

# Helping You Get It and Keep It Together

# Digital Note

by Linda Hecker, MEd, and Anne M. Fein, MA

**PICTURE THIS:** You're taking notes during an important pre-exam lecture. Or you're at the doctor's office with an elderly parent, trying to record the physician assistant's directions for post-surgical care. Maybe you're at work at a critical planning meeting for a big project.

You need to take accurate notes—complete notes—but your mind keeps blipping out, distracted by a buzzing fly or stray thoughts. You scribble furiously, but you can't keep up, so you miss important details. You stuff scraps of paper in your pocket and later stare hopelessly at your scribbles, trying to decipher what you wrote. Or worse, you can't find the notes. Maybe they went through the wash in your jacket pocket?

## Note-taking: What's so hard?

Taking good notes is a critical lifelong skill, essential at school, work, and for personal sanity. But it is especially difficult for individuals with ADHD. It taxes attention and sustained focus, not to mention the challenges of legible handwriting and inconsistent spelling, also characteristic of many with ADHD. To be useful, notes need to be organized—on the page, and in collections of related notes (think sections of a notebook) so you can look up key information that may be buried or see patterns and relationships that help you make sense of your jottings. And you need to know where to find your notes when you need them.

In short, note-taking is a nightmare for people affected by ADHD. Many have simply given up on the goal of taking usable, legible, organized notes and rely on their not-so-reliable listening skills and memory. At the college where we both teach, we address students' negative prior experiences with note-taking by introducing the Master Notebook approach, a step-by-step process for taking and using notes.

## Master Notebook: Effective but labor-intensive

This iterative process deals with many note-taking challenges by building in steps for note revision. This ensures that sketchy “first draft” notes are completed and elaborated on in order to be fully usable. Students learn a simple two-column format (based on Cornell Note Taking developed by Walter Pauk in the 1940s) which graphically separates key points (main ideas) from details, as well as how to use traditional note-taking strategies such as:

- abbreviations
- symbols (for questions, missed info, or critical info)
- writing in condensed phrases

Twenty years ago, abbreviating and condensing were novel ideas to our students, but today's students readily adapt texting and Twitter styles to note-taking. Students are also encouraged to flag where they blanked out or missed content by leaving extra spaces and marking the missing material with a symbol, such as a question mark. Students learn how to organize notes in separate binders or sections for each course, sometimes color-coded for easy identification.

Most importantly, students learn a system for reviewing/revising notes that enhances their grasp of course content and has them learning material week by week instead of cramming the night before an exam. This note revision process includes:

- working with a study partner to review notes and fill in any missing information
- scanning notes for main ideas, which are moved to the left column or highlighted
- color coding information to note important patterns or relationships



# -Taking

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- creating graphic organizers (mind maps) to synthesize content
- writing a brief summary of each day's notes (excellent prep for essay question exams)

Not everyone is lucky enough to be taught a fully functional note-taking method like the Master Notebook System in a classroom setting, with encouraging instructors who provide feedback on the accuracy, completeness and organization of notes. And not everyone is ready to invest the time and effort it takes to review and revise notes, especially with a partner to fill in gaps.

However, everyone can learn to take notes more efficiently, and with digital apps, we have a twenty-first century answer to the prayers of a note-taker with ADHD. Digital note-taking, whether on a laptop, tablet, or smart phone, solves many of the problems associated with good note-taking. Since the advent of digital text tools, the classic Master Notebook, three-ring binder style, is less ubiquitous (even at Landmark College).

### The digital advantage

Note-taking involves keeping information in working memory long enough to process it and then recording it in a way that lets you access it at a later time. Digital note-taking provides a customizable environment for recording, manipulating, and organizing information. Used in conjunction with in-the-cloud storage, it can prevent the loss of your valuable work. Not only does in-the-cloud storage prevent loss, it allows for synchronization across devices for on-the-go note-taking, updating, and referencing.

There are many note-taking apps on the market, and they're constantly evolving in response to consumer requests, but we're going to focus on a select few: OneNote, Evernote, and Notability. (See the sidebar for a list of essential and desirable features to help you choose the app that works best for you.)

