THE USEFUL TECH

THE FREE GUIDE

25 Hidden Apple Notes Features

The tricks, workflows, and settings hiding inside the most underrated app on your Apple devices. No plugins. No subscriptions. All free.

Raja · The Useful Tech

#1 Apple blog on Medium

Mac · iPhone · iPad

START HERE

You already own the best note-taking app. You just haven't found half of it yet.

I've tried almost every note-taking app out there. Notion, Obsidian, Evernote, Bear, back to Notion. I built second brains I never opened and spent more time decorating dashboards than writing in them. And every single time, the note I actually needed got typed into **Apple Notes** anyway, because it was already open and it never made me wait.

The thing nobody tells you is that Apple has been quietly stuffing this app with real, powerful features for years, with no announcement and no tutorial. You either stumble onto them or you never find out they exist.

This guide is your shortcut past the stumbling. Twenty-five features, grouped so you can jump to what matters to you. The eight from the blog post are in here so it all connects, plus seventeen more I didn't have room to cover. Most work on Mac, iPhone, and iPad. A few are Mac-only or need the latest OS, and I've flagged those.

How to read this

Don't try to memorise all 25. Skim the list, pick two or three that fit how you actually work, and use them this week until they're muscle memory. Then come back for the next two. That's how any of this actually sticks.

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PART 01 Capture & Research

1 Turn any webpage into a searchable archive

Saving a webpage as a PDF is easy. The part people miss is that Notes reads the text **inside** that PDF and makes it searchable. Half-remember a stat from an article whose title you've forgotten? Search a phrase you do remember and Notes surfaces the exact document, even though it's indexing words inside an image.

I replaced my whole read-it-later subscription with one folder called Research. Bookmarks rot and pages get paywalled. A PDF in your notes doesn't.

How: On the webpage, `Cmd + P` → Save as PDF → drop it into a note. On iPhone: Share → Print → pinch out on the preview → Share → Notes.

5 Turn messy voice notes into clean notes

Record a voice note on your phone and Notes transcribes it automatically. But a raw transcript of you rambling on a walk is chaos.

So once it syncs to my Mac, I copy the transcript, paste it into **Claude**, and ask it to turn the nonsense into a clean, structured note with the points I was actually making. Paste that back in. What started as talking to myself on the street becomes a draft I can build on, with zero retyping.

How: Tap the paperclip → Record Audio → tap the speech-bubble icon to see the live transcript. Later, the three-dot menu lets you copy the full transcript.

9 Record and transcribe phone calls · iPhone

Almost nobody knows Notes-grade recording is built into the Phone app. Tap the record button mid-call and everyone is automatically notified it's being recorded. When you hang up, a fully transcribed note lands in a dedicated Phone Calls folder.

You can search the transcript, tap any word to start playback from that exact point, and on supported devices, get an Apple Intelligence summary of the whole call.

How: During a call, tap the record icon in the top-left of the call screen. Find the result in Notes → Phone Calls folder.

15 Scan Text vs Scan Documents (they're different)

Two tools, two jobs. **Scan Documents** captures a full page as a searchable PDF, ideal for contracts, receipts, and forms. **Scan Text** uses Live Text to pull just the words off the page as editable text you can paste anywhere.

Use Scan Text when you want to quote a paragraph from a physical book. Use Scan Documents when you want the whole thing on file.

> **How:** Tap the camera or paperclip icon in any note and choose Scan Documents or Scan Text.

PART 01 Capture & Research

16 Save book highlights for free

People pay for Readwise to collect highlights from Kindle and physical books. You can do a version of it for nothing.

Point Scan Text at a passage in a paperback or on your Kindle screen, tap the Live Text icon, and select exactly the sentence you want. It drops into your note as clean, editable text. As a heavy reader, this quietly became my favourite trick in the whole app.

How: New note → camera icon → Scan Text → point at the page → tap the Live Text icon → select and insert.

13 Highlight-to-quote straight from Safari

Highlight text on a webpage, share it to Notes, and it doesn't just save a boring link. It saves the exact quote you selected, attached to the source. Tap that quote later and Safari jumps you back to the precise spot on the page where you found it.

