

Siltmark and the Commonplace Garden

A guide to two methods for writing and thinking.



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1. Introduction

There is a moment that many people who take notes seriously recognize. You have assembled something careful: a folder structure, a tagging system, a collection of templates, perhaps a daily review ritual. The system looks good. And then, three months later, you notice you are spending more time maintaining the system than using it. The weekly review becomes a chore. The tags multiply without purpose. The template stares back at you from every morning with its unfilled fields. You start writing fewer notes, not more. You open the notebook less often. Somewhere between the system and the work, the system won.

The most widespread methods for note-taking and journaling — the Zettelkasten, structured Digital Gardens, the codified version of the Bullet Journal — work well for many people. But they share an implicit assumption: that maintaining the system is a sustainable activity, separate from writing. This assumption has three concrete consequences.

The first is atomization. The Zettelkasten, in its canonical form, requires each note to contain a single concept, small enough to be linked to everything else. This is productive for building explicit knowledge structures, but costly for minds that think in intertwined forms: a quote triggers a memory, the memory generates an analogy, the analogy opens a question. Breaking this natural flow into separate fragments requires effort. The system asks you to pre-digest your thoughts before you have finished thinking them.

The second is maintenance. Tags need a coherent taxonomy. Links need to be checked and maintained. Periodic reviews need to be scheduled and executed. The graph needs to be grown intentionally. For someone who writes because

they need to think — not because they want to manage a system — these activities are not a minor overhead. They are a competing demand on the same finite energy that is needed to think and write.

The third is subtler: the anxiety of the perfect system. Structured note-taking methods have an aesthetic dimension. A Zettelkasten with irregular links, a Digital Garden with uncompleted connections, a Bullet Journal with missed daily entries — these can trigger a sense of inadequacy that has nothing to do with the quality of the thinking. The system becomes a second place where you can feel insufficient. And that feeling, once present, closes spontaneity.

The two methods described in this book were built as responses to these three problems. Not by eliminating structure — both methods have structure — but by eliminating dedicated maintenance, mandatory taxonomy, and the performance of organization. In both methods, structure is a byproduct of use. It is not built beforehand, and it does not need to be maintained as an activity separate from writing.

1.1 The shared principles

Siltmark and the Commonplace Garden were developed independently, for different functions, in different forms. One is a single text file; the other is a vault of many files. One is chronological; the other is thematic. One records thought in motion; the other holds thought still for incubation.

But they share a core, and naming it before describing the methods separately is useful.

Opportunistic structure. The structure of each method emerges from use. In Siltmark, an entry on any day is adjacent to entries from before and after, and the chronological organization arises naturally from appending. In the Com-

monplace Garden, an index page emerges when you realize you have several notes on the same theme — not before. Structure is a consequence, not a plan.

Zero dedicated maintenance. Neither method requires a cleaning session, a periodic review, or a cataloging ritual. You do not schedule time to tidy up. If a note is never retrieved, that is fine. If a journal entry goes unread for years, that is fine too. The system does not ask anything of you when you are not using it.

Organization as byproduct. This follows from the first two: you do not organize in order to write; you write, and organization emerges. In a chronological file, entries from the same period end up adjacent automatically. In a vault of notes, related ideas accumulate around the same themes and reveal their kinship through links that appeared when they were needed, not when they were required.

The system follows the gesture. Both methods are designed to accommodate the natural gesture of the writer — the way thought actually moves — rather than correct it. If you think in long paragraphs, the method handles that. If you think in fragments, the method handles that too. If your journal entry is one word, that is a valid entry. If a note in the repository is one line, that is a valid note. The writer is not the method's user; the method is the writer's instrument.

1.2 Map of this book

This book presents two independent methods. You can read it in order, or jump directly to the chapter that interests you.

Chapter 2 describes **Siltmark**: a journaling method in a single text file, with an analog variant for those who prefer pa-

per. The chapter is complete and self-contained. If you want to use only Siltmark, this chapter is everything you need.

Chapter 3 describes the **Commonplace Garden**: a note repository in local files, designed for collecting external material and personal elaboration in the same space. The chapter is complete and self-contained. If you want to use only the Commonplace Garden, this chapter is everything you need.

Chapter 4 is for those who choose to **use both**. It describes how the two methods dialogue, when a thought might migrate from one space to the other, and what to watch for when using them in parallel. Reading chapters 1 and 2 first is advisable before reading chapter 3, but not strictly required.

The **Closing Thoughts** addresses the question of who these methods work for, formulates the underlying principle that connects both, and says clearly what they are not.

The **Appendices** contain reference material: a seal cheat sheet and technical notes on Markdown compatibility.

2. Siltmark

A journaling method in a single text file, with an analog variant.

2.1 Design principles

One medium, append-only. In the digital version, everything goes into a single file — `siltmark.md`, or whatever name you choose. In the analog version, everything goes into a single notebook. You always write at the end. Nothing is reorganized, moved, or deleted. The flow is chronological and unidirectional.

This matters because the alternative — multiple files, multiple notebooks, material organized by theme — creates the recurring question of where to put things. When there is only one place, there is no question.

Prose as the default mode. The basic form of a Siltmark entry is the free paragraph. Not bullet points, not outlines, not templates. If you want to write three lines, write three lines. If you want to write one word, write one word.

Bullet points are a form of pre-digestion: they reduce an experience to a syntactic fragment, often without a verb, without context, without tone. They work for capturing facts, but they resist reflection because the format itself imposes brevity and separation. Each point is an island. Prose does the opposite. Even a short sentence — “I don’t feel like writing, but I’m here” — carries more emotional and cognitive information than any bullet point, because it preserves the voice of the person who wrote it. Bullet points ask “what happened?”; prose asks “what was it like?”. The second question tends to relieve; the first tends to accumulate.

Bullet points are still allowed. There is no prohibition. But the natural gravity of the method pulls toward the paragraph, because the paragraph is the form most faithful to how thought actually sounds.

No required form. There is no “correct” entry. One day you write half a thought, another day you write a page. Both are valid. The method does not have a template because templates create empty fields, and empty fields generate a subtle guilt – the feeling that you are using the tool wrong.

