#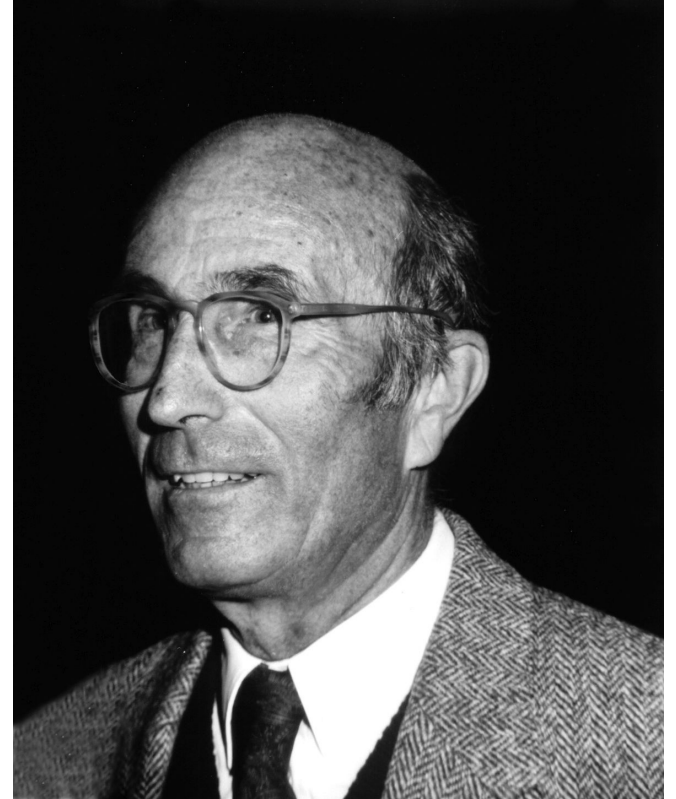 How To Take Smart Notes: One Simple Technique To Boost Writing, Learning And Thinking - For Students, Academics And Nonfiction Book Writers

Sönke Ahrens

Context

The zettlekasten/slip-box method used by **Niklas Luhmann**. Credits his profilic work to this method.

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2. use this second brain to form meaningful connections and generate new ideas
3. write about the new ideas using the second brain to pull out necessary information

Author's Prior Beliefs

Importance Of Writing

Writing is essential for thinking clearly.

"Notes on paper, or on a computer screen [...] do not make contemporary physics or other kinds of intellectual endeavor easier, they make it possible … no matter how internal processes are implemented [...you..] need to understand the extent to which the mind is reliant upon external scaffolding." (Levy 2011, 270)

"One cannot think without writing." (Luhmann 1992, 53)

Limitations Of Memory Storage

Number of "standalone" facts that can be held in memory is limited.

> *""The problem with reading academic texts seems to be that we need not the short-term memory, but the long-term memory to develop reference points for distinguishing the important things from the less important, the new information from the mere repeated. But it is of course impossible to remember everything." (Luhmann 2000, 154f)*

"The Flow"

A (reasonable) belief that organization of workflow matters.

> *"A good structure enables flow, the state in which you get so completely immersed in your work that you lose track of time and can just keep on going as the work becomes effortless (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Something like that does not happen by chance." (Ahrens, 2017)*

> *"I never force myself to do anything I don't feel like. Whenever I am stuck, I do something else."*
> *Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann et al., 1987, 154f.)*

(Discussion) Reasons For Taking Notes

- record information (meticulously or ideas for long term).
- engagement notes - aids memory/thinking
- offloading - act as a reminder

"After collecting notes for a while in the way most people do, commenting in the margins of a text or collecting handwritten notes by topic, Luhmann realised his note-taking was not leading anywhere. So he turned note-taking on its head. Instead of adding notes to existing categories or the respective texts, he wrote them all on small pieces of paper, put a number in the corner and collected them in one place: the slip-box."
(Ahrens, 2017)

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http://www.dansheffler.com/blog/2014-07-21-two-goals-of-note-taking/

Zettlekasten Method

Consists of three types of notes, with distinct roles. Quite simple.

1. Fleeting notes.
2. Literature notes
3. Permanent notes

Fleeting Notes

A reminder of a (partial) thought process, offloading it from working memory.

Literature Notes

Short notes on key results/ideas/interesting points in a paper in a few sentences.

> *"Whenever he read something, he would write the bibliographic information on one side of a card and make brief notes about the content on the other side (Schmidt 2013, 170). These notes would end up in the bibliographic slip-box."*
> *(Ahrens, 2017)*

Permanent Notes

Records an idea for long-term storage and perusal.

"In a second step, shortly after, he would look at his brief notes and think about their relevance for his own thinking and writing. He then would turn to the main slip-box and write his ideas, comments and thoughts on new pieces of paper, using only one for each idea and restricting himself to one side of the paper, to make it easier to read them later without having to take them out of the box."
(Ahrens, 2017)

So Where Is The Magic?

