

# THE 5 TOOLS THAT RUN MY LIFE (AND INCREASE MY PRODUCTIVITY 10X!)

**First, please know that I'm not (at all) prone to hyperbole.** When I say that these tools ramp up my productivity 10X, I really mean it. I used to hack together a string of tools to do what a single tool or app can now accomplish.

**Second, I've tried to organize these according to the "big buckets" of tools most people are curious about.** Thus, there are two apps for e-mail, one for writing, two for notes (analog and digital), one for tasks, and two for reading. (OK, that's actually eight tools, but five categories.)

## EMAIL/MOBILE: DISPATCH

After trying nearly every mobile mail app available, the clear winner here is *Dispatch*. I use it on iOS (my iPhone), and find that I prefer responding to e-mail on my phone much more than on my laptop these days. Why?

- **Auto-fill salutations.** No more "Hi Mike," or "Hey Sue". It will pull the name from the original e-mail and auto-fill it for you. (Be careful here, as sometimes the other person's e-mail isn't set up properly and you might end up replying to "mdarkney", or some such thing.)
- **App integration.** When I click on a link, Dispatch asks me whether I want to open it in Chrome, add it to Instapaper, create a to-do in Things, or dozens of other customizable options. It's a real time-saver.

- **Text Expander snippets.** I can import commonly used replies and other text snippets into Dispatch so that I don't have to type the same replies over and over on that tiny iPhone keyboard.

As I said, I've tried everything, and Dispatch is far and away the best I've found.

[Learn more about Dispatch.](#)

## EMAIL/DESKTOP (MAC): **AIRMAIL**

This is not such a clearcut choice. Airmail *barely* squeezes out the victory, mostly because it's very similar to Sparrow, which I used obsessively until they were bought by Google. Still, it's much less clunky than the Apple Mail app, and is pretty sturdy and reliable.

[Learn more about Airmail.](#)

## WRITING: **SCRIVENER**

Oh my. I cannot express my love for Scrivener enough. It has saved my writing life, and made the stressful process of organizing my book projects lightyears better. (It's probably saved my marriage.) Here's why I love Scrivener:

- **Flexible organization.** Create folders inside a project, then create text files in those folders. If you want to move sections of

a project around, just move them up and down in the folder before you export. No more cutting and pasting!

- **Word count by project and document.** As a writer on deadline, I live and die by the word count. Scrivener allows me to set a target number of words for a project (or document), the days of the week on which I'll be writing, and the due date, then it auto-calculates (in real time) how many words-per-day I'll need to write in order to meet my deadline. It's pretty amazing.
- **Output into a ton of formats.** Want a PDF? No problem. Word document (which I have to do for book editing)? Yep. HTML, RTF, or Markdown? OK. It's the most flexible solution I've found by far.

Again, if you are a writer I can't recommend Scrivener strongly enough. (The only downside is that there's not an iOS app yet, but it should be coming in 2014. For writing on iPad or iPhone, I currently use *Byword*.)

**[Learn more about Scrivener.](#)**

## **TASKS: THINGS**

I've waffled on this one over the years. I used to be a huge proponent of Omnifocus, which I still love, but over the past year I've shifted to using *Things* as my primary task management tool. They both utilize the GTD (Getting Things Done) philosophy, but *Things* is better for very simple workflows and fairly straightforward project management. (Omnifocus is very useful if you are doing incredibly complex projects with a lot of contingencies, or if you have hundreds of outstanding tasks to manage at a given time. Still an excellent app, just a little too much for my needs right now.) Here's why I like *Things*:

- **Seamless syncing across all devices.** I use it on Mac, iPhone, iPad Mini, and it's always up-to-date.
- **Very simple to add to inbox.** A few keystrokes and I can toss something into the inbox for later. Very helpful when I'm on the road.
- **Emphasis on projects and areas of focus rather than on contexts.** While GTD is helpful in organizing my tasks, I often find that the over-emphasis on contexts can be paralyzing. (Is this a "Mac-office" task, or an "internet-office" task?) I've kind of ditched contexts all together and instead just use "Business", "Personal", "Writing", and "Family" as my main task containers. Works really well.

