

Academic Housekeeping - a check list and explanation

Associate Professor Inger Mewburn (@Thesiswhisperer)

With special thanks to my productivity guru @jasondowns (you should follow him)

Work day tasks:

- Tick off all daily Omni-focus list tasks (or move them)
- Check-in on social media feeds
- Sweep of blog comments
- If possible, do at least one 'deep work' task
- If necessary, do '2pm project'
- Process all incoming mail through Omni
- Finish the day with no emails in the inbox
- Get at least 40 minutes of exercise somehow

Friday tidy up:

- Review all to-do lists in Omni
- Schedule all deep work tasks in calendar
- Respond to all Thesis Whisperer correspondence
- Complete all tasks in the 'you will avoid' folder
- Check on project status
- Pick one 'deep work' task to focus on

Every Three months:

- Schedule three months of Thesis Whisperer posts
- Review publishing schedule
- Drop Omni tasks that are aspirational and clearly are not going to be done

Yearly:

- Purge reference manager of useless references
- Archive year's work and create new year folders

Programs I use to keep organised

- OmniFocus2¹
- Fantastical
- Email
- Pocket
- Buffer
- Evernote
- Camscanner

¹ This is a Mac only program - if you're on a PC 'Asana' is an option.

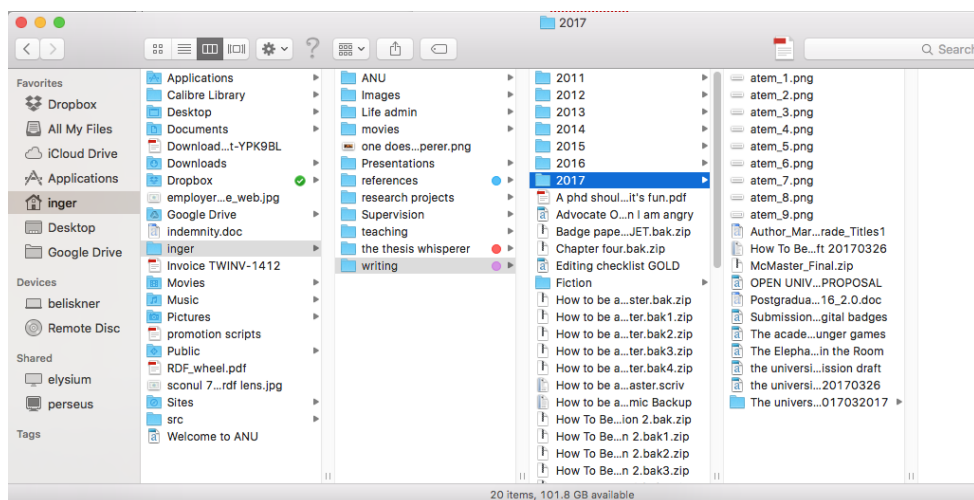
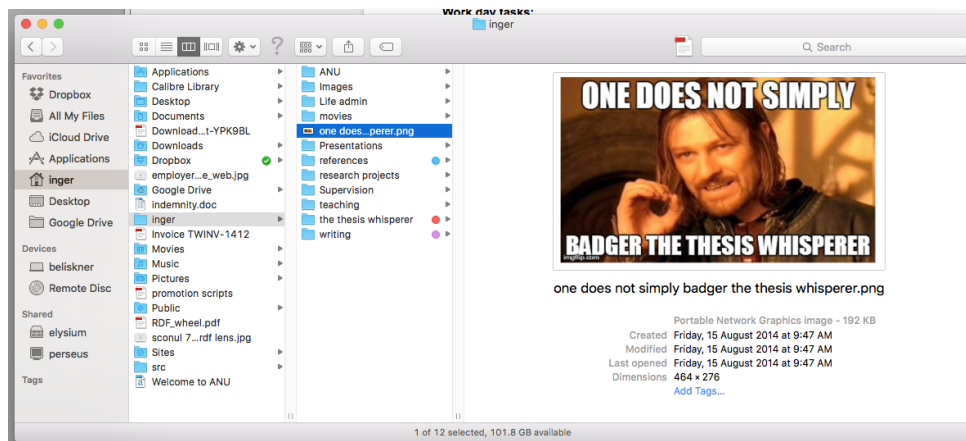
Organising Paper Stuff:

I avoid paper wherever possible (it's too easy to lose). I am not even connected a printer any more.

If people give me a piece of important paper I take an image with the phone app 'CamScanner', turn it into a PDF and file it digitally. The most useful paper replacement appliance I have is an iPad Pro with Apple Pencil. This enables me to mark up PDFs and draw diagrams just like I am handling a pen and paper (you know, except betterer).

