

“A game changer for how we can give more of our attention to the things that really do matter.” –Nate Berkus, author of *The Things That Matter*

THE TWELVE MONOTASKS



TO DO **EVERYTHING** BETTER

THATCHER WINE

Copyright © 2021 by Thatcher Wine
Author photograph by Preston Utley
Cover © 2021 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown Spark
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
littlebrownspark.com
twitter.com/lbsparkbooks
facebook.com/littlebrownspark
[Instagram.com/littlebrownspark](https://instagram.com/littlebrownspark)

First ebook edition: December 2021

Little, Brown Spark is an imprint of Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown Spark name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

ISBN 978-0-316-70553-0

E3-20211102-JV-NF-ORI

CONTENTS

COVER

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[PREFACE](#)

PART I

[AN INTRODUCTION TO MONOTASKING](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[THE ART AND SCIENCE OF MONOTASKING](#)

PART II

[THE TWELVE MONOTASKS](#)

[TASK 1: READING](#)

[TASK 2: WALKING](#)

[TASK 3: LISTENING](#)

[TASK 4: SLEEPING](#)

[TASK 5: EATING](#)

[TASK 6: GETTING THERE](#)

[TASK 7: LEARNING](#)

[TASK 8: TEACHING](#)

[TASK 9: PLAYING](#)

[TASK 10: SEEING](#)

TASK 11: CREATING

TASK 12: **THINKING**

PART III
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

MONOTASKING OUR LIVES

THE MONO FUTURE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCOVER MORE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALSO BY THATCHER WINE

CHAPTER NOTES

*In memory of my grandparents—Bessie, Morrie, Gracie, Jack, IW,
& Lil.*

With immense gratitude for the gift of their attention.

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

Tap here to learn more.



LITTLE,
BROWN
SPARK

PREFACE

I was deep into researching and writing this book in March 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the United States. The world was thrown into chaos overnight and life was intense for just about every person on the planet.

Yet with all the craziness, I felt strangely calm. It's not that I wasn't scared. I was worried about my health—I had gone through cancer treatment two years earlier, which put me in a high-risk group if I were to catch the virus. I was concerned about my family's safety and well-being. I was also stressed about Juniper Books, the business I run, and our ability to survive an economic downturn.

I considered furloughing my team and putting the business into hibernation while I concentrated on keeping myself and my family safe and healthy. In recent years, I had worn myself down as I pushed through multiple health challenges, business struggles, and a divorce while keeping up a busy life as an entrepreneur and father. Maybe this crisis was different—I wondered if I should take a break and not try to do it all this time.

I also briefly considered putting this book on hold. My schedule was packed—could I really fit one more big thing on my to-do list?

I thought a lot about it, then I decided to go a different route.

Even though there were a lot of things that were out of control in the world, what I realized was that I was still in control of my attention and I could choose to apply it where I wanted. I decided to double down on my commitment to monotasking everything in my life. I would do one thing at a time, and I'd do it well. In the chaotic stressful times of the pandemic, I would pressure-test the concepts covered in these

pages in order to get them ready to share with the world.

Throughout the pandemic, I read printed books to build my focus. I walked three times a day to get fresh air. I worked on my listening skills with my friends and family. I wasn't sleeping well, but I committed to finding ways to get more sleep every night. I didn't have a lot of time for meals, but as I ate, I contemplated how grateful I was for essential workers on the front lines. I couldn't travel, but I paid attention to things I had never noticed on my way to work. I relearned how to play piano at home by watching YouTube videos. In our daily company calls, I taught my team how to get our work done from home. I made time to play with my kids and with my dog. I created new ideas for my business every day—some worked, some didn't. I spent a lot of time thinking about what lay ahead and how to help keep everyone in my life safe.