The empty entry is a valid entry. Most journaling methods treat a day without content as an implicit failure: an unfilled template, a broken streak, an empty field staring back at you. Siltmark addresses this explicitly. This:

```
#### 2026-03-14, Saturday
```

is a complete entry. You opened the file, wrote the date, had nothing to say or no energy to say it. This is not an absence; it is a silent presence. There is no empty mood field, no unanswered “how do you feel today?”. There is a date, and the date says you existed that day.

This functions as a safety valve. The worst possible day with the journal is: open the file, write the date, close it. Near-zero cognitive cost, no guilt, no accumulated debt.

No maintenance. There is no weekly review, no migration ritual, no moment when you need to go back and tidy up. The file simply grows. If you return to it after a month of absence, you write at the end, under today’s date. The gap is not a problem; it is part of the record.

Write in the present. Siltmark records when you write, not when things happen. If on Wednesday you want to note something that happened on Monday, write under

Wednesday’s date and mention the past in prose: “Monday X happened; I’m only thinking about it now.” Do not go back to insert content under a past date.

This is not a rule imposed from outside. It is the consequence of the append-only structure: the chronology is that of writing, not of events. And it eliminates one of the most common sources of hesitation in journaling — the question of where to put something.

2.2 File structure (digital version)

The file uses three levels of Markdown headings to organize time: year, month, day. This makes the file navigable via outline or sidebar in any editor that supports heading folding (Obsidian, VS Code, iA Writer, Typora), without sacrificing readability as plain text.

2.2.1 Year (H2)

```
## 2026
```

Written once, when the year begins. Nothing else needed at this level.

2.2.2 Month (H3)

```
### 2026-03
```

Written once, at the start of each month. The numeric format — `YYYY-MM` — maintains consistency with the day dates and ensures natural alphabetical sorting.

2.2.3 Day (H4)

```
#### 2026-03-18, Wednesday
```

This is the only heading written each time you open the file. The ISO date format guarantees sorting and searchability. The day of the week is optional — include it if you find it useful for orientation, omit it if you prefer cleaner headings.

The day heading is the only mandatory structure per entry. Everything else is optional.

2.2.4 Time marks

If you record multiple moments in the same day and want to distinguish between them, separate them with the time in bold on its own line:

```
**14:30**
```

This is not a heading — it does not create a new level in the file's hierarchy. It is a mark in the flow, like glancing at a clock. Use it when the time of day matters for understanding the entry; omit it when it does not.

2.2.5 Breath

When two things within the same day belong to entirely different contexts and you want a visible separation between them, a horizontal rule serves as a pause:

```
---
```

No special meaning. It is a visual break, like looking up from the page between one thought and the next.

2.3 Margin seals

Five characters in total. They are placed at the beginning of a paragraph, followed by a space. All of them are optional.

Seals are lenses, not categories. When you use a seal, you are not classifying the entry. You are saying: “When I search through this file in the future, I want this paragraph to surface when I search by state, question, insight, or connection.” It is a retrieval function, not a classification system.

2.3.1 Content seals

Four seals describe the nature of the paragraph. The set is closed: no new seals are added. This closure is the point. It eliminates the decision of which marker to use and replaces it with a minimal, fast question: *Does this paragraph need a seal? If so, which of the four?* If none of the four fits, the paragraph has no seal, and that is fine.

This is a structural difference from hashtags. Hashtags are infinitely extensible, and the incompleteness of an open taxonomy generates the recurring doubt: *is this the right tag? should I create a new one?* A closed set of four eliminates this drift entirely.

| Seal | Meaning | Example |
|------|---|---|
| ~ | Feeling, emotional state, inner weather | ~ Dense tiredness, not physical. |
| ? | Open question, doubt, unresolved matter | ? Whether the problem with chapter 3 is |

| Seal | Meaning | Example |
|------|---|---|
| ! | Spark, insight, something that opened up | the content or the sequence. ! The turn is not a narrative unit, it is a beat. |
| & | A noticed connection between different things | & The fractal structure and the way the journal self-organizes over time. |

The four content seals are mutually exclusive. A paragraph has at most one. If it would need two, it is two paragraphs.

To see how seals appear in actual writing, rather than as isolated definitions: you write an entry about a difficult afternoon meeting. In the middle of the prose you notice an unexpected insight about how you handled conflict – you mark it !. Later in the same entry you find yourself writing a question you cannot answer yet – you add ?. The rest of the entry, including the description of events and your emotional reaction to them, has no seal, and does not need one. Seals are not for whole entries; they are for specific paragraphs you want to be able to find later. Most paragraphs will have none.

2.3.2 Highlight seal

The caret ^ is the fifth seal, and it is different in kind from the four. It does not describe the nature of the paragraph, but the fact that you recognized it as significant at a mo-

ment *after* writing. It operates on a different axis — temporal rather than typological — and for this reason it can combine with any content seal, or stand alone.

Content seals are prospective: you place them when you write. The caret is retrospective: you place it later, when you reread. It is added at the start of the line, before the content seal if one is present:

```
^? Whether the problem is the content or the  
sequence.
```

```
^! Thought without surveillance: writing  
without  
    surveilling what you write.
```

```
^ Sometimes simplicity works because you  
subtract.
```

The caret alone (^ followed by a space and text) marks a paragraph that had no content seal. The caret in front of a seal (^?, ^!, ^~, ^&) marks a paragraph that already had a seal. In both cases it is always the first character on the line.

No scale of importance, no multiple marks. A binary sign: *noticed* / *not noticed*. No obligation to reread — you do it when it happens, if it happens. There is no dedicated ritual for rereading. The caret accumulates passively over time, and if you ever want to see what has struck you across months or years, a single search for ^ surfaces all of it.

2.3.3 Rules

- You are not required to use any seal. Most entries will be prose without seals.

- A paragraph has at most one content seal.
- The caret can accompany any content seal, or stand alone.
- No other seals exist. Five is the limit.

A condensed reference version of all five seals, with search syntax, is in *Appendix A: Seal cheat sheet*.

2.4 Natural searches (digital version)

The file structure is designed so that the most useful searches are trivial to perform with any text search tool — `grep`, `Ctrl+F`, `ripgrep`, any editor’s search bar. In the analog version, seals serve an equivalent function as visual anchors while leafing through pages.

