

# *The Reader's Sticky Note*

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## Abstract

The sticky note is a ubiquitous yet taken-for-granted item of modern life. Its sticky invitation to note-making has made it a compelling and wholly fragmentary organizational tool. Examining this simple technology in the reader's lifeworld, this article aims to glean insight into the phenomena of memory, noting, reading, and the ongoing yet ineffable moments of meaning-making in our everyday life.

**Keywords:** *sticky note, reading, meaning, memory, writing*

The sticky note pad is a resident of the modern desk. Usually booklet-shaped, palm-sized or smaller, and often yellow, it is a gathering of paper bound by pressure-sensitive low-tack reusable adhesive. Each page can be easily peeled off, and stuck to something, over and over again. At first glance, a sticky note pad may look like a small notebook. Yet a notebook, regardless of its size or shape, is a stable organization of pages that encourages a system of documentation: pages turnable forward or backward, the notebook stays undivided and ordered. Only occasionally is a page removed or torn out, but the balance of the book stays intact. Yet a sticky note pad is more of an unstable unity: it is always ready for separation.

Tearing a page out of a notebook may be accompanied by a destructive, breaking sound, but when a single sticky note is removed from its pad, the peeling sound is soft, barely perceptible. On the sticky note's corner that left the note pad last, there occurs an inward curve marking its abruptly lost contact. Nevertheless, the fresh tacky glue is now fully exposed to the air, to the dust, and most especially to be pressed to a target destination. On the smooth surface of a book's open page, on the dusty wooden desk, on the edge of the laptop screen, or on the shiny fridge door...the note seems sticky enough to adhere to most surfaces—except the original note pad from which it originated. If we accidentally take a sticky note too many and manage to put it back, it is not for long that the page which has returned to the sticky pad starts to warp and even to attract dirty residue. The removed page can never truly return to the neat perfection of the original sticky note pad. The sticky note seems to realize its autonomy in its slightly bent and soiled imperfection.

The sticky note pad's propensity for easy separation may be compared with the steady but releasable grip of a binder. The binder seems an ever-welcoming home for paper newcomers. Regardless of shape, color, or size, a binder uses its rings to penetrate and embrace, and its front

and back covers then protect and solidify the unity of its contents. Occasionally when some pages are absent on leave or on a mission, the binder easily tolerates such independence while remaining always ready to reunite returned pages. A binder may become explosively bulky with cards and booklets tucked inside and grotesque papers dangling out; yet by its very name, the binder still *binds* things together. By contrast, the sticky note pad is also a tightly connected gathering but it gathers only of its original brethren, each member awaiting for a life of solitary detachment. The pad convenes a “to-pull-apart unity,” a temporary shelter for identical strangers, each destined for different lands.

## The Gesture of Sticky-Noting

The seemingly fragmentary character of the sticky-note invites the user to detach its pages with the least hesitation. Torn off, the anonymous note is often named: the address for a dinner appointment, a quick shopping list, a name and phone number of a contact, or two or three urgent errands to run. The note is thus immediately assigned its identity by the things written on it, fleeting details emerging from daily life. “Wait a moment, just a second and I will get a piece of paper.” We may be on a phone call and embark on a frenziedly reach for a sticky note. Grabbing a pen, we may quickly jot down the information dictated by the speaker. Relieved that we have what we need to remember recorded on paper, we may carry on the conversation. The digits and letters that we will need again shortly now occupy a place on the sticky note. We then may peel this note off, carry it around, attach it to an agenda book, or press it to some spot that we believe is too obvious for our eyes to overlook—on the kitchen cupboard, a desktop, or even the backdoor.

