

Do You Remember What You're Supposed to be Doing Right Now?

Anya Gregg

In this article, Anya Gregg discusses the processes of remembering, and the tools we use to remember. She argues that the tools we choose to help us remember are part of our "multimodal homeplaces," and as such, are part of our writing researcher identities.

I sit down, in a great mood having just sung my favorite song in choir. I'm tapping my feet and humming, but then tragedy descends upon my innocent mind. Once again I hear the teacher say those four dreaded words: "Take out your homework!" Oh dear. Homework? I didn't think there was homework. What excuse will I use this time? How much will this impact my grade? I did all of my other homework, I know it. Here, let me dig through my bag and shrug a little. That usually works just fine.

This situation made up about 75% of my high school experience. The number one thing my parents suggested? Something they know I do very well in my English class: write it down. I took up this idea just as I would any other genre and started cheating off of other people and using what methods they'd already developed. I put my events on the family calendar, I tied some ribbon around my finger and did most other things I could think of that might help. Unfortunately, as I would eventually discover, notes to aid memory are a very personal genre. It goes against the weird conventions of these personal genres to steal other people's way of writing them. One person's planner is vastly different compared to another's chicken scratch. It

took me four long years to develop my own way of writing things down and it still isn't perfect. Everyone has that moment of "oh, shoot." Whether it be missing an anniversary, an assignment, leaving your child at the mall or even just brushing your teeth; everyone has forgotten something. The number one solution for this problem is, you guessed it, writing it down. Since you are reading a writing-research journal, you can probably guess what this article is about: How remembering things intertwines with literary activity is the main focus here. Memory and literate activity do actually intertwine, believe it or not, using tools one is probably not even aware of most times. For example, what are you reading this on? A tablet that has a Zoom meeting on another tab? A paperback copy with your handwriting dancing around the meticulous printing? Like I said, tools are everywhere, those are just some examples. You may actually be surprised at how personal this genre is, too.

In this article, I'd like to explore how memory aids differ from person to person and to attempt to understand some of the literate activity going on in this highly personal genre.

Who Is Doing What, Now?

In order to understand this genre at all, we first need to figure out what is going on. I can picture my English teacher peering down onto my desk with a judgmental stare and asking what, exactly, the purpose of all this is? Well, Mrs. I-think-all-my-students-are-silly, I happen to care about that test

Genre

The ISU Writing Program defines genre as "a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable."

coming up, and I think the people reading this might, too. Excuse my burning hatred for high school English teachers, but it's human nature to forget and it's also human nature to invent tools to solve problems.

Think about your first job. It's the first day and everyone has high expectations, but so much information is being thrown at you in such

a short amount of time. Were you smart enough to write some notes down? Did you repeat instructions back to the trainer? Did you just suck it up and stumble through what you thought you were supposed to do? All of these solutions were created out of necessity and would (to some degree) do the job. Let's just focus on the first solution: writing it down. Did you write down steps in a tiny notebook? Did you go home and write out a plan for the next day? Did you draft a wikiHow article on how to do your job, complete with custom illustrations, but never uploaded it because you didn't want someone stealing your job? (Don't laugh at that last one, wikiHow legitimately helped

my anxious self.) There are many more examples than just these, but this should give you a rough idea of why this genre even exists.

Speaking of examples, wouldn't some from other people be nice? The following examples can help us to extract the conventions and formatting of note-taking. I have collected some different examples from a professor of writing studies at University of Central Florida, Kevin Roozen; my brother and local organization CEO Ian Gregg; my talented ringleader soccer-mom; and finally, myself. These four examples come from very different sources and are unique in and of themselves, so I think they should prove to be a good indicator of the general public's use of this genre.

My Beloved Brother

To start out, my brother has always been annoyingly perfect. Every time I happened to get a C on any assignment my parents gave me the “don't you want to be successful like Ian” lecture. I mean, look at his cabinets, for goodness sakes! So, when I had the idea of writing this article I sent him a text and he wrote me right back. Basically, what I could glean from his impeccable routine is this: Ian does not use any specific form of memory aid. He is more of a jack-of-all-trades kind of person, although most of his remembering is done through the notes app on his phone. Ian detailed to me the specifics of how he uses which apps.

