



TECHNICAL WHITE PAPER

Catchlight for iPhone

The one star test

What sixteen notes and task apps' one and two star reviews complain about most, which complaints are growing, and what any notes app has to get right as a result.

Applies to Catchlight 1.0

Introduction

When somebody gives a notes app one star, they nearly always tell you why. Multiply that by a few thousand and you have the most direct product research in the category, written by the people who actually use these apps, for free, in public.

In August I started collecting it. A small service reads the public App Store and Google Play reviews of sixteen notes and task apps every week and stores them, with the reviewer's name and identity stripped out on the way in. By the start of October it held 23,732 reviews, of which 6,483 gave one or two stars.

This paper is what those 6,483 reviews say, grouped into the complaints people make most, and what I think any notes app, mine included, has to get right as a result.

It's not a ranking of the apps. I list the ones I read, and then I never tie a complaint to any one of them, because a number about one app goes stale the day that app ships a fix, and because the useful finding is what the whole category keeps getting wrong.

What this covers, and what it doesn't

This covers what people complain about in one and two star reviews of notes and task apps, how those complaints differ between kinds of app, which are growing, and what people praise when an app gets it right.

It doesn't say which app is best or worst at anything. Every figure here covers all sixteen apps, a group of five, or, for the trend in section four, the nine apps with enough reviews to split.

It doesn't quote a single review. The reviews belong to the people who wrote them. What you'll read is counts, shares and my own sentences about the patterns.

It isn't a measurement of how often these problems happen. A review is usually written by someone annoyed enough to write one, and a keyword is a proxy for what they meant. [Section eight](#) is the full list of limits, and it is longer than I'd like.

1 Which reviews, and how they were read

The apps. Sixteen, chosen because they are what someone shopping for a notes or task app on an iPhone is likely to be comparing.

GROUP	APPS
Privacy-first notes	Joplin, Notesnook, Obsidian, Simplenote, Standard Notes
Mainstream notes	Apple Notes, Bear, Evernote, Google Keep, Microsoft OneNote
Task apps	Apple Reminders, Microsoft To Do, Things 3, TickTick, Todoist
In no group	Notion, which does both notes and tasks

The reviews. 7,827 from the US App Store, 3,721 from the UK App Store and 12,184 from Google Play, which doesn't say which country a review came from. The stores only hand over so many reviews per app, so the window differs, and not by a little. For a busy app the reviews cover a few months. For a quiet one they go back more than a decade. Every figure uses each app's full collected history unless it says otherwise, and every figure is as of 2 October 2026.

The complaints. Each one or two star review was checked against sixteen sets of keywords, one per complaint. The sets are listed in the [appendix](#). A review can match more than one.

The arithmetic. For each app, I took the share of its own one and two star reviews that matched a complaint, then averaged those shares across the apps. That way a busy app with thousands of reviews counts the same as a quiet one with a few hundred, and a single unhappy user base cannot drown out the rest. An app with fewer than forty bad reviews would have been left out of the average, because a percentage of a tiny number is noise. None fell below it.

The check. A keyword catches things it shouldn't. "Format", for example, sits inside "information". So for every complaint I read a random sample of the reviews it matched, and wherever the sample showed a keyword catching a different complaint, I tightened it and ran the numbers again. Six of the sixteen sets needed it. The figures here come from the tightened sets.

2 The complaints, ranked

Share of one and two star reviews that mention each complaint, averaged across all sixteen apps.

COMPLAINT	SHARE OF BAD REVIEWS
Bugs, crashes and slowness	16.7%
Sync and using more than one device	13.4%
Price and subscriptions	10.6%
Accounts, logins and being locked out	10.0%
Reminders and notifications	9.1%
Formatting and the editor	7.4%
Losing notes	5.8%
A bad redesign or update	5.2%
Capture speed and widgets	4.5%
Privacy, ads and tracking	4.3%
Search and organising	3.5%
Export, import and lock-in	2.9%
Bloat and complexity	2.7%
AI pushed into the app	1.6%
Support that doesn't reply	0.9%
Needing a connection	0.5%

Why the column doesn't add up to 100%. It isn't meant to, and the total of 99.1% is close to 100 by coincidence. Each row is the share of bad reviews that mention that complaint, and a review can mention several or none. Here is where the whole 100% of bad reviews actually sits.

ONE AND TWO STAR REVIEWS THAT MENTION	SHARE
None of the sixteen complaints	31.8%
Exactly one	45.3%
Two or more	22.9%

The reviews that match none tend to be short, about half the length of the rest, and a little over a quarter of them are ten words or fewer, a line of frustration with nothing in it a keyword can catch. The column total of 99.1% falls out of those three rows, because on average a bad review mentions about one complaint.

Read the top of that table again, because it surprised me. The thing people complain about most is the app not working, crashing, freezing, losing its place while you type.

The next three are the plumbing. Sync, which is whether your notes are where you left them. Price, which runs from the subscription itself to old notes held behind a paywall. And accounts, which is whether you can get into your own notes at all.

