

CAPTURING IDEAS

SUPPLEMENT FOR ORGANIZING CREATIVITY (3RD ED.)

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Daniel Wessel

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MECHANISM

Ideas are time- and context-sensitive cognitive events. Unless they are externalized quickly, they degrade, mutate, or vanish. This loss is a consequence of human limitations. The working memory is limited, attention gets reallocated, and later reconstruction of ideas — if it happens at all — likely produces plausible but inferior versions.

Thus, if you generate ideas, you need fast, immediate, always available, effortless ways to capture ideas in way that is understandable later. The captured ideas also need to end up in your idea collection and feed your projects. Without it, capturing remains an activity that might feel productive but does not advance your work.

This worksheet assists you in reducing the leakage between idea generation and realization of creative projects by preventing lossy transitions between ideation and usable material. They also address capturing the essence of the idea, insight, or inspiration, so what you capture is actually usable later.



Figure 1: Smartwatch and audio notes to preserve ideas

This is a supplement to «*Organizing Creativity*» (3rd edition). It is not included in the book because it is more specific and focused, and therefore not relevant to all readers. If the topic is relevant to you, it provides additional information. It was developed with AI input.

More Information: <https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3>

APPLICABILITY

This worksheet is useful if

- you do not capture ideas (e.g., you vaguely remember having them),
- you regularly reconstruct ideas instead of developing them,
- insights occur away from the workspace and rarely survive the return,
- capturing ideas takes effort or involves friction (e.g., you often avoid capturing),
- ideas are stored but inert (many notes but few that enter projects, e.g., large graveyard, little reuse, don't feed projects),
- ideas are captured, but they feel «cold», missing the essence of what you wanted to capture, or
- you rediscover ideas you meant to keep.

Skip it if:

- Your bottleneck is execution, not idea retention.
- Your domain already forces immediate externalization (e.g., sketching, coding, lab work).
- There is no need to «*optimize capture*» when you actually need to finish things.

Objections to Capturing

The reasons in Table 1 are sometimes given for not capturing ideas. If one applies to you, you can evaluate the counter argument for yourself by capturing ideas for a month. If you go for mostly frictionless capture, you will likely see an improvement in your ideas.

Reason	Counterargument
I remember them	Test it to ensure you are not cheating yourself out of great project ideas.
It takes too much effort	Can be made mostly frictionless and fast.
Looks strange	Focus on capturing, priorities, use accepted tools (e.g., smartphone) which people do not question.
Idea not that good anyway	Emotional reasoning biases judgment, try it and evaluate.
Others can read it	Difference between entertaining a thought and agreeing to it. Normal with fiction ideas.
Looks unprofessional	Professionals have a lot of ideas, so they do need to take notes (e.g., Helmut Newton, Robert A. Heinlein).

Table 1: Reasons against capturing

INTERVENTION VARIABLES

The litmus test for capturing ideas is that the capture has to be faster than postponing it. That depends on:

- **Capture Latency:** Immediate capture — less than five second before capturing starts.
- **Effort:** Effortless, usable when motivation is low. Low physical and mental demand. No decisions how to capture ideas.
- **Physical Availability:** Tool must be present when ideas occur.
- **Usable Later:** Ideas must be understandable later, e.g., readable or context is understood.
- **Transfer Path:** Ideas must end up in the idea collection (e.g., via a Collection Inbox).

As an heuristic: *The system has to be dumber than you are.* Sophisticated systems will fail when you are tired or taxed to capacity.

Having one method to capture ideas in a given context is usually best. The rule becomes a simple «*If I have an idea while in X, then I capture it using Y.*» Immediate availability without any additional thoughts. The capturing method can take the specific requirements of the context into account (e.g., no light when lying in bed, so voice memo might work better). Table 2 shows some examples of capturing methods depending on context.

Changes in the infrastructure are powerful, e.g., having notepads and pens available where you frequently are. Notepads and pens attached to the setting (e.g., shower, toilet, desk) are immediately available without additional thought, and the pages can simply be torn off to put them into the Collection Inbox (physically or quickly digitized via smartphone photos).

Check for possible barriers of the tools you use. For example, an expensive or pristine notebook might create a mental barrier to capturing. A cheap notepad is often better for capturing. A beautiful fountain pen is a joy to write with, but takes too long compared to a simple click ballpoint pen. A note app or task management app with an «Add» button on the lock screen is quickly available, but if you see notifications as well, it will short-circuit ideation after that initial idea (see □ Digital Environment and Digital Minimalism). Instead of exploring the idea further, it becomes «*What was that message? What did I miss?*»).