My efforts to monotask were successful. If I tried to do more than one thing at a time during the pandemic, my stress level increased rapidly, and I rarely got anything done. In contrast, when I held the line, stayed focused, and monotasked, I was more relaxed and much more productive. My family stayed healthy, and I was able to finish writing this book. Plus, Juniper Books thrived as people read more books and redecorated while staying at home.

Now, more than ever, I believe that the antidote to our ever-expanding to-do lists, the distractions of modern life, and the fragmentation of our attention is to *do one thing at a time*. Once we realize that *we* are the ones who control our own attention, we can choose where to apply it. Monotasking is all about reclaiming our attention so that we can better work through our to-do lists, improve our relationships, *and* get through some very difficult times.

PART I

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
MONOTASKING**

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the lives we live seem to be getting busier and busier. Technology has increasingly made its way into every part of our existence—nearly everyone has powerful smartphones in their hands, pockets, or somewhere close. Economic and societal pressure has increased the need, or at least the perception, that we should always be doing and striving for more.

Like many people, I've tried over the years to counterbalance the busy-ness and stress of adult life with practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and yoga. I love these practices, but quite often, making time to meditate and go to yoga is challenging. When I'm super busy and need to get a lot of stuff done, being reminded to meditate can be annoying—even if meditating will help (which of course it will, but it's hard to recognize that in the moment).

As a result of the tension between a busy schedule, a busy mind, and all the stress-relieving and self-improvement activities I want to do, these practices have at various times made me feel like I'm simply not very good at them—or that I'm not good at making the time they require. I started to wonder if there was another way to live a balanced life that could be practiced *while* we go about our daily activities, not something that was separate from them.

When I looked back at when I have been the most successful and happiest in life, I saw a common thread. It was when I did one thing at a time and really paid attention to what I was doing and who I was with. It was not when I tried to do it all at once or when I was distracted and only partially present. Even going through difficult times—cancer, divorce, closing a business—when I gave those experiences my full attention, I made it through as well as one could possibly ask for.

To be less stressed, happier, and more productive in life, I

determined that I didn't need to go on a retreat, I didn't need to find a guru, and I certainly didn't need to keep adding to my to-do list.

The book you hold in your hands started with the epiphany that if I gave my full attention to one thing at a time, I could do it well and I could enjoy it more. I needed to stop *multitasking* and start *monotasking*.

Now, if monotasking were as easy as just telling you to go do one thing at a time instead of multitasking, this would be a short and not very effective book.

The truth is, monotasking muscles need to be trained and strengthened. Our constant state of busy-ness and attempted multitasking have caused these monotasking muscles to atrophy, making it likely we will become distracted by the sound of one more notification or the “need” to respond to one more email. With strong monotasking skills, you can identify potential pitfalls and actively avoid them.

The way we build our monotasking muscles is to do the things that we already do every day, but to approach them with renewed focus and commitment. There are twelve monotasks that form the core of this book—and they in turn form the core of our lives.

The Twelve Monotasks You'll Find in This Book:

1. READING

Reading focuses our eyes and our brains in one place. By putting our phones down and picking up a printed book, we are choosing to monotask. Anyone who opens *The Twelve Monotasks* is already practicing the first monotask—reading—and therefore on their way to monotasking success!

2. WALKING

Walking reconnects our bodies to our surroundings. While it may seem like a simple activity, many people view walking as a means to an end, not the end in itself. By focusing attention on our surroundings—what we see, what we hear, how the ground feels under our feet—we naturally reconnect with our overall presence in the world.

3. LISTENING

Listening connects us to others, engaging our auditory senses and our brains. Can you feel when someone actively hears you instead of just pretending to listen? We can all tell when someone is not really present, and it hurts. When we truly listen, whether it is listening to our kids, in a meeting, or out on a date, we connect to other people infinitely better than if our minds are distracted by trying to multitask other thoughts and actions.