Basically he uses four different apps, a calendar, and his own brain. The apps include the Notes app, which he uses to scribble down things



Figure 1: My sibling's cabinets. Look at how neat and organized!)

really quick. The Alarm app and the Reminders app serve to help him remember specific times, and the Calendar app helps him remember specific dates. Meanwhile, his physical calendar serves the purpose of noting extra important dates, like a meeting with a client for his job at a music studio. These dates are more critical to his life and if he forgets them, they will have a larger impact than say events like playing a game with his brother online.

Cruisin' for a Roozen

On the other hand, we have Dr. Roozen's method, which is much more tangible than the former example. We recently had a co-interview together ("Everyday Writing Researchers: A Collaborative Co-Interview Dialogue" in this same issue!). I found out through that interview that Dr. Roozen carries a small notebook. He writes down all the information he has to remember in this notebook and seems to cross items off once he completes the associated task. He picked it up when he worked as an outdoor power equipment salesman. During an interview meant for a different piece featured in this journal, he showed me this notebook and explained how it functions: "I've written articles on these little pads of paper. I've kept dates of birthdays and stuff."

"It's just a neat little text." He said. You can specifically see how he dates each page and draws a scribble through things that are done.

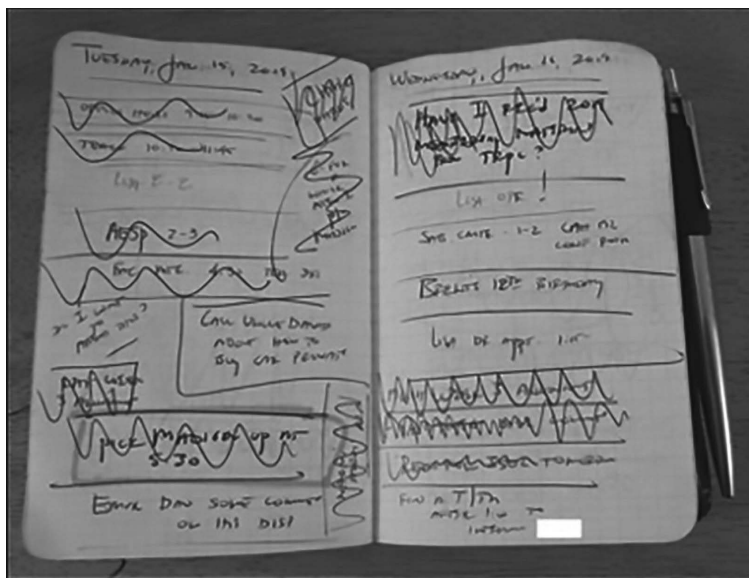


Figure 2: A picture of Kevin Roozen's pocket notebooks.

Dr. Roozen and I also spoke about how some genres dictate that the individual creates the genre from scratch, such as memory aids. The memory aid genre usually fills a more functional role than anything else, and if it fails at any step of the way, it could cause something terrible to happen. I have had that terrible thing happen more times than I would like to admit.

Oh Mother, Mother Dear

Finally, we have my dear, sweet, hardworking Mother, Mama G (yes, I asked her and that is how she wanted to be addressed here). I would like to point out that my Mom is so impeccably on time that she does not use any form of alarm and can wake up at a very specific time in the morning. You will not believe how this woman remembers stuff. She just does! She doesn't write it down anywhere. It's all in her brain and somehow that works. I asked her why she never considered writing it down and she said, "Life moves too quickly as a mom." I find this incredible. Of course, she writes birthdays and things like that on the calendar, but other than that, she relies on her sharp memory. Baffled, I asked how she remembered it all and she cited her fifty-eight years of experience (sorry for giving away your age, mom.) She mentioned she also was very nervous about missing things, so that definitely helps her remember the things she's worried about missing. The interesting thing about that is that sometimes, the best ways of remembering certain items is not to write them down but instead make a mental list or use a mnemonic. A mnemonic is a technique that helps you remember something. Please Excuse my Dear Aunt Sally is a mnemonic for the order of operations. For example, if you have a test in an hour would you copy your notes? Not at all! You would figure out tools to remember key ideas, like my Mom does with her schedule.

This Part Is About Me

As mentioned, I almost never remembered homework and due dates, which is why this memory technique is so extraordinary. I tried many genres including a calendar, a planner, a bullet journal, and many, many more. Finally, however, around senior year of high school I got my shit together and found out that I remember things best by using electronics. My phone is my most helpful asset. Any time I make an appointment or plan an outing with my friends, it goes on my virtual calendar. This calendar then alerts me ten minutes, twenty minutes, or an hour before the event. I can also set more custom alarms using my clock app, as well as set recurring events and color code. This routine gives me no extra room to forget anything.