For research where you need to trace a claim back to where you read it, this is far better than copy-pasting a wall of text.

How: Select text on a webpage → Share → Notes (or Quick Note). The highlighted quote and a jump-back link are saved together.

14 Drag in folders, songs, and map pins

Notes isn't just for text. Drag a folder from Finder and you get a link straight back to it. Drag a song, album, or playlist from Apple Music and it plays inline. Drag a location from Maps and the pin lands in your note, tappable.

Each of these becomes a live, functional object instead of a dead screenshot, so a trip-planning note can hold your playlist, your restaurant pins, and your booking PDFs in one place.

How: Drag the item directly into an open note. Works from Finder, Apple Music, Maps, Mail, and more.

19 Quick Note from a corner, with just your finger

Quick Note usually gets pitched as an Apple Pencil thing. It isn't. You can trigger it with a finger swipe from a screen corner, so you can jot a thought from anywhere in the OS without opening the app.

On a locked iPad, tapping the screen with an Apple Pencil opens a fresh note instantly, like an always-ready notepad.

How: Settings → Notes → enable a corner gesture (or set a Hot Corner on Mac). Swipe in from that corner any time.

PART 02 Organise & Navigate

2 Double-click a note into its own window · Mac

The feature I use most and see mentioned least. Double-click any note in the sidebar and it opens in its own detached window.

I write in one window and keep my outline open in another, side by side, no split screen. When I need to check an old note mid-draft, it's already floating next to me. Go back to a single cramped pane after this and it feels like typing with mittens on.

How: Double-click a note in the notes list. Repeat to float as many as you like.

6 The Recent Notes menu kills the back-button shuffle

If you bounce between a few notes at once, you know the pain of tapping back, hunting through a folder, opening the other note, then reversing the whole dance. Notes fixed this and told nobody.

The ellipsis menu shows your last eight opened notes, one tap apart. My draft, my research, and my ideas dump are all a click from each other.

How: Open any note → tap the ellipsis (•••) menu → Recent Notes. There's a Clear button to reset the list.

8 A smart folder that catches notes you forgot to tag

Most people build smart folders to gather notes by tag and stop there. The smarter move is pointing one at the notes that slipped through: set the filter to **No Tags** and you get a live list of everything you were too rushed to organise.

Same trick for Quick Notes clutter: filter Quick Notes created before a set date, then sweep through and keep or bin.

How: New Folder → Make into Smart Folder → filter by "No Tags" (or Quick Notes + a created-before date).

20 Turn an existing folder into a smart folder

Built a normal folder and later wished it filtered itself? You don't have to rebuild it. Right-click and convert it in place, keeping everything already inside.

How: Right-click a folder → Convert to Smart Folder → choose your filters.

PART 02 Organise & Navigate

12 Link one note to another to build a home page

The feature that made people leave Obsidian is sitting right here. Highlight text, add a link, and point it at another note. Now you can build a single home note, or table of contents, that jumps to every important note you own.

I keep a pinned home note that links out to every active project. It's the first thing I see, and I'm one tap from anything that matters.

How: Select text → Add Link (or `Cmd + K`), or type `>>` for a searchable list of recent notes to link.

18 Find in Note, not just across all notes

The main search bar looks across every note you have. But when you're deep in one long note and just want to find a word inside **this** note, there's a separate tool for exactly that. It highlights every match so you can step through them.

How: On Mac, `Cmd + F` inside a note. On iPhone/iPad, the ellipsis menu → Find in Note.

17 Collapsible headings to tame a long note

Any heading or subheading you create automatically becomes collapsible. Fold sections away to declutter a long note, and here's the bonus: collapse a whole section, cut it, and paste it elsewhere to reorder a big document in seconds.

How: Format a line as Heading, then tap the arrow that appears to its left to collapse or expand.

