

How to build your second brain with AI

Step by step, with local folders, Google Drive or OneDrive

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How to use this handout

This handout gathers, in written and ordered form, everything covered in the lesson. You do not need to memorise it: it is there so you can find things again calmly, later, when the lesson is over and a question is left hanging.

GOAL

Build a working second brain, choosing between a local folder, Google Drive and OneDrive, and connect it to an AI knowing in advance which tools are free and which need a subscription.

What you will be able to do

- Create a PARA-style folder structure that works with any tool.
- Choose between a local folder, Google Drive and OneDrive based on privacy and convenience.
- Connect your archive to NotebookLM, Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini or Copilot.
- Know when a paid account is needed and when the free plan is enough.
- Set up a weekly routine and ask your archive effective questions.

1. Before choosing a tool: the structure

The secret of a second brain isn't the program: it's the folders and the consistency.

Almost everyone gets the order wrong: first they choose the app, then they think about what to put in it. Let's do the opposite. The folder structure is **the same for every tool**, and you can move it from one place to another like a shoebox.

The folders (PARA method)

Create a main folder called **Second Brain** and four subfolders inside. The numbers in front keep them in order.

Inside the Second Brain folder

1-Projects

Work with a deadline

2-Areas

Clients, suppliers, home

3-Resources

Topics to consult

4-Archive

Everything finished

The folder structure, the same for every tool

- **1-Projects:** one folder per job with a deadline, for example “Spring window display”.
- **2-Areas:** folders that last forever: “Clients”, “Suppliers”, “Health”, “Home”.
- **3-Resources:** topics to consult, for example “Water lilies”, “Excel”, “Tax”.
- **4-Archive:** what is finished. Nothing is thrown away, everything moves here.

The most important file: “About me”

In the main folder create a text file called **00-About-me**. Half a page where you write who you are, what you do, what you're working on now, how you like to be answered. The AI will read it first, and it's like introducing yourself to a new colleague: from then on it answers better.

AN EXAMPLE OF “ABOUT ME”

My name is Marta, I run a plant shop in Bergamo with two employees. This spring I'm preparing a new window display and an offer for customers. Write in simple language, with short sentences, and when you don't know something, tell me instead of making it up.

Rules for file names

- A name that says what's inside: **Supplier-Rossi-prices-2026.pdf**, not “scan12”.
- The date at the start (**2026-10-07-meeting-Rossi**) keeps files in time order.
- One file, one topic. Ten clear pages beat one huge confusing one.

BEST FORMATS

For the AI, `.txt`, `.md` (Markdown, plain text with a few symbols), Word and PDF **with real text** all work very well. A photo of a handwritten page isn't always read well: type it up instead.

