

Personal Epicurean Knowledge Base Using Text (Markdown) Files

Post by “Cassius” of January 11, 2022 at 8:04 AM

I am starting this thread as a place to provide updates on something I have been working on for my own use, and can make available to others. As I mentioned [in this post](#) I have been working with two new free programs that are intended to assist in research and knowledge organization. The key to both of them is that they store their files in text-based files coded only with "markdown" syntax for formatting italics and headings and the like, and that makes them easily usable in many different programs. It also hopefully insulates them from becoming obsolete or "locked in" to any single program, which would be the case to some extent for something like Microsoft Word.

I have a large collection of many of the core documents already in markdown/text format, and that's the basis for the material that I have already posted here as the "[Epicurus College Course Material](#)." You can already use that as an online source to search through several of the Lucretius translations and other material.

But the real goal is to have a fast and complete local set of files that can easily and quickly be searched and then used to produce new articles, books, and other writing. Another example is that I am working on a project to make a presentation for Christos Yapijakis, and I am going to use these programs to generate the slides to be used during the talk (if I get that far quickly enough).

For now that's really all I want to post, except to say that I think the more productive of the two programs is probably "[Obsidian](#)," but [Logseq](#) is a close second and does some things better than obsidian. The real benefit is that both are essentially free (you can pay for some nonessential addins if you like, but they are not necessary) and both use the same format files. So with very minor tweaking (none is necessary) you can use both programs at the same time on the same files and get the benefit of both.

You can make Obsidian or Logseq look pretty much any way you like it, but here is a sample screen from Obsidian showing a search:



And an example of how easy it is to compare two translations side by side:



I will be preparing a zipped file with all the core markdown files of the texts that I have already, most of which are those already available at the "[Epicurus College Course Material](#)." Once I post a list of those that I already have, we can talk about others contributing their own files to the list so we all have access to the same material.

It is very helpful to have everything in the texts searchable by a single program that provides useful search results in a form that can be easily copied and pasted into new posts and articles etc.

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2022 at 8:14 AM

It occurs to me now that I have posted about this that it would be desirable to add Nate's book on the [Principal Doctrines](#) and Don's book on the letter to Menoecus into the same local list of searchable files (included in the zip that we eventually distribute). It's easy to use the PDF version so that's probably the way to start, but at some point if the programs you guys are using to generate the PDFs have an "export to Markdown" or "export to txt" ability, I might ask you about that too. No need to worry about that now til you see further what I am suggesting.

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2022 at 8:22 AM

In fact this already works, as you can see from the red circles where I have added those PDFs to my local directory. So now I can do a single search and include Don's and Nate's material at the same time. The limitation on using the PDF format in the list of files is as you see, it's a little harder to read. The program can't re-wrap and format the PDF text the same way it can a markdown file - but still searchable and copy-pastable.

(Oops appears I am jumping the gun and Obsidian is not indexing and searching the PDFs. I see they are talking about that issue and it should be there soon, but for the moment it can just view them. Not sure about Loqseq.)



Simple conversion of Nate's PDF to MD using the Calibre ebook program yields:



Which is not well formatted or hyperlinked but is still fine to work with. The point of a global master search is that you sometime remember a single word of a translation that nobody else chooses to use, and you need to figure out where that came from - a needle in a haystack unless you have a search facility that can go through all your collected files.

Post by “Scott” of January 11, 2022 at 10:57 PM

I also like Markdown, though I only use it for personal stuff, never anything that I share out. How is it the average folk will benefit from this? Most people don't know what Markdown is, and common office suite/word processing apps don't read it correctly.

(I haven't tried Obsidian. I'm going to download that and play!)

Post by “Godfrey” of January 12, 2022 at 1:01 AM

Good point. What is Markdown? 🤔

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2022 at 6:43 AM

[Quote from Scott](#)

How is it the average folk will benefit from this?

This is a great question. The answer is "average folk" probably won't benefit from this. But then again most of us here are not "average folk" in the broadest sense of the word.

Most of us here are fairly highly motivated people who really want to dig into the texts for themselves and determine what parts of it they think are true and which may not be, and for that purpose reading commentators is really not enough. Not that we all have to learn Greek and Latin (although [Don](#) is an inspirational example 😊). We at least need to take the original materials and organize them for ourselves so that we can make our own decisions as to what they are saying and whether they are "true."

Another aspect of this is pretty well established, that most (if not all) of the time a motivated Epicurean is going to want to "spread the word" about what he or she finds to be true at least to their own circle of friends, if not to the world at large. (We've discussed recently that "the world at large" is not necessarily a good idea, except perhaps in the examples of Epicurus and Lucretius and others writing material of general interest that anyone can pick up if they choose.)

But what I would specifically cite is [Epicurus' letter to Herodotus](#) that in order to really understand and apply the philosophy you need to sit down and draw up your own outline of the most important headings and how they fit together.

Obsidian and Logseq are to a significant degree "research and outlining" tools. They are free, which is a huge plus. They are based on interchangeable file formats which make it easy for multiple people to collaborate and share documents with each other. And maybe in terms of what they are designed for one of their most important uses is as "writing tools." They are designed not only to help you search and find existing information but also to help you use the old information to generate new documents. And of course that means that they are useful for us not only to find information for our own use but to take that and prepare documents and slideshows and graphics that are useful for explaining the philosophy to others.

So that's the basic idea.