A *note* is “a brief written observation, record, or abstract of facts, especially one intended to aid the memory” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2017). In making a note, I write down what I encounter in brief, and thereby create a reminder for later *in case* I forget. When I want to share what happened in a lecture or some particularly meaningful phrase, I may find myself referring to the notes I took earlier to aid my recollection. “It is there, in my notes.” The note extends my memory; it is a prosthetic device. With its assistance, there is less need to rehearse a noticing or to otherwise try to persistently mark it mentally and with precision; instead, a general impression may be enough at the moment, since we have transferred the key details to written notes. Yet Plato (1973) cautioned us that we may “rely on writing to bring things to our remembrance by external signs instead of on our own internal resources” (p. 96). The note, as a mnemonic device, separates remembering into two distinct activities: transcription—creating the note—and recognition—recognizing the significance of it later in order to restore the moment that was previously lived.

Adhering a sticky note to a place, then, may be an attempt to hand over a fraction of memory to the surface of one’s immediate surroundings. It is not unusual to find a sticky note on my fridge door with a meal recipe for dinner, or attached to my telephone handset as a reminder of the phone call I must make this afternoon, or glued to the top of my desktop monitor reminding me of an email that I should send out tomorrow by noon. Here the sticky note carries an imperative message that re-emerges in the context of my day-to-day activities, and adds an meaningful element of pro-gramming to my future world. My eyes may glide passively over a sticky note I made earlier, and its demand is pulled suddenly back into my foreground; I am then *re-minded*, while the message *re-enters* my mind. The sticky note may distinguish itself against

its background yet still maintain an attachment—some *stickiness*—to it. In its sticky attachment to our everyday living circumstances, it is unremarkable; yet it nonetheless remains also remarkable and seemingly saturated with significance. There must be something important to grasp, otherwise we would not have jotted it down and stuck it where we knew we would later encounter it. The gesture of writing, peeling off, and attaching a sticky note to somewhere, then, may be a gesture of gleaning and capturing emergent meanings as we move through the ongoing current of our lives. However, the sticky note is after all a mere fragment, an attachment, and it can become redundant and no longer current once we have completed the task of note. A sticky note seems to carry a paradoxical sense of urgency and oblivion, of organization and randomness. It may complement any place where encounters or thoughts continuously arise and dissipate: for instance, a sticky note may adeptly turn into a quick map at a hotel front desk, a label in a printing room, or a bookmark at the reader's hand.

### Reading with Sticky Notes and Other Assistants

*I turn over a page, almost half way through, yet the doorbell rings and draws me out from my book. I have to leave for a minute. There is a sticky note pad sitting on the desk. I grab it and peel off a page. I quickly tack the note on the edge of the current page and let the book close on its own. I tell myself, I will return later.*

A bright yellow sticky note is now reaching out of the side of the book that I am currently reading. Poking out about one third of the way through the book, it marks where I left off in my reading journey. When I am about to take a break, the note establishes itself as a momentary marker, a stop sign declaring that my current trip has arrived at a halt. Upon my return, it helpfully directs me to where I left off and may continue my reading adventure. This piece of sticky note marks where a reader closes and then later reopens the book. It folds itself in the book for the next moment of reading to unfold. A sticky note allows the reader to come back easily without creasing, dog-earing, or in any other way harming the pages of the book.

A sticky note quickly tucked between book pages, then, becomes a convenient bookmark. And yet, it may be too casual a bookmark for a more thoughtful reader. Made of stiffer material, a “genuine” bookmark may be deliberately chosen to match a book. In a delightful novel, a nostalgic anthology, or a cherished Bible, a specially selected bookmark may embellish a mass printed publication with one's choice of character or design. A hand crafted or carefully purchased bookmark may be a fine gift for a book-lover. Sometimes souvenirs like a train ticket or boarding pass from a trip or a friendly thank-you note may be tucked between the pages as a bookmark. Returning to my reading, this unique artifact reminds me of the particular memories it bears. Not so with the plain sticky note posing as a bookmark. To put a gifted bookmark or card loaded with memories between pages is like folding in a part of my life history—as well as of myself—into the book. Yet, as I touch the pages, daydream between the lines, devour the paragraphs, or by accident, spill drops of coffee on some words, this bookmark becomes witness to the passing of seconds into hours and the book's gradual wears and tears in my reading of it. In this way, the bookmark—whether sticky note, theatre ticket, or “genuine” bookmark—may come to bear the personal “mark” that ultimately marks a book as *my* book.

