

The Insightful Reader: How to Learn Deeply & Attain Life-Changing Insights from Books

I. C. Robledo

Published by I. C. Robledo, 2020.

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An Introduction

The Best Time to Be a Reader

As of 2020, around 150 million books exist – and thousands more are being published every day. Clearly, we have an abundance of books to choose from. We also have many different ways that we can read, as regardless of how you prefer to do so, there will be a format to suit your preference. There are paperback books, digital books (i.e., eBooks), audiobooks, libraries, book subscription services, summarized versions of books, literary analyses, free books online (e.g., Gutenberg.org), and even braille and large-print books. This means that for any book you want to read, you will likely be able to find and read it however you like.

The main downside today is that there are far too many books to read in a lifetime, and so we must take some time to find the right books for us. But, realize that this is a silly downside – it is as if saying the issue with having an abundance of food is that there is too much to eat in a lifetime. The task of the modern human is to adjust to overabundance – to learn to find the right books for us, rather than to become overwhelmed with the selection and avoid reading altogether. Ultimately, we must learn to choose the great books that are most worth reading for our purposes and learn to read them well.

Imagine what it would have been like to be alive 500 years ago. Let's suppose that you were an apprentice, starting out in your

career and you were expected to focus your time on developing *one* skill or trade until you mastered it, and then you could have your own apprentices work under you. For the most part, people were not literate and so this would have been your most viable option – to specialize in one ability and perform or instruct in that skill for the rest of your life. In the present day, of course, reading is something that is accessible to virtually all of us. This means that we are now in the position to develop as many skills as we wish, and to learn as much about any number of topics as we wish. We are free to explore, not tied down to one domain for life as we would have been 500 years ago.

If we know how to read effectively, we hold the power to improve ourselves, help others to improve, and meet our true purpose and goals in life. Most importantly, with reading we will be unlimited in our capacity for learning. Unlike our ancestors from centuries ago, we are always capable of learning in a wide range of new topics. Our potential back then was quite limited, yet today we are limitless. There is nothing stopping us now.

Goals of *The Insightful Reader*

Choose the right books to read

Finding the right books is not always easy, but it is worth taking some time to look for them. Some people get lost at this stage and give up on reading before they even start. This is understandable, as it can seem overwhelming to find books that you like or which you can benefit from when there are so many to choose from. But with practice, it is not so difficult to find some books that you will enjoy or that will be useful to you. To get you started, I have provided many book recommendations throughout *The Insightful Reader* for you to check out. I have also included a *Recommended Readings* section of over 200 books, for you to have all of my book recommendations in one convenient place. These will provide a starting point to help you choose valuable and insightful books to read.

Get more out of what you read

The modern world bombards us with information. It is pervasive, and more and more is being generated every day, to a level where we must learn to sift through it all and make sense of it more efficiently. Much of this information is available to us in written form. Thus, the world demands that we be high quality readers and thinkers, and that we be able to skillfully apply the knowledge we acquire. Many of us will read for work or to meet a specific need or goal. This means we must master the most important reading strategies and skills to make the greatest possible progress in our lives.

In reality, many of us have bad reading habits, such as we may not make any time to read on a regular basis. Or we may read passively, not asking questions about the book we are reading. We may read material where we already know most of the information, rather than seeking out material where we can actually learn something new. Most of us make some mistakes in our approaches to reading. The good news is that most of the mistakes we tend to make can be fixed with the tips given in *The Insightful Reader*.

In this book, I will aim to provide you with general principles that can be applied to your specific reading goals and objectives. You will find that often there is no hard and fast rule that will apply for everyone in every case. In fact, you will need to read this book actively with your full mental energy to figure out how you can best apply it to meet your needs. This will be the case with most books you read. Be aware that if you are falling asleep while reading, you will not gain much from the experience. I need you to sit up and stay wide awake on this reading journey. You should be an active participant.

Create a better, richer life for yourself through reading

It is paramount that we use reading to improve ourselves. In improving ourselves, we will be in a better position to help others improve, and then to help improve the status of the world. To begin, we should think about what is lacking in our lives, what we are unhappy with, what we can improve, and then read books that help us to move forward in a positive direction. To do this

fruitfully, we will need to apply the principles we learn from the books we read and put them into action. We do not always need to read with the specific objective to improve our lives or the lives of others, but this is important enough that we should keep it in mind when we choose our next book. There is no single type of reading that is required for this. You can make progress through reading many different types of books: self-development, philosophy, business, science, history, literature, or in other areas.

Become an *Insightful Reader*

Overall, the focus here will be to help you choose the best books to read, to get the most from them, and to live a richer life through your readings. We will examine systems to go deeper into a book, which often involve reading more deliberately and thoughtfully, and taking notes along the way, for those who want to obtain the greatest benefits from a highly valuable book. Also, we will cover more speedy systems that involve scanning, skimming, and flipping through parts of a book, in aims to get to the parts that truly matter for you. In the end, you will find that the best reader is an **Insightful Reader** – which is *someone who knows how to read with the purpose of seeking out valuable insights and a deep understanding.*

Cultivate a passion for reading

I am truly passionate about books and reading and I hope that this shines through in this book and rubs off on you and motivates you to read more books, think about the books you read, take more notes on them, discuss what you read with friends and family, and

ultimately be happier and more fulfilled with what you are reading. Those who are passionate, excited, or at least interested in reading are the ones who will ultimately gain the most from the books that they read, including this one.

