

A student with a red backpack is walking in a school hallway. The student is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and a red backpack. The hallway has wooden floors and white walls with doors in the background.

# Organizational

# Technology for Stud

# with ADHD

by Katharina Boser, PhD

**IN TODAY'S HIGHLY DIGITAL WORLD,** we are continually faced with a dizzying array of new options for becoming more efficient and supposedly “staying organized.” The problem is that the same technologies that can be helpful can also distract us and our students.

We all work most efficiently when we have a plan for making our way through all the irrelevant information, extra tasks, and overwhelming responsibilities that get thrown our way. Without a guiding system for organization, we are seeing a growing angst—even a sense of desperation—in ourselves and in our students as they begin to feel that there is no rest and no way out. Demands are ever increasing for students and teachers, and it's hard for us to do our best to keep up with it all, with or without ADHD. Relying on a subjective, internal mental world to try to keep it all together, and without a clear plan, anyone's thinking becomes unclear, distracted, and disorganized, and leaves frustration, stress, and undermined self-confidence in its wake.

So, given all the obstacles, how do you help your student with ADHD find his or her way to a productive state—with a feeling

that they're doing exactly what they should be doing, with a sense of relaxed and focused control? What's needed is a system that reduces chaos by creating a space to think, to reflect, to review, to integrate, and to connect dots. It stresses staying focused on the most important things, as they relate to goals, and desired outcomes. Resources must constantly be recalibrated to generate the best results, and students must learn to say “not now” to what's less important.

### **Strategies to reduce mental, virtual, or physical clutter**

The following strategies are adapted from a set developed by David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Penguin, 2002) to optimize focus. They can be applied to anyone needing to reduce the mental, virtual, and

# ents



Evernote and OneNote are mostly free, flexible organizational tools to consider. Google Keep (pictured) is a free service that allows web clipping and notetaking.

physical clutter in their lives, whether they're trying to succeed in school, with friends, or with family.

- **Capture everything that has your attention in writing.** Examples include an upcoming assignment, that night's homework, a birthday to plan, or just the need to get a haircut. For the typical person, it can take one to six hours to “empty the attic” of one’s head.
- **Decide what results you want first and then list the actions required to get there.** If you simply make a list and stop there, without putting the items in context, you’ll be stuck in the territory of compulsive list-making, and your lists will hold you hostage rather than put you in the driver’s seat. What’s the next action when it comes to your big project? The next step in arranging your college visits?
- **Apply the two minute rule: Do it while you can.** Any action that can be finished in two minutes should be done in the moment.
- **Organize reminders of your resulting to-do lists**—for the sub-tasks needed to achieve each goal mentioned above.
- **Regularly review and reflect on the whole inventory of commitments and interests, and bring it up to date.** As needs change, as tasks and sub-tasks are completed, what can be moved to the front burner, and what can go further back? Always consider overall goals. Schedule a weekly review, with a parent, tutor/coach or teacher, allowing space to clean up, catch up and do some reflective overseeing of the plan, for all goals, commitments and activities.
- **Finally, deploy your attention and resources in ways that make sense to achieve your goals.**





A number of scheduling and reminder apps are available; Google Calendar (above) is free and can be useful for scheduling and reminders. Popplet (right) is a visual thinking tool that lets students use interactive mind maps.

If you apply some degree of commitment and application to doing these things and harness the best of what technology offers in the process, there should be significant improvement in focus, control, and results. If not, the technology, the organizational goals, and the external realities become things to manage, not a hoped-for source of productivity. Students with ADHD, in particular, with a “reaction versus pro-action” plus procrastination mindset, will be more likely to allow the scales to tip from “productive” to “unproductive.”

