

The One-Folder Method

The complete build. How to put your whole life into one folder you can ask questions, and the exact structure, habits and prompts that keep it alive.

By Braindock. This is the in-depth companion to the web guide. Nothing held back, no signup.

Why every system you quit did not survive

Think about the productivity tools you have abandoned. A student planner. A habit tracker. A budgeting app. A note-taking app you were serious about for eleven days.

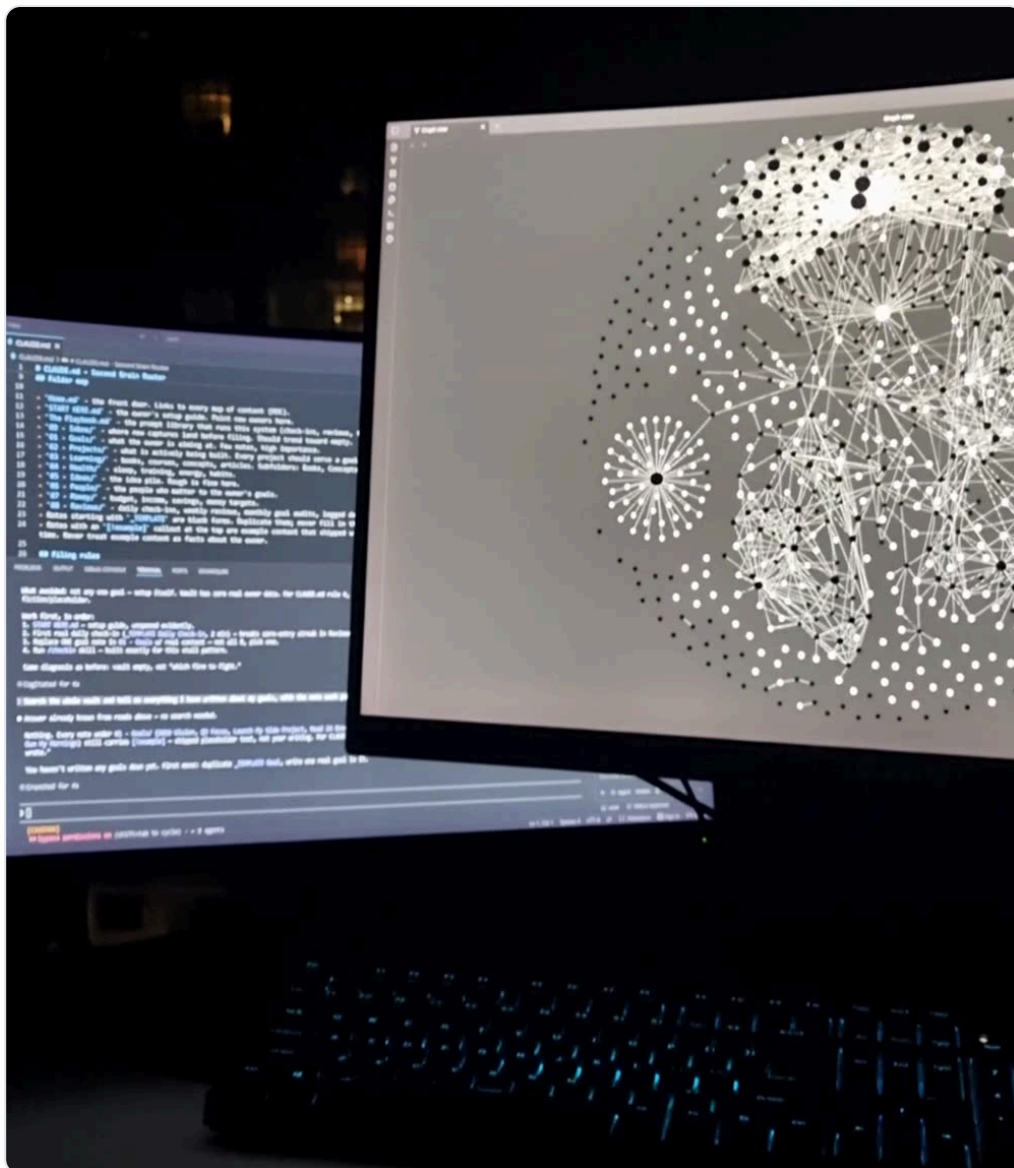
They all had one thing in common, and it was not that they were badly made. It is that each one did **one job**. So your life ended up scattered across nine apps, none of which knew about the other eight, and every one of them needed you to keep showing up for a single slice of your life.