Who am I and What do I Know About Reading?

I would like to tell you briefly about my background and qualifications for writing this book. I have my master's degree in industrial-organizational psychology, and I have written 12 books in self-development and mind-brain improvement. One of my most popular titles in self-development is *7 Thoughts to Live Your Life By: A Guide to the Happy, Peaceful, & Meaningful Life*, which I recommend reading after you have finished this book.

Since I was a child, I remember getting an immense joy from reading. I was lucky enough to have parents who instilled the habit of reading in me at an early age – teaching me to read in English *and* Spanish. In those early years, I recall often wanting to read a book, and my parents made sure to provide a supportive environment for this. There was always a great selection of books that I could read from. In my later childhood and early adulthood, I focused more on reading books for school during the school year, and I read more books of my own choosing during the summers.

After I earned my master's degree and finished my formal education, I decided that *I should read more*, since I was no longer required to read anything for school. I realized that I was free to read anything I wished, and that I could direct my mind toward learning more about anything at all. Since then I have read about 40 books per year in a wide variety of topics. At the point of this book's publication, I have read about 400 books, and I have detailed notes on the most important 40 books I have read. I have

also read thousands of news, entertainment, and blog articles, hundreds of academic articles, and hundreds of short stories and poems.

Reading is important to me because I want to know all that I can know, understand all that I can, and I want to learn from the greatest minds who have put their words on paper. I am very curious, especially about the big questions in life, many of which do not seem to have definitive answers. Ultimately, I believe that reading is the most efficient and lowest-cost way to learn, which is why I am a tremendous fan of this form of learning.

If your background is nothing like mine and you feel that you did not grow up in such a supportive environment for reading – perhaps your family did not read much, and you did not grow up with many books or much natural interest in them – there is no need to worry. The fact that you are reading this now shows that you are interested in becoming a better reader and developing your reading skills, and that is an excellent first step. I will do my best to teach you some of the skills I have learned which have been hugely valuable in my reading journey. Some of these came naturally to me, and some were learned through trial and error in my constant efforts to improve my reading abilities. Do not feel that you need to be a natural or expert reader to make good use of this book – I have especially written *The Insightful Reader* assuming that you have a lot of room to grow, as we all do. Whether you are beginning your reading journey, or even if you consider yourself an expert reader, you will find some nuggets of wisdom here that can help take your reading to a higher level. You may even spot

some major flaws in your reading patterns that you can begin to rectify.

I am aware that there are many people who have read much more and much faster than me, but I have thought critically and deeply about how we can *choose the best books to read, improve our reading abilities, and get the most value from the books we read*, which is not something that most readers do. Many of us simply employ the same habits over and over from when we learned to read as children. Thus, I think the advice in this book will be especially useful for someone who wants to improve his reading abilities, and who is open to reexamining his reading processes in efforts to improve them.

Now, I would like you to consider what your personal reading goal is. How much do you wish to read, and what do you wish to gain from your readings? My personal goal is to read a thousand insightful books in my lifetime and to understand them deeply rather than just superficially, and to be highly knowledgeable in many fields such as psychology, philosophy, business, history, and the sciences. Whether your goal is similar to mine or not, I believe this book will be a useful tool to help you meet your reading goals.

Before You Continue . . .

As a thank you for reading, I want you to have this free guide:

Step Up Your Learning: Free Tools to Learn Almost Anything

Have you ever wondered what the best sites and resources for learning are? It takes time and effort to figure out which sites are worth it, and which are not. I hope to save you some of that time so you can spend more of it learning instead of searching the Internet.

In the past ten years or so, there has been a free learning revolution happening. More and more resources for learning are becoming available to the public at no cost. With so many new ones coming out, it is easy to miss out on some of the great learning opportunities available. Fortunately for you, this guide is short at around 4,000 words, and tells you exactly what you need to know.

The guide stems from my own experiences of using a variety of learning sites and resources. In it, you will discover the best places to go for learning at no cost. Also, I will explain which resources are best for you, depending on your learning goals.

You can download this free guide as a PDF by clicking [here](#) or by typing this website into your browser: <http://mentalmax.net/EN>

Now, let's get back on topic.

The Benefits of Reading

An Introduction

Just as I was beginning to work on writing *The Insightful Reader*, my mother called to tell me that my grandfather (e.g., my father's father) had passed away. Although he likely would not have imagined this, he was an inspirational figure behind this book.

When I was four years old, I once asked him to read me a book, as any child might ask his grandfather. With a slightly embarrassed look, he told me that he could not read. This was obviously a joke, and so I persisted in asking him to read to me. This time, my grandfather emphasized that it was not possible – he never learned to read. I was shocked – as a young child I had assumed that all adults could read. However, my grandfather did not grow up anything like I did – he had a much tougher life in a *rancho* (i.e., a very small and poor town) in Mexico where not knowing how to read was the norm. Survival, work, and caring for family were the priorities, not education. Paradoxically, through lacking the ability to read, my grandfather actually knew all too well the benefits of this ability. As a skilled and hard-working laborer, on many occasions he was offered promotions into management. Of course, he was happy to have his efforts recognized, but he always had to turn these opportunities down, as he understood that knowing how to read and write would be a requirement. The value of being literate was clear to him in these moments. He understood that

books could be a portal into a better way of life, despite never having had the opportunity to learn to read himself.