How I organise my files:

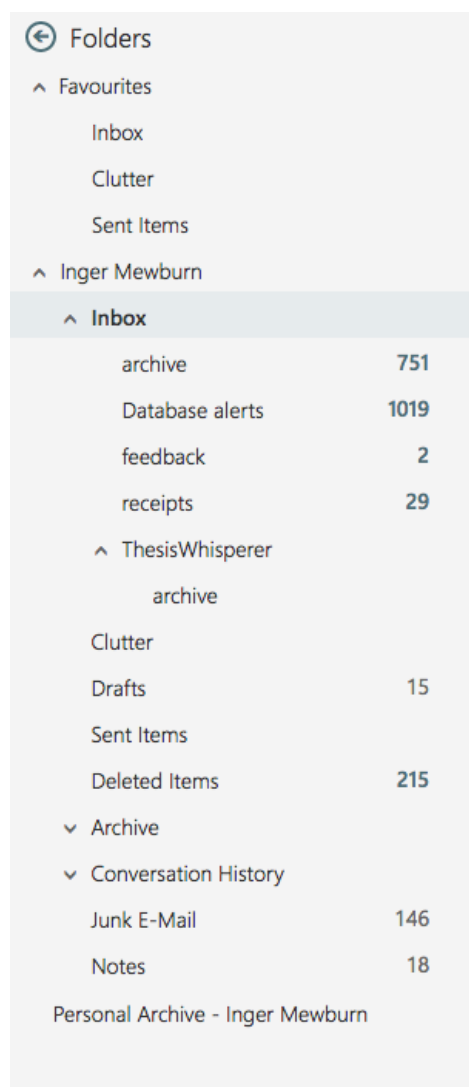
I use the 'Getting things done' (GTD) method to organise my files. Most documents are filed by activity and then year. For example:



Using a 'flat file structure' means I spend less time filing. The Mac 'spotlight' search is powerful: it looks inside a file so you can type in a random set of things you remember about the file and it will usually find it.

Email

Similarly, my email file structure is flat. 99% of things go straight into the 'archive' and I use the search function to find what I need. I only keep receipts and nice feedback emails filed separately (because doing purchase card is painful otherwise):



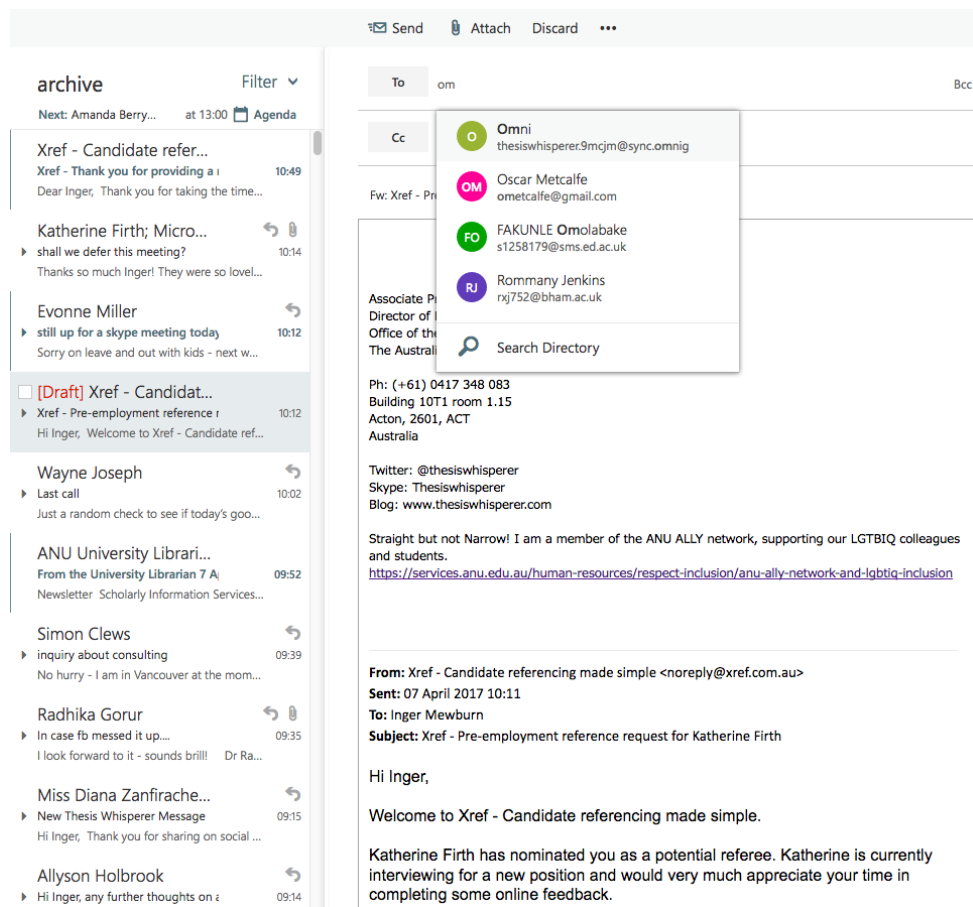
← Folders	
^ Favourites	
Inbox	
Clutter	
Sent Items	
^ Inger Mewburn	
^ Inbox	
archive	751
Database alerts	1019
feedback	2
receipts	29
^ ThesisWhisperer	
archive	
Clutter	
Drafts	15
Sent Items	
Deleted Items	215
v Archive	
v Conversation History	
Junk E-Mail	146
Notes	18
Personal Archive - Inger Mewburn	