That is the actual failure. Not discipline. **Fragmentation**. A system that holds one tenth of your life has to earn its place ten times over, and eventually it does not. The fix is not another app. It is putting everything in one place, keeping the areas separate so they do not turn into a swamp, and making the whole thing answerable in plain English.

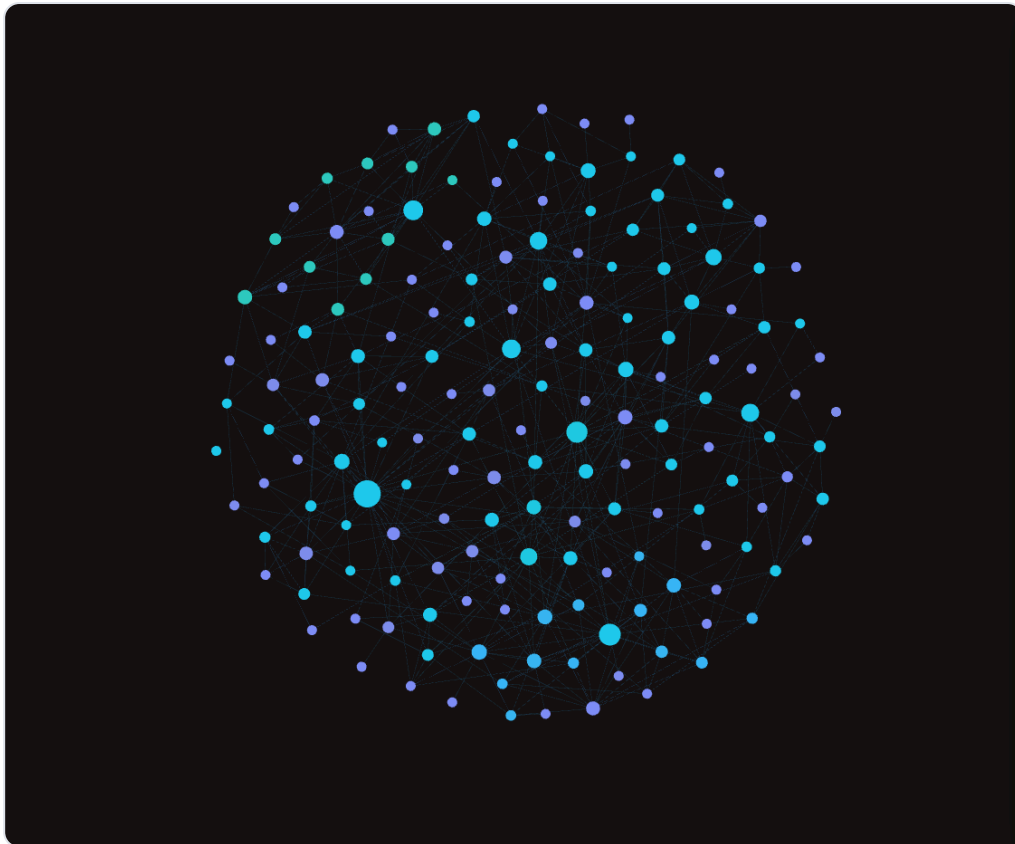
The idea in one paragraph

You keep one folder of plain text files on your computer. Inside it, your life is divided into areas that do not bleed into each other: goals, projects, learning, health, ideas, people, money, reviews. Notes link to each other, so related thinking stays connected. Then you point an AI at that folder and ask it questions, and it answers using **your own writing** and tells you which note each part came from.