Perhaps we have to admit that the sticky note used as a bookmark is not only a *note* but a *placeholder*. Yet whereas a true bookmark is singular, and moves along its journey together with

the reader and leaving no trace behind, sticky notes may be added repeatedly and remain behind like the footsteps marking a distinct path along my reading journey. The notes may spread over the pages, protruding wherever a reader had questions, comments or was stirred by a desire to reread a passage later. A sticky note tracks these dialogical moments of reading—when a reader quickly jots a thought down on this small piece of paper and attaches it alongside the text of interest.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1977) poignantly observes the reader's physiognomy in the beginning of his poem titled *The Reader*:

Who knows this one who turns his face  
away from his own being toward this thing  
that only a page, by hastily turning,  
sometimes forcibly seems to erase? (p. 62)

Reading, as such, is a paradoxical activity that simultaneously settles and unsettles the one who reads. The book opens, embraces, enchants, and erases—as if with hypnotizing effect. It invites our body into a sedentary, restful gesture, and our mind to slide into a different world. In reading, our consciousness is no longer drifting across day-to-day encounters or quotidian tasks; rather, it is rested, sedimented, riveted, and concealed. We become lost in the text and our thoughts recede; or perhaps in this lostness our thinking may encounter its originary thoughts? The physiognomy of reading appears contemplative, yet the reader's hands may sometimes reveal the vibrancy of the relational dialogue between her and the text: in the hastily turning of pages, in the careful underlining or bold highlighting, in the jotting of marginal notes, or in the notation and application of sticky notes on the page.

Along with (or instead of) applying sticky notes, a reader may as well frequently highlight or underline while reading. Highlighting can be a dramatic move where a reader varies the gestalt of the page and brings some sentences to the foreground of attention. Underlining, particularly with a pencil, appears a more humble gesture, but similarly involves drawing a line and *following after* phrases or sentences. Even though we seem to highlight or underline while we read, the meaningfulness of the lines highlighted or underlined has already been at least glimpsed: It is their halo of expressions that urges us to render a personal mark on the book pages. A sense of urgency may grip us as we try to capture words and phrases and sentences before it is *too late* and before this moment of sudden realization passes away. How strange that even though the texts are printed permanently on the page, the reader still inclines to grasp them in their transiency! Or perhaps we are not capturing the texts but something fleeting from the texts: thoughts. Thoughts that have almost taken independent flight yet are still anchored to the text. Each line we draw betrays a pregnancy of meaning. At times, the fledging thoughts may take a more concrete shape when we take some notes down. The reader may jot her notes along the narrow or roomy margin of the book or between the lines. To annotate is a literal action of furnishing, equipping, or supplying a text. The hand written notes fly through the page, sparkling creative interpretation, and yet still orient to their hermeneutic home—the text at their adjacency. Literally and metaphorically, we may say that a reader makes meanings in the margin or the crevice of the texts. Sometimes these lines and annotations may render changes or unexpected value to the book. At Husserl Archives Leuven, the first print of *Being and Time*, gifted from Heidegger to his teacher, is displayed and worshipped by visitors. Husserl's pencil-drawn lines and notes are still breathing, inviting us to wonder at the physical and literary space in-between.

Undeniably, these lines and notes engraved in the pages have made this book into a different kind of thing, less a readable version of *Being and Time* and more a treasurable memento of Husserl's reading of it (as well as all the dialogue and dispute happening during and after). Had sticky notes been invented back then, it would be a pity to imagine Husserl to write his comments on the sticky notes!

