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The Bionic Writer: How Technology Makes Us Better, Faster, Stronger

by CASEY BARBER

It's not so much that I loved writing research papers in high school, but that I loved the process of writing them—finding sources, combing texts for salient points, noting each nugget of information on an index card, and rearranging the cards until they told the story I wanted to report.

Now that I write for my most demanding boss—me—the act of writing often gets lost in the complexities of managing life as a freelancer. A stack of index cards with snippets of pitch ideas, sources for stories, and reminders of upcoming deadlines would make my small office a blizzard of recycling bin-bound sheaves. At its core, writing is a simple act, requiring only pen, paper, and brain, but it's easy to overcomplicate things when business comes into the picture.

To simplify, I rely on a small battalion of online resources that help me track my thoughts, organize assignments, and maintain an editorial workflow—even from my phone and iPad when I'm traveling.

The Big Picture

The one-two punch of Evernote and a suite of Google products (especially Gmail, Calendar, Drive, and the new [Hangouts app](#)) micromanage every aspect of my writing process, from helping ideas cohere to running revisions by clients. "There's just so much to juggle and so many ideas to mull over when working on a book or a story," says writer and recipe developer Megan Gordon, another Evernote fan. What makes Evernote appealing to us both is its versatility: sortable, searchable features that let us clip, file, and tag information directly from the Internet. And perhaps most crucially for the freelance crowd, it's free and it travels wherever I do—good ideas are never lost because I'm on the train and not in front of my computer.

Overwhelmingly technical apps don't curry favor with many writers, making [Scrivener](#) one of the more surprisingly divisive software options on the market. Though its devotees rave over its all-in-one capability that combines aspects of Evernote, Dropbox, and other syncable apps, its lengthy tutorial and high price point are huge turnoffs for others—even if one of Scrivener's cool features is the ability to pin cue cards to a virtual corkboard and reshuffle them. Luddites!

Finally, in the grand tradition of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," I've dabbled in newer apps from Trello to Todoist to Wunderlist. But my most reliable system for keeping a stern eye on my to-do list is a simple .txt file that stays open on my desktop. Google Calendar handles the big-picture work, and does it splendidly with its ability to color-code entries, but an ongoing text list is all I need to get by.

Harnessing Social Media

A brilliant bit of repurposing social media for professional use comes from writer and cookbook author Jill O'Connor, who uses Facebook's Message feature to conduct interviews. "It's instant and feels conversational, but leaves me with actual notes to return to if I want to directly quote my source," she explains. "I think it allows my interviewees to organize their thoughts better, and the quotes still feel fresh and not scripted or stilted."

Productivity Tricks

For many writers, organizing is only half the battle. Getting butts in chairs and tuning out distractions is the other half, and many swear by the incredibly low-tech 90-minute rule [as explained in the *New York Times*](#). Debbie Koenig, author of *Parents Need to Eat Too* (William Morrow, 2012), swears up and down that her most valuable tool is an old-school kitchen timer. "When I tell myself I only have to work for 90 minutes, I get a tremendous amount done. It's often enough to bang out a first draft, which had always been the hardest thing for me to accomplish."

Freelancer Virginia Sole-Smith calls the beginning of her day The Magic Hour, and makes a concerted effort to tackle her trickiest writing during her first 90 minutes of work. (Sole-Smith is also the inventor of the most comprehensive, most [effective Excel spreadsheet](#) I've encountered for organizing income goals, past due invoices, and pretty much every money-related element of an assignment.)

Part of being productive is knowing how you work best. Writing coach Don Fry sees two ways to approach the writing process: [planning or plunging](#). Knowing which is your style is key to finding the magic formula that fits your productivity patterns.

Keep It Simple

Just as in writing, most of us go through many drafts and iterations before we find the systems and apps that mesh best with our style. After scores of conversations with my freelance colleagues, I've learned that each of us favors a particular method that works in its own quirky way. The upshot of it all? The simplest solution truly is the best one. After all, complicated technology's only useful if it makes things easier for us in the long run. Maybe writers are all Luddites at heart.



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