In this section we will consider the many benefits that reading provides us with, and *how* it is that books can present us with a portal into a better way of life.

An Efficient Way to Learn

Generally, when we want to learn a vast amount of information, we have three main options. There is learning through reading, audio, or video formats. With reading, you only have access to words and sometimes diagrams or charts. With audio, you have spoken words and you can also gauge the emotional quality of those words. Through video, you have spoken words, the emotional quality is there, as well as a visual medium to help you understand the information.

With many options for learning, why should we focus on reading?

First, reading typically occurs at a faster rate than listening happens, often at about twice the speed. For example, the average reading speed is 200-400 words per minute, and the average speed of an audiobook or professional speaker is around 150 words per minute. This means that if you have the choice to listen to an audiobook or lecture, or instead to read a transcript or written book file assuming it is available, then you should choose the format that you can read visually. This will be more efficient than the alternative, generally. Of course, if you are able to listen to your content at a time or in a setting where you normally would not read, such as on a commute or while you are driving, then listening to the audio version will make perfect sense.

Another benefit of traditional reading (i.e., visually) is that you may have greater control over the speed of processing than if you are listening to a speech or to audio content. It is much easier to skip unimportant information, to slow down for more important

parts, or to review something you did not understand when you are reading traditionally as opposed to with an audiobook. And if you are listening to a speaker, of course, you may not feel comfortable asking him to speed up, skip something, slow down, or repeat something – as this will probably not be appropriate.

To be clear, I do not recommend against using auditory or video forms of learning. In fact, I think any kind of reading or learning is beneficial. Although visual reading is normally more efficient, there are some cases when audiobooks can be an especially useful option for learning. For example, audiobooks can be an asset when there is a novel that you want to savor, rather than speed through. Perhaps you have even found a narrator who helps make the story spring to life.

Another reason to consider audiobooks more carefully is if you feel that you are much better at processing auditory information. Even if this is the case, not all information is available in audio, so it will still be valuable for you to continue practicing your traditional reading skills. As another example, perhaps you would like to learn a foreign language. If so, you may pursue audio formats to make sure that you are building your listening comprehension abilities rather than just your visual reading abilities. Keep in mind that if you still prefer to learn mostly in audio format, you may choose to speed up a recording to go 1.5 or 2 times the normal speed, to make it roughly as efficient as if you were reading the material normally. With some practice, you will be able to listen and understand most of the information even at this speed.

As to learning via video formats, this suffers from the same problem as audio content, because you can only absorb the information as fast as you can listen to it. And again, for most people this speed will be much slower than your visual reading speed. However, for someone who is struggling to understand a topic, watching videos that help to visualize and animate ideas could be helpful. On the other hand, for someone who does not need this, these features may just slow down the pace of learning. Again, when we read, we tend to absorb the information much faster. Also, with videos, you are not required to think carefully about how you can visualize the information yourself, because it is already done for you. Reading is more challenging because it requires more thought, imagination, reflection, and effort on your part, but in the end, this is better for your learning.

A critical point that makes visual reading superior for me is that when I read, there is silence. There are gaps of nothingness if I simply look away from the page. Silence comes at a great value to me. I find that when I want to truly learn and understand something, especially if it is a difficult or complex topic, I need some empty spaces to mentally digest the material. Rather, when you consume audio or visual content, the medium is unlikely to provide you with natural breaks for thinking. Of course, you can always pause the content to think, but few people will actually do this. Whereas with a book, when you arrive at the end of a page, of a section, or of a chapter, you may naturally stop and think about what it was that you just read. Silence promotes the act of

thinking, as there is not a continuous stream of information coming in that you feel compelled to pay attention to.

If you want to attain the highest efficiency in your learning, the best format to read your books will be in paper. Meta-analytic studies have found that there is a statistically significant difference between reading in print versus reading on screens – print is slightly better. Personally, I aim to read more books in print, but of course eBooks or reading digitally is often much more convenient and cheaper. For more challenging reads, I prefer them in paper, and for lighter reads, I will sometimes read them in eBook or audiobook form. If you can only find a book in one format, of course, just read it that way, as long as this does not present you with any problems.

There are clearly other ways to learn beyond reading, audio, and video content. For example, there is learning through personal experience, which I believe is highly valuable and often necessary for learning physical skills. Traveling is an excellent way to learn about the world if you have the opportunity to do so. Of course, classes or lectures can be quite useful for learning as well. Games and apps can also be entertaining and socially engaging ways to learn about different topics, to help keep things interesting and stimulating. Despite the many wonderful tools for learning available, I believe that for most purposes, reading should be the primary way to learn, and other ways of learning can be used as a complement. Spend more time reading, and your level of understanding will grow much faster than with the alternatives. The reason it is not always as popular as other modes of learning is

that it requires more effort and thought than most of the other vehicles for learning. Interestingly, it is this extra effort and thought required which likely creates a more fruitful learning experience.

