

# NOTE-TAKING APPS: AN UPDATE

By Victoria L. Herring

In the June 2010 issue of *GPSolo*, I wrote a *Mac User* column entitled “Note-Taking Applications for Apple Users” ([tinyurl.com/hsdnuzm](http://tinyurl.com/hsdnuzm)). Seven years is eons in terms of modern technology, so I am revisiting the topic here. Just as I found earlier, it is difficult if not impossible to put together a short article examining all the options for note taking. Therefore, I decided to limit the list a bit. In the sidebar at right are citations to online articles, essays, etc., which provide further information and from which I distilled much of the content of this article. Other excellent places to review the options are the Apple App Store ([apple.com](http://apple.com)), which has a separate category for “Get Stuff Done” apps on its front page, the iTunes Store ([apple.com/itunes](http://apple.com/itunes)), which focuses on iOS apps, and [macupdate.com](http://macupdate.com), where you can search for note-taking, list-making, or task-management apps, as I did.

For this article I decided to focus on the following factors to decide which applications are the most useful for note taking on Mac and iOS devices: whether it’s free (although some of the apps below have a premium cost option, all start out free, at least for a trial period or the basic version); whether it syncs across computers and iOS devices (so you can create a note on your computer and edit it on your iOS device); whether it takes notes using pen or finger and allows images; and whether it allows notes to be made using dictation.

Also, there is a distinction between applications for note taking and those for task management or the making of lists. Each of these functions can be accomplished by just creating a document in Word, Pages, Numbers, Excel, Text Edit, or Reminder. The problem is not

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that these apps cannot be useful, but they are not specifically focused on creating notes, tasks, and lists. That focus is important, so, perhaps the first step is to figure out what it is you want to do: Do you just want to make lists (for groceries or favorite books)? Do you want to use “get things done” task management concepts and get your life in order? Or do you want a note-taking app that can do other functions as well, if needed?

The overview below is not an exhaustive list or discussion of note-taking applications but is focused on my top five applications. There are many more mentioned in the articles I reviewed. Because everyone’s needs and method of note taking are different, *you* will need to decide how much further to research and which to use. In the sidebar are URLs for the various articles consulted on this topic, so you can make your own decision. For the purposes of this article, I did do some minor testing and have some thoughts to share.

**Evernote** ([evernote.com](http://evernote.com)). Almost all the articles I consulted list Evernote as the top contender. In fact, Evernote is such a full-featured program that it requires study to even get a handle on its many

features. I’m a great believer in KISS (“keep it simple, stupid”), which means that I don’t use Evernote very often or very well. I have an Evernote account and for a time had a paid account, but the price increased too much for me. I do not find myself using it other than to save things for later access. But it’s a fine application, and if you want full features, it’s not too expensive for what you get.

**Microsoft OneNote** ([onenote.com](http://onenote.com)). Close on the heels of Evernote in the view of these articles is Microsoft’s OneNote. This it is a free stand-alone app, but it is better used in conjunction with the Microsoft Office suite. It is, like Evernote, extremely full featured and does take a bit of effort to learn.

**Apple Notes** ([icloud.com/notes](http://icloud.com/notes)). Over the past few years Apple’s Notes application has improved sufficiently for it to be highly rated in the articles consulted. It’s an easy application to use if you’re already in the Mac universe, it’s free, and it resides on and syncs with all your Apple devices as well as a number of non-Apple Internet accounts (such as Google and Exchange). It is similar to the old Stickies app (still in existence) and is easy to use and simple, yet it has useful

features. Because it's an Apple product, it fits the KISS bill. Of course, it's best for those who are deeply embedded into the Apple ecosphere, as I am.

**Simplenote** ([simplenote.com](http://simplenote.com)). The next application that gets good marks in most of the articles I consulted is Simplenote. It is what its name indicates: a simple note-taking application. You create a web-based account and then put the application on your Mac and iOS devices and write notes anywhere, which are then synced via the web. It allows the dictation of notes, but it handles text only—no images or handwriting. That is one of its drawbacks, but if you're not using images too often, it should not be a problem.