4. SLEEPING

Sleeping resets our bodies and our brains so that we can be healthy and have the physical and mental energy we need to thrive. Many people have trouble sleeping these days—we all have a lot on our minds, our days are busy, and our to-do lists are long. What if we could monotask sleep? What if we gave ourselves permission to get the rest and recovery we need? Bringing focused attention to sleep can have benefits that permeate our lives.

5. EATING

Eating is an essential daily activity that is often pushed to the background instead of being given our full focus. We sometimes rush through meals because we need to get back to work, or we don't really pay attention to what we are eating because we're also looking at a device. What if we brought our attention to the food on our table, how it got there, who prepared it for us, what it tastes like, and the companionship provided by those sharing this experience with us?

6. GETTING THERE

What if during our commutes and travels, we focused on the act of getting somewhere and enjoying it instead of feeling like we always have to do two things at one time, often at great risk to ourselves and others? While the time spent in transit can present an opportunity to multitask, there are ways we can bring our attention to the journey and reap the benefits of being more present.

7. LEARNING

We are all capable of lifelong learning: it isn't something we do only in our younger years. When we monotask learning, we encounter one of the most invigorating parts of being human—making new cognitive and emotional connections. Whether we are learning a new language, a sport, or something related to our work, the ability to bring our focus to one thing at a time improves our capacity to learn and unlocks our nearly infinite potential.

8. TEACHING

Teaching strengthens our brains and builds a connection to others. It is not a task limited to classrooms; there are opportunities to teach throughout our lives. One of the best ways to master a skill or subject is to teach it. Preparing to teach requires intense focus and recognition of the limitations of our own knowledge. This chapter explores both the practical elements and emotional aspects of mastering a subject and then conveying it to another person.

9. PLAYING

Playing involves letting go of much of the intense concentration required for the previous tasks, relaxing our brains, and fully inhabiting our bodies. Many adults simply don't allow themselves time to play. Often, we feel guilty when we take time for ourselves or we feel like we are wasting time if we are not being productive or “monetizing” our time. This chapter reminds us that it's okay—and ultimately productive—to have fun.

10. SEEING

Seeing integrates our visual senses. In this monotask, we practice looking both at the details close up, and farther and farther into the world. Instead of worrying about capturing Instagrammable photos, what if we see for ourselves the beauty and complexity of the world around us? How much does our understanding of an otherwise common object change when we stop to really inspect it?

11. CREATING

Creating is one of the most magical and empowering monotasks. You do not have to be an artist or musician or have a creative professional title to be a creator; we are all creators in some capacity. Sometimes the things we create are small, like a note to our children, and sometimes they are large, like starting a new company. The act of bringing something into the world that did not exist before is rewarding. By monotasking the act of creating, we can embrace our unique, limitless possibilities.

12. THINKING

Most of us never think about thinking because we are doing it nonstop, using it to fuel our everyday activities. What if we isolated thinking as a separate task all on its own? Could our dedicated thinking time help us achieve excellence? Monotasking thinking also brings attention to where we have outsourced some of our cognitive tasks to devices and other people in recent years, and how we can reclaim the most important thinking tasks.

How to Use This Book

The twelve monotasking chapters outlined above are the heart of this book. Each is packed with guidance about how to do that one task with your full attention. I recommend reading one chapter, then taking the time to practice that monotask before moving on to the next one.

In addition to the ideas and guidance you find within this book, I created a website—**monotasking.tips**—where you can find even more information, insights, and recommendations. You read the website address correctly, it ends in “tips”—as in a small but useful piece of practical advice.

With twelve tasks, you can dedicate a day, a week, or a month to each task—whatever works for you. I have tried to keep the book user-friendly, with short, easily digestible sections, arranged in the same order in each chapter. You may naturally find it easier to perform one task or another with your full focus, but don't give up on monotasking overall if some monotasks are particularly challenging.

The philosophy contained in this book reflects both my

personal experience and that of others who have monotasked their way to success and happiness. Most people have not used the term “monotasking,” but I’ll demonstrate how they, and you, have monotasked many times without even knowing it.

