

Years ago, I came across Steven Johnson's book *Where Good Ideas Come From*. Apart from the many interesting ideas in the book he made mention of his use of a piece of software called DEVONthink¹ (Dt). He writes about the notion of *private serendipity*:

Private serendipity can be cultivated by technology as well. For more than a decade now, I have been curating a private digital archive of quotes that I've found intriguing, my twenty-first-century version of the commonplace book. Some of these passages involve very focused research on a specific project; others are more random discoveries, hunches waiting to make a connection. Some of them are passages that I've transcribed from books or articles; others were clipped directly from Web pages. (In the past few years, thanks to Google Books and the Kindle, copying and storing interesting quotes from a book has grown far simpler.) I keep all these quotes in a database using a program called DEVONthink, where I also store my own writing: chapters, essays, blog posts, notes. By combining my own words with passages from other sources, the collection becomes something more than just a file storage system. It becomes a digital extension of my imperfect memory, an archive of all my old ideas, and the ideas that have influenced me. There are now more than five thousand distinct entries in that database, and more than 3 million words—sixty books' worth of quotes, fragments, and hunches, all individually captured by me, stored in a single database.

and

DEVONthink features a clever algorithm that detects subtle semantic connections between distinct passages of text. These tools are smart enough to get around the classic search-engine failing of excessive specificity: searching for "dog" and missing all the articles that only have the word "canine" in them. Modern indexing software like DEVONthink's learns associations between individual words by tracking the frequency with which words appear near each other. This can create almost lyrical connections between ideas. Several years ago, I was working on a book about cholera in London and queried DEVONthink for information about Victorian sewage systems. Because the software had detected that the word "waste" is often used alongside "sewage," it directed me to a quote that explained the way bones evolved in vertebrate bodies: namely, by repurposing the calcium waste products created by the metabolism of cells. At first glance that might seem like an errant result, but it sent me off on a long and fruitful tangent into the way complex systems—whether cities or bodies—find productive uses for the waste they create. That idea became a central organizing theme for one of the chapters in the cholera book. (It will, in fact, reappear in this book in a different guise.)

I began to try it out and missing a key piece of information about it, I stopped using it for software that allowed hyperlinking between notes, documents and so on. That software² was terminated sadly. I found a replacement³. It was not great but it allowed aggregation and the search facility was ok. It was also good for presentations.

¹ Sadly the software only runs on OSX at present.

² Circus Ponies Notebook

³ Curio

More recently, I came across a book⁴ on taking good notes which drew attention to a method of making and storing notes that was developed by Niklas Luhmann, called a slip box or zettelkasten. I chased some of the suggested software down but was unimpressed. I then came across a post that was about using Dt to build a zettelkasten. I gave it a try, a small affordable experiment and... the rest is history. :)

Why is it useful for this task?

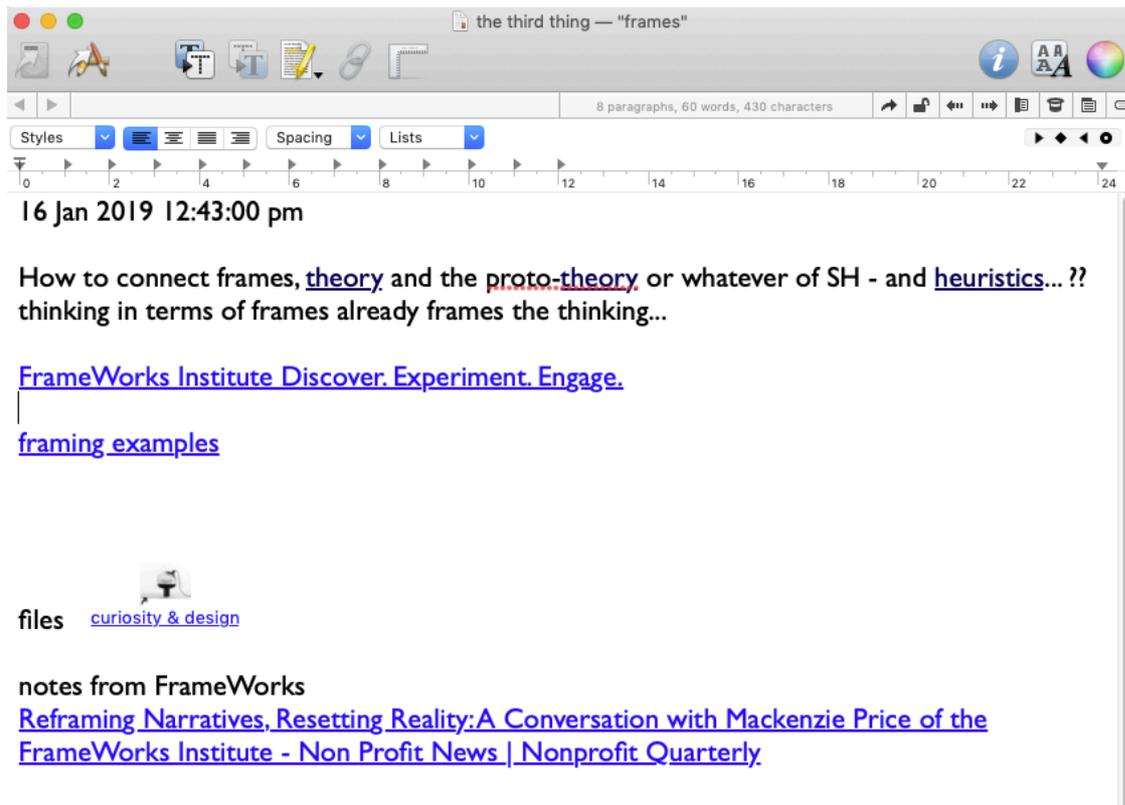
One of the key features of any set of notes is being able to easily connect to other notes. That is so easy to do in Dt. This is how I use it.

When I find a quote, post, book, review, person or whatever on a topic I have not stored, I create a note and give it a name. I usually do a search first to see what I have already captured that has that word or phrase. I then date and time stamp the top of the note. So with key author I might have a list of her books, papers in the one note and then notes for each book or paper that branches from this parent note.

So here is a note I made called frames⁵. You can see the day and time it was created.

⁴ Ahrens, S. (2017). *How to take smart notes: one simple technique to boost writing, learning and thinking*. Hamburg, Germany: Sönke Ahrens.

⁵ The database it is in is called the third thing, the project I am working on. But since then I have allowed the collection to grow beyond the project.



I was puzzling about some dot joining arising from a conversation with Stephen on Slack about frames, theory and proto-theory. The black text with a blue underline is an internal Dt link to another note. So Dt knew that I have a note called theory and a note called heuristics and those links were made automatically when I typed those words⁶.

The links with text in blue and underlined are hyperlinks to the Web. The link next to the files word is a link to my collection of stuff around frames and framing that I had already collected in Curio, an internal link. I do a fair bit of internal linking to folders and other files.

But the key feature of Dt is that any time I type in a different note, the word frames, a link will automatically be made to the note above. Dt has a heap of other features but this, for me, was the killer.

⁶ The note name can also be a phrase.