2. Where to keep it: on your computer or in the cloud

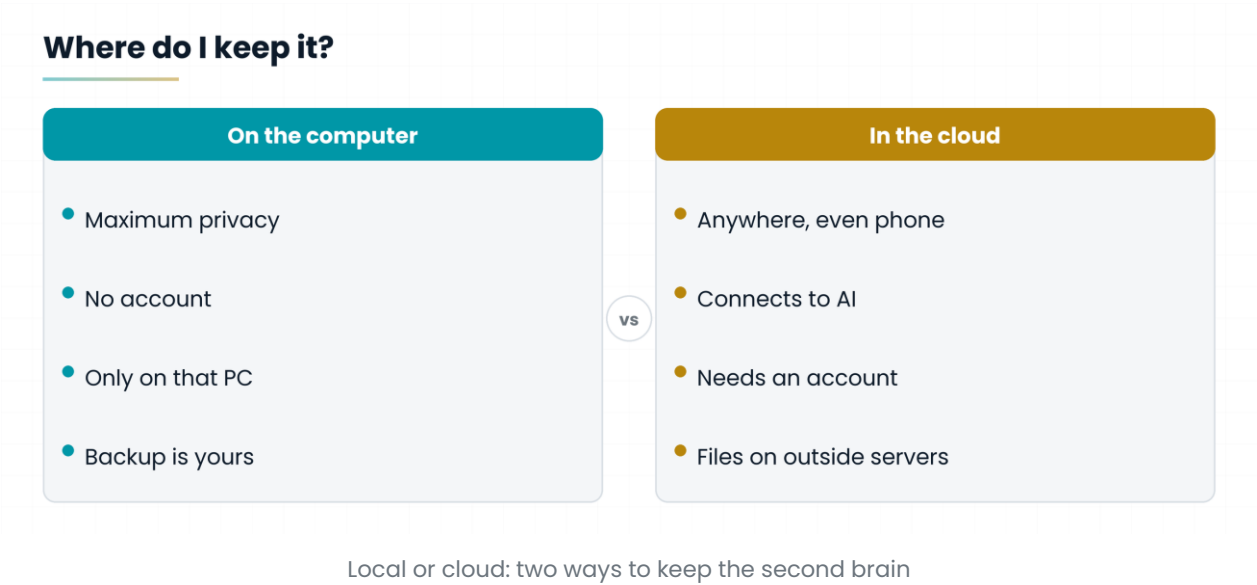
You have three possible places. The **cloud** is simply someone else's computer, where your files stay available from any device. Each has pros and cons.

Where	Pros	Cons	Cost
Folder on your computer	Maximum privacy, no account, works offline	Only on that computer; backup is up to you	Free
Google Drive	Available everywhere, connects well with Gemini and NotebookLM	Needs a Google account; files sit on Google's servers	15 GB free; more space is paid
OneDrive	Built into Windows and Office, great if you use Word and Excel	Free space is small; Microsoft's AI on your files is paid	Limited free space; more space is paid

Where to keep the second brain. Free space and prices change: check the provider's website.

A CHOICE THAT DOESN'T LOCK YOU IN

If you keep simple files (text, Word, PDF) you can change your mind at any time: just copy the folder from one place to another. There is no final choice.



3. The AI tools: what is free and what isn't

Here is the map. Prices and limits are those I checked on the official pages in October 2026: they change often, so before paying always take a look at the website.

Tool	What it does with your files	Free	Paid
NotebookLM (Google)	Reads the sources you give it and answers citing them	Yes. Up to 50 sources per notebook	More sources on paid Google AI plans (100 with Plus, 300 with Pro)
Claude (Anthropic)	Projects with reference files; on paid plans also Drive and local folders	Yes, with files uploaded by hand in Projects (up to 5 projects)	Pro: 17 dollars a month billed annually, 20 monthly. Needed for the Google Drive connection, for Cowork and for Claude Code
ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Projects with files and instructions	Yes, with few files per project	Plus: about 20 dollars a month, more files and features (check the price in your currency)
Gemini (Google)	Gems with files from your computer or from Drive	Yes, with lower limits	Google AI Plus 4.99 euros and AI Pro 21.99 euros a month in Italy; higher limits and Gemini inside Gmail and Drive

Tool	What it does with your files	Free	Paid
Copilot (Microsoft)	The free version reads only the files you upload	Yes , but it can't see OneDrive by itself	Microsoft 365 Copilot : about 30 dollars a month per user (business plans). There is also a personal plan, Microsoft 365 Premium: check price and features
Obsidian	A note-taking program: it opens your folder, it isn't an AI	Yes , for personal use	Sync (4 dollars a month billed annually) to sync devices; optional commercial licence (50 dollars a year)

Checked in October 2026 on the providers' official pages. The ChatGPT and Copilot rows must be rechecked at the time of purchase.

MIND THE NAMES

Providers often rename plans (Google has already renamed its subscription several times, Microsoft retired the old Copilot Pro). If the name you read here doesn't match the website, look for the feature, not the name: "connect Google Drive", "projects with files", "local folder".

4. Path 1: free, folder on your computer

It's the simplest and costs nothing. It works with **NotebookLM** (only needs a free Google account) or with the **Projects** of Claude and ChatGPT on the free plans. The trade-off: you upload the files **by hand**.