### Recording information

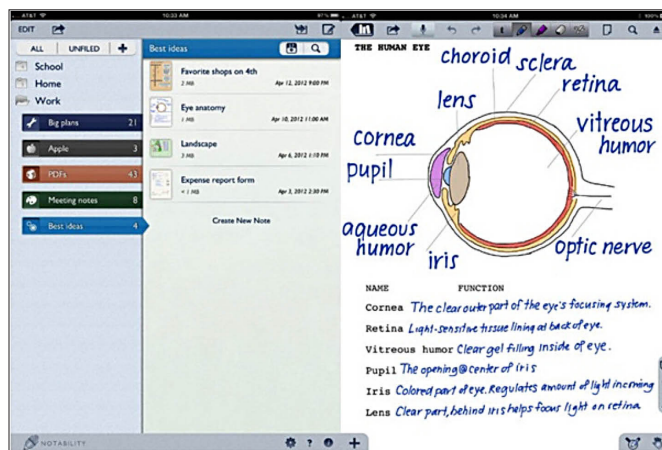
Digital note-taking provides an opportunity to use multimedia approaches for capturing information. Depending on the app, notes can be taken by typing, handwriting, or audio recording, and augmented with pictures, videos and other embedded files.

For example, Notability stands out for its built-in audio recording feature. While entering text by handwriting or typing, you can simultaneously record audio that is synced to the text for easy reference. Then when you look at your notes and can't remember what they meant, you can access the audio that was recorded right at that moment and listen with

Figure 1. One Note supports two- and three-column formats to clarify information.

Name	Function	
Cornea	Focusing system	Clear outer part of eyes focusing system
Retina	!	Light sensitive tissue lining at back of eye
Vitreous humor	Clear gel filling inside of eye	Clear gel filling inside of eye
Pupil	Opening @ center of iris	
Iris	? Colored part of the eye that regulates the amount of light that comes into the eye	Colored part of eye Regulates amount of light entering eye
Lens	! Behind the iris helps f	Clear part behind iris helps focus light on retina

Figure 2. Notability lets you combine pictures, text, typed and hand-written notes and annotate them.



fresh ears. The handwriting option in Notability lets you integrate typed notes with inked sketches and annotations. While this is not handwriting recognition, it can be a valuable option if you prefer writing by hand as a way to reinforce information.

With digital note-taking, you have a number of options for formatting your notes on the page. You can use bullet or outline features to organize information by hierarchy or relationships. OneNote lets you create a template, such as a two-column format, that provides a classic approach to differentiating main ideas from supporting details. All three apps enable you to annotate ideas, actions assigned, or clarifying questions with pre-designated tagging options or highlighting.

### Manipulating information

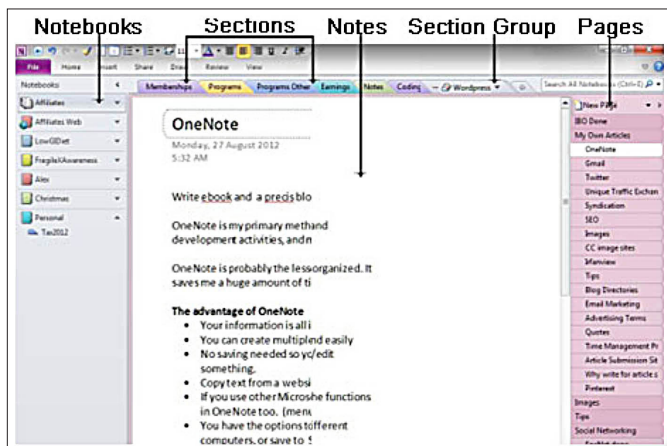
Good note-takers process information deeply (elaboratively) by strategically manipulating notes to make them more usable. The flexibility of digital note-taking enables you to engage in deeper processing by supplementing or revising your notes rather than tediously rewriting them to include missed or additional information. From a technical point of view, the availability of text editing features such as cut, copy, paste, and delete options, means you don't need to rewrite or retype information. Spellcheck tools help identify misspellings that may lead to confusion in the future, when auditory memory has faded.

If you are taking notes for a class or a workshop, a simple revision process will increase your engagement and critical thinking as you look for relationships and synthesize information. For example, you can insert a table with three columns in OneNote. You can devote one column to main ideas and another to supporting details. The third column can be used to

## Platform Compatibility

- **ONENOTE** (Microsoft) is available in the Windows, iOS, and Android platforms. There are free web and app versions that limit the user to five hundred notes. OneNote offers a fuller featured desktop version that may be purchased individually or as part of Microsoft Office.
- **EVERNOTE** (Evernote) is available in Windows, Mac OS (desktop), iOS, and Android platforms. The free version allows 60 MB per month of storage versus 1 GB for the premium version. The premium version offers greater functionality through supplemental apps and add-ons.
- **NOTABILITY** (Ginger Labs) is available only in the iOS platform that works on iPads and iPhones.

