

How to read more books

An article submitted to U3A Members by Prof Yoram Barak

Modern life can feel too frantic for books. Use these habit-building strategies to carve out time for the joy of reading

by Christian Jarrett

New York City, 21 June 2020. *Photo by Jeenah Moon/Reuters*

Christian Jarrett is a senior editor at Aeon+Psyche, with particular responsibility for writing and commissioning at Psyche. A cognitive neuroscientist by training, his books include *The Rough Guide to Psychology* (2011) and *Great Myths of the Brain* (2014).



Need to know

I envy voracious book readers. They seem worldly and wise. Also, whatever is happening in their lives, they're never completely on their own – they always have their books. My mother is one of these life-long devourers of literature, for whom books are a constant companion. She recalls contracting tuberculosis as an eight-year-old girl, before there was a vaccine, and being sent to spend six months at a convalescent home in Margate, more than 100 miles from her family. 'Books saved me from what would have been unbearable, allowing me

to escape from that bed to have adventures in other places and other lives,' she says.

Avid readers often look back on their book-reading with fondness. 'My first memories of reading are of my late mum taking me to our local library, and both of us taking out as many books as we could carry,' says Clare Reynolds,

author of the *Years of Reading Selfishly* [blog](#). ‘We didn’t have a car so had to make sure we could manage them all on the bus.’

Reynolds’s passion for reading continued through adolescence and led her to study English literature at the University of Leeds, but then the demands of work and family caught up with her, and for years she found herself in what she calls the ‘reading wilderness’. Anecdotally, many of us recognise this overwhelming sense of competing demands on our time. We hanker for the space to read more. We buy the books, they pile up, but we never get round to reading them – the Japanese even have a term for it, *tsundoku*.

Data back this up: a US [survey](#) found that more than one-third of adults report a desire to read more books, with book reading second only to exercise as the most wished-for activity. Similarly, in France, 65 per cent of people aged 15 years and over [said](#) they wished they read more books, rising to 77 per cent among those already reading at average levels.

If you’re one of these people, opening a book might have become something to do when you haven’t got anything else going on, which is almost never. It’s as if you decided at some point, likely without conscious thought, that even though you love books, book reading is effectively the least important thing in your life – you’ll squeeze it in, if you can. And if you are clinging to the remnants of a book reading habit, I’ll bet you save it for the end of the day, or perhaps only for when you’re on holiday.

To read more books, you need to make it a higher priority, which means changing your daily habits and routines to accommodate more reading. People who are ‘super readers’ by virtue of their profession – such as literary editors, agents and book award judges – show us just how much reading is possible if you are willing and able to give it a high enough priority. Consider Ed Needham, former editor at magazines such as *FHM* and *Rolling Stone*, who in 2018 launched his own magazine, *Strong Words*, which features more than 100 book reviews every month. Needham reads or listens to every one of the reviewed books. ‘I just have to find the time, there’s no way around it,’ he says. ‘I produce an issue of *Strong Words* every six weeks, and we worked out that for five of those six weeks I read the equivalent of *War and Peace* every week.’

When reading books is your livelihood or essential to fulfil your responsibilities, then it becomes the priority around which the rest of life must

bend. You don't need to go as far as Needham, of course, but to read more books you do need to take a hard look at whether, given the value you place on books, you are providing the activity with the attention and time it deserves in your life.

‘Sometimes, you just need the slightest encouragement to displace something that isn't earning its keep in your routine,’ says Needham. ‘I remember [the US filmmaker and writer] John Waters saying he found it really easy to read every night because he never watched television. That made me realise it is really easy to stop watching television, because I get more from books than I do from the vast majority of television programmes.’

When there are so many options competing for our time, it's worth reminding yourself of the unique rewards of book reading. I read the newspaper every morning and my day job involves reading countless essays and articles, but when I manage to find the time to immerse myself in a quality nonfiction book, it's a wholly different experience – you can almost feel the presence of the author alongside you on a personal intellectual journey. By the end, you're somehow changed, you see the world differently. And although TV and video games of course offer escapism, there's nothing quite like devouring the pages of a beautiful novel, sitting quietly in one place while letting words transport you to another. Screens show you what's happening; novels, by contrast, construct those fictions within your mind, allowing you to become anyone, and go anywhere.

What to do

It will take significant effort for you to read more books, at least at first. To succeed long-term, you need to develop new reading habits, so that reading is something you do without resorting to conscious effort and willpower. But before getting into details of how to do this, there are some preliminary steps to ease the way.