These are not features of the method. They are consequences of the format.

| Looking for | What you type in search |
|----------------------------------|--|
| An entire year | <code>## 2026</code> |
| An entire month | <code>### 2026-03</code> |
| A specific day | <code>#### 2026-03-18</code> |
| All emotional states | <code>~ (tilde space)</code> |
| All open questions | <code>? (question mark space)</code> |
| All sparks | <code>! (exclamation mark space)</code> |
| All connections | <code>& (ampersand space)</code> |
| Everything marked as significant | <code>^</code> |
| A specific theme | The term itself (e.g. <code>novel</code> , <code>running</code> , <code>chapter 7</code>) |

Seals work as search filters because they are single characters at the start of a paragraph, followed by a space. This is why the set is what it is — and why hashtags are not used. `~`

(tilde space) matches exactly emotional states and nothing else. A hashtag like #emotion requires consistency across all uses and generates the problem of tag variants: #emotional, #emotions, #feelings. The seal avoids this by being a character, not a word.

2.5 File example (digital version)

The following is an example of a Siltmark file covering a few days of writing. It shows the hierarchy in practice, multiple seal types, a horizontal-rule breath, a time mark, an empty entry, and the retrospective caret.

```
## 2026
```

```
### 2026-03
```

```
#### 2026-03-10, Tuesday
```

```
Slow day. Slept in late, which is rare.  
Outside it rains in that Milanese  
way that is not rain but wet air.
```

```
~ A kind of relief. As if the grey weather  
gave me permission  
to produce nothing.
```

```
Reread a few pages of Le Guin, "The Lathe  
of Heaven". Every time I notice  
something different in the way she builds  
dialogue.
```

```
---
```

Evening. Cooked from nothing, no recipe.
Garlic, oil, chili, anchovies.

Sometimes simplicity works because you
subtract, not because you add.

2026-03-11, Wednesday

09:00

? I wonder whether the ethics in the
manuscript should start from a
foundation or whether it is more honest to
present it as emergent.

Chapter 7 pulls toward the foundation, but
the rest of the text does not.

15:20

Run in the park. Dry cold, good for
running. 6 km without thinking,
which is the reason I run.

^! "Without thinking" is not the absence
of thought. It is thought without
surveillance. Maybe that is a useful
distinction for journaling too:
writing without surveilling what you
write.

& Connection with wu wei. Action without
forcing is not passivity,
it is attention without grip. Same thing
here.

2026-03-12, Thursday

Nothing in particular. Work, meeting, data.

2026-03-13, Friday

~ Subtle irritation all morning, no clear reason.

Probably accumulated stimuli from the week.

Something from Tuesday came back to mind: that Le Guin passage

about dialogue. I don't remember which one, but I remember the

effect it had. Maybe the point is not remembering the passage,

it is remembering the effect.

2026-03-14, Saturday

The last entry – a date with nothing beneath it – is a complete entry. The file records that Saturday existed.

2.6 What is not here (on purpose)

No tags or hashtags. Tags create the implicit obligation of a coherent taxonomy. Text search on the file itself is sufficient – and more flexible, because it searches actual words rather than requiring you to remember which tag you used.

No tasks. Siltmark is not a task manager. If you need to track things to do, write them where you manage tasks. The

journal is not the right container, because tasks that never get checked off become a silent accusation in the middle of prose.

No daily template. Templates create empty fields, and empty fields generate guilt. “How do you feel today? What are you grateful for? What is your intention?” — these questions are not bad questions, but their format implies that the absence of an answer is a failure. Siltmark asks nothing.

No periodic review. There is no weekly or monthly ritual. If you want to reread, reread. If you do not, the file asks nothing of you. The caret exists precisely to make rereading optional: you mark what strikes you when you encounter it naturally, without a scheduled session.

No consolidation. There is no moment of integration — no step in which you return to raw entries to distil, summarise, or restructure them into something more refined. The journal is a repository, not a laboratory. What you wrote on a given day stays as you wrote it, in its context, with its incompleteness. If a thought develops into something else, that happens elsewhere, in a different tool or space. It is not part of this method.

No event timeline. Siltmark records when you write, not when things happen. There is no structure for reconstructing the chronology of events, no mechanism for filling in a day you did not write. What the file contains is the trace of your attention, not a record of the world. This is a position, not an oversight: a timeline of events privileges facts over response. Siltmark privileges the moment of writing over the moment of happening.

No streaks, scores, counters. Writing is not a performance. A month of daily entries followed by two weeks of silence is not a failure; it is a month of daily entries and two weeks of silence. Both are in the file. The file does not judge.

2.7 Analog variant

Siltmark also works on paper. The principles are the same: one medium, write at the end, prose as the default mode, no maintenance. What changes is the visual rendering of the structure and the way entries are retrieved.

2.7.1 The medium

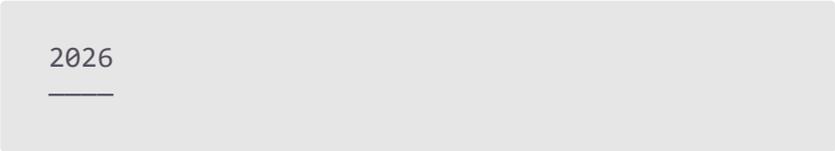
One notebook. Not loose sheets, not themed notebooks, not removable pages. A notebook with bound pages, filled in order and then closed when full. The next notebook is the next volume.

If the notebook has numbered pages, all the better. If it does not, numbering them is not required – it is a notebook, not an index.

2.7.2 The hierarchy on the page

The year/month/day hierarchy translates to paper as follows.

The year is written once, prominently, when it begins:



2026
—

The month is written once, in numeric format, when it changes:



2026-03

The day is written each time, at the start of the line:

2026-03-14, Saturday

The time mark is written in the margin or at the start of the line, separated from the text:

14:30

The breath – the horizontal rule in the digital version – becomes a hand-drawn line or simply a wider blank space between two paragraphs.

2.7.3 Seals and caret on paper

They work identically to the digital version. Written at the start of the paragraph, before the text:

~ Dense tiredness, not physical.

? Whether the problem is the content or the sequence.

^! Thought without surveillance: writing without surveilling what you write.

^ Sometimes simplicity works because you subtract.

On paper, seals have an additional advantage: when you leaf through pages, the eye catches them quickly. They are isolated characters at the start of a line, visually distinct from

prose. They serve as anchor points during fast browsing, the way a familiar symbol in the margin stands out when you flip through a physical book.

Adding the caret later — when you reread — means prepending it to the existing seal or to the text. On paper this means rewriting the character (for example, ! becomes ^! by adding ^ in front), or adding ^ before the text if the paragraph had no seal.