### Technology to consider

In order to efficiently manage and follow the plan above, consider some of the following types of technology tools for yourself and your students with ADHD:

#### 1. Digital notebooks with webclipping, and cloud services

Both Evernote and OneNote are flexible organizational tools that will sync notes across all devices and computers, and have some other worthwhile features:

- Create notes with typed text, handwriting, or sketches
- Save, sync, and share files across multiple devices and platforms (iOS, Android, Windows)

- Create task lists that can be checked off and alarms associated with notes
- Snap photos of whiteboards and book pages and annotate
- Search for text inside the images, even handwritten notes
- Organize notes on multiple levels using notebooks (only Evernote allows tags)
- Send notes, links, ebooks, or emails to Evernote directly via email
- Share notes with colleagues and classmates for easy collaboration

Evernote also offers tons of additional products (such as Penultimate and Skitch apps) that can make it an even more powerful tool for project organization. On top of all that, both OneNote and Evernote’s core functionality is essentially free and should work just fine for most student projects. Another free service that allows web clipping and note taking is Google Keep.

#### 2. Scheduling and reminder apps

iStudiez is a schedule planner and interactive calendar for iOS and Mac devices designed to keep track of due dates and group study with integration on the apps

Cloud sync allowing the same view and updating across different devices. The best part of iStudiez is its dedicated assignments tracker, which allows students to take inventory of the necessary steps in their process and schedule them in order of priority. A partial, lite version of the app is available for students to try for free, and \$10 buys the full-featured download.

Free alternatives can be found with some creative adaptation of Google Calendar or iCal to do the scheduling. Events can be attached to reminders sent via SMS, or email to phones and email accounts. The Android market has several useful apps that work with Google tasks to organize tasks, highlighting upcoming events on the smartphone.

Reminders still need to be set and events added as soon as they are received, but automatic reminders are available. Such tools allow tasks and ongoing projects to be completed in manageable chunks.

#### 3. Organizing thinking and writing

Scrivener is a new kind of word processor that allows writers of long papers to move from filling in the big picture or gist of their work to narrowing in on the detail. It provides writers multiple panes to shuffle around in the main window as they customize their workflow. Scrivener’s most unique feature is an organizational tool that digitizes the method of using index cards and a corkboard to visualize the big picture of a long piece of work. Shuffle the notecards around and their associated sections are rearranged in the document itself. Scrivener has a built-in tool for creating outlines, and also comes with the ability to view images, PDF files, web pages and other media elements right inside the writing window.

Projects can be compiled in any format, including ePub. Scrivener offers a free

trial for either OSX and Windows that gives students thirty days of use, enough for one or more small to medium-length projects. The full version of the software costs \$40-45.

Products such as those by Don Johnston or Kurzweil, which have have outlining plus features such as word prediction, word banks, and text to speech, will naturally cost in the hundreds of dollars. By comparison, Scrivener is simpler and only focuses on the organization parts. Windows users can try yWriter5, an independently developed free alternative to Scrivener with some similar features.

#### 4. Mind mapping and outlining apps and software

Popplet is a visual thinking tool that lets students use interactive mind maps to sketch relationships between notes and multimedia research material for brainstorming and organizing ideas for writing or studying. The visual depictions of relationships between pieces of information can help students better understand and remember how the details of their project work together. The interface is very kid-friendly, taking only seconds to learn the basics. The Popplet mobile app for iPad has a light version that only allows one popplet at a time. To create unlimited popplets, the cost is \$5, but accounts for the web app are free. Alternatives to Popplet include Inspiration and iThoughts which are more costly but have more writing, exporting and outlining features, and Mindjet or Idea Sketch which are free and crossplatform.

The various app markets have plenty of other organizational apps available, and it's good to test out a few to find what works—for yourself, your children, or your students. Start with those recommended here, and, together with a good organization plan, see if it's the right app. Remember to keep the plan simple and in line with achievable goals and reassess and maintain frequently. 📍

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Dr. Boser has designed curriculum on Universal Design for Learning and Neurodiversity issues for the Masters in Teaching program at University of Maryland, University College. She is on the Maryland advisory committee for Universal Design for Learning, which provides guidelines, based on cognitive psychology, for making classroom learning and content accessible for all learners.



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