work I chose Tiddlywiki and it was very helpful. I was able to tease out the key bits of info from the task management system into a form that was actually useful and beneficial for my AuDHD needs. I was just successful enough with this to keep my job.

Complimentary Concerns

Right as I was finding my head from my ass at my job, I gained a need, at home, for an organization setup and a new form of 2nd Brain.

I ended up combining my needs and working through a few approaches to see what might ultimately work. I ran two tests at the same time: testing approaches at work and testing approaches at home. I have slightly different needs at the job than I do at home but there is significant overlap. I was essentially running a years long litmus test of organizers and 2nd Brain approaches.

Version 2.0

These are the results of the years long litmus test.

The Failures

Note: These are all very valid approaches to organizing and 2nd Brain needs. Seriously. Look into them, see if they may work for you. They don't work with my approach to life but I've seen them all used with great success over the years. *If it works, it's valid.*

The first real failure for me was Getting Things Done (GTD). Tiddlywiki is great but it's not the best task manager for my needs. Fortunately, at the time, someone had implemented the entire GTD system within Tiddlywiki. GTD fell apart for me very quickly. The sheer volume of process and a judicious set of rules just turned me off. The whole approach felt tedious to my brain and I quickly moved on.

The next thing to fail on me was Tiddlywiki itself. I had adapted it just enough to make it a rough but usable 2nd Brain and organizer. Unfortunately I kept losing stuff within the system and, in the end, had to be honest that it really wasn't working for my needs. As I used the system and added information, it became increasingly more difficult to find anything and ultimately turned into a jumbled mess. It took awhile, but it happened.

The Success

Interestingly the Moleskin as a timesheet had stuck with me to this point. After Tiddlywiki fell apart I thought "why not Moleskin?". It did work and I basically dedicated a single page to every day. What I setup is hilariously similar to the first Bullet Journal I setup years later. I didn't know it at the time but this proved to be the first tiny flames of a fire to come. This was also about the time I started keeping scratch paper and a pen at hand. Most everything written on the scrap paper was tossed but some did end up stashed in a set of file folders. Much like my Uni notes were managed in binders...

Another success was the launch of the Blackberry. One of the first smart phones that was visible enough for pretty much everyone to know about. It wasn't perfect but it allowed me to properly manage my personal todo list and be successful with task management again. In the end I moved on to a Nokia Symbian device and started to lean into using my phone as an organizer, to manage PIM, music player, gps and more. This was the start of my smart phone journey.

Note: I'm not going to say much more about todo management until later in this post. As I discovered as a child: A simple todo list that I can use as a churning list of concerns is all I really need. Assume I've maintained such a thing from this point forward. Later in the post I'll expand on two other approaches that are more interesting than "use Microsoft To Do / Tasks".

A Deviation, Experiment, Total Failure

Despite my attempts, I still was lacking a proper, digital 2nd Brain. This was a growing problem and needed solving. I also hadn't kept up my 2nd Brain over time so I was essentially starting over from scratch. I backed up what I had and set about finding a path forward.

Joplin (Deviation)

I briefly looked at Joplin for my 2nd Brain and even did some initial migration work. It's a really nice, straight forward note taking system that I really like. Unfortunately I had developed a strong need for my data to be synced to my smart phone and Joplin just didn't have good options for me at the time.

I was successful enough with Joplin, independent of sync, that I *still recommend* folk take a look at it.

Android (Experiment)

Sometime in this era I switched to Android and settled in for the long haul. Todo management was handled by a now-defunct app and I wasn't using my 2nd Brain on Android (yet).

I *did* dive into the world of Android with active styluses and managed to discover Grafitti had been ported to Android and there were some note taking apps that did pretty good with a proper stylus. Unfortunately this experiment always ended in frustration and non-use. It was a good experiment but ultimately the technology wasn't able to meet my needs.

I had hoped to find a way to use a stylus for note taking and it did not go well due to various confounding factors.

Evernote (Total Failure)

Evernote was the first non-wiki styled setup I used for a 2nd Brain. At the time, it was the best of the best and worked quite well. I'm told it *still* is a good system, even if not "the best" these days. It felt a lot like Voodoo Pad but less flexible in terms of nesting and cross linking. I was no longer an OSX user at this point so I couldn't fall back to Voodoo Pad.

With Evernote I was able to migrate the portions of my 2nd Brain I needed and wanted pretty easily. I even got sync to my phone which proved hugely beneficial. Unfortunately I quickly ran into the fact that, at the time, Evernote wanted you to tag things instead of using folders. I've never done well with tags and, to this day, struggle with them as anything but secondary metadata.

Once I hit this wall with Evernote; things unraveled, I stopped engaging with my 2nd Brain (again) and I started looking for alternatives.

Version 3.0

OneNote

As Evernote was starting to fail for me I bought a Microsoft Surface Pro slate styled tablet. I had shifted to ultra books and netbooks at the time as my main computers. The Surface Pro met my requirements *and* included a proper stylus while remaining light and small like an ultra book.

Microsoft had also gotten OneNote in a position to fully displace Evernote for me. OneNote works almost exactly like a paper notebook and has an incredible amount of flexibility. I spent a bit of time creating a layout that worked for how I engage with my 2nd Brain and I was able to fully migrate to OneNote from Evernote. I did adjust things over time but, at the core, I modeled my way of thinking within OneNote with great success.

OneNote also got Android support and sync support which allowed me to work with my 2nd Brain when I wasn't at my main computer or desk. This turned into a feedback loop that reinforced using my 2nd Brain heavily. Even more so than I had with Voodoo Pad years prior.

I even got around to tinkering with the Surface Pro stylus in OneNote and discovered I really liked the setup. I liked it enough that I started taking my Surface Pro to meetings and taking notes directly within OneNote.

It worked so well when they installed OneNote on my computer at my job, I almost instantly stopped using a Moleskin and bought a Wacom Cintique so I could more effectively use OneNote on the job.

I went "all in".

Android Redux

As I was gaining my footing with OneNote something interesting happened with Android. The stylus situation on Android got significantly better. To the point I was able to buy Adonit styluses and use my non-stylus phone as a drawing and writing surface. It wasn't perfect but it worked well enough that I kept an Adonit stylus in my bag at all times. OneNote on Android also had stylus support. I was *finally* able to get a generally usable, mobile stylus setup that worked for my needs.

I also, eventually, had the pleasure of owning a Microsoft Surface Duo which allowed me to really lean into Android with a stylus for OneNote work. This was so successful for me that I was able to stop using a laptop. I now just use an Android device with proper stylus and a desktop computer. Yes, a folding Android phone undid my need for a laptop.

Paradigm shifting to say the least.

Intermission

The next large chunk of this text is all about organization systems and non-common book notebooks. I used OneNote throughout this time and kept up my 2nd Brain during this period.

However, my 2nd Brain became more of an archive styled common book than an active, living common book during this period.