A Low-Cost Way to Learn

In the movie *Goodwill Hunting*, Will (Matt Damon's character) tells a Harvard student "You dropped a hundred and fifty grand on an education you coulda got for a dollar fifty in late charges at the public library." Obviously, there is value in higher education, but Will implies that when you go to university, most of the value is being derived from books, and books can be accessed for free in libraries even if they have been written by experts who earned advanced degrees, and who themselves paid large sums of money in order to acquire that education. In essence, as long as you have strong reading abilities, self-discipline, and the ability to pick useful books to read for your purposes, you could acquire a great education at a very low cost (without earning a formal degree, of course).

You could either attain your education for free at the library, or you could even buy your books at full price and still the cost would not even approach that of a university degree. If you lament not having the means to pursue a college education, I would urge you to consider creating your own curriculum and becoming educated on your own terms. Allow your curiosity to guide your path. If you struggle to find a specific book through your library, simply ask your librarian for assistance – she may be able to get you an interlibrary loan or have some advice to help you access the book you desire. Actually, if you have any other questions about finding a similar book, or doing research on a topic, librarians generally have a wealth of helpful information. Do not be afraid to ask.

It is also possible to purchase courses or to attend an event to hear an expert give a talk. These can be useful ways to learn but consider that a course can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars and attending events can also be quite expensive. Often enough, these course developers or speakers will have published books which are available at a tiny fraction of those costs. And even if they have not, someone else will have written books on the topic that interests you. Personally, I tend to either read books to learn something, or hire an expert that I need to do a specific job for me if I find that this would be a more efficient use of my time (rather than learning how to do it myself). I generally do not find it worthwhile to pay for a course, especially if it seems that all of the material could easily have been stated or found in book format. I believe a key reason people pursue speakers or courses is that they expect the information to be more easily digestible. However, *something that is easily learned is also often easily forgotten*. It is not a bad thing to struggle through your learning process, which is called *effortful learning*. These are concepts I learned about in *Make it Stick* by Peter C. Brown, an excellent book on how to become a better learner.

If you lack funds to purchase many books, consider that an often-overlooked way to gain access to free books is to become a book reviewer. Many authors will feel uncomfortable if you email them asking for a free book, but if you ask for a review copy (these usually come in the form of a free PDF file), you may be surprised to find that you are much more likely to receive a favorable response. If you like the idea of reviewing books, you may even

pursue different services that help reviewers find new books to review, such as NetGalley. However, I do not recommend signing up unless you truly look forward to reading new books and providing your helpful review when you finish.

Despite the many low cost or even free ways that exist to access books, I prefer to invest in my learning and in books. We tend to spend money on trivial things without much thought, yet with books people may complain that they are too expensive. Rather, we should keep in mind that the information in these books will ultimately contain much more value for you, contributing to your deep understanding of the world and of topics important to you. If you have the funds for it, I would urge you to purchase some books that will be important for your needs. For the most important books I read, I like having easy access to them in print, so that I can read through them whenever I wish.

Learn from Success Stories in History

Many people will attempt to succeed by following a hunch, through trial and error, or perhaps through seeking guidance from a colleague or employer. But doesn't it make more sense to learn from the collective successes of people throughout history? If you want to learn about what contributed to the success of Bill Gates, Sam Walton (i.e., Walmart founder), or Warren Buffett (i.e., one of the most successful investors of all time), you do not need a personal meeting with these people – which unless you are a personal contact, you would be highly unlikely to get anyway. What would be most beneficial is reading books that discuss their lives and how they accomplished what they did. If you value their personal input, you can even seek out the books that they have written or been interviewed for. Keep in mind that for anything you want to accomplish, someone has attempted this and succeeded at it in the past and you can *learn how* through books. Of course, you should learn about the topics that interest you, but it also helps to learn about how people have succeeded in your field. For example: what type of skills do you need, what challenges are you likely to face, and how can you handle the tough problems that are most likely to arise?

The most obvious caveat to reading about others' successes is that the world we live in is changing so fast that what contributed to past successes may not apply to you. For example, part of what allowed people to succeed in the past may have been that there was much less competition in those times (as population sizes were much smaller the farther you go back in history). Or a greater part

than we realize may have simply been due to luck. However, even with such caveats, learning about great achievements through history is still worthwhile. We must simply focus on principles that are more likely to stand the test of time. You may find that through reading such books, you acquire unique knowledge and also an advantage over your competition. Reading about successes and people from different time periods will also provide you with a wider perspective, aiding you to keep in mind what is truly important instead of getting distracted with every new fad that is trending in your field.

Learn from Others' Mistakes

We all make mistakes. No matter how smart or skilled we are, they are inevitable. Of course, the most important thing is that we learn from them. One trick to help you avoid the suffering of having to make too many mistakes is that you can learn from the mistakes of others. Obviously, you can learn in this way by observing your surroundings and watching the mistakes other people make, then figuring out what you can do to avoid making them yourself. However, this opportunity to learn from others' mistakes requires you to be at the right place at the right time, to witness a mistake happening by chance. You will also need to have enough expertise to realize when mistakes have been made. This is clearly an inefficient process and unlikely to be the most fruitful path to learning.