2.7.4 What is lost, what is gained

You lose text search. You cannot search a notebook the way you can search a file. Retrieval happens by leafing through, and seals serve as visual anchors rather than search filters. If the notebook has numbered pages, you can keep a loose index — a separate sheet, a post-it on the cover — with the page numbers of entries marked with ^. This is not required, but it is the closest analog to the digital search function.

You gain disconnection. No notifications, no temptation to reformat, no editing history. What you write stays as you wrote it. The mistake, the crossing out, the change of mind mid-sentence are part of the entry. On paper, the method is even more faithful to its own principle: writing without surveillance.

2.8 Markdown compatibility

The digital Siltmark file is valid Markdown. For technical details on how the file structure and seals interact with Markdown syntax — and on compatibility with various editors and search tools — see *Appendix B: Markdown compatibility notes*.

2.9 Debts and inspirations

Siltmark owes something to several existing tools and methods, none of which it replaces.

One Big Text File (OBTF) — the practice, widespread among writers and programmers, of keeping all notes in a single plain-text file. Siltmark borrows the single-file structure and the append-only discipline. It adds the year/month/day hierarchy and the seal system.

jrnl.sh — a command-line journaling tool that stores entries in a single text file with timestamps. Siltmark is compatible with jrnl's general philosophy but does not require a command-line interface; it works with any text editor.

The Bullet Journal — Ryder Carroll's analog method. Siltmark borrows the idea of a single notebook and the emphasis on chronological order. It drops the migration ritual, the monthly log, the future log, and all task management. What remains is the log, stripped to its core.

Org mode — the Emacs outlining and note-taking system. From Org mode: the idea that a single structured text file can serve as both a navigable document and a writing space. Siltmark's heading hierarchy (year/month/day as H2/H3/H4) is inspired by how Org files are often organized, without requiring Emacs or any particular tool.

The method is not in competition with any of these. If you already use one of them and it works, there is no reason to switch.

3. The Commonplace Garden

A repository for collected material and personal elaboration, held in the same space.

3.1 Vault structure

The Commonplace Garden lives in a folder on your file system. It has two subfolders, and only two.

repository/ holds all living thought. Notes at any stage of development: a single collected quote, a quote with reaction, an elaboration in progress, a finished synthesis. No obligation of completeness or coherence. Notes take whatever form and length they take — one line, three pages, a quote followed by two paragraphs of reaction. They are not broken into atomic units. A note that naturally contains several related thoughts stays as one note.

archive/ holds finished products. A published essay, a delivered chapter, a post that went out, a manual in its final version. Closed material that no longer changes. When something in the repository reaches a definitive form that will not be touched again, it moves to archive.

Everything you are actively working with or might return to lives in repository. Everything that has reached a definitive form and will not change lives in archive. When in doubt, leave it in repository.

3.2 Minimal metadata

Each note in the repository carries a frontmatter block at the top of the file. The block contains one required field and one optional field.

```
---  
type: graft  
source: "Ursula K. Le Guin, The Left Hand of  
Darkness"  
---
```

type describes the nature of the note at the time of writing. Four values are available, drawn from a botanical metaphor:

- **seed** — collected material with no added elaboration. A quote, a fact, a reading note, an observation. The material belongs to someone else, or is raw experience with no commentary yet.
- **graft** — someone else's material alongside your own annotations, reactions, or commentary. The note holds both the external material and your thought about it, in the same space.
- **sprout** — your own elaboration in progress, whether it grew from external material or from nothing. Something you are thinking through, not yet finished.
- **fruit** — a mature, autonomous synthesis that stands on its own. It may have grown from seeds and grafts, or it may have appeared more fully formed. It does not reference external material as its primary content.

These types are not a mandatory progression. A seed can remain a seed forever. A sprout can emerge with no seed behind it. A fruit can appear without passing through the earlier stages. This is not a workflow; it is a description of what a note actually is at the moment you write it. The type in the frontmatter reflects the current state, not a destination.

source indicates provenance, when it exists: an author, a book, an article, a conversation, a direct experience. The

field is omitted entirely when the note is your own elaboration with no specific external origin.

Here is how a note of each type might look in practice — four different examples to make the distinctions concrete.

A seed:

```
---  
type: seed  
source: "Walter Benjamin, The Arcades  
Project"  
---
```

```
"Not to find one's way in a city may well be  
uninteresting and banal.  
It requires ignorance — nothing more. But to  
lose oneself in a city —  
as one loses oneself in a forest — that calls  
for quite a different schooling."
```

```
(Project N, on the method of this work —  
passage on the collector's posture)
```

A graft:

```
---  
type: graft  
source: "Walter Benjamin, The Arcades  
Project"  
---
```

```
"Not to find one's way in a city may well be  
uninteresting and banal."
```

It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling."

Benjamin's distinction is between orientation (functional, navigational) and genuine lostness (perceptive, receptive). I think this maps onto reading: you can navigate a book – following the argument, marking the conclusion – or you can lose yourself in it, where the argument stops being the point and the texture becomes the thing. The second kind of reading produces different notes: looser, more associative, less organized.

A sprout:

```
---  
type: sprout  
source: "Prompted by Benjamin"  
---
```

There might be two modes of reading that call for different note-taking.

Navigational reading: you are trying to extract an argument, a fact, a method. Notes should be precise and organized. This is the reading that serves research, citation, knowledge-building.

Receptive reading: you are not trying to extract anything, but something is happening to you as you read. Notes here should be loose – reactions, associations, images, half-questions. Trying to make them precise kills the thing you are trying to preserve.

(Unresolved: is the distinction in the text or in the reader's stance?
Can the same book be read both ways? Almost certainly yes.)

A fruit:

type: fruit

Reading as navigation vs reading as
lostness

All reading involves extraction, but what you extract depends on how you arrive.

When you read to build knowledge – to master an argument, follow a method, gather evidence – the text is a map, and efficiency is a virtue. You move through it, take what you need, and leave.

When you read to be affected – to find language for something half-felt,

to encounter a mind unlike your own, to slow down inside a problem – the text is a place, not a path. What you find there cannot be predicted in advance, and the notes you take will be strange: reactions, images, questions that do not yet know what they are questions about.

These are not two kinds of books. They are two stances a reader can take toward any book. And they call for different instruments.