24 Flip between date created and date edited

A tiny one that's weirdly satisfying once you know it. Tap the date at the top of any note to switch what it's showing you: when you created it, or when you last touched it. Handy when you're trying to remember whether a note is old or freshly updated.

How: Tap (or click) the timestamp near the top of an open note to toggle.

PART 03 Format & Calculate

3 Real fonts and real text colour · Mac

Everyone knows the highlighter colours. Almost nobody knows `Cmd + T` opens the full macOS Fonts panel right inside a note: real typefaces, real weights. And the Format menu lets you change the actual colour of the text, which is a completely different thing from highlighting it.

It won't replace a design app. But for the app everyone calls "the one that only does bold and italic," it's a strangely fancy thing to find.

How: `Cmd + T` for fonts. Format menu → text colour for colour. Set a default size in Notes settings.

4 Math Notes does live currency, not just sums

Notes solves an equation as you type it. What surprised me is that you can write a conversion in plain language, like **$1,500 in INR**, and it converts on the spot using a live rate. Since a chunk of my income is priced in dollars, I can work out a deal's rupee value mid-sentence.

Think in graphs? Type **y = x + 5**, insert the graph, and it plots inline. Add a second equation and it stacks onto the same chart.

How: Just type the maths or the conversion in a note. For a graph, type an equation, then tap/click it and choose Insert Graph.

7 Mono style is secretly the best way to save a quote

Tucked at the end of the formatting options is Mono style, a monospaced block everyone assumes is only for code. I use it for quotes.

When I pull a line from a book or article into a note, I drop it in a Mono block so it's instantly, visually separate from my own thoughts around it. No confusion later about which words were mine. It has saved me from misattributing a quote more than once.

How: Format menu (AA button) → scroll to Mono styled. Great for quotes, code, and serial numbers.

23 Block quote formatting

A newer, subtler formatting option: block quote adds a clean indent that sets a passage apart from the rest of your note. Pair it with Mono style and you've got two distinct ways to separate borrowed words from your own.

How: Format button → choose the block-quote icon.

PART 04 Privacy, Pencil & What's Next

10 Lock the entire Notes app · iOS 18+

Locking a single note is well known. Locking the whole app at the OS level is not. If most of your notes are personal, you can require Face ID to open Notes at all.

How: Long-press the Notes app icon → Require Face ID.

11 Give a locked note its own password

When you lock a note, you can set a password that's separate from your device passcode. So even someone who knows how to unlock your phone still can't open that note. Useful for the genuinely sensitive stuff.

How: Settings → Notes → Password → choose a custom password (or Face/Touch ID). Then lock a note from its share/ellipsis menu.

21 Auto Shape Recognition & Smart Script · iPad

Draw a rough circle, star, or arrow with the Apple Pencil and hold at the end: Notes snaps it into a clean, perfect shape. Smart Script goes further, subtly straightening your actual handwriting while keeping it recognisably yours, so your messy notes stay legible without losing their character.

How: Draw a shape and pause before lifting the Pencil. Toggle Improve Handwriting in the Pencil menu.

22 Annotate PDFs right inside a note

Drop a PDF into a note and you can mark it up without opening a separate app. Open it in Quick Look for full-screen markup with pen, highlighter, and shapes. A pro touch: hold a highlight stroke for a second at the end and Notes neatens the line for you.

How: Add a PDF → tap its name → Quick Look → tap the pen icon for the full markup toolbar.

25 Notes on your Apple Watch · watchOS 26

Notes is finally coming to the wrist. View any note, tick off checklist items mid-errand, and create new ones by dictating to Siri, no phone required. There are even watch-face complications to jump straight to your latest note or start dictating.

How: Update to the latest watchOS, then add the Notes complication to your watch face.

ONE LAST THING

You didn't need a new app. You needed this list.

I spent years convinced the perfect note-taking app was one more download away. The whole time, the answer was the boring grey icon that came pre-installed on every device I own. None of these 25 features cost a thing, and not one of them needs a plugin or a weekend of setup.

Pick two or three, use them this week, and let them become automatic. That's the whole game.

Written by Raja · The Useful Tech

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