Step by step with NotebookLM

1. Create the **Second Brain** folder with the four subfolders and the **00-About-me** file.
2. Put a real project in **1-Projects** with three or four files (notes, quote, PDF).
3. Open NotebookLM with your Google account and create a **new notebook** (that's what a container of sources is called).
4. Click **Add sources** and upload the project files, including "About me".
5. Ask the first question: "Summarise the state of this project and tell me what's missing." Check that it shows which sources the answers come from.

ONE NOTEBOOK PER PROJECT

Don't put everything in one notebook. Make one per project or topic: answers stay focused and you don't exceed the source limit of the free plan.

With free Claude or ChatGPT

Create a **Project**, write in the instructions "Answer using only the project files and tell me which file each piece of information comes from", and upload the files. On the free plan the number of files and conversations is limited: for a small project it's perfectly fine.

DO YOU NEED A SUBSCRIPTION?

No. This path is free. The limit is convenience: every time you change a file you have to upload it again, and free plans have fewer files and fewer messages per day.

5. Path 2: Google Drive

If you already use Gmail or Google Docs, this is the most natural path: files sit in Google's cloud and Google's tools read them without you uploading them by hand.

Step by step

1. On Google Drive create the **Second Brain** folder and the four subfolders. If you already have a folder on your computer, drag it into Drive.
2. For new documents write in **Google Docs**: NotebookLM and Gemini read them with no conversion.
3. Open **NotebookLM**, create a notebook and under **Add sources** choose **Google Drive**: select the project documents.
4. Alternatively, open **Gemini**, create a **Gem** (a personalised assistant) and add files from Drive: changes to the files are reflected in the Gem.
5. Ask: "What did I decide with supplier Rossi?" and check the answer.

DO YOU NEED A SUBSCRIPTION?

NotebookLM and Gems can be used for free, with limits. A paid Google AI plan gives higher limits and Gemini built into Gmail and Drive. For Gemini you also need to turn on "Keep Activity" and connect Google Workspace to the Gemini apps.

Variant with Claude

On paid plans, Claude has a **Google Drive connector**: you switch it on in settings, grant permission and then, in Projects, choose “Add content > Google Drive”. It is **not** free: you need the Pro plan (17 dollars a month billed annually or 20 monthly).

A REAL CASE

Luca, the barista studying to be a sommelier, keeps one Google Doc per lesson. In NotebookLM he has an “Sommelier exam” notebook with all the documents. Every evening he adds the new lesson and gets quizzed. Cost: zero euros.

6. Path 3: OneDrive and Microsoft

If you work with Word and Excel and your folder already sits on OneDrive (Microsoft's cloud), it makes sense to stay there. But I have to be very clear on one point: **Microsoft's AI that reads your files by itself is paid.**

What you want	How	Cost
Have Copilot read your archive inside Word, Excel and OneDrive	Microsoft 365 Copilot	Paid (about 30 dollars a month per user on business plans; check the personal plan)
Ask Copilot about single files	Copilot Chat: you upload or drag files into the chat	Free
Let another AI read the folder	Download or sync the folder to your computer, then use path 1 or 4	Depends on the tool you choose

The three ways with OneDrive. Always check plans on Microsoft's website.

Step by step (free version)

1. Create the **Second Brain** folder inside OneDrive, with the four subfolders.
2. Turn on OneDrive syncing on your computer: the folder shows up in File Explorer like a normal folder.
3. Open Copilot Chat with your Microsoft account and drag in the files you need for the question.
4. For a bigger archive use path 4, which reads the synced folder directly.