Table 3 shows tips to reduce friction with specific tools. Note that digital tools come with the risk of «*trying to make it perfect*». The affordances of digital tools run counter to the quick and ugly sketch that is needed to capture ideas.

Context	Recommended Capturing Methods and Usage Tips
Walking	• Paper notepad or smartphone (if you control it, e.g., no distracting notifications) works. • Easy access is crucial (e.g., clothes pocket, not bag). • Write while walking • paper: bend paper slightly for stability, smartphone: one handed typing.
Car	• Audio notes (smartphone, e.g., hardware button; headset). • Never write while driving.
Bed	• Light usually aversive, favors audio notes (smartwatch watch face button for voice memosFigure 1). • Small reading light/light pen works for pen and paper (accessible in the dark, e.g., knife sheath at bed with pen). • Smartphone usually too bright and distracting (notifications, apps). • Great place for ideas but also high risk that ideas get lost (too tired, «remember it in the morning»).
Shower/ Bathtub	• Capturing without interruption and before leaving the context (e.g., leaving the shower). • Cheap notepad with pen that writes on wet paper (e.g., uni PowerTank) → tear off full pages (shower: throw them over the shower curtain, pick up afterwards). • Water-resistant paper (e.g., «Rite in the Rain») is an option. • Steam (bathtub) kills digital devices.
Toilet	• Notepad and pen within easy reach.
Sports	• Regular movement and head free for ideas. • Gym/treadmills easier than outside, but can capture ideas while jogging. Fall back to walking or write between sets.
Work	• Notepad at workplace, tear off pages afterwards.

Table 2: Capturing Methods for Different Contexts

Fallback-Method

Having dedicated capturing tools immediately available in each context is fastest. However, in case this tool is not usable (e.g., pages full, pen is empty), it pays to have a fallback-method. For example, always carrying a pocket notepad with you, or having a notes app on the smartphone easily available. If the primary method does not work, you just switch to the fallback-method without having to think about it.

Tool	Tips to Reduce Friction
Pen	• Good but not luxurious, functional (write cleanly and clearly, against gravity for lying on back in bed). Ballpoint pens are faster than anything with a cap and can be used with one hand. Mechanical pencils usually beat pencils that need to be sharpened. • Can learn to write without looking (e.g., during orchestra performance, in bed with lights out) and while walking. • Light pens have small lamp to write in the dark (bed). • Good pens: uni Power Tank, Fisher Space Pens.
Paper	• Affordable but usable paper. • Blank or dotted paper usually less distracting/lower affordances. • Water resistant paper («rite in the rain», «field notepad») good for shower/bathtub. • Spiral bound lies open. Notepads usually better for capturing (tear off pages). • Laminated cover helpful (sweat, rain). • Good paper: Clairefontaine (very smooth).
Stationary Surfaces	• Whiteboards, blackboards, static-cling writing sheets • Useful if ideas are complex and externalization takes time and space
Smartwatch	• Low effort audio capture (e.g., in bed) possible • Not useful for writing
Tablets	• sketching and note-taking apps (e.g., Apple Notes, Concepts, Procreate, GoodNotes, Notability) can work well • deviations and changes easier (e.g., duplicate sketch, use layers)
Smartphone	• Works only if way to capturing app is not distracted by notifications (e.g., notifications only from VIPs and rarely on screen). • Lock screen buttons useful, e.g., add Task (= idea) to task management app or start voice memo. • Hardware («action») buttons useful (e.g., to start voice memo). • Useful Apps: «Things» (task manager), «Just Press Record» (voice memo app).
PC/Laptop	• Quickly open a text file (e.g., «ideas.txt») via link on Desktop or in Dock/Task Bar, or via shortcut (e.g., Spotlight). • Text files faster and prevents formatting, just write them down. • shortcuts to task manager app useful • headset/camera works for audio/video capture

Table 3: Capturing Tools and Tips to Reduce Friction

Usable Later: Essence of Ideas

Part of usable capture is that you preserve the essence of the idea when capturing.

