

Help! I'm drowning in a sea of information!

Are you:

- struggling to take, keep and use good notes?
- often hearing about 'zettelkasten' but not sure what to make of it?
- fed up with trying apps like Notion, Obsidian, Trello or Evernote but spend more time fiddling with the software than thinking or writing?
- wanting to think more clearly, have more creativity and produce assignments more easily?

An antinet zettelkasten might be just the thing you need. You can find lots of information on the internet about zettelkasten but much of it will point you to digital tools that are good at producing a swamp of information, much less good at helping you utilize what you're reading and produce good output. Zettelkasten (German for 'note box' or 'slip box') have been around for a long time. They were invented by Blumenback in 1786. Many well-known creatives (Gessner, Leibniz, Sertillanges) have used them. A German philosopher and sociologist called Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) made one famous with the 19,000+ cards he produced over 40 years which enabled him to write over 560 journal articles and 70 books – not to mention the 200 more unpublished articles found in his papers after his death. Luhmann's explanation of his method is both in German and relatively difficult to understand, so these notes have been put together from Scheper's *Antinet Zettelkasten* which uses 'antinet' to differentiate from all the digital methods you may read about.

What you'll need to start

- one hundred 3x5 note cards (you can use 4x6 as used by Luhmann and recommended by Scheper, but they cost more and take up more space). If you prefer, cutting up paper into 3x5 slips is just as effective and takes even less space.
- a pen that doesn't put too much ink on the cards or slips
- a rubber band (at first), a small box for some time thereafter, a larger box or drawers if you really get into it and develop your antinet over years
- if you want to splash out, a set of A-Z indexing cards is useful but not necessary

What? Analogue notetaking? Isn't digital better?

No. Digital is quick and easy but results in lots of information and very little thinking about it. The search (which is fast) can overwhelm you with results. The easy ability to relabel notes doesn't help you learn about how you've thought in the past and what you've learned since.

The process of slowing down, writing by hand and giving considered thought to what you're doing rather than cutting and pasting on screen, aids memory in what you're reading, forces you to think about why this is important to you, and helps with 'consilience' later on (connecting up thoughts and ideas and producing happy accidents of linking ideas). Luhmann was able to have such a prodigious output *because* he worked with analogue cards, not in spite of it. My experience with a nascent antinet supports this finding and while it can take a long time to start having 'conversations' with your antinet (possibly years), you can begin to get results in quite a short time frame if you put in the work.

Three types of card

There are three sequences of cards in an antinet:

- Maincard – these are the main entries you'll create of the notes you take and thinking you do
- BibRefs – these give the bibliographic references of your reading material and quick notes
- Index – these help you find your way around your antinet

If you like, you can amalgamate the BibRefs into the Index and just have two sequences.

It doesn't matter if the index goes at the front or behind.

Maincards

These are the main part of your antinet and are usually one of three kinds. A quotation, a reformulation or a reflection. A **quotation** is exactly what it says, but shouldn't form the majority of your cards, it's better to think about the concept you're interested in and **reformulate** it in your own words. A **reflection** might begin with your initial observation on the concept and go on to note your further thinking on it. It's not impossible for a maincard to have all three types of information on a card but it is your own thinking that will be most important for future reference (and prevent your antinet from simply filling up with 'data' or information that becomes too much to deal with).

You'll need to give the card an address. See 'Is that it?' below.

BibRef

Perhaps the easiest cards to understand and a good place to start, a bibref card simply has the author of the book you're making notes on (you could include journal articles too) at the top, the title, publisher and date of publication beneath. Then your goal for reading the book and then a *very brief* outline of the book. On the back of the card, flip it to portrait orientation and make very brief notes (just key terms) as you read the book. Not about everything, not even about what's important, but on things that are *irresistible* to your thinking. If you want to write more, make a maincard for it (see above).

You can also create cards for new words that you learn which can either go here or in the Index.

Index

Prepare a card for each letter of the alphabet. Whenever you create a maincard, think of at least one appropriate keyword and put it on the correct index card along with the address of the maincard. Don't worry about alphabetical order on the index card, just add terms as you come to them. Example: I make a note on a maincard about consciousness, address the maincard (e.g. 1015/1 – see below) and then on my 'C' index card write "consciousness 1015/1". You can write more than one index card entry if you think the maincard note needs it.

A special kind of index card is a 'Collection' (or Collective). When one particular index entry has lots of references, or you know it is a subject that is important to you, collect that index entry on its own card. It can then sit behind the relevant letter of the alphabet.

Is that it?

Not quite. **The most important part is your addressing of the cards.** This is literally the key to your antinet. You can address the cards or slips in the top right or the top left as you wish. These addresses are the key to both finding information subsequently but more importantly in bringing together ideas to help you with your thinking and writing.

Choose half a dozen to a dozen top level subject areas. You could use Wikipedia's academic disciplines (<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Outlineofacademicdisciplines&oldid=1078952876> – see the five main headings on the left), you could use the ten main Dewey Decimal Classification categories. You can invent your own. (Luhmann started with 108 but in his mark 2 version of an antinet reduced this to just 11 top level categories). Give each heading a four-digit number. As you create maincards, pick the area they are most suited for and add that number and then, after a full stop or slash as you wish, add further numbers or letters to differentiate them from nearby cards.

The next time you write a maincard that is close in concept to one you already have, give it a similar alpha-numeric sequence; otherwise, give it a new number. So, from our example above, I might choose to put 'consciousness' in the 1000 sequence at 1015/1. Later on, I make a note about AI consciousness and decide to put it near this notecard rather than in, say, a computing section of my antinet, so I address it 1015/5 (or 1015/1/A depending on how I like working and what cards are collecting there).

Note: You are NOT trying to recreate a hierarchical sequence (like Dewey), it is a rough and ready address for the note – do not aim for perfection. The actual numbers don't particularly matter. Each card is like a leaf on a tree and equally important to the system. All that matters is that you can add numbers and letters to related concepts you want to connect with each other and then make a note of that number/letter sequence in the index.

You'll now understand the name 'antinet': Analogue, Numeric-alphabet, Tree, Index NETwork.

Further Tips

You could just use an antinet to make notes as you read, but you'll get the most effect out of it by treating it as though you're going to be producing something from it (an assignment or an article or even a book!) or teaching from it – even if it is just to explain something to a friend or colleague. This will help you focus on what you need in the way of keywords but also help you to understand the material in the first place.

Consider using coloured cards or slips to help your memory of where/when/why you made a note of something. (You can also date cards if you think that will help – perhaps at the bottom.)

Browsing your antinet, working with it, will help your memory, help you find connections and inspire your output.

Further Reading

Luhmann, Niklas (2018). *Communicating with slip boxes: an empirical account*.

<https://luhmann.ir/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Communicating-with-Slip-Boxes.pdf>

Scheper, Scott P. (2022). *Antinet zettelkasten*. Greenlamp.

Sertillanges, Antonin (1992). *The intellectual life*. CUAP.