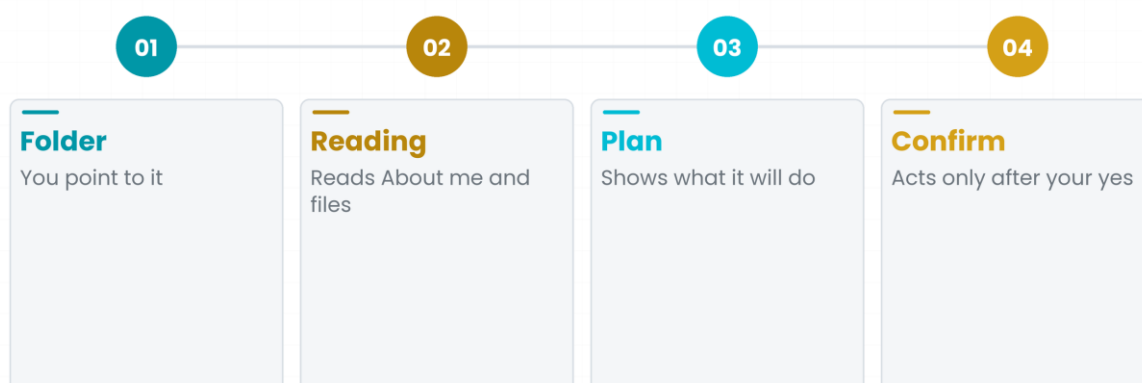
DO YOU NEED A SUBSCRIPTION?

To let Copilot read all of OneDrive, yes, you need a Microsoft 365 Copilot licence. **To begin, no**: with free Copilot Chat you upload the files yourself, and with the synced folder you can use the other paths.

7. Path 4: the most powerful, local folder and agent

So far the AI has **read** your files. In this path it can also **write** them: it sorts new notes into the right folders, updates client profiles, prepares your weekly summary. Tools like **Claude Cework** and **Claude Code** do this, working directly on a folder on your computer.

The agent on the folder



How an assistant that writes into your folders works

Step by step

1. Keep the **Second Brain** folder on your computer (even synced with Drive or OneDrive).
2. Install the Claude desktop app and sign in with a **Pro** plan or higher.
3. Open **Cework** (or Claude Code, if you're comfortable with the terminal) and point it to the **Second Brain** folder as the working folder.
4. Ask: "Read 00-About-me, then tidy the files in the Inbox folder by moving them into Projects, Areas, Resources or Archive. First show me the plan and wait for my confirmation."
5. Check the plan, confirm, and verify the result by opening the folders.

DO YOU NEED A SUBSCRIPTION?

Yes. Cowork and Claude Code are included in Claude's Pro, Max, Team and Enterprise plans (Pro: 17 dollars a month billed annually, 20 monthly). There is also a free way to give Claude access to computer files, through the desktop app's extensions, but it is more limited.

A free companion: Obsidian

Obsidian is a program, free for personal use, that opens your folder of `.md`` files and shows them like a linked notebook, with links between notes and a map of relationships. It isn't an AI, but it pairs very well: Obsidian for comfortable reading and writing, AI for sorting and answering. Syncing notes across devices costs 4 dollars a month billed annually (**Sync**), but you can do it for free using Drive or OneDrive.

CAREFUL: THE AGENT REALLY WRITES

An assistant that moves and edits files can make mistakes. The first time, always work on a **test copy**, back up the folder and always ask it to **show the plan before acting**.

8. The right questions to ask your archive

A great archive with vague questions gives vague answers. Here are four templates to copy, one per task. Only change the words in square brackets.

Task	Question template
Find	Search my files for everything about [topic]. For each point, list the name of the file you took it from.
Summarise	Summarise in ten lines the state of project [name], listing what is decided, what is open and who has to do what.
Connect	Are there ideas in my notes on [topic A] and [topic B] that I could put together? Suggest three links.
Produce	Using only my files, write a draft of [document] for [person]. Mark with an asterisk whatever you inferred that isn't written down.