3.3 Titles

The title of each note is the primary tool for finding it again. It should describe what the note is actually about, in your own natural language, specifically enough that scanning a list of titles is sufficient to recognize the content without opening the file.

The practical test: if you see the title in a list three months from now, with no other context, can you tell what is in the note? If yes, the title is good. If no, it needs more specificity.

A few comparisons, from more opaque to more useful:

| Opaque | More specific |
|------------------|---|
| Benjamin note | Benjamin on navigational vs receptive reading |
| Writing thoughts | On the difference between note-taking as |

| Opaque | More specific |
|--------------|---|
| Meeting L. | extraction and as reception Conversation with L. on restructuring chapter 5's argument |
| Ritual ideas | Rituals of attention as alternatives to productivity management |

The opaque titles were probably adequate at the moment of writing – you knew what they referred to. Six months later, they will not be. The more specific titles cost a few extra seconds to compose but save those seconds at every future encounter with the note.

Fruit notes can carry stronger, more general titles – not because they are more important, but because their content is more autonomous and self-contained. A fruit titled “The ethics of ambiguity as a design principle” stands out from a seed titled “Note on de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, chapter 2” without any filter or tag.

3.4 Links

Links between notes are spontaneous and never mandatory. When you are writing a note and a connection to another note comes to mind, you place the link. When nothing comes to mind, you do not. No debt, no incompleteness.

The resulting graph of connections is a byproduct, not a project. It grows passively over time. Some notes will accumulate many links because the material they contain is frequently relevant; others will have zero links and remain

perfectly valid notes. You do not curate the graph, complete it, or use it as the primary way of navigating the vault.

Occasionally, when you browse the graph, you may notice unexpected clusters — several notes connected around a theme you had not consciously recognized as a theme. This is the graph’s occasional value. But it is not something you manage toward. It appears, if it appears, as a consequence of writing.

3.5 Index pages

When you realize, while working, that you have several notes on the same theme, you can create a note that gathers them: an index page. It might be called “Ideas on attention” or “Notes on narrative structure” — a note whose primary content is links to other notes on that theme.

Index pages are reactive, not proactive. They emerge from need — specifically, from the need to see related notes side by side — not from an obligation to catalog every theme in the vault. When the need arises, you create the index. When it does not arise, you do not.

An index page lives in the repository like any other note. If it is never updated after the first draft, there is no debt. It remains a pointer to the notes it was created to gather, and that is enough.

This is secondary writing — writing about existing notes — and it counts as work. It is not maintenance. Creating an index page for notes on a theme you are actively developing is part of developing that theme.

3.6 The fruit as a springboard

Fruit notes – mature, autonomous syntheses that stand on their own – naturally function as starting points for future work. They contain a complete enough thought that they can be picked up at any point and developed further, or used as a foundation for something new.

They do not require a different location. Fruits stay in the repository alongside seeds and grafts. Their distinctiveness is in the title and in the type field, not in their physical location. A fruit titled “Secular ethics of doubt” stands out from a seed titled “Note on MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch. 3” without any filter – because of how it is named, not where it is stored.

Fruits also tend to attract links naturally. Because they are complete thoughts with strong, specific titles, other notes find them when you need to reference an idea they contain. Over time, well-titled fruits become the high-density nodes of the vault – the notes that other notes point toward when the theme is relevant.

3.7 Discoverability

Five channels, in order of immediacy:

1. **Full-text search** – for when you know what you are looking for. Works best with specific terms: a name, a phrase, a keyword you remember using.
2. **Scanning titles** – for rediscovering what you had forgotten you had. Works best when titles are specific enough to be recognizable at a glance.
3. **Index pages** – for seeing existing notes on a theme side by side, when you need to gather material on a specific subject.

4. **Passive graph** — for unintentional connections, consulted occasionally and without expectations. Best used when you have no specific goal and are curious what is connected to what.
5. **Random note** — for surfacing material buried by accumulation.

The first four channels share a structural limitation: they all require, to some degree, knowing or remembering what you are looking for. After months or years of deposit, good material becomes invisible simply because you do not remember having written it, or cannot find the right words to search for it.

The random note solves this at the lowest possible cost. In Obsidian, the “Random note” core plugin (included, no installation needed) opens a random file from the vault with one button. When you open the vault with no specific purpose, pressing that button two or three times brings forgotten fragments back to the surface. This is not a periodic review; it is the equivalent of flipping a physical notebook to a random page. Sometimes the note will be irrelevant. Sometimes it will trigger a spontaneous link or a new index page. The cost of the button press is near zero.

This does not make the entire repository visible. After years of accumulation, some material will remain buried regardless. But the alternatives — systematic tags, periodic reviews, exhaustive indexes — carry a cost that exceeds their benefit for most users. The Commonplace Garden accepts this as a known tradeoff, and the random note is the lowest-cost mitigation available.

3.8 What this method does not do

- It does not require maintaining the system as an activity separate from writing. There are no tidying sessions, no cataloging rituals, no upkeep.
- It does not impose atomization of notes. A note that contains several related thoughts stays as one note.
- It does not rigidly distinguish between collected material and your own thought. The graft type formalizes the continuum: external material and your reaction to it belong in the same note.
- It does not use thematic tags, dataview queries, dashboards, or any infrastructure that presents the complexity of the vault as an object to be managed.
- It does not treat the link graph as a product to be built, completed, or maintained.

3.9 Operating principle

The repository is a notebook, not a database. You write in it. You do not periodically review it, catalog it, or maintain it as a system separate from writing. You return to it when you need something for work in progress. If a note is never retrieved, that is fine.

This method is not without structure. It has an opportunistic structure: the structure is not built beforehand and is not maintained as a dedicated activity. It emerges from the gestures of writing and working. A link appears when it comes to mind. An index page appears when it is needed. A fruit becomes a high-density node because of how it is written, not because of how it is classified.

Organization is a byproduct of use, not a prerequisite.

4. Using Them Together

4.1 Why two spaces

The Commonplace Garden works well for what it is: a repository of readings, reactions, and elaborations that grow at their own pace. But there is an area of mental life that does not fit well in a thematic vault. The days when you are not reading anything, not elaborating anything, but need to discharge something — a mood, a nameless irritation, a thought with weight but no direction.