Present Tense?

The following section related to analog and paper methodologies will include a lot of present tense. When my health hassles aren't crippling the use of my arm for handwriting, I *still* use analog methods heavily. Particularly "scratch (working) paper" and an every day carry pocket notebook. I may not be able to use them reliably but when afforded opportunity, I use them to ensure my skill with analog methods stays sharp. It also helps ensure my handwriting skills don't fade over time.

Rediscovering Analog

This period of my journey is all about the analog.

During this time I was in meetings regularly, I was dealing with ongoing health problems that had me in and out of doctors offices, I was doing spec work, I was managing other humans, I had become an open source software maintainer and more.

I was busy and I needed a fast way to note things to deal with later. OneNote fell apart when I added this requirement. I discovered that my approach to OneNote, despite my efforts, wasn't usable for managing my daily churn. I needed hours of battery life, fast sync and "immediately accessible". At the time, the technology just couldn't keep up with my daily churn needs.

I ended up developing an analog setup that allowed me to manage the non-stop churn of my day to day without losing my mind. At the end of the day, I'd go through and cull anything noteworthy into OneNote for 2nd Brain needs and purposes. The old adage "the right tool for the job" very much applied to my situation. OneNote was the right tool for my 2nd Brain but not for the daily churn. Analog proved to be the right tool for my daily churn.

The analog layout I developed, combined with OneNote as a 2nd Brain, was so successful for me that I've written heavily about it on this blog. It was so successful I bothered to document it and memorize it. It was so successful I continue to point people at this setup as a starting point for developing their own analog system(s). It's that flexible and powerful. Especially if your Autistic and/or ADHD.

Note: this is a good starting point for analog. Just be sure to keep what works and toss what doesn't. "Adapt it and make it your own."

Handwriting

Before getting into the specifics of my analog setup, it's important to point out I re-learned cursive handwriting, as an adult, early in my analog journey.

In grade school I was taught cursive handwriting. I was one of the last cohorts to be taught cursive in grade school. Despite being taught cursive, I didn't use it much outside of any school related requirements. Cursive, even then, was fading from collective consciousness and it quickly became clear "reading cursive" was a dying skill, let alone writing in cursive. Because of this I ended up developing a fast way of writing "printed letters" that was... well it is borderline illegible and definitely not accessible to others when writing fast.

When I rediscovered analog and started using analog notebooks heavily, I ultimately found "printed writing" to be cumbersome, slow and mildly painful for both short and long writing sessions. I was writing fast and most others struggled to read my handwriting so the whole "accessible to others" desire I had in mind at the start of this process quickly became a non-factor.

I did a small amount of research and re-discovered the fact cursive handwriting can be "better" if you're writing a lot and... I was writing A Lot during this period.

I also discovered there are a few forms of shorthand as well as a few forms of "phonetic writing" that can be even faster than "standard cursive". As much as I'd *still* love to learn a couple of these systems, they would involve a lot of work to memorize and learn to use properly. Because they were even more involved to learn than cursive, I started with re-learning cursive handwriting.

Ultimately I found standard cursive handwriting to be sufficient and more accessible to my brain.

Learning Cursive (Again)

"American Cursive Handwriting" by Michael Sull is one of the best, if not the best, book for learning cursive handwriting. I bought the combo teacher + student workbook version and worked through it every night from start to finish.

As long as you can "write at a 5th grade (USA) level (printing or cursive)", you can work through this book. It is built around deliberate practice and guides you through learning cursive handwriting. It can feel like a bit of a slog at times but the centering of deliberate practice is important. Deliberate practice has been shown to be the *best* approach to mastering a skill. Writing is a skill and Sull does an amazing job ensuring you can develop and hone writing as a skill.

The book's "end point" is when you can fluidly write cursive within a 4 or 5 mm line rule (aka: small).

This was one of the best things I bothered to learn as an adult. It sped up my writing, made it more legible and I can write in small spaces reliably. Wins all around and a huge help when going all-in on analog notebooks and organizers.

A Quick Note On Paper

When I work on paper there are a few things that are universal for me. I have settled upon very specific papers and paper sizes that I use. These things haven't changed in a very long time and I expect will never change. The below are my standards and you can assume any discussion of analog uses these standards.

- I *only* use Tomoe River paper as scratch paper. This is *not* hyperbole.
- I prefer paper with a bit of bite and texture for non-scratch paper.
- I use blank sheets of paper for scratch paper.
- I use loose sheets of paper for scratch paper (tear out or truly loose).
- I use dot grid layouts with a 5mm grid.
- I prefer the A5 size in general.
- I prefer the A4 size for long form writing tasks, like blog posts and other dense writing.
- I get along with the Field Notes and Travler's (both standard and passport) notebook sizes and they are the easiest to carry around on the go for me. I use these sizes heavily despite my preference for A5 sized pages.

Note: I spent a long time "trying all the things" when it comes to paper and selected what works best for *me*. There are not wrong answers here. If you go analog, try all the papers and writing utensils then select your preferences.

Scratch (Working) Paper

In the world of analog I quickly realized I have a strong need for "scratch paper" or "working paper". My ideas, thoughts and things I'm working on all benefit from an unstructured, open-ended area I can use for laying out my thoughts.

After I've laid out my thoughts and generally "thought things through", I distill the information into my actual notebooks. This allows me to churn my thoughts, make connections and generally organize my thinking and path(s) forward with out muddying the contents of my main notebooks.

For this churn, I use A4 and A5 clipboards loaded up with Tomoe River paper as well as leather envelops full of fresh, loose sheets of Tomoe River paper. Tomoe River paper is super light weight yet incredibly durable and recyclable. I adore the stuff and keep a stockpile on-hand at all times. For writing instrument I tend to use pen with water proof, archive grade ink or 2mm pencil lead in a lead holder.

The clipboards and loose paper let me write on a proper surface pretty much anywhere and I can spread out the pages looking for connections and cross referencing. Thanks to the leather envelops being nearby I also have a never ending supply of fresh pages to fill as needed.

When using analog, damn near everything I work on starts life via a clipboard loaded with loose Tomoe River sheets. I *still* use this methodology despite using digital systems as my primaries these days. When my health hassles allow me to write, I instinctively reach for my clipboards instead of anything digital.

Every Day Carry

Given I used multiple notebooks heavily across multiple topics (more on this below), I quickly ran into problems with "on the go" use. I'm no longer a student carrying around a Timbuk2 messenger bag full of binders. I'm a human with a job, responsibilities at home and more. I also prefer a cross body styled purse such as the Pacsafe Vibe 150 Sling Pack which has enough room for my every day carry needs but not enough space for the notebooks I kept.

I ended up settling on a pocket notebook for my every day carry (edc) analog needs. Specifically I chose the Traveler's lightweight paper refill and Field Notes as my notebook types, a leather cover, clicker pen and a lead holder. I set this up so I have the notebooks in the cover, an Ohto 0.4mm rollerball refill in the pen as well as a 2mm HB lead in the lead holder.