Doesn't it make more sense to learn about the common mistakes people make in your field, or in whatever topic you are interested in, and then avoiding those? Do not misunderstand, as again, mistakes are likely to happen no matter what you do. And in fact, mistakes are not all bad. They present us with great learning opportunities – and can be highly beneficial in our development. Whenever I find myself getting upset about a mistake I made, I remind myself that this is a lesson learned, and that I do not have to worry about making that mistake again, because now I will be more careful and avoid making it in the future. Those personal lessons are the most valuable. However, through reading about other people's mistakes, you can absorb many lessons in the time it takes to read a book, without having to make them yourself. This

is something many of us fail to fully realize. After learning from others' mistakes in this way, if you must still make your own, they can be new ones and present you with higher level learning opportunities.

These are a few book titles that focus on learning from others' mistakes: *Brilliant Blunders* by Mario Livio, *Bad Days in History* by Michael Farquhar, and *Mistakes I Made at Work* by Jessica Bacal.

Pursue Your Own Education

A common fallacy is that your education ends with high school or college, but in today's world, the day your education ends is the day you become obsolete. Someone else who continues to learn will end up being promoted over you and you may eventually even lose your job if you stop learning new things. And when you lose that job, you will not be competitive enough to find a new job easily. This is because the people who were making sure to learn something new will be more competitive applicants than you. It is practical to be a lifelong learner for the above reasons, but it is also a joy if you allow yourself to be guided by your own personal curiosity. It is better to be guided by a love of learning something new than a fear of losing your job. As a benefit, if you learn something new regularly, then you will always have options in your career and life.

When you pursue your own education, you will not need to enroll in a classroom, and you will not necessarily need to pursue a degree or find a specific teacher or tutor to learn something. You will learn the most valuable skill, which is being able to learn on your own. When you pursue your own education through books, you will learn to figure out what your strengths and weaknesses are, what you need to know more about, what your deep interests are, and what is a waste of time and energy and not useful for you to know. You will be forced to think deeply about exactly what it is you want to accomplish and what you need to learn to do so, instead of blindly reading books that are assigned to you by someone else, with a purpose that someone else has for you.

The education with the highest value is the one that you pursue on your own. As an adult, you do not need someone to tell you what to learn. You are fully capable of deciding what it is that you want to learn and understand. You can decide whether your biggest priority is your relationships, your finances, that you want to pursue a new type of job, or if you want to learn more deeply about philosophy, history, or the sciences simply to grow in your understanding. A key in pursuing your own education will be in realizing what you know and do not know. Then you can read more of what you do not know that interests you. But you should not jump ahead too quickly – allow yourself to make progress gradually. If you have jumped into a topic which is too difficult for you to process, you can instead pursue something that is lighter or more fundamental, where the ideas are explained more thoroughly. Establish your foundation of understanding first and build up gradually from there. With practice, you will learn to pursue the right amount of challenge to stimulate your mind without overwhelming it.

Stimulate Your Creativity and Imagination

Most of this book will pertain to nonfiction reading, but I am still a big believer in the value of reading fiction. Fiction will be especially useful for stimulating our creativity and imaginations – thinking styles which will only become more and more valuable in the modern age. One reason for this is employability, as people who are creative are capable of creating their own jobs during difficult times. Another reason is that the most challenging problems humans face will not be solved by straightforward logic. If they were, we would have already figured them out. Rather, the biggest problems we face will require a creative and imaginative mindset, which can be cultivated through reading stories.

When we read, especially fiction or narrative nonfiction, we develop our abilities to imagine other worlds and lives. As a writer creates a world or universe through words, you are provided with the task of making those words come to life in your mind. You will imagine a world that is different from every other reader because you have your own unique imaginative abilities. When we watch TV or movies, rather, we do not need to exercise our imaginations in this way because the visual effects are provided for us. With movies we are processing the stimuli, whereas with books we are co-creating a world or a universe with the author. The author has provided the baseline information, but we must create the stimuli and imagery in our minds. Ultimately, through reading stories and exercising your creativity, you will be able to imagine more and more possible scenarios in your everyday life. A key benefit is that

you will be more likely to come up with solutions when others get stuck.

Another important aspect of fiction books is that they tend to have no real limits in terms of where you can go. You can see what the Wild West was like, time travel, visit aliens, defy the laws of physics, solve crimes, and so forth. There are no limits to what can be experienced through reading. And many of these scenarios are so wildly different from your day to day life that of course they will stimulate your creativity and imagination. For deeply imaginative stories, read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, or *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams.

Build Your Empathy and Understanding

In our day to day life, it is easy to forget that we are all thinking beings, with our own personal quirks, likes, loves, sensitivities, desires, and fears. There are such deep complexities to each and every one of us, but when we see a stranger in public, all we see is a superficial figure, and we rarely perceive the full complexities of a person. Even for the people that we know all of our lives such as a parent, sibling, or close friend, we do not truly know all the levels of complexity that make them who they are. For instance, we cannot access their innermost thoughts, besides of course what they choose to share with us.

But through reading, we can gain a greater insight into the essence of a fictional character or even the soul of a real person. And if the story is well done, we see that this person is as complex as we are. You can perceive their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and you can essentially see the world through their eyes. This forces you as the reader to realize that: *Perhaps everyone is as deeply complex as I am, and I should see people as more than the superficial levels that I am able to perceive. Maybe I should be more empathetic and understanding, because at the end of the day I do not fully know what problems or sufferings other people are going through. They may have greater troubles than me.*

Expand Your Communication Skills

In my youth, I always enjoyed having something new to read and learning regularly. Since around 15 years of age, I realized that my reading habit had a great influence on my vocabulary and on my ability to articulate exactly what I wanted to say. At that time, I did not talk very much as I was more of an introvert, so I certainly could not attribute my growing vocabulary and articulation to speaking more than anyone else. It was due to reading. Not only was I articulating my own thoughts better, but I found that more and more often, I was able to help clarify the thoughts of my friends and family, on the occasions when they struggled to convey exactly what they wished. I had gained the ability to intuit what people truly meant when they spoke, not just focusing on the actual words used. This is an important skill when reading books too. What is the hidden meaning beneath the words, that not even the words themselves can fully capture? Have you ever pondered that?