In drawing and writing, the reader's footprints are left irrevocable and the substance of the book is made accordingly unique. Yet for this very reason, we may feel reluctant about such readerly treatments, whereby the original integrity of a book is forever compromised: a limited edition borrowed from library or a friend, a precious handbook printed on sleek chrome paper, or the newest work written by a beloved author may appear spoiled. We may cherish the pages in the same way we respect the content they contain, as if the print words crystallize valuable knowledge and they themselves also need to be carefully preserved and guarded. In situations like these, despite our eagerness to read, we may want to leave the pages as untouched as possible. Any line-drawing or even dog-earing would be deemed to deface the book. A sticky note may reconcile this difficulty by its promise to repeal.

A reader may reach for a sticky note with an impulse to track a moment of reading, but too, a reluctance to scar the book page. The tack glue on the back of a sticky note gives a grasp that is neither too much nor too little so that it ensures the flexibility to attach and later detach. The promise of detachment may in turn invite us to expand our annotation by putting one note after another on subsequent pages or the same one. When attaching, we barely need to give pressure for the note to adhere to the page. The attachment of the sticky note to the book is direct and even somewhat intimate: it cleaves to the page, and the page to it. Yet with the ever-present possibility of detachment, the contact between the note and the page in the meantime remains always tentative and ambivalent. The reader's sticky note thus embodies the original aporia of reading: an "extreme closeness and extreme detachment" (Poulet, 1969, p.63) between the book and the reader, between the text and our annotation.

## **The Annotating Sticky Notes**

We write on the sticky notes to annotate, but the note may stand out on its own as an annotating attempt. Even an empty note attached next to a paragraph may contain a reader's tacit comment: "This point is interesting," "These words are so well written," or "I want to remember this passage." Alongside the white book pages and ink black words, a sticky note's yellow strikes a visual contrast that demands our attention. The note may be put on top of the book, tucked by the side of the book, or hidden in the book, but the moment we see it we cannot un-see it. The fluorescent pigmentation of the note is near immune to being dismissed, forgotten, or ignored by our eyes. In a way even the default-ness of the yellow is resistant to anonymity: the sticky note's presence on the page states something is note-worthy.

Besides yellow, sticky notes may be found in a rainbow of fluorescent colours from which the reader may choose. Colour choice may be made purely based on aesthetic preference. Sometimes the array of colours contributes to the manifold annotated meanings. Blue, orange, green, pink...A reader may assign sticky notes of different colours with different significance. The colour of the page itself may contextualize or supplement the notes to be written on it. For example, a reader may use the blue ones to note the quotes for later use, the orange ones for the pressing or unresolved questions, green or pink for some initial responses needing expansion. At

times, the colours may become the self-sufficient code to note meaning, especially for the sticky index notepads that come in four or five colours altogether. Their tiny size makes writing on them difficult and, to some extent, unnecessary—the different colours alone may provide enough notation.

On the university library desks, especially during the exam season, it is not uncommon to find these colourful sticky index notes reaching out thickly from pages of textbooks or notebooks. Such an index of stickies help the diligent student reclaim the landscape of lecture materials so that the exact page and lines can be quickly located and consulted. The student preparing for exams may be considered as a special kind of reader, who takes the book as a reference or index of the course outline or exam guidelines. “Reading,” during this stressful time, may have a narrower orientation, pointedly attending to and on the lookout for potential exam questions. Here, the sticky notation attempts to provide a more directional than interpretive annotation, for example, to aid the student in relocating paragraphs or pages that may help organize an answer. The colours may reduce or replace the student’s labour of noting similar topics or assigning organizational meaning. For the student, coloured sticky notes may act as navigational signage for a terrain of study.

### **The Sticky Note Contacts the Surface of a Book**

Sticky notes come in different sizes. The familiar 3-inch yellow square seems to strike a comforting compromise: it is of sufficient surface for my hand to indulge a brief thought, yet not too large to invade too much into the book when adhered to the page. Different dimensions allow the reader to take note in an either more expanded or confined space. To attach, the note must cover up some space on the page to give the tack on its back full contact in order to adhere. A sticky note may extend beyond the page but must necessarily conceal it in part. Sometimes, if we are in a hurry, we may tack a sticky note somewhere in the middle of the page knowing that in returning it has to be removed for us to see the noted sentences and understand the point it means to note.