This is super helpful as the Ohto refills are smooth rollerballs and use a water resistant ink (once dry) so spills and light rain are a non-issue. They are the same size as Pilot G2 refills so the pen in my edc bag is Pilot G2 refill compatible, one of the most commonly available refills. If I run out of ink on the go, I can easily find a replacement refill, even if it's not my preferred refill. Pencil is water proof and allows for shading which is great when I end up in a wet environment or I need to sketch something with nuance. Traveler's passport sized refills and Field Note notebooks were *designed* to be pocket notebooks so they Just Work for my needs. The leather cover adds a bit of protection to the notebooks which further increases their durability and ability to live in my bag for months, if not years, without problems related to wear. The cover also has pockets for loose paper scraps, receipts, my government id and my bank card. It can double as a wallet if desired.

Note: the Traveler's passport notebook size is slightly smaller than the Field Notes notebooks and the lightweight paper form is Tomoe River paper that can be torn out. Additionally, the Traveler's passport sized covers are *usually* big enough to cover Field Notes notebooks too. You can *usually* get away with mixing and matching Traveler's passport sized items with Field Notes notebooks and vice versa.

My use of this edc notebook is pretty straight forward. I used the left notebook for transient thoughts that are culled immediately upon me regaining access primary notebook(s) when I'm no longer on the go. The right notebook I use for "bigger thoughts" that are more than simple, transient snippets. I usually flesh out smaller topics in the right notebook, particularly expansions of todo items that I then transcribe into my main notebook(s) once I feel I have a reasonable expansion complete. Basically the left insert is "scratch / working paper" and the right is a portable version of the clipboard setup I use at my desk.

Even though I have health hassles, I *still* keep this edc setup in my purse *always*. It's proven to be useful, helpful and an amazing safety net when my digital devices run out of battery. This is probably the *single most important* component of my analog setup. It has never failed me, it's flexible in nature and durable (in every sense).

Bullet Journal

Those familiar with Bullet Journal will know there are an infinite number of ways to layout a Bullet Journal, layouts can use multiple notebook paradigms and, generally speaking, Bullet Journal is highly adaptable, personal and takes time to hone for an individual's preferences and needs. If you go down the path of Bullet Journal, there is *no* wrong approach. Just a series of ideas and suggestions that may or may not work for an individual. Use what works, toss what doesn't work. Just be honest and try things until you find an approach that works for you.

When I work with analog I mainly use a Bullet Journal that is setup as an organizer and faux common book. I keep a very simple form of Bullet Journal as it helps me stay focused and boxes in my AuDHD enough to keep it in line but also leaves some wiggle room for creativity and "shower thoughts" to flourish when appropriate.

Multiple Notebooks

It should be noted: I kept multiple notebooks. The multiple notebook paradigm allowed me to have "zones of focus" and helped me avoid conflating areas of life I tend to keep separate, such as my job and home life.

Multiple notebooks also helped keep the size of my notebooks from becoming overwhelming or too large to use away from my desk. For example: when going to medical appointments I could grab my purse and medical notebook without problem. If I had also had "daily life" as part of this notebook, it'd have been far to thick to just "grab and go". Portability was, and still is, very important for me.

Key notebooks I kept are:

- Daily Life
- Job
- Medical / Health
- Travel

Noteworthy Specifics

I used the same writing utensil for all my notebooks. I used a Lamy Safari Extra Fine fountain pen filled with Platinum Carbon Black ink. The pen allowed me to write cursive smoothly and in small sizes. The ink is archive grade and water proof so I didn't have to worry about spills. On rare occasion I'd use my every day carry pencil for writing.

I used standard Traveler's sized notebooks with one exception: my travel notebook. The travel notebook used the Traveler's passport size to help keep it smaller and more portable which I needed when traveling.

Notebook Layout

Each of my notebooks were laid out identically. It turns out I have a reasonably open ended way of engaging with a notebook that is generally loose with some guard rails to keep me from going down rabbit holes or indulging wasteful deviations.

My specific notebook layout is deceptively simple. I use a simple leather cover, pen loop attachment, 3 notebook refills and a file folder insert. I have one notebook refill on the left, another on the right and in the center I have the file folder insert wrapped around the center notebook refill.

I use this layout for all of my "working notebooks" including my daily life notebook, my job notebook, my medical notebook and a travel notebook.

Notebook Use

When it came to using these notebooks I had a specific workflow that proved very successful for my needs in both a notebook and organizer.

The left most refill was Tomoe River paper that could be torn out (Traveler's Lightweight Paper Refill to be specific). I used this refill for transient notes, things I needed to transcribe to other notebooks or my 2nd Brain or my contact list or… you get the idea. I was judicious in tearing out the pages once the contents were addressed and I churned through this refill regularly. It was my most used refill and acted as a topical every day carry notebook. I still kept my edc pocket notebook "on me" at all times but when I had my "Daily Life" and "Day Job" notebooks at hand, I tended to use them for edc notebook needs instead of my pocket notebook.

The center most refill was where my "churn" happened. In my daily life and job notebooks I wrote down my todo list and key calendar appointments in this refill every morning. I also used this refill as a daily log in my medical notebook as I needed a daily log, not daily todo list for my medical notebook. I dedicated at least a full page of this refill to each day and it acted as my main organizer and main reference point over the course of a day. As I completed items, I marked them done and if I had items that weren't complete, I'd copy them to the next day's page to be addressed. When I replaced this refill, I performed my usual "copy forward in the morning" operation and continued on normally.

The right most refill served two purposes: misc notes and a long term todo tracker.

I'd write any notes related to the items in the center refill so I could expand or add detail to my daily todo items. I also worked through difficult problems over time as notes and more within this refill. I even kept healthcare appointment notes and meeting notes in this refill. This was "the details" section of my notebooks.

Tracking my longer term todo items in this refill is a strange approach but it worked for me. Some things just take a long time to complete and I didn't want long-term tasks on my daily task list due to my brain "vapor locking" if a todo list gets too long and/or dense. Rather than interweaving this list or leaving gaps at the start of the refill, I put it at the *end* of the right refill and I wrote from bottom to top and the pages flowed from right to left. It was a form of mirror writing and allowed me to curate my longer term todo list without affecting or getting in the way of my notes or daily todo list.

When I replaced this refill, I copied the long term todo list to the new refill and any notes I needed or wanted to persist forward.

Another important thing I did was cross reference and use a set of symbols to tell me the state of information within the notebook. I used pretty simple symbols that sprung forth naturally as I used my notebooks over time. They ebbed and flowed with time but I generally knew what they meant, even if they weren't wholly consistent. If you go down the analog path, consider developing your own symbols to help you manage the information within your notebook.

