

Building a Second Brain

*A Proven Method to Organize Your Digital Life and Unlock
Your Creative Potential*

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Chapter 11: How to Create a Tagging System That Works

For millennia, philosophers and academics have been obsessed with finding a universal way of organizing humanity's knowledge.

As far back as the fourth century BCE, Aristotle attempted to classify all knowledge into ten broad themes. In the sixteenth century, English philosopher Francis Bacon argued that all human knowledge could be sorted into just three categories: memory, reason, and imagination. In the twentieth century, the Indian librarian Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan proposed classifying knowledge by personality, matter, energy, space, and time.

The goal of all these endeavors was to create a system of classification – known as a “taxonomy” – that every piece of knowledge could be placed into. But over the last couple hundred years, as our knowledge has exploded in volume and complexity, the possibility of such a universal taxonomy has faded. It has become clear that any such all-encompassing categories will either be too broad to be useful or too narrow to be universal. The dream of a universal taxonomy for humanity’s knowledge is dead.

The Problem with Tagging

Despite the difficulty of creating workable taxonomies, many modern notes apps offer a “tagging” feature that allows you to label, or classify, your notes according to topics, themes, or categories. By applying a tag to a note, you can see its relationships and associations with other notes regardless of where they are located.

This tantalizing possibility leads many people to spend countless hours attempting to create an all-encompassing taxonomy of personal tags that will apply to any future piece of content they capture. But in my experience, this is a futile exercise. We are unlikely to succeed where many of the greatest thinkers in history have failed. There is no such universal taxonomy of knowledge, and any effort dedicated toward that goal will only lead to frustration.

While tags seem useful on the surface, the most common way I see people using them – tagging every note as it’s being created with every topic it might relate to – has serious flaws. For example, a note on urban planning might be tagged with “design,” “architecture,” “public transit,” “neighborhood safety,” “local politics,” and so on. This might seem like an effective way to surface all the connections between notes, but it is

exactly the opposite of what I recommend. The problem with this approach is that it requires you to spend a lot of energy upfront making a series of mentally taxing decisions before you even know whether and how a note will be used. This tends to create so much anxiety over making the right decisions that you are likely to abandon your notetaking practice altogether.

Traditionally, tags were used to facilitate searching and retrieval in an age when computers weren't as capable as today. But search technology has now advanced so far that effectively every word of a note is a keyword. We can search the full contents of our notes just as easily as we can search any tags we've added.

Ultimately, tagging should facilitate effective action, not just abstract thought. Your time and energy are much better spent thinking about how the contents of your notes can be used to advance your projects and goals.

I propose an entirely different use for tags for modern knowledge work: to track the *progress* of your notes. Following the same principle of actionability we've used as a north star throughout *Building a Second Brain*, we can shift the purpose of tags from *classification* to *action* and unlock profound benefits to both our productivity and creativity.

Tagging Is an Advanced Technique

Before I propose three concrete ways of making tags actionable, I want to point out that tagging should be considered an advanced technique. Like Pandora's Box, once we begin to apply tags it can be incredibly tempting to start labeling each and every note willy-nilly, without considering whether all that effort is worth it. We need to

understand what we are trying to use our notes to accomplish to avoid the trap of “tagging for the sake of tagging.”

For that reason, I recommend waiting until you’ve captured hundreds of notes and used them to complete multiple projects before even attempting to use tags. I encourage you to start small, stick with the simpler PARA folders for as long as possible, and focus your effort for now on turning the notes you’ve captured into tangible outputs.

Three Actionable Approaches to Tagging

There are three practical approaches to tagging you can use as your Second Brain grows and matures. Each one follows the principle of actionability and answers an important question about the purpose of a given note:

1. Create personalized tags for your use cases. (How will my notes be used?)
2. Use tags to track the progress of notes. (How are my notes currently being used?)
3. Tag notes retroactively and only as needed. (How have my notes been used?)

You can use as few or as many of these techniques as you find helpful, or use them only for specific projects or areas that demand a higher level of rigor. Each tag you create should answer a question about the past, present, or future status of a note so you always know where it’s been and where it’s going.

Let’s examine each one more closely.

1. Create personalized tags for your use cases.

For specific fields or professions, taxonomies continue to be not only useful, but essential.

Chemists use the periodic table to place all the elements into a common system, which helps them understand the differences between elements. Biologists use a standardized system of animal kingdoms, phyla, class, and so on to place each species on a branch of the tree of life. Art critics would have no way of discussing artistic trends without agreed-upon terms for artistic schools and periods. Every profession relies on a taxonomy to categorize information in a way that makes sense to them.

Similarly, if you already know how your notes are likely to be used – such as for citations in a paper [Source], as evidence in a trial [Evidence], or as slides in a presentation [Slides] – it can be helpful to tag your notes according to those use cases. This ensures that whenever you need a citation, piece of evidence, or slide graphic, you can search your notes for that type of content and instantly pull up many options to choose from.

Here's an example from a student of mine, who created a personalized set of tags to aide his work as a scriptwriter for films. He takes notes on ideas he encounters in his reading and daily life, and adds one of the following tags if appropriate:

- C = description of a Character who could be used in a story.
- L = interesting or visually interesting Location.
- O = curious or evocative Object.
- S = loaded or revealing Situation.
- A = unusual or revealing Act.
- T = any intriguing Theme that is embodied in life.

Since this person already knows how he is likely to use the chunks of information he captures, he can justify putting in the effort upfront to label them according to the most likely use case. When he sits down to do focused work, he can easily perform a simple search and review all the notes in any one of these six categories. In his own words, “Then I can see all of these notes side by side and if any particular combination of elements sticks out to me, I have the beginnings of a story idea.”