Opening the Garden in those moments does not work. To create a note in the Garden, you have to give it a title, choose a type, decide that the thing deserves its own space. When you are drained, that minimal gesture is already too much. It is not the Garden's fault — it is not designed for that. It is an incubator, not a journal.

Siltmark fills that gap. One file, one date, free prose. The lowest possible activation cost: open, write the date, even if you write nothing else. But Siltmark is not only for the days of discharge. It is also for the full days — those when too many things happen to stop and incubate something, but you do not want to lose the trace of how you were and what crossed your mind.

The two systems answer different questions. Siltmark asks: *what is happening right now, inside you?* The Garden asks: *is there something you want to grow?* These questions coexist in the same person, often in the same day, but rarely in the same moment. Keeping them in a single container tends to confuse them. Keeping them in two separate containers protects them.

4.2 Where they truly differ

On paper the two systems look very different: one is a single chronological file, the other is a vault of thematic notes. But in practice the distinction that matters is not structural – it is in the gesture.

In Siltmark you write *inside time*. That thought is part of the flow of that day. The context is the day itself: what happened before, the mood, the hour. Even when you write a brilliant insight, you write it as part of a moment. You are not separating it from the rest – you are recording it where it emerged.

In the Garden you create *a dedicated space*. When you open a new note, even if you write only one line, you are saying: this thing deserves a place of its own. You are not necessarily developing it – perhaps today it is just a sentence. But you are giving it an address, a title, the possibility of being found for what it is, not for the day it came to mind.

The very same sentence can go in either one. “Maybe the problem with chapter 3 is the sequence, not the content” – in Siltmark it is a doubt that surfaces on a Sunday morning while you drink your coffee. In the Garden it is a seed that might sprout into a structural revision of the text. The content is identical. The gesture is different, and the gesture determines what happens next.

In practice the choice is almost always instinctive. If you are writing in the flow of the day and a thought arrives, it stays in Siltmark. If something comes to mind and you feel you want to give it a separate space – however minimal, however incomplete – you go to the Garden. No decision rule is needed. What is needed is simply not to confuse the two spaces: if Siltmark becomes thematic it loses its function as a discharge space, and if the Garden becomes chronological it loses its function as an incubator.

4.3 Thoughts that migrate

Sometimes you write something in Siltmark and do not think about it again. Then, days later, it comes back to mind – or you find it again while browsing the file, looking for something else. You realize that the insight has a direction. It is not just a moment; it is the beginning of something.

In that case, you give it a note in the Garden. You do not copy it: you rewrite it. Rewriting is already elaboration, because in the passage from the chronological flow to the thematic space you shift perspective. What in Siltmark was “a thought I had on Tuesday” becomes a seed or a graft that exists on its own, detached from the moment it was born. You give it a title, a type, and you leave it there. It may grow, or it may stay as it is.

The original in Siltmark is not touched. It is frozen in time, part of the journal. The version in the Garden is something else: it lives, it can evolve, it can connect to other notes. They are not two copies of the same object – they are the same thought in two different states, like water and ice.

4.4 A concrete example (that could have stopped at any step)

The following is a real case, not because it is the typical path, but because it shows what *can* happen. Most thoughts do not make this journey. This one did, and it is useful for making the mechanism visible. At each step there is a note pointing out where the journey could have ended with nothing lost.

4.4.1 The origin in the flow

Writing in Siltmark on a Thursday morning. Heavy day at work, too many emails. At lunch, reading a chapter of Byung-Chul Han, a distinction between two kinds of tiredness surfaces. Written in the flow of the day. A few days later, while rereading, a highlight caret is added:

2026-03-19, Thursday

Heavy morning at work, too many emails. I
have the feeling
we are all shouting in empty rooms.

Lunch break. Read a chapter of Byung-Chul Han
("The Burnout Society").

^! Han draws a beautiful distinction between
the tiredness
that divides (performance tiredness, where
you are alone with
your exhaustion) and the tiredness that
unites (physical,
shared, peaceful). It makes me think about
how I feel after
two hours scrolling social media versus how I
feel after
cooking for friends. The first drains me, the
second fills me
even though I am physically tired.

It could have stopped here. In Siltmark this is a valid and complete entry: a dated insight, in its context, with its seal. Many thoughts stay exactly here forever, and nothing is missing from them.

4.4.2 The seed

A few days later, while reading something else, that thought comes back. Not sought out – it returns on its own. The Han distinction deserves a space in the Garden. A note is created in the repository, just collected material, nothing else:

```
**Note title:** `Han, tiredness that divides  
vs tiredness that unites`
```

```
---
```

```
type: seed
```

```
source: "Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society"
```

```
---
```

```
> "The tiredness of the achievement society  
is a solitary tiredness, which divides and  
isolates. [...] But there is also a tiredness  
that inspires, that unites, a tiredness of  
the 'we'."
```

```
*(note taken from reading chapter 2)*
```

It could have stopped here. A seed with a quote and its provenance. Many seeds remain seeds forever, and that is fine.

4.4.3 The graft

A few days later the note is reopened and a reaction is written alongside it – one already sketched in Siltmark but here reformulated with more calm. Not copied from the journal:

rewritten, and in rewriting developed. The note becomes a graft: someone else's material with personal commentary. Only the type in the frontmatter changes, and the commentary is added:

```
**Note title:** `Han, tiredness that divides  
vs tiredness that unites`
```

```
---
```

```
type: graft
```

```
source: "Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society"
```

```
---
```

```
> "The tiredness of the achievement society  
is a solitary tiredness, which divides and  
isolates. [...] But there is also a tiredness  
that inspires, that unites, a tiredness of  
the 'we'."
```

```
Han's distinction is exactly the difference  
between digital overload and physical  
tiredness. When I spend hours on social media  
(implicit performance, comparison), I come  
out drained and irritable. When I cook for  
hours or go for a long walk (restorative  
tiredness), I come out tired but at peace,  
ready to be with others.
```

It could have stopped here. A graft with a quote and a personal commentary. Many notes live like this forever, and they are already useful.

4.4.4 The sprout

Time passes. The note reappears through the “Random note” button. Something personal is being formulated: it is no longer a commentary on Han, it is a distinction that belongs to the writer. The title changes to reflect this:

```
Note title: `Friction tiredness vs flow tiredness`
```

```
---
```

```
type: sprout
```

```
source: "Prompt from B.C. Han"
```

```
---
```

Beginning to divide tiredness into two categories to understand how to recover energy:

1. **Friction tiredness:** What Han describes as solitary tiredness. For me it comes from sensory overload and digital micro-decisions. It requires isolation and silence to recover from.
2. **Flow tiredness:** Healthy physical or creative tiredness. Cooking, walking, writing without surveillance. This tiredness does not require isolation; on the contrary, it predisposes you to connection with others.