Perhaps the best thing about monotasking is that it can be applied to every aspect of your life *while* you live it. The more you monotask, the better at it you will become—and you will be able to monotask *more* of your life with greater ease.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF MONOTASKING

monotask / ('m.ɒnə, tæsk) / verb
to perform one task at a time

While “monotasking” may not be a household term yet, the concept is inherently familiar to us for one simple reason—we all know what *multitasking* is.

Multitasking is when you *attempt* to do multiple things at the same time. Monotasking is the opposite—you do one thing at a time.

Throughout this book, I describe *how* to monotask in a variety of ways, but the foundational approach remains the same: Strip everything away until you have one thing left. *Do that one thing with all your focus.*

In order to become good monotaskers, we need to unwind and break apart our multitasking habits—everything from checking our phone notifications while having lunch with a friend, to answering emails while participating in a Zoom call, to thinking about what happened at work today while playing with our kids.

By isolating individual tasks, you’ll become aware of what it looks and feels like to pay attention to one thing. Don’t be surprised if this feels foreign to you when you first practice it. It’s a feeling we may not have experienced much in recent times.

We can elect to combine various tasks later if we choose, but when we do so, we will be equipped with a new awareness of the difference between monotasking and multitasking. The purpose of this book is *not* to make you feel bad about multitasking. We all live in the twenty-first century: We’re navigating rapid changes together, and we all face the same challenges.

The Roots of Multitasking

The word “multitasking” was reportedly first used in 1965 to describe how an IBM mainframe computer could perform multiple tasks at the same time. A few decades later, as personal computers entered the mainstream, people started using the word more frequently to describe both how they, and their computers, could work on multiple things simultaneously.

Apple’s Macintosh computer was introduced in 1984 and came with 128K of RAM (random-access memory)—that’s a tiny amount of processing power in today’s terms. PCs back then would generally crash if you tried to get them to do more than one thing at a time. I frequently feel like one of those early computers when I take on too much at once.

With the release of Microsoft Windows 2.0 in 1987, millions of business users got their first visual representation of what multitasking looked like. One could toggle between applications that performed very different functions—a word processor and a spreadsheet, for example. A new era in multitasking computers, a multitasking workplace, and a multitasking culture had begun.

The introduction of personal computers in the 1980s was followed by rapid growth of the internet in the 1990s and near universal adoption of smartphones in the 2000s. With each step in the technology revolution, our expectations increased—not only of our devices, but also of ourselves. If computers and phones were becoming faster and more powerful every year, shouldn’t the human brain be able to keep up? And if computers designed by people could multitask, couldn’t people learn to multitask just like them?

The Downside of Technology

Here we are, well into the twenty-first century and decades into the technology revolution. The reality is that we are working more and experiencing more emotional and psychological ups and downs as we make our way into the future. We are more connected and more reachable than ever before. No matter where we are on the planet, emails and texts come in at all hours of the day. Even when we take a break, we still work—according to Project: Time Off, 73 percent of employees work while on vacation.

With the rise of social media, so, too, has there been an increase in reports of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. For a large portion of the population, fear of missing out (or FOMO) is a real thing. Users compare their lives to what they are seeing in the social media feeds of others and often feel never-ending pressure to keep up by working more, spending more, and doing more.

We are all constantly trying, or pretending, to process massive amounts of information. A 2011 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reported that while we can cope with the inflow of sensory information, it comes at a cost. “We’ve identified a kind of bottleneck in the prefrontal cortex of the brain that forces people to address problems one after the other, even if they’re doing it so fast it feels simultaneous,” says René Marois, PhD, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at Vanderbilt University and coauthor of the study. “This explains why previous data shows brain activity going down instead of up with each new challenge—it’s like a mental traffic jam.”