That last part is the whole payoff. Not storage. Retrieval. You get your own thinking back at the moment you need it, months after you forgot you ever had it.



The whole system, running. On the right, the vault graph. On the left, the one instruction file that teaches the AI how the folder is organised, so it never has to be explained again. That is the entire setup. There is no app and no account.



Closer, in a dark theme. Every dot is a note, every line is a link between two notes. Nobody drew this. It is what a few months of capturing and linking produces on its own, and it is the reason the AI can find things by meaning instead of you remembering a filename.

Why plain files and not an app

Plain markdown files in a normal folder means no account, no subscription to the folder itself, no lock-in, no company that can shut down and take your life with it. You can read these files in twenty years with any text editor. Obsidian (free) is just a nice window onto the folder. The folder is the product, and it is yours.

The structure

The full method uses nine folders, but you do not start with nine. The free Starter Brain begins you with three (inbox, projects, notes), because the habit is the hard part, not the structure, and three is enough to start capturing today. Nine is what it grows into once capturing is second nature, and it is what the paid kit hands you already built. This specific set is not sacred, but it has one property that matters: every part of a life has an obvious home, and there are few enough folders that you never stall deciding where something goes. Here is the full shape you are working toward:

00 - Inbox	everything lands here first, unsorted
01 - Goals	what you are actually aiming at
02 - Projects	what you are building right now
03 - Learning	books, courses, concepts, articles
04 - Health	sleep, training, energy, habits
05 - Ideas	the pile. rough is fine here
06 - People	the people who matter to your goals
07 - Money	income, budget, targets
08 - Reviews	check-ins, weekly reviews, decisions

If you name your areas differently because your life has different shapes in it, that is correct. A freelancer needs a Clients folder. A PhD student needs Papers. The method is the separation, not my particular nine.

The two rules that keep it from rotting

1. **The inbox trends toward empty.** Capture fast and messy into `00 - Inbox`, then file in one batch later. An inbox that only grows is a junk drawer. Filing weekly is plenty. The point is that capture is instant and sorting is deferred, never the other way around.
2. **Every note links to at least one other note.** End each note with a short "Related" section pointing at neighbours. Unlinked notes are lost notes. This is also what builds the connected graph that lets you and the AI find things by meaning rather than by remembering a filename.

The three habits that keep it alive

A structure with no habits attached is the thing you abandon. There are exactly three, and only the first one is non-negotiable.

1. Capture (five seconds, whenever)

Something worth keeping crosses your path. Make a note in `00 - Inbox` with a one-line summary or the link. Do not file it. Do not tidy it. Five seconds, then get on with your day. This single habit is the system. Everything else is optional polish. If you only ever do this one thing, you already have a second brain.

2. The daily check-in (two minutes, mornings)

You answer four questions with an AI: what you said you would do yesterday and what actually happened, today's one to three tasks, one thing on your mind, and anything worth capturing. The output gets saved into `08 - Reviews`.

The reason this outperforms a to-do list is that it starts by making you account for yesterday. A to-do list lets you quietly rewrite history every morning. This does not. Two weeks of these files is also the richest thing you can later ask questions of, because it is a running record of what you actually did versus what you meant to.

3. Ask your notes (whenever you need it)

The payoff habit, and the one that makes the other two worth doing. Covered in full in the next section.

The prompt that makes it click

Here is a complete, working prompt. This is not a teaser. Paste it into Claude along with some of your notes, and it does the thing this whole method exists for.

```
Based only on these notes from my vault, answer: <your question>.  
Cite which note each part of your answer came from. If my notes do  
not contain the answer, say that instead of guessing.
```

The two constraints are doing real work. **"Based only on these notes"** stops the AI answering from the internet, which is exactly what you did not want. **"Say that instead of guessing"** stops it inventing a memory you never had, which is the failure mode that would make you stop trusting the whole system.