The method for taking permanent notes. Explicitly enables forming connections between ideas.

> *"He kept them usually brief enough to make one idea fit on a single sheet, but would sometimes add another note to extend a thought. He usually wrote his notes with an eye towards already existing notes in the slip-box." (Ahrens, 2017)*

Closer Look At A Zettel

Key Features

1. Zettels are rarely standalone and are explicitly linked to other ideas.
2. They are referred by abstract alphanumeric keys (free-form)
3. Tags and ids help bring out the context in which the note should be found again.

Allows a bottom up approach to note-taking.

Forming Links

1. Placing the zettel behind another one.

> *"Whenever he added a note, he checked his slip-box for other relevant notes to make possible connections between them. Adding a note directly behind another note is only one way of doing this."* (Ahrens, 2017)

2. Using the id to link them together

"By adding these links between notes, Luhmann was able to add the same note to different contexts." (Ahrens, 2017)

3. An index system which provides an entry point to topics in the zettelkasten (added on the go).

These come from a simple trick - not organizing by topic, but let the organization emerge as the ideas collate (abstract number reference enables this).

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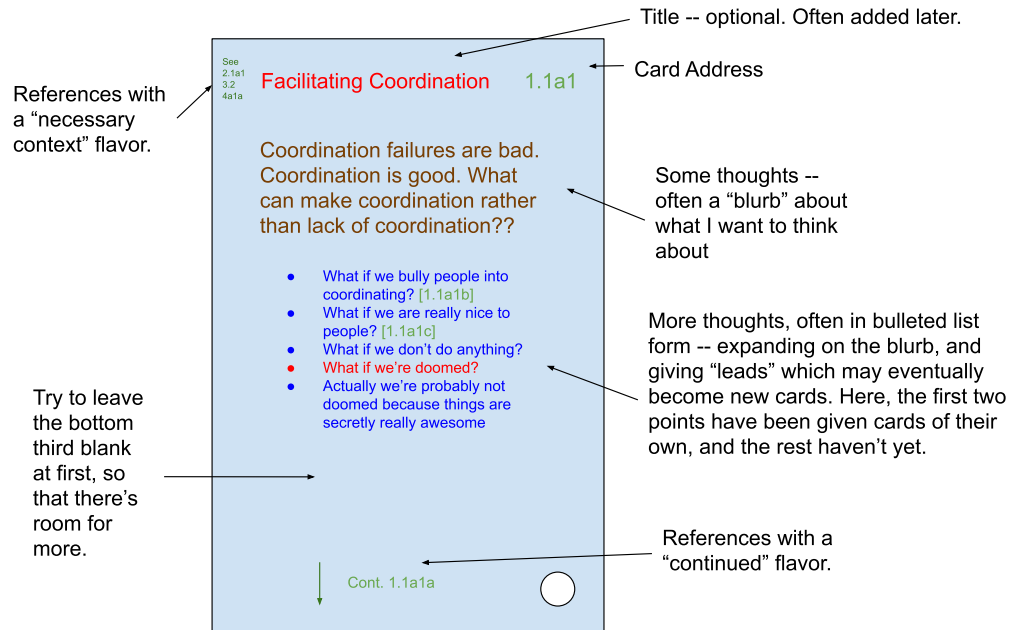
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The key reason it works is because of elaboration, i.e. really thinking about the meaning of what we read, how it could inform different questions and topics and how it could be combined with other knowledge.

Modern Take And Resources

Title -- optional. Often added later.

Card Address

References with a "necessary context" flavor.

See 2.1a1 3.2 4a1a

Facilitating Coordination   1.1a1

Coordination failures are bad. Coordination is good. What can make coordination rather than lack of coordination??

- What if we bully people into coordinating? [1.1a1b]
- What if we are really nice to people? [1.1a1c]
- What if we don't do anything?
- What if we're doomed?
- Actually we're probably not doomed because things are secretly really awesome

Some thoughts -- often a "blurb" about what I want to think about

More thoughts, often in bulleted list form -- expanding on the blurb, and giving "leads" which may eventually become new cards. Here, the first two points have been given cards of their own, and the rest haven't yet.

Try to leave the bottom third blank at first, so that there's room for more.

Cont. 1.1a1a

References with a "continued" flavor.

A good resource -
https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/NfdHG6oHBJ8Qxc26s/the-zettelkasten-method-1

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- Talks quite a bit about attention, short-term memory, willpower etc, and how this method checks all the requirements for a simple but effective system.
- Talks a lot about his prior beliefs (especially about writing and its link to thinking).
- Lots of anecdotes from people across disciplines. Nice to see how he was able to connect ideas.

Thank You