Technology has certainly improved our lives in many ways, but it has come at a cost. It can be hard to put a finger on exactly what that cost is, perhaps because of our own mental traffic jam, but we can feel it. We know we can do better and feel better, but where do we begin?

The Infiltration of the Present Moment

Up until the early 1990s, there was a certain daily rhythm to most people’s lives. School took place at school, work was done at work, dinner happened around the dinner table, and leisure time that included television watching, radio listening, and book reading usually took place in the evenings and weekends. There were very few opportunities to do these activities outside of their usual time and place and so we did them one at a time.

As devices have proliferated and smartphones have become attached to us in recent years, we have the ability to do just about anything we want, anywhere we want, anytime we want. Further, we can seemingly combine as many things as we want into the same moment.

While the internet and our devices may be recent introductions to our lives, the difficulty that humans have staying in the present moment is nothing new. Philosophical and religious traditions have long guided us back to the present moment via prayer and meditation, and for good reason. The present moment is where everything happens and it is the only place where we are truly connected to ourselves, others, and the universe.

Nevertheless, it is our human tendency to always be thinking about the past and the future—we try to make sense of what has already happened, and we ponder what is to come. Then we add incredibly powerful devices to our lives, flood our senses and brains with massive amounts of information, and our present moments become truly jam-packed.

It has become substantially *harder to stay* in the present moment. And, it has become substantially *easier to try* to do more than one thing in that present moment.

The Attention Economy

Where does our attention go during a typical day? How many times do we pick up our phones? How often do we check our texts and emails? How frequently do we log on to social media, use apps, play games, watch the news, or just browse the internet?

All those glances at our phones may be entertaining and informative for us, but they are even more valuable to someone else in the “attention economy.” Our attention is a prized possession, and yet we tend to give it away for free, perhaps on the dubious promise of quick entertainment, social connection, information, or something we think we want or need.

In the 2020 Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, Tristan Harris, former Google design ethicist and cofounder of the Center for Humane Technology, repeats a saying that describes how many Silicon Valley giants have built their empires: “If you’re not paying for the product, then you are the product.” The more attention we give to our devices, the more valuable the companies who are behind the screens become, and quite often, the less we get done.

Our devices don't have feelings (yet!)—if they did, they would be equivalent to the needy narcissistic partner for whom no amount of attention is ever enough. They superficially appear to care about you, give you just enough positive feedback to keep you interested in them, but never genuinely ask how you feel about your relationship. You doubt that you should get more serious, but it's too easy to stay.

Monotasking is not about giving up our devices. It's about making the choice for ourselves where our attention goes in every moment.

Let's jump into the twelve monotasks and start building our monotasking muscles.

PART II

THE TWELVE MONOTASKS

TASK 1: READING

In the spring of 2019, I was exhausted, depleted, and very distracted. For the previous three years, I had been constantly battling and recovering from one thing or another. First it was a hole in my head (true story—more on that later!), then cancer (Non-Hodgkin lymphoma), and then divorce.

All these personal challenges had taken some or all of my attention for a long time. I made it through each one and emerged on the other side, but I was drained—physically, emotionally, and financially. A full recovery would require far more energy, focus, and creative problem-solving than I had ever imagined possible.

While I had kept my business going through all the turmoil, it was now suffering. I started Juniper Books in 2001 and had achieved a long run of growth and profitability. Then came 2017, cancer, hundreds of hours of chemotherapy treatments, and lots of time away from the office. While I was fighting for my life, Juniper Books racked up a substantial loss and experienced a heavy load of office drama that would need time to settle and heal.

After I finished chemo, I wanted to pretend I was fine and that I had my old energy back. However, I was faking it—the truth was, I was beyond exhausted. I wanted to inspire others with my optimism and work ethic, but this time I didn't have the reserves to back it up.

I put in long hours at the office, got up early, and worked late into the night. I was constantly on my phone, on email, and traveling. I was also multitasking nonstop. I was doing all this because I was afraid that the business I had worked so hard to build over eighteen years and keep alive during cancer and divorce would collapse during my recovery.