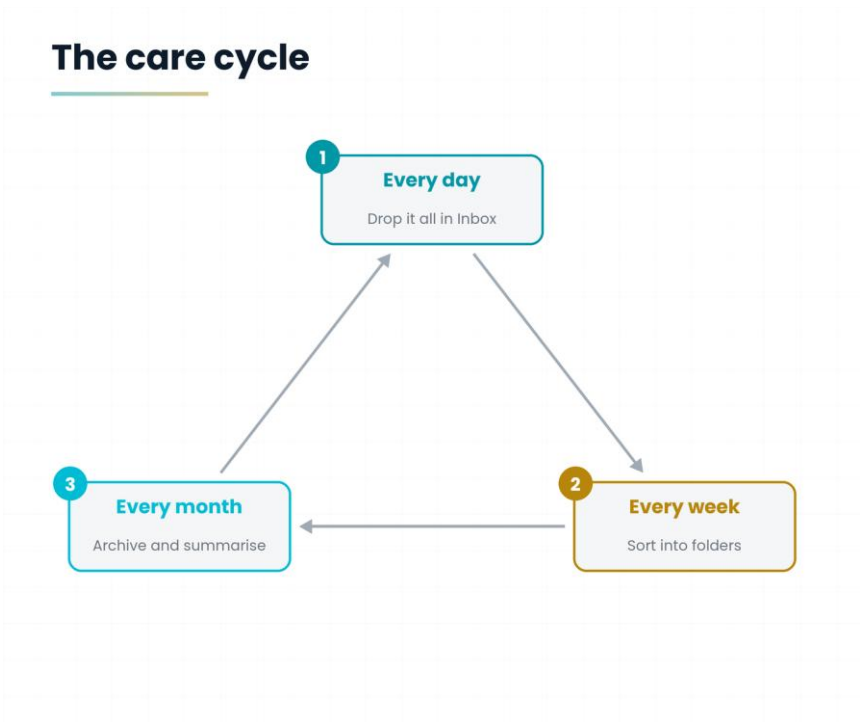
Four template questions to query the second brain.

THE SOURCE TRICK

Always ask which file the answer comes from. If the AI can't say, it probably made it up: check again.

9. The routine that keeps it alive

A second brain dies of neglect, not of tool errors. The cure is a tiny routine, like watering plants: little, but regular.



The routine that keeps the second brain alive

When	What you do	How long
Every day	Drop whatever you need into an Inbox folder: photos, notes, PDFs, without sorting them	5 minutes
Once a week	Sort the Inbox into the PARA folders (by yourself or with AI), update “About me” if something changed	15 minutes
Once a month	Move finished projects to Archive and ask the AI for a summary of the month	20 minutes

The routine in three rhythms.

10. Confidentiality: what not to put in

Everything you upload to an online service leaves your computer. It's not a drama, but it must be handled with care.

BEFORE UPLOADING A FILE

Never passwords, card or bank account codes, identity documents.

Data of **clients, patients, employees**: only if you have permission and have checked how the service treats it (in Europe the GDPR, the data protection regulation, applies).

In each service's settings there is usually an item on the **use of your data to train models**: read it and set the choice you prefer. Business plans often have stricter rules than personal ones.

If a file is sensitive, leave it **out** of the second brain connected to the AI, in a separate folder that no tool reads.

The most private path is the one **only on your computer**, with no cloud and no AI connected. But even there you can choose: use the AI only on a folder of non-sensitive material.

11. Which to choose? The summary

If you're in a hurry, here's the compass. Start with the free option: if you find something missing, then move to a paid plan, not before.

If...	Start with	Need to pay?
You want to try without spending	Path 1: local folder + NotebookLM	No
You already use Gmail and Google Docs	Path 2: Drive + NotebookLM or Gemini	No to start; yes for higher limits
You work with Word, Excel and OneDrive	Path 3: OneDrive + Copilot Chat	No to start; yes to let it read all of OneDrive
You want AI to tidy and write into your folders	Path 4: Claude Cowork or Code	Yes (Claude Pro or higher)
You want a comfortable notebook to browse	Obsidian on your folder	No (Sync only if needed)

Which path to choose and when a subscription is needed.