Within its limited canvas, the sticky note always promises to help preserve the reader’s tentative interpretation at its earliest stage, the fledging idea in its hatchling shape. The sticky note mediates, expands, and but also overlays the landscape of the page, allowing our comments, our mind—perhaps together with our-selves—to temporarily dwell. We may find ourselves carefully juxtaposing a piece of sticky note with certain sentences, and trying not to cover any of the printing words as if to track the ideas at the site where they arose. Is it really in the book where those ideas originated? Perhaps they quickened at the site given by the event of the sticky note, and now lies waiting there to fledge?

Not unlike writing—which may involve tirelessly reading and ploughing through the sentences just penned—in reading, we may also be perpetually re-composing or creating in the context of and astride the textual spaces that we encounter. Without such ongoing composition or creation, we may be unable to really comprehend the text. No matter whether we are browsing, skimming, or ruminating over one phrase or word, as soon as we start to read, we may already start to render some original meanings of our own. There is almost a state of emergency when we are reaching for the sticky note. As our responsive graspings or fledgling understandings emerge in response to a text, we may feel compelled to re-cord them by scribbling before they evaporate as if having never existed. The gesture of peeling off, writing on, and attaching a sticky note to a

book, in this way, is never insignificant, where the reader confesses her attachment and tries to form an independence from the book. And yet, as our sticky notes physically suggest, the meanings that we might have composed remain at the surface of the book, as a tentative, trivial add-on to something appearing more substantial. The space of the sticky note records a certain kind of writing that may be succinct, subordinate, and incomplete. If we reread our notes, we may find that we were writing capriciously and responding to someone that will not talk back, as if having a dialogue without a partner. As readers, we have to fictionalize the textural reality the writer tried to convey in his or her absence (Ong, 2002, p. 99). The sticky note is, after all, just a temporary attachment. The book itself remains solid, opaque, and seemingly impossible to penetrate. From time to time, the feeling of merely gliding over the pages may concern us, leading us to doubt whether our readerly responses are barely scratching the surface, and whether our grasping of the text is merely superficial.

And yet, isn't it also true that our understandings have to begin somewhere not far from the surface, somewhat superficially? Only by gleaning and grasping hold of the momentary inspirations that occasionally surface can we possibly glimpse in-depth meanings. A reader may never be a serious writer—the one who writes with dedication and creates coherent textual expressions. Yet by making note while reading, we seem to have already created something that is writerly, contained and beyond the scribbled written notes.

The etymology of the verb “to note” points back to writing: “to indicate, designate; take note of, write down.” The words for “write” in most Indo-European languages originally meant “carve, scratch, cut” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2017). To comprehend and to read, or to express and to write, may inevitably involve scratching the surface of life experiences, and of carving out understandings in a world composed of ephemeral moments. To note, therefore, may be essentially to write down and to carve out our understandings onto the surface of the book pages. As we are finding a way to attach our notes to and make contact with the words being read, the freshly attached or well-worn sticky notes may be testimonial of the reader's tentative or serious commitments to “scratch the surfaces.” As Susan Sontag (2009) declared about this ambiguous and tireless commitment:

For, I am not only reading this book, but creating it myself, and this unique and enormous experience has purged my mind of much of the confusion and sterility that has clogged it all these horrible months. (p. 8)

As readers, we may carry this enormous and ineffable experience of being “clogged” while we are intensively engaged with a book. Creating notes by hand or marking them in our mind, over time we may come to an epiphany that we are creating a book ourselves. Too, we may realize that ourselves are no longer the same: we are trying to address our desire for and inability of expression and have become the ones who think, note, and read. Sticky notes materialize part of our internal dialogue with the world of the text that we have encountered. Through these notes, we are committed to make this language world our own and in this way, to re-write the text.