When it comes to communication skills, something of key importance is knowing how to say exactly what is on your mind. Reading more and building your vocabulary helps with this. In my later teens as I read higher level books, I tended to use a full range of words, rather than just the most common ones. As you read more, you will naturally come up with the perfect word in some instances, when someone else would stumble, knowing the idea, but not being aware of which word conveys that idea. The language we use every day tends to be rather basic, suffering from overuse of the same words and ideas day after day. Even if we

know words which are more precise, we tend to use lower level words because they feel safe and convenient. The issue is that sometimes these words do not allow us to convey *exactly* what we mean.

Through books, we can be exposed to a much deeper vocabulary, as authors tend to have a much more expansive vocabulary than the average person, and they find it important to use more accurate and descriptive words even if these are not always commonly known. Aside from reading, another helpful tip is to surround yourself by readers and people who have a richer vocabulary.

As you read more, you will learn about the powerful differences between words. There are nuances of meaning that can be significant between different words that you will learn to recognize. Is he *apathetic* or *nonchalant*? *Steadfast* or *intransigent*? *Introverted* or *introspective*? Are you unsure of what some of these words mean? Look them up. The more words you are exposed to, the more you learn to see them as having their own special quality, and you see the world in a richer and more vibrant way. Words are not mostly synonyms that all mean the same thing. They actually convey slightly different meanings that can become important, and in some cases, you can even misunderstand something deeply if you are not alert to specific meanings.

To become a better communicator, learn the deeper meanings (e.g., first, second, and third definitions) of the words that you use and that you hear or read. When you find yourself disagreeing

about what a word means with someone, look it up. Often, you will find that a word has several meanings, some of which may even conflict with one another. One such word is *abysmal*, which usually means *horrible*, but can also mean *profound*. One meaning implies something bad, and the other something neutral or good. A tip is that when you hear someone use a word and you think she used it incorrectly – do not correct her immediately, some people will use the second or third definition of the word which is lesser known, catching you off guard. Also, if you hear the same word used often, even in unrelated situations, look it up. People may be using the word incorrectly without being aware of this.

To be clear, expanding your vocabulary is not about showing off the words you know. No one will be impressed. This is about expanding your ability to think more precisely. It is difficult to think of something unless you know the specific words that relate to that thought. *Imagine*: How can you think of what “North” and “South” are if you do not already have a basic understanding of magnetism and the shape of the Earth? As you *build your vocabulary*, you will be able to *think more precisely*, which will help you to better *communicate your ideas* to others. After you have learned to communicate exactly what you wish to say, the next skill that will be important for you to learn is to communicate complex ideas in basic terms, so that everyone can understand.

The Reading Simulator

The act of reading is like entering a simulator, allowing you to experience the bad paths that lead to negative consequences, and the good paths that lead to positive outcomes. As a pilot will enter a simulator to practice flying, a human being will enter the simulator of reading books to practice living life. Through such simulated experiences we are able to discover a great amount about ourselves. Perhaps you find a role model in a character or person you are reading about – and decide you want to follow in his steps. Conversely, you may read about real-life villains or fictional ones and decide that you never want to be that way. Perhaps you see that someone puts himself in a very difficult situation and you realize that you would never put yourself in such a compromising position. The benefit with books is that you can read about all the different ways to live your life and see what the options are, instead of simply doing what you have always done, or rather than doing what you have always seen done around you. *Reading expands the boundaries of what we can think, be, see, and do.* Ultimately, through reading you can shut off the aspects of life that are unimportant or irrelevant to you and magnify the parts of life that have the potential to offer infinite paths of joy and opportunity for you. A major benefit of reading is that we can discover who we truly are, what we are in this world to do, and then we can set out to do it productively.

Reading Habits, Approaches, and Styles

An Introduction

In this section we will learn about the best reading habits, approaches, and styles that we should work on developing. Most of us learn to read at a very young age, but soon after this we do not continue to receive tips for how to become better readers. If we have classes on reading, often we are given material to read and then we are quizzed on what we read, but we are not given much guidance on how to develop better reading habits and skills in general. We are left to our own devices to figure this out, and for many of us, we may continue to have the same approach to reading for all of our lives. However, I think our reading abilities are important enough that we should spend some time to think them through and make sure that we are always making progress.

The Data – Trends in Reading

How much do most people actually read? The average American reads 12 books per year, which seems good, but in fact this number is influenced by a small percentage of people who read a lot. The median number of books read is just 4, which is closer to the number of books most people actually read. This means that half of people will read at least 4 books per year, and half of people will read less.

What do we mean when we say “read”? In 2018, 72% of U.S. adults read a book in any format, 65% read a print book, 25% read an eBook, and 20% listened to an audiobook. The general trend is that people have been reading paperback books and eBooks at about the same rate for many years, and more people have been listening to audiobooks as time goes on.