The main problem with email is that it's a 'to do' list created for you by other people: a list that is all jumbled up and in the wrong order. I managed my 'to do' list via my email inbox for years and years - it is exhausting and error prone. The trick to being amazingly productive is to get information out of email and assemble it in useful, actionable ways. This is where Omnifocus fits in.

Being amazingly productive (and rarely stressed out)

I have tried many, many productivity programs. Most take so much work to maintain that you might as well use paper lists. Omnifocus is the only one that has ever worked for me, but you must surrender to it *completely*. Omni is a 'to do' list - on steroids. I have a saying "If it's in Omni, it happens". The rest of this document is a walk-through of my whole academic workflow using Omni.

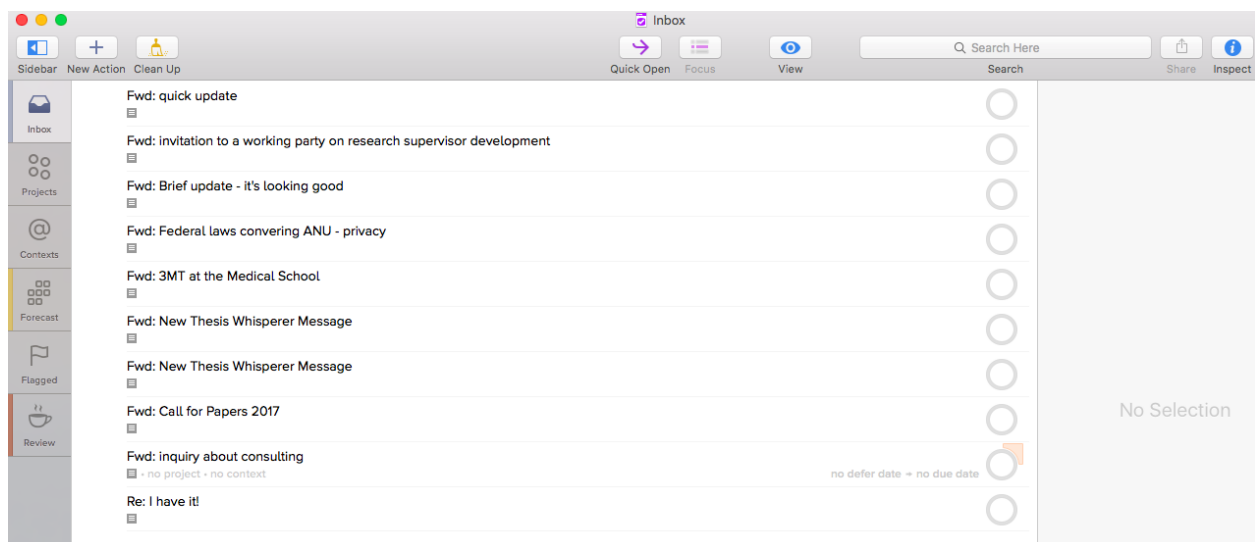
An email appears in my inbox asking me to do something I don't want to do straight away. I forward it to Omni and then put the email object straight in the archive box. That way I know at a glance what has been dealt with and what is still outstanding and my inbox is beautifully clutter free:



I don't want to just be reactive in my work. If I have an idea at night, randomly on my bike, while walking, in a meeting or during a conversation, I pull my phone out and make a note in Omni straight away. I try to put a verb at the front of each idea and make quick notes so the idea still makes sense to future Inger:



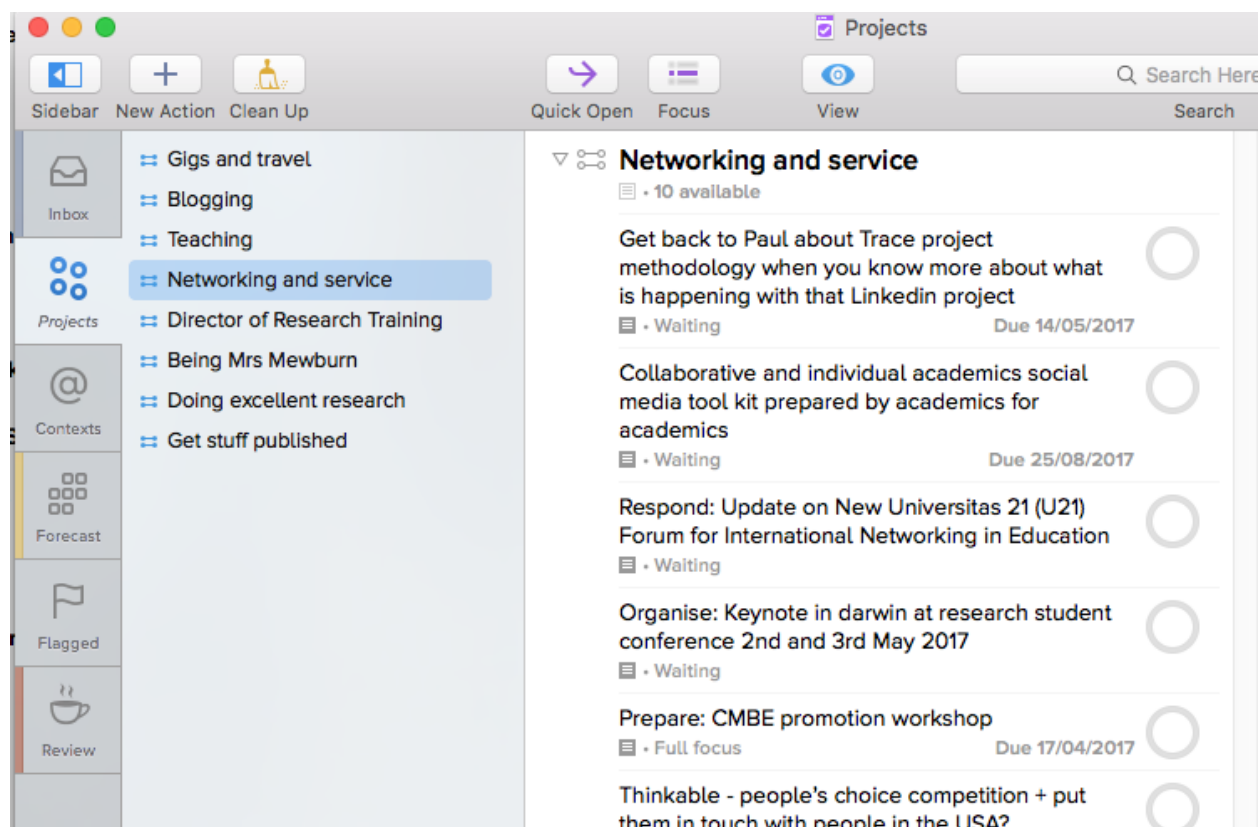
Omnifocus acts as a big 'bucket' of stuff I have to do. Now it's just a matter of organising these tasks and scheduling them. Your email or ideas, by default, go in the 'inbox' view: Here's what my inbox looks like right now. You see that big circle on the right? You get to tick that when each one is done (very satisfying!).



Omni is basically an electronic PA that remembers all the details of your ongoing work for you. If you spend a small amount of time organising it properly, the program tells you exactly what to do with each hour of the day and presents you with all the information you need to achieve the task. This reduces your cognitive load and means you don't wake up in the middle of the night remembering something you forgot to do the day before...

This is the bit that usually puts people off using Omni. They say “Oh, that looks like a lot of work”. But you *always* need to do work to keep yourself organised. Better to do it in advance of the task, rather than in the middle of doing it. For example, you open an email and it’s asking you a question you need the internet to answer. Next thing you know you are shopping for unicorn stamps on Etsy. Trust me when I say it becomes easy, even enjoyable, to organise yourself in Omnifocus.