In general, you might try to capture the following to preserve the essence:

- **Sensory Snapshots:** Write brief fragments focusing only on senses: light quality, temperature, sounds, body feel, movement patterns, color palette, textures (capture sensations, not story). *«Sunset. Orange bleeding into violet. Cool air on eyelids. Distant dog bark. Sea-salt smell. Slow warmth in chest.»* This brings back atmosphere instantly later.
- **Emotional Temperature Tags:** Give the moment 1–3 *«temperature words»*. Not emotions — qualities. These tags act like keys later, unlocking the full memory-state (e.g., brittle, warm, suspended, aching, luminous, unresolved, ancient, electric, ungarded).
- **Symbolic Objects:** Note one symbol that *«held»* the emotional meaning of the moment. Symbolic objects recreate emotional texture better than paragraphs. *«The way her hand stayed on the railing.»*, *«The last ray catching the dust.»*, *«The folded letter.»*, *«The untouched cup.»*
- **Metaphor Fragments:** Emotion compresses deeply into metaphor. Write metaphors instead of explanations. This preserves emotional meaning directly. *«A grief shaped like a collapsed tent.»*, *«The sunset felt like a quiet agreement.»*, *«The air was a held breath.»*
- **Body Markers:** Capture how your body reacted. The body remembers what the mind forgets (e.g., jaw loosened, throat tightened, chest expanded, stomach dropped, eyes stung, shoulders softened).
- **Color Notes:** Capture colors, not sentences. Even single-word colors work. Colors bypass rational flattening (e.g., peach, brass, indigo, charcoal, gold-dust).
- **Positive Beauty (sunsets, intimacy, awe):**
 - a) **Capture the contrast:** Contrast intensifies future recall. *«What was this moment in contrast to?»* E.g., *«Stillness after the chaos of the day.»*
 - b) **Capture the moment's «invitation»:** Beauty always invites something. It resurrects the feeling later. Invitation, e.g., slowness, surrender, wonder, silence, breath, attention.
- **Emotional Time-Stamping:** Write one sentence: *«This moment matters because...»* Not philosophically — emotionally. This anchors meaning. *«This matters because ...»*, e.g., *«... it's the first time I felt the future*

loosen.», «... I realized I wasn't angry anymore.», «... the light matched the grief.»

- **Voice Memos in the Emotional Tone:** Speak your perception in the emotional timbre you feel. Later, the voice carries the emotion back to you in a way text can't. (This is especially powerful for moments of awe, grief, or love.)
- **Grief, Loss, Breakthroughs:** If the emotional moment is tied to loss or intense meaning, preserve the useful material, do not relive trauma. Use metaphor over detail: Details degrade; metaphors stay true. Capture the shift: *«What changed in me?»* is as important as the memory. Tag it for later: Label it *«For Writing Use»*, *«For Painting Use»*, or similar — this boundary prevents emotional flooding when revisiting. *«The world suddenly had no corners.»*, *«It felt like the moment the tide turned.»*, *«Something ancient in me went quiet.»*
- **Soundtrack Anchoring:** If possible, identify (or choose) music that fits the emotional quality. Music is an emotional time capsule. Later, the music restores the emotion in seconds.
- **Micro-Scene Sketches:** Sketch the physical layout very roughly — a few lines, arrows, shapes. Sketch → faster access to place memory → faster access to emotional memory.
- **One-Sentence Summary:** Capture not the moment, but the felt architecture of the moment. And do so using senses, metaphors, body signals, and emotional temperature — not narrative.

Table 4 shows examples of bad vs. good captures.

Transfer Bridge to Collection

Captured ideas have to lead to new projects or support existing ones. So there must be a bridge into the collection. A **Collection Inbox** is that one place where ideas from different capturing methods end up before they are added into the collection.

That **Collection Inbox** can be a literal box (e.g., for notepad pages, sketches, etc.), or a digital inbox (e.g., a folder for images and a text file). Simply taking smart-phone photos of notes and adding the images to the inbox folder is a low effort way to ensure the material gets there. This allows you to type the text later or use OCR (□ Digitizing Information), and the ideas can become part of regular □ Backups.