At the same time, my kids, then ten and twelve, really

needed my attention in our new reality of two homes and two parents they saw half the time. They were stressed, anxious, and having trouble sleeping. Night after night, my ten-year-old daughter had panic attacks before bedtime. She didn't want to go to school or on the upcoming spring trip. The arguments and anxiety would escalate every night as bedtime neared.

We tried new approaches to wind down and ease the stress, but nothing seemed to help. We watched shows together, we talked about the day, we made tea, we snuggled with stuffed animals, and I tried to explain rationally how there was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing worked. She was stressed, and I was distracted and thinking about my own problems. That didn't help.

Finally, one night when the arguments at bedtime had escalated again, it seemed like we were heading toward another late and stressful night. She had some reading homework she didn't want to do, so I proposed reading her book to her at bedtime, something I had not done since she was much younger. I picked up her copy of *My Side of the Mountain* and started reading aloud.

No sooner had I started reading the book to her than something magical happened for both of us. Her anxiety subsided and she listened. I focused my mind on reading and didn't think about my work.

That evening in the spring of 2019, we read for twenty minutes. My daughter fell asleep and slept through the night. Every bedtime after that when she was at my home, we read together until we finished *My Side of the Mountain*.

People talk a lot about the intellectual benefits of reading—how you can learn new things and experience the world from the perspective of great storytellers. While we did learn about fourteen-year-old Sam Gribble and how he survived on his own after running away from home, more important, we relearned how to bring our attention to a single point of focus. Our minds were scattered all over the place prior to reading. Once we started the book, they were concentrated in one place.

For my daughter and me, the act of reading calmed our nervous systems. Before picking up that book, the distractions of the world were commanding our multitasking brains to think

about this and worry about that. When we returned to life the day after reading each night, we found ourselves much better equipped to tackle one thing at a time. I methodically worked my way through the challenges in my business over the next few months with a newfound focus. My daughter worried less at bedtime and had the experience of a lifetime on the big class trip she had been anxious about.

Reading is one way—one highly effective way—to build monotasking muscles. When the distractions of life accumulate, reading is where I always start to bring my focus back and, along with it, my ability to get things done and to be happy.

The Facts About Reading

Humans invented reading a few thousand years ago, points out Maryanne Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist and child development expert, in her book *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. “And with this invention,” she writes, “we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which altered the intellectual evolution of our species.”

Books and reading have played a central role in how we have arrived where we are today.

These days, competition for our attention is fierce, and one result is that fewer Americans are reading at all. The Pew Research Center found that 27 percent of Americans had not read a book, in whole or in part, in the previous year. Further, younger people tend to read for less time than older individuals, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics report from June 2020.

But reading offers tremendous benefits to those who engage in the activity for even a few minutes a day. Ceridwen Dovey, a social anthropologist, wrote in *The New Yorker*, “Reading has been shown to put our brains into a pleasurable trance-like state, similar to meditation, and it brings the same health benefits of deep relaxation and inner calm. Regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers.”

Reading is also a particularly effective counterbalance to many of the negative effects of other forms of entertainment we

particularly lengthy and complicated ones.

Even though we don't realize it consciously, we quickly develop a mental map of the contents of a printed text, as if its argument or story were a journey unfolding through space. If you've ever picked up a book you read long ago and discovered that your hands were able to locate a remembered passage quickly, you've experienced this phenomenon. When we hold a physical publication in our hands, we also hold its contents in our mind. The spatial memories seem to translate into more immersive reading and stronger comprehension.

We live today in an age of distraction, in a constant whirlwind of information and data. The pages of a printed book provide a refuge, a calm place where our minds, freed from the stress of technological overload, are encouraged to connect with deeper thoughts and feelings. Far from being obsolete, the physical book, printed and bound, seems more vital than ever. It is a balm for the harried mind.