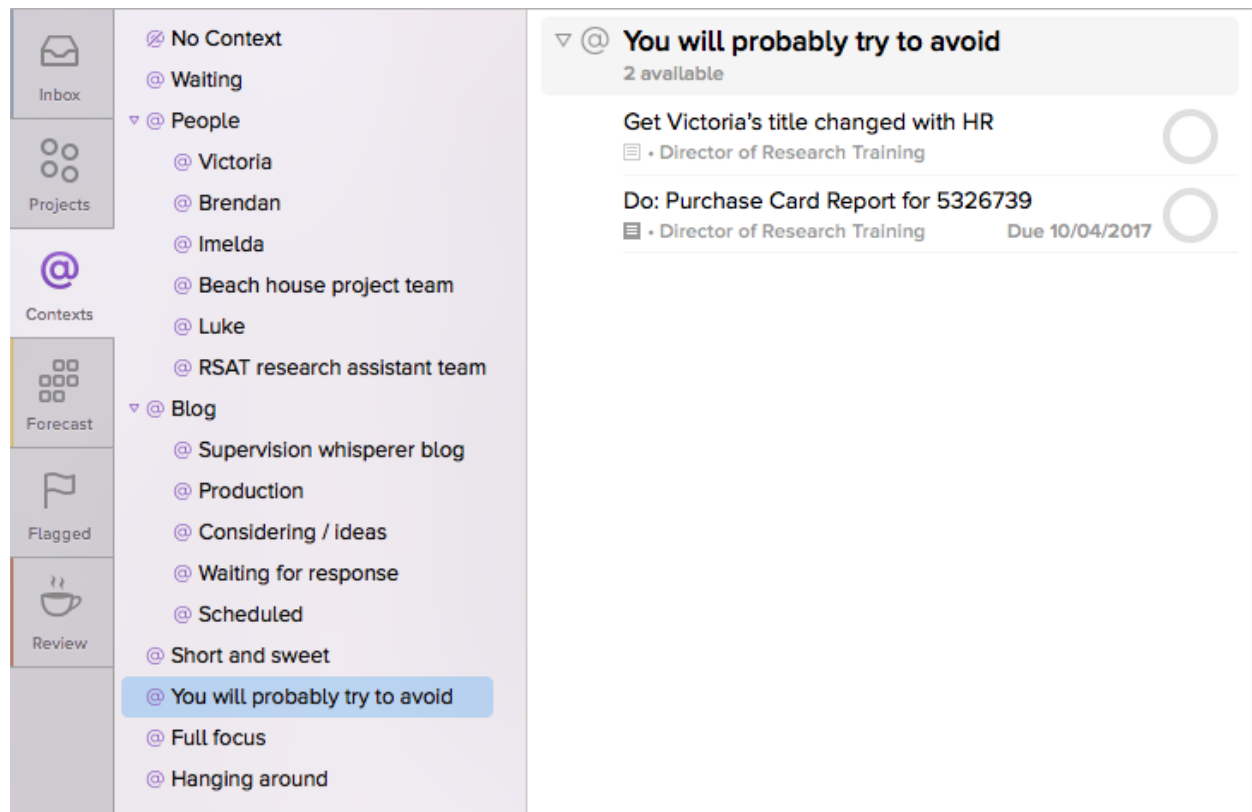
The first step in processing your inbox is to assign ‘metadata’ to each task. There’s two types of metadata: Projects and Contexts. These are really just two different ways of viewing your to-do lists, once they are created. For me, projects are the roles I play and things I do:



- Gigs and travel is a way to keep all my outside ANU commitments organised
- Blogging contains my whole production line (more on that later)
- Teaching keeps track of my workshops and supervision tasks
- Director of Research Training is my primary role. Most of the stuff here is the ‘administrative’ work that students rarely see (or wouldn’t even know I do)
- Being Mrs Mewburn is all my personal things. This relates to my ‘2pm project’ on the daily list.
- Doing excellent research is a strategic aim - it’s good to remind yourself by giving it an aspirational title.

- Get stuff published is basically my publishing schedule, organised.