(To develop: perhaps the rule is not "avoid getting tired", but choosing the right kind of tiredness?)

It could have stopped here. A sprout with a personal elaboration in progress. No obligation to bring it to completion.

4.4.5 The fruit

At some point that distinction becomes a short autonomous text that stands on its own, detached from the original source. It moves from [repository/](#) to [archive/](#):

```
**Note title:** `Choosing your own tiredness`
```

```
---
```

```
type: fruit
```

```
---
```

There are two kinds of tiredness.

"Friction tiredness" is generated by sensory overload – notifications, noise, multitasking – and leaves you isolated and drained. Recovery requires silence and solitude.

"Flow tiredness" comes from immersive activities – walking, creating, manual work – and leaves you at peace and open to others. Recovery happens through rest, not withdrawal.

The goal of energy management is not to reach the end of the day unrested, but to reach it tired in the right way. The question worth asking is not "how do I tire myself less?"

but "am I converting occasions of friction
tiredness into occasions of flow tiredness?"

This journey happened over the course of weeks, without planning. The point is not that it happened in full. The point is that at every step it could have not happened, and none of the intermediate steps would have been a failure. The seed was already valid as a seed. The graft was already valid as a graft. The sprout could have remained a sprout forever. No stage exists for the sake of the next one.

4.5 Thoughts that stay

Most of what you write in Siltmark will never migrate to the Garden. This is the normal way things work, not a failure.

The note about the morning's emotional state, the remark about the weather, the "nothing in particular" of an ordinary Monday — these entries have value exactly where they are, as the trace of a day lived. They do not need a thematic space. They have no direction. They are not asking to be developed. Siltmark welcomes them without judging them, and there they stay.

Even insights marked with ! can stay in Siltmark forever. Not every spark becomes a fire. Sometimes it was a momentary flash, interesting in context but without the legs to walk on its own. Recognizing this is not a loss — it is an accurate reading of what the thought was.

4.6 The Garden without Siltmark

Not everything that ends up in the Garden passes through Siltmark. You can read a book and open a note directly in

the repository. You can have an idea and go straight to creating a seed. The Garden does not depend on the journal to be fed — it has its own entrance, always open.

This is why the two systems are not in a hierarchy. There is no “before” and “after,” no primary and secondary. There are two spaces with different natures, and thought enters from wherever it arrives.

4.7 When the system works (and when it is derailing)

After some months of parallel use, you learn to recognize certain signals.

The system works when Siltmark has fluid writing — full days and empty days, and an uncontrolled tone. It works when the Garden has a mix of raw seeds and more developed notes, and grows in an irregular but living way. It works when you do not consciously think about the distinction between the two: you simply open the right one for the moment.

Three drifts are worth knowing.

The Garden set too high. You write in the repository only when you have something mature, and seeds disappear. The repository becomes a collection of near-finished texts, and you lose the space for fragile, half-formed things. The correction is simple: remember that a one-line seed is a perfectly valid note. The Garden does not require you to bring something finished before it can receive it.

Siltmark becoming an incubator. You start structuring thoughts in the journal — writing with an eye on what you might extract later. The tone changes. Spontaneity is lost. If you notice you are writing in Siltmark while thinking about

the Garden — shaping prose for extraction rather than discharge — it is time to return to free writing with no direction.

Migration anxiety. You start wondering whether you should extract something from the journal, whether you are neglecting sparks marked with !, whether the Garden is too empty relative to what you are writing in Siltmark. This is exactly the kind of pressure both systems are designed to eliminate. Migration is not a duty; it is an event. It happens when a thought comes back to mind on its own, or when you need it for something in progress. If it does not happen, there is nothing to do.

5. Closing Thoughts

Both methods described in this book share a premise that runs through every design decision, though the methods themselves are very different in form.

In Siltmark: you write at the end, in prose, when you want. The structure of the file — year, month, day — is not built beforehand; it appears automatically as you write, a consequence of the heading hierarchy that marks each entry. A connection between entries is not a link in any technical sense; it is the natural adjacency of things written on nearby days. You do not organize; you write, and organization is a consequence.

In the Commonplace Garden: you create notes in any order, of any length, at any stage of development. An index page appears when you realize you need to see notes on a theme side by side — not before. A link appears when a connection comes to mind — not when the system requires it. The

repository grows, and the structure of what is in it becomes visible through use.

In both: the structure is not built beforehand. It is not maintained as an activity separate from writing. It emerges from the gestures of working — from writing, rereading, connecting, developing. This is what *opportunistic structure* means: the structure is real, but it is a byproduct, not a plan.

Organization is a byproduct of use, not a prerequisite.

This is not a small claim. Most note-taking methods assume the opposite: that you must first build the structure — the taxonomy, the template, the review ritual — and then writing happens within that structure. The assumption is that good organization enables good writing. Both Siltmark and the Commonplace Garden invert this. Writing — any writing — produces organization as a side effect. The chronological order of Siltmark, the thematic clusters of the Garden, the links and index pages that accumulate over time: none of these is something you do. They are things that happen when you write.

The implication is that the worst version of these methods — the version that produces the least organization, the fewest connections, the sparsest structure — is the version where you write the least. The solution is always the same: write more. Not organize better. Write more.

5.2 Who they work for

These methods were not designed with a universal user in mind. They were built to answer specific problems — problems that some people encounter acutely and others barely notice.

If you recognize any of the following, these methods were built with you in mind.

You process deeply and broadly. Your reading notes tend to become reactions, and your reactions tend to become elaborations. The boundary between “what I read” and “what I think” is porous. Methods that demand strict separation between collected and produced material ask you to sever connections that are already part of how you think. The graft type in the Commonplace Garden exists precisely because this porosity is not a flaw but a mode of working. Siltmark’s prose form accepts it too: the same entry can move from description to reaction to insight without requiring you to separate them.

Maintenance drains you disproportionately. The periodic review that other users find refreshing feels to you like a second job. The backlog of unfiled notes, uncompleted links, or unreviewed entries is not a minor annoyance — it is a source of low-level pressure that competes with the actual work of thinking and writing. Both methods eliminate dedicated maintenance: not by magic, but by design. The structure that exists is structure that appeared through use, and nothing is waiting for you when you open the file.