A Quick Note On "Symbols"

Most everyone I know who keeps analog anything ultimately develops a set of symbols they use to help annotate their writing. I strongly recommend looking into this and developing your own set of symbols that help clue you into things like "moved to another notebook", "complete", "carried forward", "see expansion in notes refill" and similar.

I also recommend creating a legend and keeping a copy in every notebook. At some point you'll need to refer back to your legend and it'll be a huge help when the need arises. For example: I have a symbol I use to denote "rare but critical health event" which isn't used often enough to have memorized but it's on my legends so I can use the symbol when the need arises. Keeping a legend also clues me into meanings of symbols I no longer use as the symbols I use have changed over time.

This will end up being very individual so I won't put forth my personal symbols. However, they are a huge help when working with analog setups. Especially for cross reference needs and tracking completion.

Filled Refills & Archival

Whenever I filled a refill in my notebooks I took care to go through the pages looking for anything I missed carrying forward, things I wanted to archive in my 2nd Brain and similar. I'd dedicate time to go through and review the *whole* refill. I did this when my 2nd Brain, the fresh refill and filled refill were all at hand. Usually in the evenings.

As I went through the filled refill I'd transcribe things into my 2nd Brain or the fresh refill. Kind of a final wrap up and review of everything I had written over time.

I rarely kept a copy of filled refills as I had transcribed the information into my 2nd Brain which acted, at the time, as an archival common book or into a refill I was going to actively use day to day. The only refills I tended to keep were ones related to my health issues as I wanted as many redundant copies of that information as possible. I also use archive grade writing materials and know that my written medical notes are safe for longer than I'll be alive.

Other Experiments

While I was heavily using analog supplies I did some experimenting and tinkering and more. I discovered there are a few ways to write in a way that's water proof, I discovered my preference for archive grade writing supplies and I even developed an anti-bad habit notebook.

I covered a lot of ground and rather than re-hash what I've already written; I direct readers to the Analog section of my blog. There is a lot of additional information and experimentation documented in other posts.

Personal Journal (Diary?)

One thing that popped out of my heavy use of notebooks to manage daily life was the development of a daily journal habit. It could also be considered a diary depending on how you contextualize the information within. Either way: I write in an A5 notebook almost daily.

As already stated: I have health hassles. The kind that take over 15 years to be properly diagnosed. My main health hassle causes a ton of secondary symptoms and can easily hide in plain sight if doctors refuse to listen or think they somehow know better. Because of this I started keeping a health notebook and instead of a daily task list I kept a daily log of symptoms. As I worked on this log it became clear I was dealing with some kind of horrific anxiety problem with an unknown cause.

When I discussed this discovery with some medical professionals they suggested I morph my symptom logging habit into a daily journal or diary. Daily journals and diaries have been shown to help with anxiety in some humans. Daily journaling did help my anxiety and years later I would discover this anxiety problem is caused by my primary health hassle and was *never* "in my head". I owe this discovery to the fact my daily health log became a daily journal which ultimately exposed my primary health hassle.

When I tried daily journaling I quickly discovered that I was tracking noteworthy health symptoms as well as documenting my trials, tribulations and successes over time. This notebook became the place I went to unpack and process daily life. These writings been very beneficial for my mental health and happiness over time. So much so that, to this day, I will fight my health hassles so I can scribble in my journal with a pen. It doesn't matter how bad my health gets, I make time for this notebook and I'll go to hell and back to scratch out some words. Even if the scribbles are barely legible due to my arm tremors.

Early on I tried a number of different notebooks, paper sizes, layouts and whatnot. I ultimately settled on a 5mm dot grid Leuchtturm1917 notebook in A5 size. I also use an Extra Fine Pilot Vanishing Point fountain pen with Platinum Carbon Black ink. The nib of the pen is fine enough to allow me to write comfortably within a 5mm rule. Additionally, the notebook, paper and ink are all archive grade. This is because I've been known to spill my water and coffee across my desk. I'd like these writings to be persistent despite any liquid spills.

I highly recommend daily journals / diaries. They are essentially the same thing: a place to process daily life. It can be very beneficial and I recommend trying it for a month. This habit has been incredibly beneficial for me over time. One thing to note: if you find yourself in loops of ruminating and/or essentially "thought spiraling". *stop and assess the why*. Thought spirals are usually an indication a daily journal / diary is going to become a problem over time.

Analog Art

Beyond my daily journal I also setup an analog sketch book. Strathmore sketch pads, Copic Sketch Markers, De'Atramentis inks, Staedtler 2mm lead holder and Staedtler Mars Carbon leads wrapped in a waxed canvas cover.

I set this up to practice Zentangle and coloring. Two things I discovered while looking into why a daily journal helped my anxiety. Zentangle and coloring help with anxiety too. Enough that I made it a point to setup a proper sketchbook for myself.

I highly recommend Zentangle and coloring. They can be quite meditative and can quiet the brain some.

Health Hassles...

I have a few health hassles that went untreated for over 15 years despite my efforts to self-advocate and find doctors who would be willing to work with me. These hassles are also the kind that *get worse* when untreated. At my worst I was going into shock, on average, every 3 months. You read that right: at my worst I would regularly go into shock. These health hassles also caused a persistent, non-stop tremor in my writing arm. I'd have learned to write with my "off hand" except my tremor was so bad I couldn't reliably use my off hand to write. I couldn't use analog anything.

With analog I had built an approach to managing life that *worked* and made my life so much easier I cannot describe it in words. When my health took away my ability to use analog I panicked. Badly. I needed to find a new methodology that was digital and could reliably replace my analog notebooks. I also needed to re-visit my 2nd Brain as OneNote was starting to prove problematic as I had finally overshot its limits.

I was fucked.

Transitioning (Analog To Digital)

If it wasn't clear: I'm a giant nerd when it comes to notebooks and organizers. So much so that I pre-ordered "The Notebook: A History of Thinking on Paper" by Roland Allen as soon as I was made aware of its existence. Seriously: I stopped what I was doing, opened the Kobo website and pre-ordered the book without any hesitation.

I'm also clearly an "analog human" at heart who excels at bending the analog to personal need(s).

Unfortunately my health hassles forced me to migrate from analog to digital. This was not an easy process and I got very lucky in that I *am* an organizer and notebook nerd who had kept up on "the digital" despite not using it for anything more than a simple archival common book.

I didn't want to "go digital", I was forced to go digital in order to survive. I *require* a good organizer and notebook setup. Digital, analog, whatever. These are things that make it so I can function within the world in which I live.

That said, I *do appreciate and recognize the value of digital*. It *can* be adapted to needs, it just takes more effort. Effort I was forced to put forth.

Digital On The Job

As my health got worse, my Job got less involved. I worked with my employer to essentially change jobs. We worked together to find a role for me that minimized any problems caused by my health hassles, allowed me to work from home full time and generally worked to ensure my success as an employee.