IF YOU TAKE HOME JUST ONE IDEA

Structure first, tool second. With a tidy folder, an “About me” file and fifteen minutes a week you already have a second brain: AI is just the wand that makes it move.

Practical exercise: your first second brain

One hour, a free Google account and a real project. You spend nothing.

1. Create the Second Brain folder with the four numbered subfolders and an Inbox folder.
2. Write the half-page 00-About-me file with who you are, what you do and what you're working on now.
3. Choose a real project and put three or four files about it in the Projects folder.
4. Open NotebookLM, create a notebook for that project and upload the files, including "About me".
5. Ask the four template questions (find, summarise, connect, produce) and note which files the answers come from.
6. Put a fixed fifteen-minute weekly appointment in your calendar to sort the Inbox.

WATCH OUT

Do the answers show which file they come from?

Did you check at least one important fact against the original file?

Did you write in "About me" how you want the answers?

Did you leave out passwords and sensitive data?

Questions that come up in class

Do I absolutely need a subscription?

No. You can start for free with a folder and NotebookLM, or with the Projects of Claude or ChatGPT. A subscription is needed when you want more files, automatic connections to Drive or OneDrive, or an assistant working on the folder on your computer.

Which AI is best for a second brain?

There is no best one overall. NotebookLM is handy for asking questions about sources, Claude and ChatGPT for writing and reasoning, Gemini if you live inside Google, Copilot if you live inside Microsoft. Try two tools on the same project and keep the one that gives you more useful answers.

Can I use several tools together?

Yes, and it's recommended: the folder is one and each tool looks at it its own way. Just don't duplicate files in several places.

What if I change tools or the provider shuts down?

That's why it's best to keep files in simple formats such as text, Word and PDF. You can take the folder anywhere: tools are replaceable.

Can the AI delete or ruin my files?

If you only use it to read and answer, no. If you let it write (path 4), it can make mistakes: always back up and ask it to show the plan before acting.

How much does it all cost if I want the maximum?

It depends on your choices, but a Claude or ChatGPT Pro-level plan costs about twenty dollars a month plus a few euros for extra cloud space. Start free and pay only for what you really use.

Glossary

Term	What it means
Agent	An AI that doesn't just answer but takes actions, like moving and writing files.
Cloud	Space on a provider's servers, where files are reachable from any device, like Google Drive or OneDrive.

Term	What it means
Connector	The authorised link between an AI and an outside service, such as Google Drive.
Gem	In Gemini, a personalised assistant with instructions and files.
Inbox	The entry folder where you drop everything unsorted; you sort it once a week.
Notebook	In NotebookLM, the container where you put the sources for the AI to read.
Project	In Claude and ChatGPT, a space with instructions and reference files that the AI uses in every conversation inside that project.
Syncing	The mechanism that keeps the folder on your computer and the one in the cloud identical.

Further reading

Claude pricing page (claude.com/pricing) and official Projects guide – Free, Pro, Max plans; projects; connectors; consulted in October 2026

Official Claude desktop app guide – local file access, Cowork, Claude Code; consulted in October 2026

Gemini Plans page (Italy) and official Gems guide – AI Plus and AI Pro prices; Gems with Drive files; consulted in October 2026

Official NotebookLM guide – source limits per plan; consulted in October 2026

Obsidian pricing page (obsidian.md/pricing) – free app, Sync, commercial licence; consulted in October 2026

Microsoft documentation on Copilot Chat and Microsoft 365 Copilot – consulted through secondary sources: recheck before buying

ChatGPT pages on Projects and plans – consulted through secondary sources: recheck before buying

Tiago Forte, Building a Second Brain, 2022 – CODE and PARA methods

WATCH OUT

Prices and features verified in October 2026 on the official pages where indicated; for ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot the information comes from secondary sources and must be rechecked. Plans, names and limits change quickly: read the current terms before subscribing. Prices for Gemini are the Italian ones; others are in US dollars as published.