If there's anything special I need to remember that doesn't pertain to a date or time, it will always be in my notes app. My notes app is comparable to Dr. Roozen's notebook scribbles. Sometimes it contains brilliant ideas, other times a shopping list, and still others I word vomit onto the page and use it as a place to contain my writing that is less annoying than Google Docs. My notes are truly a mess, but the thing is, everything is on one app. Oftentimes during a Zoom meeting I will actually be looking at my calendar and notes app rather than the other participant's faces in order to organize my thoughts and find times for questions.

These apps contain all different kinds of features and literary elements to them, and I'm almost positive it would take my Mom an hour or more to understand how I use it. It is simply that I am around my phone a lot and had quite some time to figure it all out. If I were given a different phone with an app that does the same thing but looks different, I would be just as confused as my Mom.

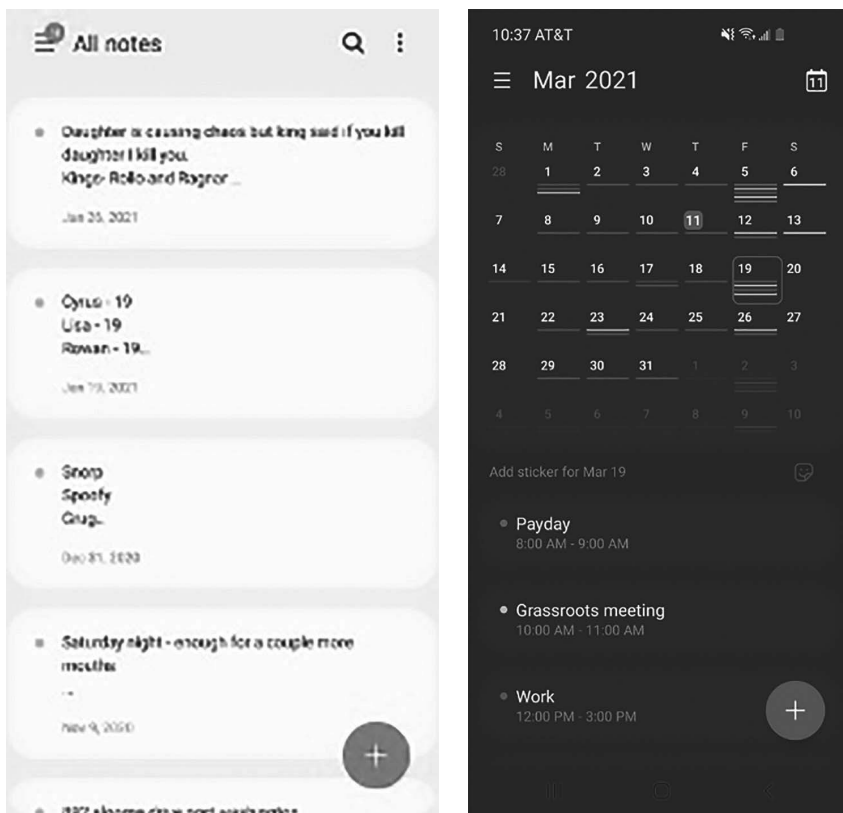


Figure 3: An example of the apps Anya uses to organize her life.

Ugh, Highschool Teachers

The reason I found this method of memory so late in my life was simple. One stupid rule: my teachers forbade phones in class. We could have them during the time between classes, but not in class. This took away that immediate response of putting the date away, so if a teacher mentioned a due date towards the beginning of class, I was screwed. My teachers clearly didn't understand that different students have different multimodal homeplaces. Mine happened to be my phone.

Multimodal homeplaces are the genres or methods that a person is comfortable and familiar with. Let's go back to the example of Dr. Roozen and his notebook. When he showed me a picture of his notes they did not make any sense to me. His wording and grammar were just plain weird.

This kind of notebook just wasn't something I felt comfortable interpreting, and I don't think I'd be comfortable writing it. It's not that I don't have the ability to read it (literally), but I have no clue as to how it's organized. Are there more recent things closer to the end? Won't he forget stuff if he just continues to write stuff down and it gets buried? Does he have different sections for different parts of his life, like work stuff, family stuff, personal stuff? Does he use different colors to describe different ideas?