Thanks to the fact I have an amazing employer, I was able to find a better place within the organization. It also changed my my organizer and notebook needs such that they essentially match my personal life needs.

You can assume anything I'm doing in the digital realm to address personal need is what I'm also doing at my job currently. The only difference is I do *not* sync anything to my phone. The data and information I need for my job only lives on the computer I use for my job.

On Digital Methodologies

There are some "core" methodologies that digital brings to the table. These core methods can range from the digital version of "free form" all the way into "so rigid it comes with a rule book".

Same as analog.

The Zooming Out Problem

The downside of digital is it's very difficult to "spread out and see what's going on" like you can with analog. With analog you can spread out your papers on the floor, a desk, wherever to get a much bigger, zoomed out view of everything when needed. Pop culture shows a cork board covered in papers and strings for a reason. "Zooming Out" is a very useful thing.

With digital... I don't have a proper solution for this, all I can say is: if you chop up your digital organization and notebook's into "zones" you can get close by having multiple zones open at the same time. Beyond that... there isn't a good or affordable (to us plebes at least) option available that I've seen to date.

If you require a way to "spread out across the desk/floor/etc" you will likely struggle with digital and I've not found a way to address this need.

Every other aspect of analog I've looked at, I've managed to re-implement digitally.

Free Form Editing

Simply put: open a text editor and start typing. Open a drawing app and start making marks on the canvas. Whatever you need. The sheer number of applications available across operating systems and device types is mind bending. You can choose your own adventure, so long as you're willing to try things and be honest about them working or not working for your needs.

The big pitfall with this is "scope creep". You can easily end up with a dozen different applications with different file formats and a huge tree of files / folders that create a mess that makes finding any information nearly impossible.

You'll need to be judicious in your workflows and organization scheme for this to work well over time.

Outline Editing

Outline editing is essentially list editing. You only ever have "a list" and each item within the list can be short or long or anywhere in between. This can be incredibly powerful and a lot of outline editors let you expand and collapse nodes so you can focus on higher levels or lower levels within the list's tree.

This forces a bit of structure on your information and can prevent things from getting too "out of control" when compared to free form editing. Especially within individual files.

Zettelkasten

Simply put: a web of information and/or a mind map. There is a link to the Zettelkasten site below that does a far better job of explaining the methodology than I can.

If you're into webs of information, mind maps, and having a basic way to "zoom out"... this method is for you. The "zoom out" isn't quite the same as you get with analog but it may be good enough for some.

I've looked into this method, ported some of my data into it and ultimately struggled to be effective with it. It's too different from my modes of thinking to be practical *for me*. Notably, I regularly recommend this method to people whenever discussing digital systems.

A lot of humans use Zettelkasten with great success. It's worth a look.

Other Methods

As noted early in this post there are methods like Getting Things Done. There are also a bunch of other methods like the Eisenhower Matrix, Kanban, Pomodoro, etc. They all are different ways of approaching organization and notebook keeping that can be used within the digital realm.

These methods vary in complexity and I've struggled to use them in a meaningful way as stand-alone methods. They are worth looking into but I tend to recommend folk find their own path forward. The only time I tend to recommend pre-canned methods is when someone is obsessive about process. Hint: few are.

One important point I should make: I do use aspects of these methods but I've never been successful going "all in" with a single method. Aspects of these methods that I do use were honed independently of any deep research. I just happened upon some useful components while developing my own approach to the digital.

I do recommend looking at pre-existing, rigid methods in the digital realm. Much like Bullet Journal, there are a lot of approaches and ideas. The trick is using what works and tossing what doesn't work.

An Elephant

I avoided discussing files and folders in the above because it's a borderline religious topic in my experience. If you go looking, you'll find no end of options and approaches for managing files and folders and similar concepts in the digital realm.

Systems like Dewey Decimal, Johnny Decimal and others can help you manage your files and folders. I leave it to the reader to figure out what works best for them.

I use a few different approaches (zones, dates, modified Johnny Decimal, others) and they are specific to how my mind indexes information. I *strongly* recommend you spend time with file and folder organization and work towards an approach that works for *you*. There is no wrong option so long as it works for you, just be honest about whether an approach works or does not work.

Going Digital

One Handed Typing

Given I have a terrible arm tremor... I struggle to type with two hands. I struggled so badly early on in my health journey that I learned to type one handed. I did a lot of work in the one handed typing world and ended up designing my own one handed keyboard hardware *and* I forked a well known one handed keyboard layout to further enhance it so I could be more effective as a programmer when typing one handed. I currently use my forked keyboard layout, Ardux, as my primary keyboard layout.

Even though I've regained some function of my arm, I *still* type one handed by default. It's that ingrained and important to me. Especially when my health hassles flare as they cause my arm tremor to be very problematic.

This is important for 2 reasons:

1. I can't type 120 - 140 words per minute one handed. I type 40 - 60 one handed. That's half the speed I was used to.
2. I rely on a trackball (non moving mouse) heavily to use my computer now. If a program's UI is too textual it gets in my way and becomes a hinderance.

These are accessibility concerns for me and I don't faff about when it comes to ensuring they are accommodated by the programs I use day to day.

org-mode

Given OneNote was proving troublesome and I needed to find a digital system for my todo list, habit tracking and notebooks; I needed something flexible. Very flexible.

org-mode is an emacs editing mode that uses a nice markup syntax at its core. It's an outline editor but you can pretty reliably make individual items "dense" without worry. It has agendas that are amazing for helping manage a todo list or habit tracker. It's incredibly tunable as the configuration file is actually computer code so you *program* your config. org-mode is flexible. It can adapt to almost any need or workflow.

It's also been around for a very long time ("forever" in the land of tech) and is generally a great environment to work within.

I was able to port *all* my OneNote data and *all* my notebook information into org-mode over the course of a month. It took about 3 months to dial in the config to my desires, preferred methods and needs but I got there. I used org-mode for multiple years for *everything*.

Seriously: org-mode is *highly competent* and I regularly recommend it to more technically inclined individuals.

Unfortunately, with time, there were a few things about org-mode that I found to be annoying and grating. I also discovered a *huge problem* of my own making one afternoon.

org-mode is designed to be used on a "real computer", not "a phone". Due to this I struggled to manage all but my todo list and habit tracking on my phone. I lost my 2nd Brain on mobile. I was ok with this to a point but over time it became very problematic for me. The app startup time was also slow due to the fact emacs (the editor part of org-mode) is *not* designed to run on Windows and is a pretty trash experience on Windows which happens to be my main operating system.

Emacs is also highly textual, keyboard driven and eschews any kind of meaningful mouse support in my experience. As I started to understand my accessibility needs (read: one handed typing and competent mouse support) I became more and more annoyed with emacs and org-mode. I can live with some annoyance but it doesn't help me want to continue using a program long-term.