Post by “Scott” of January 12, 2022 at 10:12 AM

Makes sense, Cassius, thanks.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 12, 2022 at 6:36 PM

Is Markdown a program similar to Obsidian and Logseq, or is it the basis of these? What type of learning curve is there to these? The last thing I want to do is get bogged down in learning new software, but if they're easy to learn and use then I might be interested. But right now I confess that I'm clueless about this 😞

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2022 at 7:39 PM

Markdown is simply a method for typing plain text, with things like **emphasis** or for underlined. It is meant to be extremely simple and readable in any program even without processing the tags into polished form. It is free and therefore cannot be captured by any corporation. It is widely used by web designers for its "interoperability" with most any program

and format. Due to its simplicity and readability without a computer program people talk about it as a good way to make "permanent" records that won't be obsolete in five years when a new program takes over. It's kind of like pain text etched on a wall.

The thing about obsidian and logseq is that you store all these data files locally and you are not dependent on "the cloud" to use them.

I'll eventually post some more screenshots so you'll eventually see the point of it that way best.

Post by "Scott" of January 12, 2022 at 10:45 PM

*Obsidian and Logseq also provide other capabilities beyond what Markdown does. They help organize and structure the files that are created in Markdown. Think like outlines and hyperlinks and creating knowledge bases

Post by "Cassius" of January 12, 2022 at 10:55 PM

Right. Lots of the discussions around "knowledge bases" can get pretty "touchie-feelie" and then you have these geometric idea maps that these programs can draw that I admit are neat and pretty but I really fail to see the benefit of.

However the concept of "outlining" does seem to be important to Epicurus, and these programs are structured to really help with that.

Post by "Scott" of January 13, 2022 at 1:05 AM

I haven't looked into the discussions on KBs on these applications so I can't speak to that, but I have used tools similar to the Geo mapping and those can sometimes be helpful in brainstorming and information/knowledge design.

And hyperlinking between documents is a great feature. Outlines like Epicurus employed are good, but he of course didn't have hyperlinking capability - like what we have built-in to this forum, allowing jumps between relevant material that would otherwise either not be known

about, or when it was, be cumbersome to locate and travel to.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 13, 2022 at 1:47 AM

How would one go about learning to use these? Start with Markup and then move on to Obsidian and/or Logseq? Or is Markup a part of Obsidian and Logseq so that you can just pick one of the two of them to learn and still have the functionality of Markup?

Are these set up for non-techie users or is some knowledge of programming required? The last programming I did was with punch cards 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2022 at 6:14 AM

Godfrey: Both logseq and obsidian have extensive and very active user communities. But I would say the best and quickest way to get a feel for what this is about is to watch a couple of user youtube videos

There are many to choose from here that are basic:
<https://www.youtube.com/results?search...idian+vs+logseq>

I have watched several of this guys videos and he is a good presenter
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgbLb6QCK88&list=PL3NaIVgSIAVLHty1-NuvPa9V0b0UwbzBd>

He focuses on Obsidian but there are many good videos on Logseq too and they are very similar.

What I gather is going on is that there was last year a "fad" to use a program called Roam Research among a number of researchers / writers / academics. It apparently has very advanced hyperlinking abilities, but is expensive.

Then this past year Obsidian and Logseq came along offering essentially "free" alternatives to Roam that do a lot of the same things.

I need to repeat that I think that there is absolutely no necessity to use a program like this. The whole approach tends to appeal to people who like to use "outlines" in daily life. It is very interesting how some people tend to want to "outline" everything, and some people don't think

that way at all and find outlines a total waste of time.

I am not ready to pass judgment on whether everyone needs outlines or how often they need them. Maybe they are a really important tool only on very complex projects, or while learning, or whatever. But it does seem clear that Epicurus recommended outlining (which itself seems interesting to hear from an ancient mind) and I do think programs like this, which offer both hyperlinks and easy ways to move elements up and down and sideways on the outlines, are useful.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 13, 2022 at 2:05 PM

Thanks for the links Cassius. I'm intrigued by these. It just depends on time costs v benefits as to whether I'll dig deeper into them. They're certainly worth knowing about in general, so I'll watch some videos and see how they look. 👍

Post by “Godfrey” of February 17, 2022 at 1:55 AM

Are these programs types of zettelkasten? I've been watching some videos and looking through the Google store and this is the impression I'm getting. It looks like it could be useful for taking hyperlinked notes on my reading at the very least.

Can text be copied in to these programs from Libre Office? I'd hate to have to re-type old notes.

I've been using Trello for years (although I never heard of a zettelkasten before). It seems to be a type of zettelkasten, but in a very different format.

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2022 at 2:36 AM

Godfrey my reading is the answer to your question is yes. These programs like the zettlekasten system seem to revolve around putting information in discrete notes with tags and an indexing system that lets you combine them in different ways.

Both obsidian and logseq are tools which index and make the linking easier.

The latest fad (which I think is going to last) is that these programs avoid complicated proprietary formatting like Microsoft Word uses and stick to very simple formation using asterisks and pound signs and underline characters and similar, which makes them readable by the human eye without a lot of computer code. That's what "markdown" is.

Libre office files are in Word or a type of XML format and it's my understanding that obsidian can read them, but can't manipulate them optimally like markdown.

But libre office and make other utilities can easily convert or export them to markdown if desired.

I now have most of the key Epicurean texts in markdown and I need to zip them up and upload that somewhere so that people can use them in either logseq or obsidian. Of the two I am finding obsidian more helpful for this.

In my Observation logseq is more of an outlining program useful for generating new content, and obsidian is lending itself to organizing lots and lots of large files and searching through them.