Again, you can't go wrong with either *Things* or *Omnifocus*, but for those among us who desire to streamline life a bit, *Things* is a great choice at the moment.

**[Learn more about Things.](#)**

## **NOTES/ANALOG: MIDORI TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK**

OK - this is the center of my work universe right now. The *Midori Traveler's Notebook* is a customizable notebook system that allows you to add small notebooks (think Field Notes or Scout Books type notebooks) together into a leather binding so that you can adapt it to fit your needs. I use it for my journal, my logbook, my commonplace book, and my running ideas list. Mine is the smaller (passport) size, and it fits perfectly into my back pocket or jacket when I'm traveling. Here are a few tips, if you get one:

- **Scout Books fit great.** If you want refills, the Midori paper is high-quality, but a little expensive. Scout Books fit really well into the cover and are a lot less expensive.
- **Buy the planner notebook and use it as a logbook.** Keep track of when you get up, what you get done, and what you read. It's great for recognizing patterns over time.
- **The Brass Pen is also pretty great.** It has a *really* thin point, and is great for writing small notes and drawing diagrams. Seriously - if you are a Moleskine fan (as I've been for many years), you will be ecstatic about the customizability and flexibility of the Midori.

**Learn more about the Midori Traveler's Notebook.**

## **NOTES/DIGITAL: EVERNOTE**

I don't know if there's much more to say about *Evernote* than what's already been said. You've probably heard of it, and you probably use it already. If not, you're missing the boat.

It's a cross-platform archival/notes system into which you can throw everything from research to recipes. I use it to research all of my books, to capture articles for sharing later, and to keep track of all of my important personal information. A few tips if you use it:

- **Minimize the number of notebooks.** Because Evernote's search functionality is so amazing, there's no need to create a complex taxonomy. Just create some major buckets (maybe 10-15) and fill them.
- **Tag generously.** If you do need to organize your info a bit more delicately, then I'd encourage you to use tags. That way

you can have similar content in multiple notebooks and still find and organize it all easily.

- **Create a default notebook called “inbox”, and review it regularly.** Just like you empty your e-mail inbox regularly, make sure you review what you’ve tossed into Evernote on a frequent basis, and move those items to the proper notebook. That way you (1) review what you’ve put in there, and (2) keep things nice and tidy.

### Learn more about Evernote

## **READING: INSTAPAPER**

This is another one I’ve waffled on over time, but I’ve recently returned home to my first love. Just like all of my research, etc., goes into Evernote, anything I want to read later goes into Instapaper, then I go work through on my iPad Mini or iPhone during my study time, on a flight, or whenever I have a bit of downtime.

There are bookmarklets for Chrome and Safari that allow you to add any article or webpage to Instapaper. The app will strip out the non-essentials (ads, images, etc.) and create nice, readable text for you. Here are a few reasons I love Instapaper:

- **Superior organization.** You can create your own folder system for storing articles. Instapaper even creates RSS feeds for each individual folder, which means you can share the contents of those folders with others! (I created an [IFTTT](#) rule to create a Tweet about an article whenever I add it to my “recommended” folder.)

- **Highlights and snippets.** You can keep track of highlighted text in the app, and you can even have your highlights sent directly to Evernote with just the relevant text and a link back to the article! When I'm doing research, this saves me a ton of time.
- **Elegant reading.** It's a personal preference, but I just find Instapaper to be a very elegant reading experience. The font selection, minimalist design, and features like tilt-scrolling make it a thoroughly pleasurable reading experience.

**Learn more about Instapaper.**

OK - that's it. I'd love to hear about the apps and tools you use to organize and run your life.

Please send me a note to share something you're excited about. My e-mail is [interact@accidentalcreative.com](mailto:interact@accidentalcreative.com).

It's great to be creating with you!

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