Here are some further trends to consider: women read more, younger people read more, people with more formal education read more, and people who earn more money also read more. These are trends and not necessarily rules. Certainly, there are people from all walks of life who are readers.

The above data is according to www.pewresearch.org

Read More and Do Not Make Excuses

This is the ultimate reading habit. If you do not make it a priority to read on a regular basis, it is too easy for everything else to take precedence over reading. We make time for TV, social media, other forms of entertainment, yet we often fail to read, and we regress in our lives when this happens. When we are not reading, we neglect to learn new things, to invest in our personal growth, and to pursue a path toward our best selves. The habit of regular reading can help us with such matters of importance, but somehow, we put it on the backburner, as if it were just another trivial activity in our lives. Instead, we must enlighten ourselves as to the true importance of reading and make time for it. Most people understand the idea that they should invest money to grow their bank accounts, but we should also invest in ourselves through books to aid in our personal growth. If you do not choose to invest in yourself, who will?

Let's discuss a few ways to think about reading so that we can always make sure we are on the right path to including reading in our lives.

Using reason helps to guide me to make sure that I read regularly. I often think that watching a sitcom certainly will not be helping me in 5 or 10 years. That is time wasted compared to the insights I could be gaining through reading a book. Or I will think that this is a very competitive world. If I am *not* reading, I am falling behind the competition. Whereas if I am reading, I am always gaining an edge and putting myself in a better position to make progress and

succeed in my goals. I will also think that there is limited time in my life – I want to learn as much as I can and in order to accomplish this, I must make time for regular reading.

Reasoning out why I should be doing something helps me, but it does not work for everyone. Many people need emotional triggers to get them to change their habits. In that case, consider the happiness or improved way of life you could achieve through reading. Or consider the major problems in your life that could vanish if you became a student of life and found solutions. Our lives will often flow in cycles, where we perpetually create the same problems for ourselves, over and over – wouldn't you rather read and find a way to beat your personal problematic cycles? If it helps, consider what could go wrong in your life as a result of *not* spending some time reading. *What catastrophic mistake might you be on the verge of making right now?* Remember that for any problem you have, someone has likely dealt with it and written a book on how to resolve it.

The benefits of reading are simply too great to ignore. If you struggle to make time to read, then listen to an audiobook on your commute to work or while you eat your lunch. If you do not have the money to spend on books, go to a library or swap books with friends. You can even use a site like Paperbackswap.com to trade books with people online. Free digital files of some books are also available online at sites such as Gutenberg.org.

As another example, perhaps you are easily distracted by noise when reading, and this prevents you from making progress. Then

use noise-cancelling headphones and play light music, white noise, or the sounds of nature. Otherwise, simply go to a quiet place such as the library to do your reading. Distractions are a part of everyday life, so if this is something that is disrupting your ability to stick to your reading habit, then it will be well worth it to find a way to resolve the problem. As annoying as distractions can be, I have found that focusing on reading in spite of environmental sounds and noises has helped me to build my ability to focus.

Schedule Reading into Your Calendar

We already established that reading is a highly beneficial use of your time, which means that it will be worth it to schedule blocks of time into your calendar where you will sit and read or otherwise reflect on your readings and take notes on them. I schedule reading for one hour per day, usually at night from 9-10. Google Calendar (a free application) is convenient for this since I can easily setup repeating events, but you may use any calendar. Of course, schedule your reading for the time that works best for you. You can also split up your reading, doing part of it in the morning, and part in the evening if you prefer. If you are starting to get into the habit of reading, you may start with scheduling 15 minutes per day, to make sure you set an achievable goal.

I learned the importance of scheduling what you want to accomplish by reading *15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management* by Kevin Kruse. **The science says that scheduling what you want to do in a planner or calendar is more productive than having to-do lists.** Think about it: when you schedule something, it seems more important, as normally we schedule appointments and meetings that that we must attend. Thus, when we schedule our plans on a calendar, we feel more committed to working on those tasks. This insight has been very helpful not only for my reading goals, but also for helping me to be more productive in my personal and work goals.

How Many Books Should You Read?

This is a typical question, yet the answer will be different for everyone. As a starting point, you may begin with the goal of reading one book per month. Most of us can reach this pace if we put some effort into building a reading routine. After you have succeeded with this, try reading two per month. Reading one or two books per month is a great accomplishment, but if you have already achieved this, you can strive for reading three or four books per month. My goal is to read about three books per month, but you are welcome to pursue a goal that works for you. In the end, you should feel free to go on your own reading journey, in your own way.

The important thing is to make a goal and stick with it, progressing slowly if you like, as this is often more productive than making sudden changes that you are unable to keep up with. To help you keep pace with reading the number of books you wish to read, you may find it useful to limit the book sizes you will read to anywhere from 250 to 500 pages, depending on your preference. In time as you get into the rhythm of reading more books, you can stop limiting the page amounts. For example, many years ago, I used to limit myself to books that were no longer than 500 pages. This was because I was eager to read as many books as I could at the time. I no longer focus on the number of pages or the number of books, as now I put more emphasis on what I am learning and gaining from what I read. Nonetheless, if a book is over 500 pages, I will examine it more closely to try to ensure that it will be a worthwhile read, since it will use up much more of my time.