Ask yourself, “What are the most common use cases for the content I capture?” Here are a couple common examples:

- Tagging according to the **final product** a note will be used in: [Presentation], [Essay], [Report], [Website], [Project plan], [Meeting agenda], or [Budget]
- Tagging according to the **kind of information** a note contains: [Arguments], [Theories], [Frameworks], [Evidence], [Claim], [Counterpoint], or [Question]

It takes some thinking to choose tags that fit the needs of your profession and your life. In fact, it’s likely to be an iterative process, so don’t be surprised if you run into a few dead ends before you find the set of tags that works – simple enough to be used consistently and useful enough that it’s worth the effort.

The good news is you are free to make your tags as specific to your personal needs as you want, since no one else has to approve or even understand the labels you use. And once you land on the right set of tags for you, their simplicity and usefulness can be truly liberating.

2. Use tags to track the progress of notes.

As you begin capturing ideas, insights, and observations from your daily life, you'll start to notice that many ideas follow a long, winding path on their way to being used or shared. While some notes are clearly and directly related to a specific project, others are much more ambiguous and open-ended. They might need some time to percolate through your Second Brain.

As your collection of knowledge expands, at some point you may feel the need to track their progress towards the outcomes you're trying to create in your life. You don't need to remember the status of every note – you can offload that information to your Second Brain as well!

Here are a couple examples of how I've seen people successfully use tags to track the progress of their notes:

- Tagging according to its **role in a project**: [Meeting notes], [Timeline], [Budget], [Decision], [Action], [Idea], or [Objective]
- Tagging according to the **current stage** of their workflow: [Planned], [In process], [Waiting for approval], [Reviewed], [Approved], [On hold], or [Finished]

These kinds of tags aren't about the *contents* of a note. They are about its *context* – specifically, the context in which it is being used. Since information about the current status of a note isn't usually contained within the note itself, it can be worth adding it in the form of tags.

By using your Second Brain to track the progress of your thinking, you can more easily return to the state of mind you were in the last time you interacted with a note. These

small contextual clues can help you pick up right where you left off, whether that was days, weeks, or months ago, so you never lose any progress.

3. Tag notes retroactively and only as needed.

Sometimes the true nature of an idea only becomes clear after it's been put to use, like a primitive life-form emerging from the primordial soup of your thinking. Digital information is incredibly malleable, and it is often easier to organize your notes retroactively than to try and guess upfront all the projects, areas, and resources you might eventually need.

I once worked with a freelance consultant to organize her ideas and clarify the expertise she was offering to her clients. She specialized in helping companies improve their hiring process and had gathered dozens of notes on various aspects of hiring. She was certain she had a tremendous amount of valuable knowledge at her fingertips but felt overwhelmed at the prospect of organizing it into productive shape.

We started by identifying each of the stages of the hiring process she typically saw in her consulting projects: writing job descriptions, reviewing applications, evaluating candidates, checking references, among others. We could have created PARA folders for each of these, but they aren't exactly projects. Instead, they represent the stages of her process and the way she personally approaches the complex subject of hiring.

We didn't want to move her existing notes from their respective PARA folders, but we did want to be able to see all the notes related to "writing job descriptions" or "reviewing applications" in one place with a quick search. This is the perfect situation for tags: when you want a different way of "viewing" your notes, without having to

undertake a massive reorganization of your entire system. In this way, tags provide an alternative lens through which you can view your knowledge and expertise. They allow you to see a cross-section of your notes from a different perspective than the categories of PARA.

Although hiring is an expansive topic with many facets, by focusing on the practical use cases of this consultant's business – consulting projects with companies – suddenly the task of organizing her knowledge became far easier. We created tags for each of the 10 stages of the hiring process and began to use them to label her notes. You would think adding structure to your notes after the fact would be harder, but in fact it's easier. Instead of trying to predict your future needs in advance, you can simply look at what you've already collected and pick the groupings that seem to emerge organically.

Instead of applying tags when you first capture content, I recommend applying them when it's time to use it. Often, the ideal moment is when you are getting ready to start a new project. When you apply tags with a specific use case in mind, the tags you come up with will be far more concrete and actionable. And you will have the motivation to do the work of adding them because of the immediate needs of the project you are taking on.

The Benefits of Actionable Tagging

An actionable approach to tags has several powerful advantages for our productivity, learning, and even peace of mind.

It allows you to jump into new projects much faster. Instead of spending your precious energy getting set up when you're excited about something, you can plunge directly

into the heart of the subject, capturing whatever resonates and trusting that you can sort it out later. This ensures you are spending as much of your time as possible directly engaging with the subject matter of your learning, rather than wasting time trying to create the “perfect” system upfront.

Best of all, using tags in this way means it’s perfectly fine to skip adding tags altogether if you don’t feel like it. Since tags are not your primary way of organizing, your ideas won’t fall through the cracks if you don’t have the time or energy to apply tags to a given note. This eliminates the frustrating experience of trying to force yourself to think of a tag for a note, even when nothing comes to mind, because you fear that otherwise it will be lost forever. Even if no tags are applied, the note will always be right in the folder where you left it.

An actionable approach to tagging preserves not only our energy but also our enthusiasm. By moving the effort of organizing as close as possible to the problem it is meant to solve, we can ensure that every bit of work we put in is necessary and useful. Your end goal is to have the fewest, clearest, and most consistent tags as possible (or none at all), even if they aren’t “perfect” or fully comprehensive.

This is the magic of digital information: it’s easy and frictionless to make changes after you’ve captured it. Once you find an approach that works for you, your Second Brain can truly be a joy to navigate – no matter whether you’re jumping through your PARA folders or through a set of simple, useful tags.