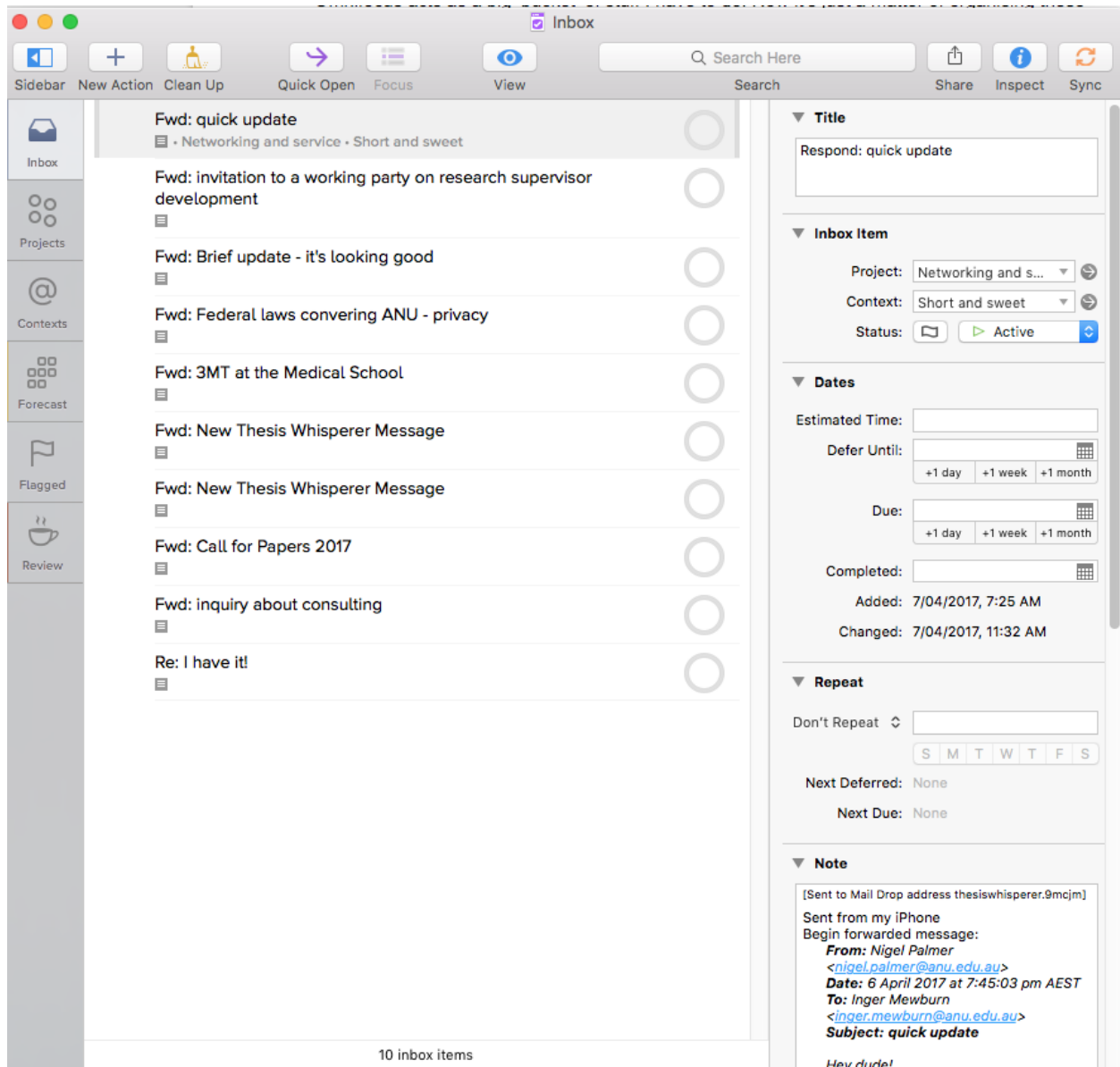
Contexts are just another way of looking at the same tasks. My contexts are either people or time related:



- **Waiting** is the perfect context for working in a large, complex bureaucracy like a university. It's for stuff that I have asked other people to do and need to follow up after a certain amount of time. This context makes me scary efficient. I'm that person who calls you up and says "I wrote to you on April 13th requesting... where is it?"
- **People** are people who I have regular meetings or interactions with. This context is useful because each time there's a meeting you can pull a list of things up that you need to check, report back or ask them. Luke and Brendan are my Husband and Son (they each have an omni context because I love them and need them to get shit done).
- **Blog** is my production queue. Each post is an item that gets managed through a process. It would take me ages to explain this. Another time.
- **Short and sweet** is my first time based context. Everything here can be done in under 15 minutes. This means when I have a bit of spare time before a meeting, or I'm hanging around waiting for something, I can pick off a task and just do it.
- **You will probably try to avoid** is for boring, annoying, irritating - but necessary tasks. How I hates it.
- **Full focus** is for 'deep work', where I need to just put my head down and do it. Like writing this document.

- **Hanging around** is for airport lounges, sitting on the couch ... anytime I am just at a loose end, but have my laptop around and in the mood to do a bit of work. What ends up in here, usually, are papers or websites that people recommend I read or look at.