Questions that work unreasonably well once you have a few weeks of material:

- "What did I say I believed about this six months ago?"
- "I am about to start a new project. Based on my goals notes, does it serve any goal I have actually written down, or is it a distraction?"
- "Summarise everything I have learned about this topic across my Learning notes."
- "What patterns do you see across my last two weeks of check-ins?"

That last one is the sleeper. Two weeks in, ask it, and be ready for it to be right about something you were avoiding.

How the AI actually sees your notes

Simplest way, works on every plan including the free one: open the note, select all, paste it under the prompt. That is genuinely it. When you want the AI to read the folder itself without pasting, Claude Desktop can connect to a folder, and Claude Code can read and write the whole vault directly. Both are upgrades you do not need on day one. Habit first, plumbing later. Plumbing before habit is how second brains die.

What this actually looks like on a normal day

Method sections are easy to nod along to and hard to picture. So here is a real day, in order, with nothing dramatic in it. This is the whole point of the system and it is deliberately unimpressive.

Morning, two minutes. I open the check-in prompt. It asks what I said I would do yesterday. I said I would finish one thing and I did half of it, so I say that, and it writes the honest version into `08 - Reviews` rather than the version I would have told myself. Then it asks for today's one to three. Three, not fifteen.

During the day, five seconds at a time. Something crosses my path worth keeping. A line from a video, a job ad, a thought about a project, someone's name. One line into `00 - Inbox`. No filing, no tidying, no deciding. Five seconds is the entire commitment, which is exactly why it survives busy days.

When I actually need something, this is the part that pays. Real questions I ask, and the shape of what comes back:

"I am about to start a new project. Based on my goals notes, does it serve a goal I have actually written down, or is it a distraction?"

It quotes the goals I wrote when I was thinking clearly, weeks before I got excited about the new thing, and names which one this does or does not serve. Most of the time the answer is no. That answer costs ten seconds and saves a week.

"I have an interview for this role tomorrow. Pull everything from my notes that is relevant, and give me the honest version of what I can and cannot claim."

It reads the projects I actually built, with dates, and drafts answers grounded in them. It will not let me claim something that is not written down anywhere, which is the entire value. You cannot be caught out by your own notes.

"What patterns do you see across my last two weeks of check-ins?"

It reads the daily files and tells me what I keep saying I will do and keep not doing. Be ready for this one to be right about something you were avoiding. It is reading your own words back to you, so there is nowhere to go.

"Summarise everything I have learned about this topic across my Learning notes, and tell me what I still have not understood."