Example	Bad Capture	Good Capture
Capturing a Sunset (for future painting or writing)	«The sunset was beautiful. Orange sky. Felt peaceful.» Problems: too vague, no atmosphere, no emotional texture, nothing usable later.	«Burnt-orange fading into violet. Air cooling on arms. Light felt heavy, like a long exhale. Silence had a soft edge.» Works: Sensory detail, atmospheric quality («heavy light», «soft edge»), emotional temperature («long exhale»).
Capturing Grief (for a later story scene)	«I felt sad after the call. It reminded me of loss.» Problems: self-narration, flattened meaning, and emotional content totally lost.	«Grief like a collapsed tent — still standing in places, but not livable. Breathing felt diagonal. The room seemed too quiet for what it held.» Works: Metaphor → preserves the emotional architecture, body marker («breathing felt diagonal»), and spatial/emotional contradiction («too quiet for what it held»).
Innovative Idea Spark (for future concept development)	«Idea: combine journaling app with calendar.» Problems: Shallow, nondirectional, no trace of the original insight mood, and easily confused with other ideas.	«Idea shape: timeline + emotional layer. Felt like collapsing diary + day planner into one vertical gradient. Mood: clean, inevitable.» Works: Captures form («timeline + emotional layer»), captures metaphor («vertical gradient»), and captures meaning tone («clean, inevitable»).
Conversation Insight	«He said something interesting about feedback loops.» Problems: Worthless later, no reference points, and memory cannot reconstruct.	«Trigger: when he said «systems get tired», I saw the project as three feedback loops, not one. Moment felt like a sudden widening.» Works: Captures the trigger, captures the structural shift, and captures the emotional sensation of the insight.
Moment of Intimacy (for future relationship writing or art)	«We had a nice moment together. It felt close.» Problems: Generic, emotionally dead, and doesn't preserve the magic.	«Her voice dropped into a softer register. The pause between sentences felt warm, not empty. Candle flicker on her wrist — quiet, unguarded.» Works: Sensory details, emotional micro-texture, body language cues, and preserved atmosphere.

Table 4: Bad vs Good Capture of Ideas, Inspirations, and Insights

Set weekly reminders to add the captured ideas into the collection and to avoid huge and demotivating backlogs. Ideas relating to the core project should be added prior to the next work phase on that project.

Without transferring captured ideas into the idea collection and using them for creative projects, capturing is just decorative.

TRIAL DEFINITION

If you change your capturing method to capture more, you can use Table 5 to diagnose and plan an intervention. Design a trial with the □ Integration Worksheet.

Success and Kill Criteria

The trial should test whether capturing increases, the captured ideas enter your idea collection or current project, and whether the ideas are actually useful (e.g., capture the essence of the ideas).

A major risk with capturing is that it becomes an end in itself. Often by being infatuated with a capturing method (e.g., idea journals) or by leaving the ideas in the capturing method (creates a dam to the collection).

In the first case, capture increase but project material does not and recording feels satisfying independent of use.

In the second case, you end up with a large capture «collection» (e.g., an «idea drawer» with lots of notes).

Treat capturing as a highly temporary place for ideas and ensure you can add the information easily into your collection (see □ Collecting Ideas).

In your trial, set kill criteria to catch when it happens.

Improving Capturing

How do you currently capture ideas? Do you try to remember them, use a notepad? Smartphone app? Which methods do you use in which contexts? Fill in Table 5.

Diagnosis & Interventions

If you lose ideas before capturing them, then your method is not frictionless enough or you do not capture them prior to context changes. For example, the latency is too high, the availability too low, or moving to a different place before capturing. Check Table 3 for better options or try different capturing methods.

If you lose ideas during capturing, then the cognitive load is too high (e.g., formatting or other decision interfere) or the capturing option provides too much friction. For example, it is too slow, not suited to the kind of ideas you have, or for

Context	Current Capturing Method	Capturing Method to Try Out
Bed		
Shower/ Bathtub		
Toilet		
Sports		
Work / School		
Other Places at Home		
Walking		
Car		

Table 5: Improving Capturing

the context you use them. Check Table 3 for better options or try out different capturing methods in a trial.

If capturing the essence of ideas is a problem, check Table 4 to better understand the problem, and the examples for examples on how to capture specific kinds of ideas, inspirations, and insights.

If the transfer to the collection is the problem, check the book chapter on Collection Inbox. It is often helpful to make the inbox more salient (e.g., link on the desktop, putting a physical box where you can see it more easily) and set regular reminders to transfer the inbox material into the collection.

HAND-OFF

You have more than enough information about capturing ideas, what matters now is what you do to improve your capturing. So identify the problem and do an intervention.