Privacy, the thing a lot of apps lead their marketing with, mine included, sits at 4.3%. That isn't because people don't care about it. [Section five](#) shows they do, a lot. It's that privacy is rarely the thing that visibly breaks on them, assuming they know what level of privacy they actually have, and that a leak would ever be visible enough for them to notice.

3 Different apps, different complaints

The averages hide how differently each kind of app goes wrong. Here are the complaints where the three groups differ most.

COMPLAINT	PRIVACY-FIRST NOTES	MAINSTREAM NOTES	TASK APPS
Sync and more than one device	19.9%	12.7%	9.5%
Accounts, logins and being locked out	17.4%	6.1%	7.4%
Reminders and notifications	0.7%	3.3%	24.8%
Formatting and the editor	10.6%	9.2%	2.4%
Losing notes	5.5%	9.1%	3.3%
Capture speed and widgets	1.2%	2.7%	9.9%

Three things stand out.

People who chose a privacy-first app pay for it in sync and logins. These are apps people choose so the company can't read their notes, and in most of them that protection still runs through an account and a sign-in, or through a sync set-up the person has to manage. Both show up here. One in five bad reviews of this group is about sync, and more than one in six about accounts and getting locked out. On accounts alone, that's nearly three times the figure for mainstream notes apps.

In task apps, the reminder is the product. A quarter of the bad reviews of the task apps are about reminders that didn't fire, fired late, or can't do what was needed. That's the largest single figure in this study. Capture comes next at 9.9%, and it is the same complaint from the other end: if getting a task in is slow, it doesn't get in.

Mainstream notes apps lose notes more often than the others. 9.1% of their bad reviews mention notes vanishing, being wiped or deleting themselves, against 5.5% and 3.3% for the other two groups.

4 What's getting worse

The same complaints, split at twelve months, reviews from the last year against everything before. Only apps with at least forty bad reviews on both sides of the split count here, which is nine of the sixteen, because a busy app's whole history can fit inside one year.

COMPLAINT	BEFORE THE LAST 12 MONTHS	LAST 12 MONTHS
Accounts, logins and being locked out	12.0%	15.9%
Reminders and notifications	3.4%	5.9%
AI pushed into the app	0.1%	1.1%
Price and subscriptions	7.5%	8.3%
Sync and more than one device	19.6%	11.8%
Bugs, crashes and slowness	24.7%	14.9%

Getting locked out of your own account is the complaint that grew the most, by nearly four points. Reminders and AI grew faster in proportion, from smaller starting points. Sign-in walls, verification codes that don't arrive, passwords that won't reset.

Complaints about AI being pushed into the app were almost non-existent before the last year and are now a measurable share. It's still small, and I'd be wary of anyone who calls it a backlash. The direction is clear, though.

Sync and crashes have both fallen, a lot. It's fair to say the category has got better at both, at least by its own users' account, and I want that on the record as plainly as the complaints are.

5 What people praise

The same keyword sets, run over the 15,319 four and five star reviews.

THEME	SHARE OF GOOD REVIEWS	SHARE OF BAD REVIEWS
Sync and more than one device	9.1%	13.4%
Reminders and notifications	6.8%	9.1%
Formatting and the editor	6.5%	7.4%
Privacy, ads and tracking	5.3%	4.3%
Price and subscriptions	4.8%	10.6%
Search and organising	4.5%	3.5%
Bugs, crashes and slowness	3.4%	16.7%
Losing notes	0.5%	5.8%

Sync is the most praised theme and the second biggest complaint. It's the thing people notice most in either direction, which makes it the one an app can least afford to get wrong.

Privacy and search are among the few themes praised more often than they are complained about. People mention them when they are the reason they chose the app.

And almost nobody writes a five star review because an app didn't crash or didn't lose their notes. Stability and safety are only visible when they fail.

6 What a notes app has to get right

Read as a list of what the category keeps getting wrong, the reviews point at these, roughly in order of how much they cost people.

Work, every time. No feature makes up for an app that freezes while you type. It's the top complaint overall and first or second in every group, and nobody praises its absence.

Put the notes where the person left them. Sync is the most praised and second most hated theme. An app either does it reliably or it shouldn't promise it.

Never stand between someone and their own notes. That means a login that can lock them out, and a lapsed subscription that holds old notes back. Both are big, and the first grew more than anything else here.

If it does reminders, they have to fire. For task apps this is the whole job.

Don't lose anything, and make deleting hard to do by accident. It's a smaller share, and almost nobody mentions it when it goes right.

Ask before adding AI. Small today, but it barely existed a year ago.

7 Where Catchlight stands on each

I make Catchlight, so here is my own app against the same list. Where it falls short, it says so. Catchlight hasn't launched yet, so everything below describes what is built, not what thousands of people have tested.