Why Monotasking Reading Will Help You Do Everything Better

Reading on a regular basis can be difficult, but it also offers tremendous benefits. Bringing your focus right here to the words on this page—and keeping it here long enough to truly absorb the content—takes some commitment. When you choose to read a printed book, generally the *only* thing you can do is read that book. You can't do anything else while you read, because if you take your eyes off the page you will no longer be reading. If you start thinking about something else, you won't absorb the information from the book.

We should appreciate reading *because* it takes our full focus. Few activities in our contemporary lives require as much concentration as reading. Every time we read, we are building

our monotasking muscles for future use in other areas.

For example, reading a science fiction book definitely takes more time and concentration than watching the movie version of the same title. The book might take fifteen hours to complete while watching the movie takes only two hours and little effort. Our attention may wander in both venues, but when we're watching the movie and only sort of paying attention, we can usually absorb enough that the story makes sense and we are entertained. However, with books, if your attention wanders, you may have to go back and begin again where your mind drifted. This is a feature, not a flaw! Reading from the printed page is the first step toward reclaiming our attention, focus, and time.

Other benefits of reading include increasing empathy, decreasing stress, and slowing mental decline as we age. In a 2009 study, researchers at Seton Hall University found that sustained reading (in this case "non-provocative" articles from a magazine) led to lowered blood pressure and heart rate, along with decreased feelings of psychological distress.

According to a study in *Innovation in Aging*, book readers outlived non-book readers by two years. People who read for three and a half hours a week were nearly 25 percent more likely to live longer than those who didn't read at all. Additional research suggests that as we grow older, keeping our brain engaged with activities such as reading helps us maintain and improve our cognitive functions.



YOUR READING MONOTASK

Read Daily For Twenty Minutes, On Paper

If you've taken a break from reading on a regular basis in recent years, you may find it difficult at first to locate your reentry point. But the great thing about reading is that the more consistently you read, the more you will likely enjoy it and find that giving a book your solitary focus comes naturally.

I consider myself a dedicated reader, but there have

been times in my adult life I've gone weeks or months without reading a book. The longer I go without reading, the harder it is to get back into it. Usually, these literary droughts occur when life has become super busy and I've let myself become too occupied with other things.

My reentry point to reading usually begins with short magazine articles (such as Talk of the Town pieces in *The New Yorker*), then longer stories (a *Vanity Fair* article, or perhaps a Hemingway short story), and finally on to an engaging novel or biography. Sometimes I'll read a page turner, such as an easy reading thriller or mystery novel, or I'll reread a book I love. Some of my favorites include *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and anything by Kurt Vonnegut—I can revisit these quickly; material I'm reading for the first time takes longer.

Here's what to do:

- Place your phone and all devices in a different room. Turn your notifications off. If you need to be reachable by your kids or school, or if you provide on-call services, adjust the settings so those calls can get through but silence all other notifications. (This will be true for just about every monotask in this book, so you're going to see this one repeatedly.)
- Choose reading material that appeals to you—rereading a favorite book from decades ago is fine, or it can be a magazine, a newspaper, whatever piques your interest. The act of reading and keeping your focus on the page is what's important at this point, not how intellectually challenging the content is. If it's been a long time since you have done any concentrated reading on paper, don't start out with *War and Peace* or a complicated medical journal if that's not your usual fare.
- Find a place to read that will be peaceful. You may need to get up a bit earlier or find a quiet spot on your lunch break, let family members or others know you need a

break, or choose a time when your children are busy with an activity that isn't likely to require your attention.