Fortunately(?) I discovered a big problem with my org-mode data one afternoon. I was already annoyed that my one handed typing kept triggering odd behaviors whenever I typo'd. These were generally non problematic but one afternoon I discovered a typo had disconnected a large chunk of my 2nd Brain from my "main index" page I used as a starting point for navigating my 2nd Brain data. This caused me to "dig in" a bit and I found a lot of information I had simply forgotten about because it had gotten lost within the outline editor.

org-mode also didn't work well for anything but pure text for me. File attachments, inline graphics and more were just not a good experience within org-mode for me. Things I use heavily within my 2nd Brain.

Mix the nearly lost data, strange behaviors caused by typo's, difficulties managing attachments and nearly non-existent support for mouse input and you've got a big problem. A very big problem. It was time for me to seek alternatives.

Note: org-mode is a *fantastic* piece of software. I highly recommend looking into it.

Todoist

Simply put: I could have easily switched from org-mode to Todoist for todo and habit tracking. I could re-implement my current digital todo tracker, habit tracker and similar within Todoist without hassle. If I hadn't already solved the org-mode on mobile problem prior to discovering Todoist, I'd probably be using Todoist.

If you're looking for digital todo and habit tracking, start here.

Useable and Digital

Leaving org-mode behind was an endeavor. I spent a ton of time, energy, spoons, matches and all the things finding an usable alternative.

Thankfully I'm an honest, persistent asshole and was able to find an approach that *does* work for me. I just had to stitch together a few different applications to be successful.

Logseq + Orgzly Revived

Despite this section coming first, it was actually the last piece I addressed during my org-mode migration. I live and die by my todo list and habit tracking. These things exist independent of my notebooks currently. Given the importance of my todo / habit management and the fact they exist independent of my notebooks, I put this section first for clarity.

Currently Logseq + Orgzly Revived *are* my todo list and habit tracking. They are critical for my success with digital.

Orgzly Revived is an Android app that understands the org-mode file syntax and is an outline editor. It's very good at managing a todo list and tracking habits on a phone and has a useful search feature that can build competent agendas. I've been using this app since I first setup org-mode. Thankfully the investigations for my 2nd Brain migration also yielded a good alternative to org-mode on my computer. An alternative that let me re-use my existing Orgzly Revived setup as well as my existing sync setup.

Logseq is a cross platform outline editor that understands the org-mode file syntax. It's also really good at managing a todo list and tracking habits. It even has a built in query language that you can use to build very powerful agendas and other views. It stores data as plain text files that can be sync'd to my phone easily. Basically it's a more graphical form of org-mode for me. Exactly what I was looking for in a manager of my todo list and habit tracking on my computer.

As I spent time with Logseq, I was able to port my *entire* todo list and habit tracking setup from org-mode to Logseq, including the development of *better* agendas. Thanks to it speaking org-mode syntax I just aimed it at my existing org-mode data and made a few mild adjustments. The "hard part" was re-developing agendas and ensuring they are useful to me. This was a shockingly straight forward process that also let me continue to use my existing todo/habit sync as well as continue using Orgzly Revived.

You'll note I'm using outline editors here despite the fact outline editing caused me problems within org-mode. It turns out I leverage outline editing heavily for todo lists and habit tracking. It's how I organize such information in my headspace. However, this is the *only* place outline editing works for me.

Outline editing *is* valid but I've discovered it is only useful to *me* in specific contexts. Like my todo list management and habit tracking.

Obsidian

Simply put: Obsidian is a digital form of an analog notebook. In almost every sense.

To be more specific: Obsidian is a free form editor with a pretty standard file and folder tree for the data stored within. It also lets you have multiple "vaults" (notebooks) so you can chop up your data into zones like I had done with analog notebooks. It has a plugin system so you can extend the core functionality which has proven helpful. It also stores data as plain text files which really helps with non-native sync options.

It's worth looking at very closely and trying if you're looking for a digital notebook.

I was able to port *all* of my non-todo and non-habit data into Obsidian with minimal effort. The "hardest" part of my migration from org-mode was converting org-mode syntax to Markdown. It wasn't that hard, more tedious than anything. I even gained better mouse support, inline images, improved attachment handling and a hell of a lot more. Obsidian *is* the digital notebook I've wanted for decades.

Obsidian has a competent mobile app that's just as powerful as the desktop app. I use Obsidian heavily on both my computer and my phone. It really feels like they just tweaked the UI for mobile support without taking away any of the power or utility of the app. It's mind bendy how well the mobile app works for me.

There are even a few different sync options you can setup with Obsidian. I picked one that leverages my existing, self-hosted "cloud storage" but they have a built-in sync feature that's *actually affordable*. I tend to recommend folk pay for the official sync built into the app but rolling your own sync is also valid. I won't cover the specifics of sync as others have written about this topic at length.

Within Obsidian I setup 5 vaults:

- Art Composition Book
- Medical
- 2nd Brain
- Shower Thoughts

I think "2nd Brain" and "Medical" are pretty straight forward vaults. They are exactly what the name implies: my common book and my medical notebook. Nothing too fancy and broken up to allow for better focus and faster sync to my phone. I laid these out similarly to my analog notebooks with some influences drawn from my earlier forays into digital notebooks.

The "Shower Thoughts" vault should probably be called "EDC Notebook" as it's modeled after my analog edc notebook. It's a very simple, lean vault meant to be *fast* and *efficient*. I can sync this vault with my phone in under a minute, open it near instantly and start a new note with two taps on my phone or a single click on my computer. Like my analog edc notebook, this is *the* place where I jot down random thoughts, notes, etc as I go about my day. My other vaults are large, non-instantaneous to work with and full of secondary "stuff" that can easily pull my focus away from jotting down a note. They just don't work as pocket notebooks. This is exactly what I ran into with analog notebooks: The need for something small, fast, efficient to jot down information on the go. This vault addresses that need perfectly. It does such a good job I've published a free copy online that others can download and use.

The "Art Composition Book" is a blog post on it's own. However, there is more to this than my existing post puts forth.

As my health hassles worsened I lost my ability to do things like color, fill in dot to dot pages, practice Zentangle and draw. These things are what I reach for when trying to unwind or calm my brain. My art may not be "professional" but it helps. A Lot. Losing this was borderline devastating to me. Thankfully my time poking at slate styled laptops and active styluses on Android made me aware of Krita, an open source drawing app. Krita is an amazing application and I've managed to use it to color, fill in dot to dot images, practice Zentangle and draw. It runs on standard desktop OS's, Android tablets and works with active styluses on Android. I won't get into the specifics but it's safe to say I was able to leverage Krita to re-create all of my analog art workflows as digital.

The problem with digital art is you don't get a composition book or a sketch book that's easy to work with. You certainly can't just open to a page and faff about with your art. However, you *can* take an app like Obsidian and use it as a wrapper around your art. You can use it to manage the metadata related to each piece of art, create galleries of inspiration/ideas, create galleries of complete art, track in-progress art and more. Obsidian *can* be used as a digital art composition book.

