

Tools for thought

published on November 10, 2021

[10/12/21] Clarification: when I talk about “tools for thought” below, I am solely referring to the note-taking apps that rally under that banner, not [the more general theme](#).

I was thinking about “tools for thought,” the rallying cry of the modern note-taking app proliferation. Are they really helpful in their goal? It seems that Roam and its ilk basically just add tagging features in a giant nested list... but other than that, are pretty bog-standard ways to type on a keyboard.

So are they better than any of the other ways to get information out? I can type on a keyboard here in Ulysses, or in TextEdit, or in Apple Notes, or in Pages, or in Google Docs, and wherever I type they’re still the same words and they still convey the benefit of getting my thoughts out of my head. So would a pen and paper, a pencil and paper, a wax tablet and stylus, or even a stick and some sand (just ask Archimedes and Tesla).

It seems the only feasible benefit this new generation of note-taking apps can bring to the table is increased *searchability*, memex-style. (Note that this could also be accomplished on a set of text files... so they’re really just fancy editors on top of search, at the end of the day.) But I write a lot, and I think a lot, and the *act* of writing generally matters much more to me than any recall of it afterwards. It’s the getting-it-out-of-my-head that counts.

Sure, there are benefits to searchability: track your thoughts over time! Find an old note that comes randomly to mind super easily! Catalog and publish your ideas! But I don’t find any of those points compelling as a *tool for thought*. The best tool for thought is a habit of thinking, and of writing: you need to *do it*, there’s no cheat or

tool that will synthesize and analyze your experience for you. Reading truths that the machine figures out for you wouldn't be too much different from reading a book, right? It still needs to sink in; you still need to think and grapple with and understand whatever the idea is.

That's why I'm skeptical of "tools for thought." Thinking is simple to do, but hard—and we've done it for millennia. How could some modern crutch change the equation all that drastically, summoning thinking-points out of nowhere? What really matters is putting in the reps, not recording your workouts better.

It's possible that a "tool for thought" that focused on *getting people to think more* (and more deeply), perhaps by consciously causing its users to develop an addiction, might actually be useful. (Note productive > consumptive focus.)