

EverNote -- Help for Dissertation Writers

Dissertation writers struggle constantly with organizing and noting their thoughts. Here is a note on EverNote, written by one of my readers. As the EverNote people say, "quickly create, organize and find any type of notes on an endless, digital roll of paper." It's free and might help with your dissertation, so check out this description!

Evernote is a software product intended as an organizational aid. The key thing is its use of an "endless tape" metaphor: everything you add to your Evernote file is appended to one endless roll of electronic paper. The nominal ordering is by time: whenever you add something, it gets added to the bottom of your tape. A timeline along the right-hand side of the window lets you find entries by date pretty easily.

Evernote permits lots of different entry types: text entries, Web pages, to do lists, whiteboard drawings (a little like PowerPoint files), etc. I think you can also actually link to other files (e.g. Word or Excel files) that might be important in some context that you describe in an entry. But I don't really do that – if I deem it useful, I just copy the text of an email or Word document.

An important feature is the ability to assign categories to entry types. As you know, I'm working on several different projects, so I created categories for each project and assign each entry to the appropriate category. I think you can also define "smart" categories, e.g. every entry with the phrase "research project B" is put into a certain category. Each entry can be in multiple categories simultaneously. For example, one of my entries might be categorized as a "to do list" (this is automatic according to the entry type), "research project B" (a user-defined category that I attached to the entry), and "experiment idea" (another user-defined category). The unfiltered view just shows all your entries organized by time and date of creation, but you can easily filter based on categories, or search for text.

I use Evernote mostly to capture my free writing, notes from meetings with my advisor, interesting excerpts from papers I read, ideas I had while driving, etc. That is, I use it for ideas and other content that might be important to me, but that I'm not necessarily going to act on right away. I'm hoping that this will help me maintain some continuity and longevity for my ideas. As I said, there's also a To Do list feature, but I personally can't give up paper and pencil for the short-term to dos (what's more satisfying than crossing something off a list?!), and a Word doc for the long-term ones.

I don't use OneNote so I don't know how they compare. But I suspect that OneNote might provide more infrastructure for more formal organization of content (e.g. articles, emails, etc.). Alas, I can only do so much organization.

Evernote is available at Evernote.com. I use the free version. I believe it's Windows only at this point. So if you think it might help you, give it a try. But don't play around with new software as an excuse to avoid working on your dissertation! (Something I've done many times.)