**Google Keep** ([google.com/keep](http://google.com/keep)). A new kid on the block is Google Keep. It does appear to be quite simple and easy to use, and you can collaborate using it. However, one author cautioned against relying on it because it might go away, much as Google Reader did. If an application ceases to exist suddenly and without *any* backup or export possibility, that's a fair criticism, and you would be wise to avoid it. In fact, given this possibility, you might want to consider whether any of these applications have an easy method of exporting data, and, more importantly, whether their data is retained somewhere in a duplicate file, on your computer or in the cloud, accessible to you even if the application goes south.

There are a number of iOS note-taking apps (available from iTunes App Store) that allow you to use handwriting in addition to typing on a keyboard. One is Paper and another that receives high marks is Penultimate (from the folks at Evernote), but they do not have matching Mac computer apps. And you would be wise to read the review comments. Of course, as newer Macs come along and the OS is updated, maybe they will become useful on Mac computers as well.

All the note-taking applications above

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Mac Update: [macupdate.com](http://macupdate.com)

Apple's App Store (for Mac OS X as well as iOS): [apple.com](http://apple.com)

"Evernote, OneNote, and Beyond: The 12 Best Note-Taking Apps," Jimmy Daly, *Zapier*, October 22, 2015: [tinyurl.com/zxbg7cj](http://tinyurl.com/zxbg7cj)

"40 of the Best To-Do Apps for Personal Task Management," Andrew Kunesch, *Zapier*, April 21, 2015: [tinyurl.com/zyfl55m](http://tinyurl.com/zyfl55m)

"The Best iOS Apps for Taking Notes with Apple Pencil + iPad Pro," Chance Miller, *9to5Mac*, April 6, 2016: [tinyurl.com/zwkvc8u](http://tinyurl.com/zwkvc8u)

"The Best Apps for Taking Notes," Joel Mathis, *Macworld*, September 1, 2014: [tinyurl.com/haqmh5](http://tinyurl.com/haqmh5)

"5 Best Note Making Software/Apps for Mac," Yogesh Kumari, *TechGYD*, June 3, 2016: [tinyurl.com/jnw8lzu](http://tinyurl.com/jnw8lzu)

"What Is the Best Note Taking App for Mac?," *Slant*: [tinyurl.com/hwme4ak](http://tinyurl.com/hwme4ak)

"Should You Be Using Apple's Notes for iOS and OS X?," Bryan Wolfe, *Make Use Of*, February 24, 2016: [tinyurl.com/j299vxf](http://tinyurl.com/j299vxf)

"2016 Guide: The Very Best Notes App for Your iPhone and iPad," Craig Grannell, *TapSmart*, February 23, 2016: [tinyurl.com/zpqd6m9](http://tinyurl.com/zpqd6m9)

"The Best Note Taking Apps for Students," Thorin Klosowski, *Lifehacker*, August 8, 2016: [tinyurl.com/j2n4ucp](http://tinyurl.com/j2n4ucp)

"The Top 12 Note Taking Apps for Getting Things Done in School," C.M. Smith, *Lifhack*: [tinyurl.com/hoohucr](http://tinyurl.com/hoohucr)

"7 Best Note Taking Apps," Brett Nuckles, *Business News Daily*, October 5, 2016: [tinyurl.com/nuvzvsh](http://tinyurl.com/nuvzvsh)

are free (at least for a trial period or for the basic app). The articles listed in the sidebar above include quite a few other free or inexpensive note-taking apps that might be worth exploring. For instance, Notability ([gingerlabs.com](http://gingerlabs.com)) is worth it for writing and retaining information for a little over \$10. (I generally do not engage in subscription plans that charge a set amount every month or year.)

So, how do you figure out which application you want? Figure out the factors that are necessary for you: cost, the ability to sync across devices, the ability to take dictation, the creation of simple notes or lists as well as complex and detailed notes. There are many other factors, but they are all somewhat dependent on the user and his or her needs or wants.

One other feature worth mentioning for some note-taking apps is IFTTT ([ifttt.com/discover](http://ifttt.com/discover)), a web-based, free service allowing you to create workflows that will do things automatically. For instance, you can create a channel for Evernote, then a workflow so that every time you have a blog post, it is copied to Evernote. Check out IFTTT for yourself—the ability to automate actions might be worth it for you. Because I use Evernote, I do have a few of the workflows related to Evernote. I have not tested out IFTTT in other note-taking applications, but I plan to do so in the future.

As noted above, your choice of note-taking apps will depend on your purpose. I hope this article and the resources in the sidebar above will help guide you to a wise choice. ■