

How to keep the pen mighty in the digital age

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Of late, it has been looking as if the death of handwriting might be upon us, as a screen-obsessed society texts, tweets, and Instagrams its way through every situation. Old writing tools? Drying up in the pen-itenentiary.

But as one who still takes notes with ballpoint pen and paper pad, I find it comforting to see growth in hybrid products that marry new and old forms of data entry, such as tech tools that let you enhance electronically generated pages with handwritten comments or digitally share your on-paper scribbles with the internet.

Decorating the new book: The just spawned Samsung Galaxy Book (\$1,129 and up) is one of those curious, new-breed, two-in-one computers that function as both a full-fledged Windows 10 PC and as a tablet. The switcheroo is simply done by separating the 12-inch tablet screen from its magnetically attached keyboard/cover/stand. When the two are attached, the gorgeous OLED display can sit at four different angles, including as a one-foot-deep laptop, and works better in that regard than a similarly configured (Core i5 chip) two-in-one Microsoft Surface Pro (starting at \$999 without keyboard/cover). The Samsung's rubberized keyboard also beats the Surface Pro in tactile responsiveness and spill resistance. I foresee these things being used a lot as a kitchen computer that you can instantly fold up and stash away with the place mats.

Samsung also is pushing family connections, as content and communications are easily transferred between a Galaxy Book and a Galaxy smartphone.

But what really got to me was the included S-Pen and custom software, which are terrific for annotating documents and for personalizing online articles that you want to share with others. The S-pen writes and erases without an on-board battery. It can also drag and drop links and images into your missives, though not quite as elegantly as

with the three-button, battery-operated Surface Pen featured with the Surface Pro 4 and Surface Book.

The best known, Livescribe pens still capture only stuff drawn on special graph paper.

IRISNotes, by contrast, works with any piece of paper up to the size of a standard office letter (A4). It works by using two rechargeable components - the smart ballpoint IRISNotes pen that you write with and a small receiver that clips on the top of the page.

For transferring stuff and charging, the receiver has to be plugged into a computer (or Bluetooth-linked to a smartphone or tablet) preloaded with IRISNotes 3 software. The program then converts your previously inked words to computerized text, able to work in 30 languages.

But be forewarned: The system setup is still poorly explained. And neatness counts when doing the original note-taking on paper with the IRIS smart pen. Otherwise you'll wind up staring at a converted-to-computer-text document that looks as if it's riding up and down a hilly road and has hit several large objects along the way. An IRISNotes 3 costs \$149.99 at Amazon.com. The similar-looking SmarsonPen sells on the same site for \$79.95.

What the kids are digging: While not quite as hot as a Fidget Spinner, the Rocketbook Wave Smart Notebook is pretty cool for students and teachers alike, said Alex McDonnell, the tech integration specialist (and international relations teacher) at Friends' Central School. "We live in this climate of iPads and notebook computers, which is great for some students, but can be a distraction for others. I like the idea of the Rocketbook as a useful alternative. It gives you a way to electronically save your work, organize the work, back up the work, and share it if you want."

Billed by the maker as "the world's first smart,

microwave-to-erase and reuse notebook" a \$27 Rocketbook comes with a special app for Android and iOS products that lets users snap a digital picture of whatever they have written or drawn on a Rocketbook page and then send it to Google Docs, Dropbox, iCloud, Evernote, Box, or email. And if you've used a Pilot FriXion pen as the writing implement, you can erase the Rocketbook and reuse it at least five more times, just by placing the spiral-bound, 80-page book inside a microwave, along with a cup of water, for a few seconds. This is all possible because FriXion pen ink turns clear when heated to 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

So what's also hot, we asked the techie teacher, with smart-stylus note taking?

McDonnell recommends that iPad-toting students use the PDF annotation tool Notability to take and trade notes. He also sees potential in the Google Keep app, which "will convert script to text if you write really neatly." And he gives high marks to the Acer Chromebook Spin 11, a convertible (flip over) notebook/tablet launching soon at \$329.99 with a low-cost, eraser-equipped stylus included. Asus will also offer a similar Chromebook Flip C213.

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