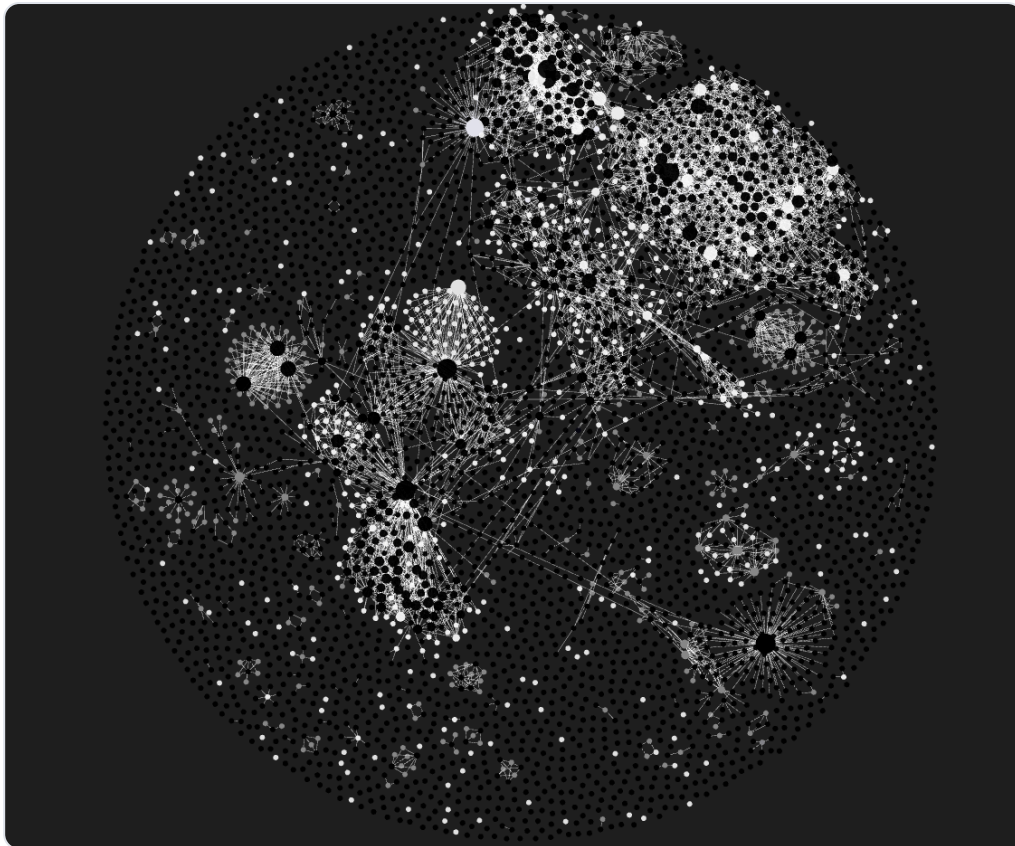
Six months of scattered reading comes back as one page, in my own words, with a note name against each part so I can go check it. This is the difference between having read something and being able to use it.

The areas it covers, and why one folder beats five apps

The reason this replaces the pile of apps is not that it does each job better. It is that the areas sit next to each other and are linked, so a thought in one shows up when you are working in another. Concretely, in one folder:

- **Study.** Course notes, concepts, and deadlines, so revision starts from what I already wrote instead of from the lecture slides again.
- **Work and job hunt.** Every application, every role, every prep doc, linked to the projects that back the claims. Nothing gets claimed that is not written down.
- **Projects and business.** What I am building, what state it is in, and what the next single action is, so picking a project back up after two weeks away takes a minute instead of an evening.
- **Health.** Sleep, training and energy, which turns out to be the note that explains the bad weeks in the other four areas.
- **Money.** Income, targets, and what each thing is actually worth doing.
- **People and ideas.** Who matters to what I am doing, and the rough pile that later becomes projects.

Separated, so none of it turns into a swamp. Linked, so a health note can explain a work week and a job-hunt note can pull straight from a project. That combination is what no single-purpose app can give you, and it is the entire argument for one folder.



This is what those areas look like from above: my own vault, the same graph you see in the video, after years of the same nine folders. Nothing here was arranged by hand. Each dense knot is a part of my life that got worked on, and the sparse ring around them is everything captured once and waiting to matter. You do not need it to look like this for it to be useful. It looked like the small one earlier in this guide for a long time first.

The shoulders this stands on

None of this was invented from nothing. Two people in particular shaped the version you are reading, and the method got noticeably better once I took their ideas seriously. Here is exactly how each one amplified it.

[Andrej Karpathy: the idea, made obvious](#)

Karpathy put into plain language the notion of a personal AI that reasons over your own material rather than the whole internet. That reframing is the spine of this method. Before it, a "second brain" was just tidy storage. After it, the point became **retrieval and thinking**: your notes are not an archive, they are context you feed a capable model so it answers as a version of you that never forgets. Everything in the "ask your notes" section exists because of that shift. It is why the structure is optimised for being read by an AI, not just by a human tidying folders.