What if You Struggle to Make the Time to Read?

If you struggle to find time to read, use the system presented in *The Miracle Morning* by Hal Elrod, where reading is an activity so important that you spend some time on it every morning when you wake up. Instead of reaching for your phone and flipping through social media or checking emails, you can invest in yourself first. Even if it is 10-15 minutes of reading time, this is still beneficial. Perhaps you can also schedule some time later in the day to read. But in case you never get back to it, you can rest assured that you made progress on your reading goals first thing in the morning.

In *The Miracle Morning*, a key insight I learned was that **it is important for us to prioritize our wellbeing much higher than most of us do. Spending some time in the mornings on important self-developmental goals can go a long way toward improving our lives.** If we wake up and start the day dreading having to go to work, checking emails that we do not really want to read, and flipping through social media in a zombie state, then we are starting the day in the wrong frame of mind. Also, this is clearly not helping our general wellbeing. Instead, we should start each day doing something beneficial for ourselves, such as reading something of value, exercising, meditating, or journaling. This may mean getting up a half hour early every day and cutting off your time to watch a TV show at night, but ultimately taking deeper care of ourselves will help to improve every facet of our lives.

What if your struggle is not finding the time, but it has more to do with your difficulties in staying motivated and focused enough to continue reading? In such cases, understand that the more you read, the more background information you will gain to make sense of new books that you read. I have read many, many books on psychology, self-development, writing, and business, so if I choose to read a book in any of these topics, I am able to acquire any new knowledge from the pages quite efficiently. I will quickly see that I am highly familiar with a certain chapter, so then I can refresh myself on certain topics for that chapter instead of reading everything in painstaking detail. Also, I can focus on reading more interesting and advanced books, rather than becoming bored with the dry fundamentals of a topic. Although reading may be a struggle early on, it will get easier as you read more and find more patterns, learn more, understand more, and acquire more insights to help you learn more efficiently.

If you struggle to read regularly and stick with it, find an accountability partner – preferably one who also wants to improve her reading habits and abilities. You do not even need to read the same book. You can talk weekly about what you are reading, what you are getting out of it, and the type of progress you are making with your reading goals. Finding a partner to help support you is one of the best steps you can take in life with any area that is important to you, especially when you are truly struggling to make progress. This may be the push you need to make a positive change in your life.

Surround Yourself with Different Books for Different Purposes

You may have comic books for reading something that is entertaining for both yourself and your children. You may also read thrillers with your spouse to discuss the stories together. In addition, perhaps you are reading some technical materials on different types of plants for your work or to help with your personal garden. And you may be reading Albert Einstein's biography (e.g., *Einstein: His Life and Universe* by Walter Isaacson) to learn about his life and what helped him make his great discoveries. Of course, different people have different limits as to how many books they will read side by side. You may prefer to only read one book at a time and someone else may read several at a time, but the key point here is to always have something that you are in the mood to read. Perhaps you usually read one book at 9PM, but on this night you are not in the mood for that book. You always want to have something to read that you are excited about, or you will procrastinate and find something else to do. Also, waiting can be a big part of modern life. But sometimes when you are waiting (e.g., on your commute or at the doctor's office), you are not in the mood to read something too difficult or dense. For those situations, you should have something lighter that you can read through easily and save the more difficult readings for when you can truly focus.

It is also a good idea to read in different formats. I prefer to read some books in paper, some in eBook form, and some as audiobooks. For instance, I recently began reading *In Search of Lost*

Time by Marcel Proust, and I had a difficult time focusing through the elaborate and long-winded prose, so I decided that this would be better to read in audio format, and I have found it to be a much more enjoyable experience this way. My preferred format is to read in paper, but eBooks are also very convenient and so often I read them. I have also found it helpful to have an audiobook or two saved that I can listen to when I want to savor the reading experience. Having access to a variety of book formats helps to create an environment where I am always surrounded by books and I have no real excuse to not read. Surround yourself with a wide range of books for different purposes, and you will never have an excuse to avoid reading. This will help you to cultivate a regular reading habit.

Build Your Anti-library

Nassim Nicholas Taleb writes in *The Black Swan*, “A private library is not an ego-boosting appendage but a research tool. Read books are far less valuable than unread ones. The library should contain as much of what you do not know as your financial means, mortgage rates and the currently tight real-estate market allows you to put there. You will accumulate more knowledge and more books as you grow older, and the growing number of unread books on the shelves will look at you menacingly. Indeed, the more you know, the larger the rows of unread books. Let us call this collection of unread books an anti-library.”

It is easy to feel bad for acquiring piles of books that you may not have read fully or read at all, but I would encourage you to not feel too bad. As noted above, the books you have not read are the ones with the greatest potential value for you. They contain knowledge and wisdom that you do not yet know, and thus are portals to your greater understanding. If you are able, it is an excellent idea to surround yourself with books that have the potential to be highly useful to you. If your dream is to become an artist, then you can surround yourself with books about art history, analysis of artworks, and instructions on art technique. Or if you love literature, you may surround yourself with some of the most celebrated classics of all time. You can acquire such books gradually and pick and choose to read them at the time that you wish. The most important books are the ones that we end up reading and applying in our lives – and those are likely to be the ones that we surround ourselves with.