When we see someone's book exploding with sticky notes, we see a book as this reader's re-invention through committed time and effort; we may even guess about the painful or enlightened moments they have lived through while reading and noting. However, when we are offered to have a look at the book overlaid by sticky notes, we may hesitate to take it, not to mention to flip through the pages. We may worry our intrusion may cause some of the carefully placed sticky notes to go missing and we may interrupt the structure that has been so carefully

built. These sticky notes appear raw and fragile. Their thick existence covers the pages and makes the book less welcoming to others, and possibly to the owner too, later wanting to read the book anew. For whoever has attached them there, the sticky notes, if left too long, may lose their original immediacy and urgency. The sticky notes may solidify the fleeting thoughts, but they are by no means permanent. Overstaying, the notes and the thoughts recorded on them, may turn musty, and the detract or erode the meaning of new reading encounters.

## **Taking Off the Sticky Notes**

Sometimes seeing a sticky note abandoned in a book by a previous reader, even by oneself from a while ago, is an encounter of ambiguity. Perhaps it contains some discernible written words, or perhaps its location bears some special implications, yet the note can only tell us so much. Not being the (same) person who once affixed the sticky note to this location, we may not fully grasp the meaning it once tried to secure. The succinct writing on the note may seem to be both saturated and deprived of interpretative possibilities. We may end up removing it with a vague hesitation, as if we are terminating something we do not yet understand and perhaps will never have a chance to do so.

The sticky note appears to be trustingly attached to the book page, yet its sticky adherence is nonetheless fragile: detaching a note may be as effortless as attaching one. The meaning given by the note is cursory and ephemeral. The sticky note on the page carries not only the quick scribble of a question or comment, but a trace of the temporality we dwell in as a reader encountering a book. A sticky note on the side can remind us to expand our thoughts or address our question—hopefully in the near future. As such, the sticky note is an appeal to our future self to go beyond the temporal limitation of the note, to realize its transient status in more a substantial or meaningful form.

When we have finally answered a question we made a sticky note of, or have recorded all our notes together with their page numbers on computer, we can remove the sticky notes and toss them to the trash with perhaps a slight sense of accomplishment and relief. In this moment, the used sticky notes are transformed into wastepaper: the emerging, contingent meanings they used to carry have been sublimated into a different form and place.

However, this careful sublimation and transformation takes time that we may not always have at our disposal: who has never experienced an unexpected recall from the library, when we have to rush to take off our notes collected over time? Removing these sticky notes may seem like we are abandoning a not-yet-fledged baby bird, or peeling away a scab that has not totally healed. With regret, we must destroy the tentative notes and nascent thoughts we have built in intimate conversation with the book. We may blame ourselves for taking the sticky notes' short-term occupancy as permanent. We may regret having assumed that we might own the ideas that still belong to the text.

When the book has gone, the abandoned sticky notes stay as the relics of my embryonic hermeneutics. These notes may still hold some lasting breath or fleshy reminiscence of the book, but without the concrete references, the crooked question mark may turn into an unanswerable mystery, the comment of "look into more Heidegger's similar writings on this topic" now seems like an imperative without clear directions. The detached and soiled sticky notes are remains, testifying only to the absence of the book, and to a premature ending to our readerly composition. We may be with grief or reluctance while tossing them into the garbage as if giving



up upon a lingering life. After all, we can do nothing to revive the emergent meanings that we may have but briefly chewed over or dwelled in while reading. It is in those moments of giving up that we are again reminded of the limitations set to our time and the finitude of tasks that we can possibly accomplish; we may realize it may be indeed a portion of our own life that we have to let go.

In some way, the sticky note speaks to the undeniably vulnerable, mundane, and mortal corporeality of its human applicant. Reading, one page after the other, sticking, one note over another...in its ordinary, fragmentary perseverance, a sticky note seems to remind the reader that: perhaps we may never succeed in capturing a meaning just beyond our grasp, but we shall never stop trying to do so.

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