But even though I find this method of reminders confusing, it seems to work for Dr. Roozen. It's his homeplace—not just a tool that he uses but a part of his identity, his way of being a writer in the world. And if someone forced him to use another genre or even different conventions while still using a notebook, they would be completely bypassing his multimodal homeplace. If he had to write things out in full sentences, would the notebook still be an effective way to keep reminders? What if he was forced to use a bigger notebook? One that he couldn't keep in his pocket?

My point is that the grammars used, the format, the artifacts (small notebook, colored pens), the order of contents, and plenty more things are all tools used to create one strategy: keeping track. Those tools are all a part of a person's multimodal homeplace—the literate activities that help them find their way through the world. As scholar Christina Cedillo notes, “A ‘home place’ is more than a physical space. It is a complex of personal ties, cultural and communal values, and linguistic conventions that make existence a life—plus the established modalities and technologies needed to express and maintain those relations. People do not leave their home places as they navigate the world.” So it's not just the actual tools (digital or physical) that we use, it's also interesting to look at the ways we think about these tools, and

the language resources and strategies we use for specific kinds of goals—like remembering when that math assignment is due.

At this point in my research, I thought back to my psychology teacher in high school. He was a very interesting person and his class was so memorable that I was able to get a high score on the AP test at the end of a year filled with COVID-19 junk. In fact, I can still tell you the major parts of the brain and what purpose they are associated with. It all stuck with me due to the way he taught. Instead of lecturing, this teacher would tell stories. If he didn't have a story, there was a mnemonic device in its place. These two tools quickly became a more prominent feature in my multimodal homeplace throughout the year.

Eventually, one individual who was used to a more “normal” method of teaching, got angry enough to ask him why he didn't teach the class in a “normal” way. Turns out, the teacher had been asked that question every year and he put our current unit at the time on pause to talk about memory. He explained to us why stories and mnemonics stuck in our brain. He also gave us strategies for studying including things like listening to a certain song while studying, studying in different places for each class every time and making our notes as unique to us as we possibly could.

Indeed, these techniques were all centered in the biological process of the brain. I can now say that I am (kind of) a master of studying, too. That leads me to my next point. If I used notes to remember school subjects, why didn't I use them to remember dates and times? Cue a new section header!

Why Some Work for Some and Some Work for Others

Let's start off with my mom as an example. If we switched methods of remembering information I would forget almost everything and she would be much less productive than usual. So why is this method not a more stable genre (like a resume), that generally remains stagnant as different people use it in different settings? This is because these other genres *are* different from person to person.

I'd like to transition to one of my least favorite topics here and talk about essays. In school, every student had a different way of writing an essay. Some would make an outline and research stuff first, and others (me) would sit down and just go. Of course teachers always tried to help us find our best way to write, usually by forcing an outline on us. I hated outlines. They slowed me down, much like notes slow my Mom down.

This is sort of the way it is with memory aids. While Dr. Roozen pulls out a pen and physically writes, my Mom just hears the information and remembers. These are the strategies and tools that work best for them. The difference between these memory aids and more public genres is that the memory aid only has to help you remember; that is its only requirement. Unless someone else is going to need to use your personal reminders, you can use whatever works best for you. Just like how an essay outline needs to help you write the essay, a memory aide has one purpose. Therefore, this offers a lot more freedom to the author in the way of production.

Just as the production of the text or lack thereof is unique to each individual, the items we need to remember are unique as well. For me, I work at the same time every day except Saturday and Sunday. I do not need to remember this as much as other things because at this point it has just become routine. Other things, like what time I have a horseback riding lesson, which are fairly irregular, need to be noted more than work. *What* individuals write down is just as important as *how* they write it down.

Conclusion

To conclude, I'd like to pose a few questions to you, the reader. How do you remember things? What about the people around you? Is that how you have always done it? Why do you use that particular method? How much physical writing does it involve? How did you remember the fine details of this article? Did you take notes, or just simply remember? All these questions serve as doorways into not only investigating yourself as a writer, but also to help keep you organized, which in this day and age, is essential.

Bibliography

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Anya Gregg is an 18-year-old trying to (and sometimes even succeeding in) being an adult. She is planning on fostering her love of writing next year when she ends her gap year and goes to school for a psychology and writing double major. When she isn't asking weird questions like "how do you remember stuff?" to her mom, Anya enjoys horseback riding and playing board games or video games with her friends. She lives at home with her two dogs and cat and hopes to one day become an animal assisted therapist.