Let's look at how it works in practice. The first email I sent to Omni this morning (from my phone, in bed, while listening to the news on the radio) is from my good friend Nigel, who is giving me an update from a conference I missed (sadface). I filed it like this:



I changed the title to 'respond' (a verb right? So the action I have to take is clear on a casual scan). The project is 'networking and service' and a time based context of 'short and sweet' because I can bang it out and he doesn't worry about structure or spelling mistakes. I put a date of today on it, because he's a friend and I like to be responsive to my friends on email.

Let's look at the next one. This is a link sent to me by Colin Steele who runs the 'meet the author' series at ANU. Colin is a lovely guy, a member of the Emeritus faculty, who likes to share stuff on email (and will not be persuaded to use Twitter so everyone can benefit from his good taste - sigh). Colin's genius is sending stuff that he just knows you will be into - this is an almost perfect example of academic networking by the way. Here's how I filed it:

The screenshot shows a productivity application interface. On the left is a sidebar with icons for 'Inbox', 'Projects', 'Contexts', 'Forecast', 'Flagged', and 'Review'. The main area displays a list of emails. The top email is titled 'Read: CHE picks up paywall// How a Browser Extension Could Shake Up Academic Publishing' with a due date of '14/04/2017'. Below it are several 'Fwd:' emails. On the right, a detailed view of the top email is shown. It includes fields for 'Title', 'Inbox Item' (Project: 'Doing excellent r...', Context: 'Hanging around', Status: 'Active'), 'Dates' (Estimated Time, Defer Until, Due: '14/04/2017, 5:00 PM', Completed, Added: '7/04/2017, 11:24 AM', Changed: '7/04/2017, 12:14 PM'), 'Repeat' (Don't Repeat, Next Deferred: None, Next Due: None), and a 'Note' section containing contact information for Associate Professor Inger Mewburn and a link to the ANU ALLY network.

I put it under 'doing excellent research' because I will benefit from reading it. The context is 'hanging around' (I have to take my son to a swimming lesson tonight, so I will probably read it then). I put a due date on it of a week's time. If I read it before that, I'll get back to him. IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO SAY THANK YOU when a senior academic takes time out of his day to be nice to you. It's a mark of mutual respect and how networks are maintained.

The next email is a response from an academic to an invitation to a working party related to a project I am running. Dirk tells me that he is not going to be in the role for which I have invited him, but that the person who replaces him should respond. Just in case the new person doesn't get back to me, he's offered to have me contact him in 2 weeks to organise representation. This

sounds like a simple email, but it's surprisingly complex as it's a minor detail on a big stakes, high profile project. Here's what I did:

The screenshot displays a productivity application interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with icons for 'Sidebar', 'New Action', 'Clean Up', 'Quick Open', 'Focus', 'View', and a search bar. Below this, the 'Inbox' is visible with three items: 'Follow up: invitation to a working party on research supervisor development', 'Fwd: Brief update - It's looking good', and 'Fwd: Federal laws converging ANU - privacy'. A calendar window is overlaid on the inbox, showing a weekly view for the week of April 13-15, 2017. The calendar includes events like 'Good Friday', 'Holy Saturday (re...)', 'Working at home...', 'Easter Saturday (...)', 'Saturday after Go...', 'The Saturday befo...', 'McDonald's Cooyong Street, Braddon ACT 2612, Australia', '8:00 AM B: Work', '8:00 AM TBC Veterans Day', '9:00 AM Meeting requests - book as necessary', '10:30 AM HDR "Academic Housekeeping" M...', '12:00 PM Research supervision', '1:00 PM DTF Pres...', '2:00 PM Supervisory meeting', '12:00 PM SES Student conference lunch', and '2:00 PM sad Xeem chapter four'. A detailed view of the email 'Follow up: invitation to a working party on research supervisor development' is shown on the right. It includes fields for 'Title', 'Inbox Item', 'Project' (Director of Resea...), 'Context' (Waiting), 'Status' (Active), 'Dates' (Estimated Time, Defer Until, Due, Completed), 'Repeat' (Don't Repeat), and a 'Note' section. The note contains a forwarded message from Dirk Pattinson to Inger Mewburn, dated 6 April 2017, with the subject 'Re: Invitation to a working party on research supervisor development'.

Overlapping is the calendar app 'Fantastical'. The key feature of this program is that I can drag and drop tasks from omni straight into it. This means I can schedule work as I commit to it.

Looking at the calendar I realise that Easter is coming up. I can't leave it two weeks to get back to him, so I put a due date on the last day before Good Friday, under the assumption that he will probably not answer it then, but will see it first thing when he gets back. I give it a Project of 'Director of Research Training' and a context of 'Waiting', so I know it's with someone else for now, but I have to get back to it later.

