

Why The Hard Way is Better

Another con of analog is that it's harder than digital. It requires more effort, time, and deliberate attention. More, it requires a greater quantity of work to produce less. With digital notetaking systems, knowledge is easier to create. It's also cheaper to create. However, I contend that the extra effort and the deeper thought processing is worth it. Oftentimes, the hard way is the best way. In fact, it can be argued that it's the only *true* way.

Writing by hand was valued by writers in the early modern period precisely for the reason that it was hard. It sharpened not only their faculties for controlling their *attention*, but also improved their *retention* of material. As scholar Anne Blair observes, writers used the process of writing by hand as "a mental and physical discipline that sharpened attention and retention."¹

For myself, using an analog system helps cure my ADHD-tendencies. When I begin writing a main note (i.e., reformulating or reflecting on material), I feel almost sucked into the experience. I cannot pry myself away from my desk until I finish the thought. This practice is certainly not exclusive to analog; however, I find it more prevalent in analog. I also find my thoughts to be better developed and processed when writing by hand. Much of this book was written by hand using my Antinet. This sentence and this section you're reading right now, however, were not written by hand. I'm thinking by typing on my computer (hypocrite)! While I do not think this is necessarily a bad section, I do think it would have been much better and had a stronger impact if I had taken the time to deliberately write it out by hand first. The reason I have not done so is because the content backing much of what I'm writing here will be covered in another section of this book (a section on the power of writing by hand). So, essentially I have indeed written out the core idea of this section (the power of writing by hand), yet I have not specifically handwritten *this section*. Still, I have deeply thought through the core idea I'm writing about in this section. How so? Because I developed it elsewhere through writing by hand.

Analog is harder than digital not only in terms of the effort it requires, but in other ways as well. With an analog system, you must buy a variety of materials. Blank notecards, boxes, containers, Wite-Out, pens, rulers, and other items. That's not too difficult, yet it does indeed require more space.

¹Ann Blair, *Early Modern Attitudes toward the Delegation of Copying and Note-Taking* (Brill, 2016), 265.

Analog systems also result in quizzical regard from others who see you using such. They may question your sanity for investing so much time and energy into boxes of physical notecards. If you aren't strong-minded, you may even end up questioning your own sanity!

Here's The Truth: The Hard Way Is Better

One of the biggest myths about Zettelkasten centers around the tradeoff between ease vs. effort. Here's the truth: you must be prepared to do things the hard way if you wish to produce great work. The paradox, however, is that the hard way turns out to be the easy way. The up front hard work of writing notes by hand later turns into the greatest benefit of the system.

As Mortimer Adler outlines in his classic *How to Read a Book*, one must be prepared to go about processing books the hard way. "That is the only way," Adler writes. "Without external help of any sort, you go to work on the book. With nothing but the power of your own mind."²

After Ryan Holiday wrote a piece outlining his notecard system, he responded to a question he is frequently asked: "Wouldn't digital be easier?" Here's Holiday's response:

Yes. But I don't want this to be easy. Writing them [notes] down by hand forces me to take my time and to go over everything again (taking notes on a Kindle is too easy and that's the problem). Also being able to physically arrange stuff is crucial for getting the structure of your book or project right. I can move cards from one category to another. As I shuffle through the cards, I bump into stuff I had forgotten about, etc.³

Holiday makes three important points here. One is the benefit of an analog system enabling him to better develop his thoughts. The other is the benefit of haptic factors utilized in knowledge management (that is, being able to lay the cards out in front of you to physically rearrange). The last benefit Holiday

²Mortimer Jerome Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, Rev. and updated ed (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 7.

³Ryan Holiday, "The Notecard System: The Key For Remembering, Organizing And Using Everything You Read," RyanHoliday.Net (blog), April 1, 2014, <https://ryanholiday.net/the-notecard-system-the-key-for-remembering-organizing-and-using-everything-you-read/>.

touches on is bumping into stuff he had forgotten about. Here Holiday is describing *maintenance rehearsal* in human memory.

All of these aspects, admittedly the *hard way to do this*, end up producing better work. The hard way, paradoxically, becomes the best way.

The bottom line is that analog thinking systems are hard. They take more time and energy investment than digital systems. They're also less conventional than digital systems, and thus suffer from an implicit bias that digital systems are used by smarter people who are geeky enough to know shortcuts and hotkeys (rubbish). This is a false notion. There are no shortcuts. In fact, the shortcuts end up falling far short of the desired destination: excellence.