Your writing is sensitive to the container. A template with empty fields changes what you write — it asks you to produce the format, not the thought. An empty text file, or an empty notebook page, does not. Siltmark’s design of “no required form” is not a feature for casual users; it is a deliberate choice to protect the spontaneity of what gets written. For those whose writing closes down under the weight of structure, the difference between a template and a blank page is not aesthetic — it is functional.

You are prone to the anxiety of the perfect system. Another method’s incomplete graph, unfollowed template, or broken streak may feel to you like evidence of inadequacy — not about the method, but about yourself. Both Siltmark and the Commonplace Garden are explicitly designed to have no in-

complete state. An empty entry is a valid entry. A seed that never sprouts is a valid seed. A note with no links is a valid note. There is no version of either method where you are behind.

Both systems add their own specific forms of protection. Siltmark's empty entry is a safety valve for the days when showing up is already enough — when the worst possible use is open the file, write the date, close it. Prose protects the voice from the distortion of format: even a short sentence carries more information than a bullet, because it preserves the tone of the moment. The caret allows reevaluation without pressure, because it is added when rereading happens naturally, not on a schedule. In the Commonplace Garden: the seed type formalizes the gesture of deposit and release — you encountered something, you have put it somewhere, you do not need to carry it further right now. The absence of mandatory maintenance removes a constant background pressure. The absence of mandatory links means the question “should I be connecting this?” never needs to be asked.

If you recognize yourself in this profile — not necessarily all four points, but the general shape — these methods were built with your mind in mind.

If you do not fully recognize yourself here but the problem of maintenance speaks to you, they work for you too. The profile is not a prerequisite; it is an explanation of the design decisions. You can benefit from the decisions without sharing the full experience that motivated them.

5.3 What they are not

They are not a productivity system. Neither method tracks goals, monitors output, or helps you do more things faster.

They have no dashboard, no progress indicator, no way of measuring whether you are “using them correctly.” If you are looking for a system that makes you more productive in the conventional sense, these are not it.

They are not a task manager. Tasks that end up in Siltmark stay there as prose, untracked. Tasks that end up in the Commonplace Garden are just notes that happen to contain tasks – they will not be reviewed automatically and will not remind you of anything. For task management, use a dedicated tool.

They are not a substitute for guided introspection. Siltmark is a journal, not therapy. Writing in a journal can have genuine value for self-understanding, but it is not therapeutic in any clinical sense. If you are dealing with something that requires structured support, these methods are not the right instrument.

They are not the only way. These methods were built for a specific problem and a specific way of working. If your Zettelkasten serves you, keep it. If your bullet journal works, there is no reason to switch. There is no universal best method – only methods that fit or do not fit the person using them. These fit some people well, and do not fit others at all, and that is correct.

They are not in competition with other methods. Siltmark and the Commonplace Garden can coexist with other tools. You can maintain a Siltmark journal and also use a project management app. You can keep a Commonplace Garden and also have a Zettelkasten for a specific research project. The claim is not that these methods replace everything else – it is that, for the function they serve, they work without maintenance. And for some people, that is the only kind of system they can actually sustain.

Appendix A: Seal cheat sheet

Five seals in total. All optional. Most paragraphs will have none.

A.1 Content seals (prospective — placed when writing)

| Seal | Meaning | Search syntax |
|------|---|------------------------------------|
| ~ | Feeling, emotional state, inner weather | Search: ~ (tilde space) |
| ? | Open question, doubt, unresolved matter | Search: ? (question mark space) |
| ! | Spark, insight, something that opened up | Search: ! (exclamation mark space) |
| & | A noticed connection between different things | Search: & (ampersand space) |

Rules: - One content seal per paragraph at most. - If a paragraph would need two seals, it is two paragraphs. - The set is closed. No new seals are added.

A.2 Highlight seal (retrospective — added when rereading)

| Seal | Meaning | Search syntax |
|------|---|---------------|
| ^ | Noticed as significant at a later reading | Search: ^ |

Rules: - Can stand alone: `^ text` (paragraph had no content seal) - Can combine with a content seal: `^! text`, `^~ text`, `^? text`, `^& text` - Always the first character on the line - Added without a scheduled ritual – when rereading happens, if it happens

A.3 Combined forms

```
^~ A feeling I notice now was significant at
the time.
^? A question that still matters when I look
back.
^! A spark I now recognize as consequential.
^& A connection I want to remember noticing.
```

Appendix B: Markdown compatibility notes

The Siltmark file is valid Markdown. The H2/H3/H4 hierarchy (year/month/day) is compatible with any editor that supports heading folding or outline navigation, and remains fully readable as raw plain text.

Seal characters and Markdown syntax:

- `~` (tilde): in Markdown, strikethrough uses `~~double tildes~~`. A single tilde at the start of a paragraph followed by a space has no syntactic meaning and renders as plain text.
- `?` (question mark): no syntactic meaning in Markdown.

- **!** (exclamation mark): image syntax in Markdown is `![alt text](url)`. A `!` followed by a space at the start of a paragraph is not image syntax and renders as plain text.
- **&** (ampersand): no syntactic meaning in standard Markdown (it has meaning in HTML, but Markdown processors handle this correctly).
- **^** (caret): no syntactic meaning in standard Markdown. In some extensions (notably Pandoc), `^text^` is superscript — but a bare `^` at the start of a line followed by a space is not affected by this.

Editor compatibility: The file can be opened and edited with any plain-text editor. Heading folding is supported in Obsidian, VS Code (with the appropriate extension), iA Writer, Typora, and most Markdown-aware editors. In editors without folding, the file is still readable as linear text — the hierarchy is visible in the heading levels without requiring any special feature.

Search compatibility: The file can be searched with any text search tool: the editor's built-in Ctrl+F, `grep`, `ripgrep`, or any command-line search utility. The seal characters (`~`, `?`, `!`, `&`, `^`) are standard ASCII characters that require no special escaping in most search contexts.

Portability: Because the file is plain text, it is readable without any specific software, transferable across operating systems, and compatible with version control systems. A Silt-mark file started in Obsidian can be continued in iA Writer, searched with `grep`, and archived as a plain text file — without any conversion.

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