The next email is from my publisher at University of New South Wales Press, Phillipa. She's read my book (yay!) and loves it (double yay!). She's got some information that relates to the next step of the process. I'll need to write back to her today, when you get such a nice email it's a delight to respond. See the notes pane down there on the right? It's a good spot to record a note for future self, when she gets to the task I may have forgotten the question in my head so I put it on top of the email text to remind myself:

The screenshot shows the 'Projects' application interface. On the left is a sidebar with navigation options: Inbox, Projects, Contexts, Forecast, Flagged, and Review. The main area displays a list of tasks under the heading 'Get stuff published'. Each task has a status icon (a circle) and a due date. The tasks are:

- Check in with Claire: still interested in TIHE special issue call? (Waiting, Due 14/04/2017)
- Check feedback has been received and submit: ATEM paper (Beach house project team, Due 14/04/2017)
- Get final clearance from SEEK for project report and papers (Beach house project team)
- Write outline: blogging stuff (Full focus, Due 5:00 PM)
- Contact JD about book on academic productivity (Short and sweet, Due 4/08/2017)
- Respond: The book, and the marketing form (Full focus, Due 21/04/2017)
- Review information: The Postgraduate | Annual Conference 2017 Special Edition! (Hanging around)
- Article on digital badges? (Waiting)
- Respond: Brief update - it's looking good (Short and sweet, Due 5:00 PM)

On the right, the detailed view for the task 'Respond: Brief update - it's looking good' is shown. It includes fields for Title, Action, Dates, Repeat, and Note. The Note field contains a forwarded email from Phillipa McGuinness to Inger Mewburn, dated 6 April 2017. The email text is as follows:

Ask when they need the publicity material

Begin forwarded message:
From: Phillipa McGuinness
 <p.mcguinness@newsouthpublishing.com.au>
Date: 6 April 2017 at 5:20:31 pm AEST
To: Inger Mewburn
 <inger.mewburn@anu.edu.au>
Cc: Emma Driver
 <e.driver@newsouthpublishing.com.au>
Subject: Brief update - it's looking good
 Hi Inger

Let me cut to the chase: I've so enjoyed reading your book so far (I'm about half way). It has met and even exceeded my expectations: it's rich advice wrapped up in honest and insightful observations, all written in a warm and authoritative style. I've made notes as I go, but they're mainly minor style things, a few minor structural things

In this view I am looking at all my ongoing work related to publishing. There's an item for each of the papers I have underway or might be doing in the near future. See how some of the circles are yellow? This means they are close to due. Let's look at the Forecast pane where I can see all my tasks, this time arranged by due dates:

The screenshot shows the Forecast app interface. On the left is a sidebar with icons for Inbox, Projects, Contexts, Forecast, Flagged, and Review. The main area displays a calendar view for Friday, April 7th, and Saturday, April 8th. The task list for Friday includes:

- Make new keynote presentation: Darwin and Sydney (Due 5:00 PM)
- Presentation for academic housekeeping event** (Due 5:00 PM, highlighted in blue)
- Write outline: blogging stuff (Due 5:00 PM)
- Respond: Brief update - it's looking good (Due 5:00 PM)
- Apply for a tax file number for Brendan at post office (Due 7:00 PM)

The task "Presentation for academic housekeeping event" is highlighted in blue. On the right, a detailed view of this task is shown, including its title, action, dates, and a note.

Title: Presentation for academic housekeeping event

Action: Project: Teaching, Context: Full focus, Status: Active

Dates: Estimated Time: , Defer Until: +1 day, +1 week, +1 month, Due: 7/04/2017, 5:00 PM, Completed: , Added: 6/04/2017, 1:44 PM, Changed: 7/04/2017, 9:57 AM

Repeat: Don't Repeat: , Next Deferred: None, Next Due: None

Note: April's ANU College of Law informal HDR Morning Tea will be dedicated to Academic Housekeeping, addressing issues around being 'materially' organised, such as how to keep track of and order your online and paper documents, manage administrative deadlines etc. In short, essential aspects of productivity and a certain sense of calm...

Highlighted in blue is this task - write a presentation for the academic housekeeping event at the school of Law (because I know the venue doesn't have a projector). You can see this is one of the three 'full focus' tasks I have left to do today. In the notes pane is the briefing I got from the organiser. I think I have documented enough about how to be productive with a 'certain sense of calm' and this seems to be a pleasingly meta place to stop this productivity rant, so thanks for listening and good luck with your academic housekeeping!