Figure 3. OneNote lets you organize notebooks into sections, groups, and pages.



add missed information or clarify terminology or concepts. Alternatively, you can use the third column to paraphrase supporting details.

Additionally, the free format feature of the page lets you view notes while writing a summary that condenses key information. You can further elaborate core notes by including supplemental information via embedded sketches, audio recordings, hyperlinks, and documents with related information. In Notability, the built-in handwriting feature lets you write down questions or ideas you have in the moment as you review your notes.

Another valuable feature in OneNote and Notability is the ability to use multiple color highlighting to prioritize information for later reference. Main ideas and their related supporting details can be highlighted to create “chunks” of information. These chunks, once identified, can then be reorganized into subtopics and topics. This eases the process of creating a summary of a meeting or a class for future reference.

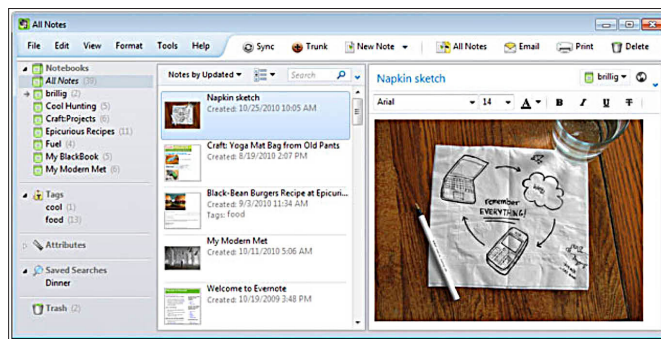
### Organizing and safeguarding information

Too often information becomes lost in a flurry of disorganized papers. The ability to create “collections,” or notebooks, is key to organizing those papers. Each app provides a systematic way to group related notes. OneNote creates individual notebooks with sections and pages within each section. Evernote offers a tile-based view of notebooks with individual notes organized within specific notebooks. By creating stacks, you can group related notebooks. For its part, Notability offers a clear format with a list of notebooks in the left-hand pane and a preview of notes for the selected notebook in the right-hand pane. If you need to find specific information, your notebooks and digital notes are fully searchable.

Now that you have organized your notes, how can you safeguard them? In-the-cloud storage is your answer. OneNote can be set up to automatically back up your files to SkyDrive. Evernote also provides its own synchronization service. In contrast, Notability allows backing up files, as PDFs, to your personal cloud storage sites, such as Dropbox and Google Drive. The same cloud feature enables synchronizing across devices, a valuable solution if you want to access your notes on a laptop or desktop computer, but prefer the portability of a tablet for meetings. In addition, by sharing access to a cloud service, multiple people can work collaborative on or from a set of notes. Three-ring binders have no match for the benefits of in-the-cloud storage of digital note-taking.

So the next time you need to take notes for work, school, or personal use, instead of searching for a pen and scrap of paper, reach for that item you’re most likely to have close at hand: your smartphone or tablet. That way you can take notes confidently knowing you can listen again to information you missed, easily search for key details, elaborate and reorganize without recopying, and rest easy knowing that if even if you lose your phone or tablet, your notes are waiting for you in the cloud. 📍

Figure 4. Evernote lets you annotate and tag notes in various ways.



**Linda Hecker, MEd**, has taught at Landmark College since its founding in 1985. She has directed tutorial and teacher training programs; taught English, study skills, and music classes; and served as an academic advisor and dean. Appointed to Landmark’s Institute for Research and Training in 2001, she serves as Lead Education Specialist. She is the author of numerous articles and book chapters, including work on multisensory learning and assistive technology.

A faculty member of Landmark College for twenty-three years **Anne M. Fein, MA**, has taught communication, reading and study skills, and first-year courses, in addition to serving as an academic advisor. In 2001, Fein designed and launched Landmark’s Office of Assistive Technology Services and the Digital Text Library. Her current focus is on designing and teaching hybrid and online courses for students with learning disabilities.

## Note-taking Apps Features Checklist

### REQUIRED

- Drawing tools (color, varied line width)
- Annotation tools: highlighters
- Email/share notes
- Interface with Cloud storage (e.g., DropBox, OneNote, Evernote )

### DESIRABLE

- Selection of page formats (e.g., two-column, graph paper)
- Word search option
- Input variety (photos, contacts, reminders etc.)
- Audio recording that syncs with text
- Input by hand as well as keyboard

### FULL-FEATURED APPS FEATURES CHECKLIST

- Notability
- Others (not discussed here) include
  - AudioNotes
  - VoicePad