

# Smartpen takes handwritten notes into mobile, cloud era

February 8 2013, by Troy Wolverton

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I may be a tech columnist who spends nearly all his time with digital products, but when it comes to taking notes, I'm often stuck in the analog age.

When meeting with sources in the office or at a conference, I often use a plain old [notepad](#) and pen.

Unfortunately, I often can write down only a fraction of what's said and frequently have difficulty reading what I wrote. And to find my notes later, I typically have to search through the stacks of notebooks on my desk.

I've long been interested in Livescribe's series of smartpens as a solution to my notetaking problem. When used on special paper, the pens record your every scribble with a built-in camera. Better yet, they can also record audio at the same time and sync that audio with what you write.

The Oakland, Calif., company recently updated its lineup of pens for the cloud-based, [mobile computing](#) era. Dubbed Sky, the new smartpens sync with Evernote, the popular Internet-based notetaking and storage service, rather than with the user's computer. And they typically connect to Evernote directly through their built-in Wi-Fi radios. Assuming users are near a hotspot, their Sky pens will begin syncing their notes as soon as they stop recording them.

The big advantage of the new pens is that they - and the notes they record - are no longer tethered to an individual computer. Because users can access Evernote through a [Web browser](#) or apps designed for the [iPad](#) and all the other major mobile computing platforms, users can much more easily review their notes from non-PC devices.

Livescribe worked with Evernote to mesh their combined services. While Evernote limits to 60 [megabytes](#) the amount of [data users](#) can send for free to its servers each month, Sky pen owners can send up to 500 megabytes of data for free from their smartpens. That's about 70 hours worth of recordings or 10,000 pages of notes, Livescribe estimates.

The two companies have built into Evernote a Livescribe player that allows users to see and hear their notes at the same time. Evernote

arranges the notes by page in their notebook, but when you click or tap on the page, the Livescribe player will collect and display all the pages of notes from that particular recording.



Once users' notes are in Evernote, the service scans them for recognizable characters and words so users can search them. The search feature wasn't able to decipher all of my notes, but it did a decent job of finding words in my chicken scratch.

I like a lot of things about the Sky pen. It was great to have my handwritten notes in digital form and great to be able to access them from multiple devices. But it has several shortcomings that bugged me.

For one thing, the pen is married to Evernote. You can't choose to sync your notes with any other service. That's too bad, because as popular as Evernote is, not everyone uses it. I, for one, would much rather be able to sync with Google Drive, which is where I store all of my typed notes.

Another limitation of the Sky pen is that it can be slow to transfer recordings. You can expect that the time needed to upload an audio recording over Wi-Fi will take several times the duration of the actual recording. With one particular story I was working on, that delay was too long; I ended up reviewing my notes the old-fashioned Livescribe way. All Livescribe pens allow users to replay audio recordings by simply

tapping their pen on their written notes.

The Wi-Fi radio also seems to drain the battery quickly. Livescribe representatives said Sky pens should make it through a full day's worth of notetaking, audio recording and transmitting data. But I got much less use than that; I managed to burn through the battery on my Sky pen by recording and transmitting less than 2 hours of written and audio notes.

The other thing I dislike about Livescribe's pens is that you have to use them with company approved paper, which includes special patterns recognizable by the pen's built-in camera. Livescribe does allow users to print out paper with the patterns on it, but if you want to use a notebook, you have to choose one approved by the company. Those tend to be much more expensive than a typical notebook and come in a more limited range of styles.

So I'm on the fence about the Sky. Having a digital, searchable, easily retrievable archive of my notes has a lot of appeal. I just wish it were faster and longer-lasting on a charge - and could work with my \$1.50 notebook.

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#### LIVESCRIBE SKY WI-FI SMARTPEN:

-Likes: Syncs directly to a cloud service rather than to a computer; cloud-based notes accessible on a wide range of devices; able to search handwritten notes; syncs and allows simultaneous playback of audio recordings and [handwritten notes](#).

-Dislikes: Requires special, pricey notebooks or paper; tied to Evernote rather than allowing users to sync cloud-based service of their choice; transfers can be slow over Wi-Fi; Wi-Fi sync drains battery; unable to

connect to Wi-Fi networks that require browser logins.

-Price: \$170 for 2GB model, \$200 for 4GB model, \$250 for 8GB model.

-Web: [livescribe.com](http://livescribe.com)

**More information:** *Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.*

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