Nate Herk: the automation that removes the friction

Herk's work on AI automation and agents is where the second half of this system comes from. The method survives on one thing: capture has to be effortless. His approach to wiring tools together showed me how to make capture and retrieval run with far less manual effort, so an idea caught on your phone lands in the inbox on its own, and the daily check-in and filing can be driven by an agent instead of willpower. The core method here runs fully by hand, on purpose, so anyone can start today. But the reason it scales past the first busy fortnight is that the boring parts can be automated, and that half of the design is his influence.

Credit also to the **Obsidian** and **Claude** teams, whose free tiers make the whole thing possible without paying a subscription to your own notes.

What this costs, stated up front

Obsidian is free. The folder is free. The files are yours. The asking part runs on Claude, which has a free tier that is enough to try everything in this guide. If it becomes part of your week you will want the paid plan, which is **about 20 dollars a month**, and that is a real cost you should factor in before you start rather than discover later. That is the entire cost. There is nothing else, and I would rather tell you now than have you find out three weeks in.

The honest part: how this fails

This system fails exactly one way. You stop capturing. Not because the structure was wrong, but because a busy fortnight happened, the inbox went quiet, and coming back felt like admitting something. Then the vault becomes another abandoned folder and you conclude you are just not a systems person.

When it happens, and it will happen, here is the whole recovery: **do not rebuild anything**. Do not reorganise the folders. Do not start fresh. Capture one thing, run one daily check-in, and the system is running again. Five minutes. The urge to redesign it is the thing that actually kills it, because redesigning feels productive and capturing feels trivial, and it is exactly backwards. That paragraph is the most useful thing in this guide. The structure is easy. Restarting without ceremony is the skill.

Start today, for nothing

You now have the complete method. You can build this yourself from what is written above, and if you do, that is a genuine win and I hope it works. Nothing in this guide was held back to make you buy something.

Three ways to go from here

1. Build it yourself, from this page. Start with three folders, grow to the full nine as you go, capture for a week, run one check-in, paste the prompt. That is the whole thing. It costs nothing and it works.

2. Start from the Starter Brain. If you would rather not face an empty screen, it is three folders, two templates and five paste-ready prompts, deliberately small so you start a habit instead of building structure. Unzip, open in Obsidian, running in about ten minutes. \$3.69 one time:

braindock.co

3. Take the version I run my own life on. That is **The Brain Kit**, one time, no subscription. Current price at **braindock.co**.

What is actually in The Brain Kit

People ask what the paid version has that the guide does not, so here it is in full rather than as a teaser.

Starter Brain, \$3.69

- Three folders: inbox, projects, notes
- Two templates: a project and the daily check-in
- Five starter prompts
- A plain-English START HERE, written for someone who has never opened Obsidian
- Enough to build the habit, which is the only hard part

The Brain Kit

- Everything on the left, plus:
- The full nine folders with a map of content per area, so the whole of your life has somewhere to go
- A worked example brain of 80 interlinked notes, so you can see a living system instead of guessing at one
- A template for every note type, pre-linked
- The full Playbook: the first-hour setup interview, the daily check-in, inbox filing, ask-your-notes, the weekly review, the monthly goal audit, and the "grill me" accountability prompt
- The CLAUDE.md router file that teaches any AI your whole vault at once, so you stop explaining it every session
- All future updates, free
- Video walkthroughs, in the works: the setup recorded end to end plus real use cases, added free as they are made

The honest summary: **the method is free and complete, the kit is the execution.** You are paying to skip the couple of months of deciding what goes where and what to ask it, not to unlock a secret. If you have the time and the patience, build it from this guide instead. That is a real recommendation, not modesty.

If you want to see it running before you decide

I build this in public. The real vault, the real graph, what breaks and what I change, posted as I go. That is the honest way to judge whether a system is worth copying: watch someone use it for months rather than read a sales page once.

Instagram and TikTok: @braindock.co · braindock.co

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