The "Art Composition Book" vault *is* my digital art composition book. It works so well I published a free copy online that others can download and use. It's still a little bit clunkier to use than analog but it's usable. Especially for those of us who cannot engage with analog art. The published vault also includes all of my notes on how I manage my digital art workflows and how Obsidian and Krita work together to create an usable digital art composition book.

Android Success

If you're not aware, Samsung sells some amazing folding phones that have a stylus: the Galaxy Fold. I love this phone, it can be a phone, a small tablet with stylus or, with Dex, a full computer.

The key here is "small tablet with stylus". Combined with the Obsidian digital art comp book vault, I always have my art available to me. This allows me to work on my digital art the same way I used an analog sketchbook.

I cannot understate the importance of this and how it meets my needs and desires for practicing art. I've re-created my analog sketch book thanks to the Galaxy Fold and my digital art comp book Obsidian vault.

Zotero

One thing I've struggled with over the years is research. I never quite learned how to research in an effective manner. I can search online, I can dig through a book but I never quite found a way to research a topic in a way that worked well for me. Especially not if I needed to distill a large, complex topic into something more usable.

Zotero solved this problem for me. Strangely I wasn't trying to solve this problem but I *was* talking to friends about research papers and my desire to dive into the science literature for my health hassles. My friends were kind enough to point me in some good directions and one of those directions was Zotero.

Zotero is an application designed to help academic researchers with their work. It's particularly good at ingesting information and providing good workflows for note taking and annotations. It can work with pdf files, website snapshots and more.

I setup Zotero on a whim and started ingesting any open access research papers I could find related to my health conditions. As I was working through this process, I found myself needing to figure out a complex technical problem. I decided, on a second whim, to do this technical research within Zotero. I had also just finished going through the Johnny Decimal system and had ear marked it as "possibly useful, but only in specific circumstances for me".

Basically I nerd sniped myself into figuring out how to research.

I quickly discovered that Zotero's annotation and note support *worked for me* and using the Johnny Decimal system as inspiration, I was able to layout my notes, annotations and attachments to items in a way that was reasonable and sensible for my way of thinking.

I may not have done much research with analog methods but I definitely found a digital method that works brilliantly for my needs. It works so well that I've started to instinctively put materials into Zotero whenever I need to learn something new, work through a complex topic or generally distill information that I can then put into my 2nd Brain for reference later.

Drawing Tablets (Redux)

Simply put: XP-Pen, Huion and Wacom sell amazing drawing tablets with competent drivers on Windows. These drawing tablets greatly facilitate digital art and free form markup on documents.

I looped around to these well after I had sorted digital art on my Galaxy Fold device because I had a very specific, critical need: free form markup of documents. I needed the ability to have a stylus that worked with my computer. Badly.

After some research, I went with the Wacom One (Small) as it's close to the size of an A5 sheet of paper and has competent drivers. The size of this is arbitrary and based on my *personal* preferences. However…

One thing I noticed when revisiting drawing tablets was the fact I could constrain the tablet's active surface to only a portion of a monitor via the driver config. Given I have three 1440p monitors hooked up to my computer, this is a *critical* feature that allowed me to actually use a drawing tablet. I ended up setting the tablet active area to map to only 1/3 of my primary monitor. By doing this I can put a note taking app or a drawing app on 1/3 of my monitor and have it feel similar to what I was doing with analog sketch books and notebooks.

Saber

This app has saved me a *ton* of pain when it comes to "free form markup of documents". Saber is a note taking app that Just Works and gets the hell out of your way. It has page styles so you can have the drawing area look like liked paper, graph paper, dot grid and other layouts. It also has a few different pen/pencil types, a highlighter, eraser and more.

It's the epitome of a note taking app. A highly competent note taking app.

Given my health hassles, I'm full time work from home. I also work in healthcare developing electronic medical record systems.

My job requires me to work with dense specifications, trade secrets and some amount of health care data that can under *no circumstance* leave my work compute environment. I cannot print a spec, I cannot print an example of a bug/problem and I sure as shit cannot print anything that has protected health information present. I take this very seriously.

Given I cannot markup anything I work with as part of my job on paper, combined with my health hassles, I need a digital solution. This is why I revisited drawing tables and why I ended up finding Saber.

A drawing tablet combined with Saber's PDF import feature allows me to import any specs, any trade secrets, any examples of bugs/problems, etc and mark them up in a safe, secure manner. Saber's PDF import works amazing, the app is powerful but not overwhelming. I can scribble all over documents using a drawing tablet and not lose my mind with frustration along the way. I've even exported my marked up specifications to share with co-workers who were able to pickup were I left off without hassle.

Saber even has a whiteboard feature that behaves exactly like a white board mounted to a wall. I've used this feature to mock up a few things over time and I've used it's export feature to save the mock up for sharing with others.

Another subtle, but critical, item is the fact Saber has undo and redo operations. If my arm is being problematic, I can slowly but steadily scratch out letters on the page using undo to erase any bad scribbles caused by my arm tremor. It's tedious but it *is doable*. This is a huge help and has become critically important for me.

If you need a way to markup documents in a purely digital fashion: look at Saber. It's by far the best app I've used for this purpose over the years.

Tying Everything Together

Given I'm using 4 core digital apps (Logseq, Obsidian, Zotero, Saber) as my organizers and notebooks one may wonder how the hell I tie everything together and not lose things.

I cross reference heavily.

Logseq, Obsidian and Zotero all have URI handlers that allow me to link to any content stored within them. The link formats are well documented and start with `logseq://`, `obsidian://` or `zotero://`. When links to their content are clicked, they open directly to the linked content. Same as a website URL.

Saber doesn't have a URI handler that I've seen. However, the information within Saber is always an expanded form of a todo item or directly related to a note within Obsidian for me. I'll mark the todo or Obsidian note with a tag or a bit of detail alerting me to the fact there is information in Saber related to the item I'm looking at. The same as I'd do with analog.

It's a simple, elegant solution that actually works. When I first tried the URI handlers I was shocked at how reliably they worked and how easy it was to cross reference between the applications.

I also setup a 3rd party bridge that will pull my notes and annotations from Zotero and save the information as a note within Obsidian. This allows me to do my research within Zotero then draw down my notes and annotations into Obsidian to be distilled further and organized into a "final note" within my Obsidian vault. It's a really nice workflow and, even if not required, is very helpful for how I work.

For digital art, I work out of my Obsidian digital art comp book vault exclusively. It's my view into my digital art. Since I use the vault as a metadata wrapper around the actual digital art files, I don't lose anything. All my digital art "stuff" is within this Obsidian vault so it's easy to track and manage over time.