- Bring your full attention to the book or magazine while you read.
- Try to read at the same time every day for a week so that it becomes a routine.
- If your mind wanders, bring your focus back to the pages, and be gentle on yourself. Your brain has gotten used to flitting from task to task, and you're essentially in the process of retraining it, not unlike training your muscles if you're taking up a new sport or activity.
- As you build the routine of daily reading, add more time to this monotask. Perhaps you can do fifteen minutes in the morning and thirty minutes at night, or whatever best accommodates your schedule.
- As you observe the benefits of reading, you will find the right balance of time. Like other good habits that can make you feel better, such as exercise, you will notice that daily reading has a calming effect and improves your ability to move through life with new effectiveness and focus.
- Realize that the benefits of monotasking accrue over time. Stay with it.

Your Mantra: “Just Read”

A mantra is a word or phrase that you repeat over and over again while performing a spiritual or physical practice. Mantras usually have a dual effect achieved through the power of the words you are saying and the repetition of those words, which may bring a trancelike state, or simply a focused mind.

Monotasking can be daunting; it can often feel like you are not doing enough if you are only doing one thing at a time. Here

is where having a mantra for each monotask can be affirming—our mantra for reading is to repeat the phrase *Just read* over and over again in your head in order to focus on your primary task and let go of other distractions that come into your mind.

Whenever you find yourself distracted while reading, simply repeat the mantra in your head: *Just read*. Give yourself permission to monotask and focus only on the activity you are doing: reading.

Acknowledge that you are here at this moment to do one thing and one thing alone, and that is to read. Yes, you are capable of doing more. Yes, you have other things to do, but you will get to those later when it is their turn—now is the time to read.

Repeat it a few times if you need to: *Just read. Just read. Just read*. Tell yourself to bring your focus back to the book and only the book (or whatever you may be reading).

The Urge to Multitask

There are many distractions that will try to lure you away from reading. The key is to acknowledge them when they come to tempt you and then diligently return to your monotask. If you are experienced with meditation, this process of gently steering your attention back to your point of focus, without judgment, will be familiar.

If you have your phone, tablet, or computer nearby, there will always be an email that demands attention, a social media post to like, a game to play, a show to watch, a chore to do, a call to make, an errand to run, and so on. A study in the *Journal for the Association of Consumer Research* concluded that you don't even have to be using your phone for it to negatively affect your capabilities: "the mere presence of these devices reduces available cognitive capacity."

If you are reading on an electronic device, such as a Kindle or iPad, it is inherently a little more difficult to monotask reading than with a printed book. The temptation to be distracted looking up a word, switching to a different app, or multitasking while reading can be very strong. One option you may want to consider is to turn off the wi-fi on your device or

monotasking is all about.

The Task in Your Past

Sometimes it is helpful to look to our past in order to build confidence and familiarity with a task to master it again. There was likely a time that each of us did some or all of the tasks in this book with complete focus. We are all fully capable, but we've gotten busy, we've become distracted, and we're constantly in a rush. You may find monotasks in this book where looking backward helps you connect with the inner monotasker from your youth; it does not have to be every task.

Was there a time in your past when you were a good reader? Perhaps when you were younger, when you were in school, or when you went through a training program for work? Even if there wasn't, that doesn't mean you can't learn to read effectively now.

Most people read a lot more when they were younger simply because reading was required for school assignments and because they had more spare time. When reading became optional and we could choose what activities to spend our time on, perhaps our reading consumption declined in favor of other media and hobbies. Looking back, if we were once a reader able to finish books in a matter of days or weeks, we can again rebuild the attention span and commitment to do so now.

One of my clients at Juniper Books loves having a collection of her favorite childhood books in her home. She doesn't read the books anymore, but she uses that bookshelf both to bring a smile to her face and remind her that she has been a lifetime reader. She has other contemporary books to read; those childhood volumes act as encouragement to sit down with her current reading list.

The great thing about reading as an adult is that we can make the conscious choice to do so for our own benefit and self-care. In most cases, no one is going to make you give a book report or force you to finish a book by a certain date. If we look at reading as a means to an end instead of an end in itself, and channel our lifetime experience as readers, we can hopefully find the time and motivation to improve our lives through a