

# You can still think deeply in the digital age

December 5 2014, by Joanne Orlando

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Take note: how does a typing on a laptop stack up to handwriting? Credit: Ed Yourdon/Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

Two people walk into a seminar: one takes photos, video and an audio recording of the presentation, while the other takes hand-written notes. Which person do you think will better recall the information?

The former can use their digital notes to create something new that builds on the topic, the latter – not so easy.

Yet we still keep reading reports, such as one recently in [New Scientist](#), which suggest that writing notes on paper gives a person a definite advantage in terms of remembering content. That report was based in part on an article in [Psychological Science](#) on the advantages written notes have over those typed on laptops.

The argument has been around for many years and is usually based on the idea that handwriting is slow and deliberate which allows the reader a deeper understanding of ideas and information, and therefore a better ability to remember it.

That, so the argument goes, is at odds with digitally recording ideas which typically is a quick, haphazard action that limits understanding and therefore recall.

Similar arguments are made over our ability to remember things that we read from a screen, such as a smartphone, tablet or e-reader, as opposed to a paper-printed form.

My question, though, is should memorising information still be a priority?

## **Remember back when ...**

Time shapes knowledge and how we work with it. If it didn't, we'd still be waiting on those handwritten books produced at the monastery. Important changes have emerged regarding the ideas and information available to us, and the ways we can engage with them that are worth considering.

We now have more information available to us than ever. There's almost an infinite number of ideas and resources available at the tip of our keyboard, and the information is not just presented in writing.

Digital technology allows a range of visual, audio and word based information and ideas. On a daily basis we can access podcasts, vlogs, videos, audio recordings and animations to name just a few.

In addition, the interactive aspect of screen-based content means that we can do more with the information and ideas than just read them. We are reading more than ever ([three times more](#) since the 1980s) but interactive components allow us to work with and develop information in many different ways.

It's common for children today to be able to create a multimodal presentation for a school project which has writing, images, video, sound, animation features and hyperlinks to websites. The days of photocopying information for a project and gluing it to cardboard are long gone.

Against this backdrop, the question of whether we should be expected to, or even need to remember large amounts of information to develop knowledge becomes more complex.

## **Deciding what we need to remember**

There are of course times when we need to remember information but there are many more times when we do not – our smartphone usually helps us with whatever we need. Both standpoints have their value depending on the circumstance.

We need to remember things such as mum's birthday, things that are beneficial to our health and well being and those things that can cause us harm such as certain poisonous things, or how to get from home to work (although in all cases we can let technology remind us). At times we also need to understand some ideas deeply and have a very good memory of them, such as, knowing how to drive a car or how to do our job. Most

professions expect you know and remember what to do.

On the other hand there are many more times we need to use pieces of information for only a while – we don't need to remember them but they help us to learn at the time: details of an event, how to cook a recipe or finding out the breadth of changes in a recent government policy change.

Today's school curriculum focuses on 21st century skills which are about processes of applying information, problem solving and collaborating.

A key skill in our current era is the ability to draw on lots of different types of information and bring them together to work out a solution, to gain a new perspective on a situation or to develop our knowledge of something.

Is it important to remember all the research you did for your trip to Hawaii? Probably not. As long as you can access, organise and use the information while you're there is what most people would need.

We also all have different learning styles. The availability of a range of platforms to create information and from which we can access [information](#) is important for all. Handwriting and reading text doesn't necessarily suit everyone.

## **Deep thought**

If remembering and understanding are linked to deliberate action then editing some footage or composing a script for a YouTube clip needs to be well thought through. It's not about if it was written on paper first but just that deep thought has been given to it.

Also if the argument for turning back to books is about not being distracted by online ads or checking our social media or email accounts,

then it's important that we learn to work well in our e-society.  
Technology is not going away.

The shift away from pen on paper has been driven by:

- convenience – our devices are always close by
- cost, as cloud-based content eliminates expensive printing costs
- the thrill of the latest innovation.

These are important factors and suggest screens will become an even greater part of our lives in the future.

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