COMPLAINT	CATCHLIGHT TODAY
Bugs, crashes and slowness	No feature answers this, and I can't claim it before launch. The reviews will judge it later
Sync and more than one device	The weakest answer here. Encrypted files sync to a cloud folder you own, with no server of mine between. At launch that's one iPhone. Two devices side by side comes later, and there's no Mac or Android app yet
Price and subscriptions	Partly answered. It's an annual subscription. Stop paying and every Take stays readable and exportable, you just can't add or edit
Accounts, logins and being locked out	Answered outright. No account, no email, no password. A 12-word Privacy phrase made on the phone is the only key, and I can't reset it for you
Reminders and notifications	Answered. Repeats on any schedule, location reminders, snooze from the notification, up to three follow-up nudges, and on a checklist it names only what's left
Formatting and the editor	Partly answered. Text and checklists mix freely in one Take. Bold, headings and other inline formatting aren't there yet
Losing notes	Answered, with one exception. Deleting asks first, conflicts show both versions, and everything exports to Markdown. Lose the 12 words with no copy and the Takes are gone, by design
AI pushed into the app	Answered. Catchlight has no AI of its own, and Apple's AI "Writing Tools" stay off unless you turn them on
Privacy, ads and tracking	Answered. Encrypted on the phone with a key only you hold. No ads, tracking, account, analytics or crash reporting of its own, and the app sends nothing to me, ever. A crash report only reaches me if you've told iOS to share them with developers, Apple's setting and your choice

8 What this study can't tell you

A keyword is a proxy. A review that praises sync in passing still matches "sync". A complaint that never uses any of the words is missed. The figures compare complaints with each other. They aren't the rate at which these things happen.

Reviews are usually written by the annoyed. Most people who use an app never review it, and the ones who give one star aren't a random sample of anyone.

The windows differ. A busy app's reviews cover months and a quiet app's cover years, which is why no figure here compares raw counts between apps.

Store order matters. The stores hand over the newest reviews first, up to a cap. For the busiest apps, that means older reviews are missing entirely.

The trend uses nine apps, not sixteen. Only those with enough bad reviews on both sides of the twelve-month split count, and they aren't the same mix of groups as the whole study.

Google Play reviews carry no country. The App Store figures cover the US and the UK. Play could be from anywhere.

I make a competing app. I've tried to keep that out of sections one to six, and section seven is where it belongs. You're entitled to read the whole thing with that in mind.

Appendix: the keyword sets

Each complaint matched a review when any of these appeared, ignoring capitals. Plurals and close forms of each word count too.

COMPLAINT	WORDS AND PHRASES
Sync and more than one device	sync, syncing, across devices, between devices, other devices, iCloud, multi-device, on my Mac, iPad, laptop or computer
Price and subscriptions	subscription, subscribe, paywall, expensive, overpriced, price increase or hike, too much money, per year, per month, a price in dollars or pounds, premium price, plan or tier, free version, pro version, money grab, cash grab, one-time purchase
Bugs, crashes and slowness	crash, freeze, froze, slow, lag, unresponsive, bug, buggy, glitch, won't open, won't load, keeps closing
Losing notes	lost my, lost all, lost everything, disappear, vanish, notes are gone, data loss, deleted all, deleted my, wiped, missing notes, deleting notes
Accounts, logins and being locked out	log in, login, sign in, sign up, password, locked out, account, two-factor, verification code
Privacy, ads and tracking	encrypt, privacy, private, zero-knowledge, tracking, ads, advert, sell my data, data breach, data harvesting, data mining, spying
AI pushed into the app	AI features, AI slop, AI everywhere, AI assistant, AI integration, forced or mandatory AI, useless AI, AI-powered, AI-generated, opt out of AI, artificial intelligence, Copilot, Gemini, ChatGPT, LLM
Bloat and complexity	bloat, too or overly complicated, complicated interface, overwhelm, cluttered, learning curve, too many features, confusing interface, so confusing, not intuitive, unintuitive, hard to use, difficult to use
A bad redesign or update	new, latest or recent update, new design, redesign, after the update, since the update, bring back, old version

COMPLAINT	WORDS AND PHRASES
Formatting and the editor	format, formatting, Markdown, bold, rich text, font, bullet, indent, checklist, checkbox, editor, typing, magic or external keyboard, keyboard shortcut, cursor
Reminders and notifications	remind, notification, alarm, nudge, due date, recurring, repeating task or reminder
Export, import and lock-in	export, import, backup option, can't back up, migrate, lock-in, get my notes out, notes held hostage
Search and organising	the search, no search, poor search, search function, search bar, can't search, find my note, tags, folders, organisation features, hard to organise
Capture speed and widgets	widget, quick note, quick capture, quick add, Siri, shortcut, lock screen, Apple Watch, share sheet, action button
Needing a connection	offline, no internet, no connection, no signal, without internet, without wifi
Support that doesn't reply	customer service, support team, no response, never replied, contacted support, devs don't

References

The reviews themselves are public on the [Apple App Store](#) and [Google Play](#), on each app's own listing.

[How to tell whether a notes app is actually private](#), for the tests behind the privacy claims in section 7

[What AI features cost you in a notes app](#), for why Catchlight has no AI of its own

[Zero-knowledge sync with no server and no account](#), for how the folder sync in section 7 works

Version history

VERSION	DATE	CHANGE
1.0	2 October 2026	First release