My "Shower Thoughts" Obsidian vault has a related habit in my Logseq habit tracking. The habit is simply "cull shower thoughts" and repeats daily. Basically at the end of my day, I open the Shower Thoughts vault, tease out any useful information and delete things judiciously to keep the vault as empty as possible. The notes in this vault tend to be stand alone but I will sometimes make mini cross references within the notes so I know the note is related to something I'm tracking elsewhere. It's not super robust but this isn't meant to be robust, it's meant to be useful and kept on top of day to day.

Parting Thoughts

That's everything, start to finish. This post is the result of *years* of effort, conversations, research and more. I'm definitely an organizer and notebook nerd. The above is what I've regularly told folk about over the years. This is the summary, the overview, the very definition of my approach to organizers and notebooks. Both past and present.

There are themes like the fact I always have a churning todo list, always have a pocket notebook and I always chop up my content into areas of focus. These are key needs that strongly influence how I setup organizers and notebooks. You may find them problematic, feel free to change the approach based on your need(s).

I skipped over some of the random testing I've done and I've skipped over some of the explorations I've taken. These are not noteworthy items. For example: everyone knows about Apple Notes or Google Keep. Everyone has seen a digital calendar solution of some form. Everyone has seen the highly specific "daily organizers" that are paper based. They are valid options to explore, I just don't feel a need to pontificate on the common, well known and well documented options available.

Yes, I call attention to some methods that work for me, specific supplies I've come to adore, I even call attention to specific apps that work for me. However, all of these have alternatives and the alternatives are highly visible and easily found if what I put forth doesn't work for you. My focus is on a bigger picture, not finer details.

I've *intentionally* avoided articulating some of the finer details of my approaches and setups. Knowing that I only use tags reliably within my medical notebook isn't particularly useful information. Nor is the fact I spent multiple months developing and tuning the digital art comp book. Nor is the fact I regularly blend date based and non-date based file names depending on need and sorting requirements. These details detract from the main point: how I setup my organizers and notebooks overall. The "finer details" are highly individual and I implore others to try, fail and iterate. It's the only way to fine tune an approach such that you'll achieve long-term success. You'll know pretty quickly if a method will or won't work. Fine tuning comes *after* you find the higher level method(s) that "clicks" for your brain.

A subtle point of this post was to ensure you know you're not alone when it comes to the pain of developing an organizer and/or notebook. Anyone who has a setup they adore and swear by has put a lot of effort into developing and honing their setup. It takes time and a willingness to try, fail and iterate in order to find an approach such that it becomes something you swear by long-term.

If you take away anything from this post, take away the fact there are options and some will work for you, some won't and there is *no wrong way* to setup an organizer or notebook. Take your time, try things, adjust, adapt and hone your setup. You will get there, just be honest and persistent.

Links and Websites

The below are in [roughly] chronological order.

- Bullet Journal (BuJo): https://bulletjournal.com/
- VoodooPad: https://www.voodoopad.com/
- Tiddlywiki: https://tiddlywiki.com/

- Getting Things Done (GTD): https://gettingthingsdone.com/
- OneNote: https://www.onenote.com
- Drawing tablets
  - Wacom Cintiq & One (Small): https://www.wacom.com/en-us
  - Huion: https://www.huion.com/
  - Xp-Pen: https://www.xp-pen.com/
- Moleskin: https://www.moleskine.com/en-us/
- Evernote: https://evernote.com/
- Joplin: https://joplinapp.org/
- Microsoft To Do / Tasks: https://to-do.office.com/tasks/
- Adonit mini: https://www.adonit.net/collections/styluses-for-android/products/mini-4
- Adonit dash: https://www.adonit.net/collections/styluses-for-android/products/dash-4
- Pacsafe Vibe 150: https://pacsafe.com/collections/slings-waist-packs/products/vibe-150-anti-theft-sling-pack
- Timbuk2 Messenger Bags: https://www.timbuk2.com/
- Field Notes: https://fieldnotesbrand.com/
- Traveler's Notebooks: https://travelerscompanyusa.com/
- Leuchtturm1917: https://www.leuchtturm1917.us/
- Zentangle: https://zentangle.com/
- Strathmore sketch pads: https://www.strathmoreartist.com/
- Ohto Rollerball Refills: https://www.ohto.co.jp/english/product/c-304/
- Lamy Safari: https://www.lamy.com/en/lamy-safari/
- Pilot Vanishing Point: https://pilotpen.us/Product?0=40&1=30&cid=297
- Platinum Carbon Black: https://platinumpenusa.com/
- Copic Sketch Markers: https://www.copicmarkers.com/
- De'Atramentis Document Inks: https://www.de-atramentis.com/en/document-ink-84/
- Staedtler 2mm Lead Holder: https://www.staedtler.com/intl/en/products/pencils-and-accessories/mechanical-pencils-and-lead-holders/mars-technico-780-leadholder-780-c-bkp6/
- Staedtler Mars Carbon Lead: https://www.staedtler.com/us/en/products/pencils-and-accessories/pencil-leads/mars-carbon-200-lead-m200/
- org-mode: https://orgmode.org/
- My org-mode config: https://git.kemonine.info/kemonine/emacs
- Zettelkasten: https://zettelkasten.de/
- Johnny Decimal: https://johnnydecimal.com/
- Ardux: https://ardux.io/
- org-roam: https://www.orgroam.com/
- Todoist: https://todoist.com/
- Obsidian: https://obsidian.md/
  - Shower Thoughts template vault: https://git.kemonine.info/kemonine/digital-edc-notebook
  - Digital art composition book template vault: https://git.kemonine.info/kemonine/digital-art-composition-book
- LogSeq: https://logseq.com/
- Zotero: https://www.zotero.org/
- Saber: https://saber.adil.hanney.org/
- Krita: https://krita.org/
- Productivity methods: https://todoist.com/productivity-methods
- The Notebook: A History of Thinking on Paper
  - Digital ISBN: 9781782839156
  - Hardcover ISBN: 9781788169325
  - Paperback ISBN: 9781771966283
- Prior blog posts related to this topoic
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2018-03-29-anti-bad-habit-notebook/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2018-04-01-analog-every-day-carries/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2018-04-02-a-riff-on-bullet-journals/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2020-06-22-american-cursive-handwriting/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2020-06-29-waterproof-writing/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2020-07-06-tamoe-river-redux/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2020-07-08-interesting-if-not-odd-discoveries/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2020-08-03-pocket-notebooks-and-every-day-carries/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2021-04-07-organizers-univesally-stink/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2022-10-27-personal-knowledge-base-wiki/
  - https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2022-11-03-digital-bullet-journal/

- https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2023-02-17-android-org-agenda/
- https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2023-10-08-pacsafe-vibe-150-sling-pack-mini-review/
- https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2024-08-31-drawing-tablet-mini-review/
- https://blog.kemonine.info/art/2024-09-19-digital-art-composition-book/
- https://blog.kemonine.info/blog/2024-11-16-health-hassle-handwriting/