The first is to reflect on *why* you want to read more books. Benjamin Gardner is a social psychologist at King's College, London and an expert on the psychology of habits. His theory of habit formation begins with the need for sufficient motivation. ‘Think about why is it exactly you want to do it? What would the benefits be? Answering these kinds of questions can make you more motivated,’ he says.

There's little doubt that you will benefit from reading more books. People who read literary fiction in particular tend to be better at reading others' [emotions](#) and have greater [moral sensitivity](#), possibly due to their [simulation](#) of the lives of complex characters; and reading nonfiction will increase your knowledge and broaden your mind. In fact, reading books is considered a cognitive '[reserve building](#)' activity that could help to protect you from Alzheimer's and related illnesses. However, also relevant here is the distinction between intrinsic motivation, which means you find reward in doing something for its own sake, and extrinsic motivation, which is when you're motivated by the promise of some kind of external pay-off. Note that, especially when starting out, you are more likely to prevail if you choose books to read that are inherently enjoyable for you, be that because you find them entertaining, calming, moving or intellectually stimulating and fascinating. This might require some trial and error until you find a genre and/or author that matches your tastes and priorities.

James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits* (2018), agrees. He recalls the approach of the Indian-American entrepreneur and investor Naval Ravikant:

[Ravikant] says something along the lines of 'Read whatever the hell you want to read in the beginning' because the real thing that you're focused on is building the habit of reading, not necessarily the knowledge. Like if you just want to read romance novels. Awesome. Read that. If you just want to read fantasy, read that. Read whatever helps you fall in love with the act of being a reader or the habit of reading. And once you fall in love with the habit, then it's easy ... Now you've got a lot of options because it's part of your life.

A related point is giving yourself permission to quit books that you're not enjoying. 'I had spent so many years picking up books that people had told me I "should" read,' says Reynolds. 'I diligently ploughed my way through literature prize longlists and shortlists. I would try to push on until the end of every one, even when I really didn't enjoy them. Then one day, I just put a book down I didn't love, and picked up another one which I did. It was then the idea for my Reading Selfishly blog and ethos was born.'

'A lot of people feel locked in from the start,' adds Clear. 'But the little phrase I try to keep in mind is *start more books, quit most of them, read the great ones twice*. I think that a lot of readers would be well-served if they did that.'

A next preliminary step is to look at your surroundings. How easy is it for you to grab a book – paper or digital – and start reading? ‘The more frictionless [a habit] is, the easier it is to pick it up,’ says Clear. He recommends making changes to your digital and physical environments so that reading is easy and effortless – including making reading apps especially prominent on your phone, and placing books in the physical places that you most often frequent. ‘Being around books makes it very easy to pick them up and check them out. If you want something to be a big part of your life, make it a big part of your environment.’ Of course, if you are prone to *tsundoku*, this is a lifestyle tip that you have already mastered – just try to remember to actually pick up those books.

A final preliminary step is to consider your goals. Clear recommends having modest goals for your new reading habit initially. If you try to achieve too much, too quickly, you’re more likely to fail. ‘I would say giving yourself the permission to just read one page per day or something like that,’ he says. Clear calls this ‘the two-minute rule’. By getting into the routine of just ‘showing up’, even for just 120 seconds, the new activity is more likely to become an entrenched part of your daily routine. ‘There is a deep truth about habits in general that people overlook,’ Clear says, ‘which is a habit must be established before it can be improved.’

Now, having laid the foundations for your new reading habit, then according to Gardner’s model, the next stage involves creating new ‘action associations’, which in the context of books means reading often enough in the same situation enough times until a strong, learned association is formed between being in that situation (or that time of day) and reading.

Gardner says that, the more specific you can be, the more likely you are to succeed. So, think about the specifics of when and where you are going to do the extra book reading, such as with your breakfast, on the train to work, with your midmorning coffee, when you’ve finished getting the kids ready for bed, or after dinner. This cue to read could be a set time, an event or a particular situation – Gardner says it doesn’t matter which, as long as this specific opportunity for reading happens consistently in your life.

You might even find it useful to keep a detailed diary for a week, of what you do and when, to see the patterns that currently exist in your daily routines.

‘Most of us are creatures of habit already,’ says Gardner. ‘Many of us commute to work. We’ll catch the same train. Or our evening and bedtime routines will be the same. So, in that respect, you can kind of piggyback your new habit onto what you already do habitually. It can be easy if you know what you’re aiming to do, and when and where you’re going to do it.’

Once you’ve found the moments in your daily life when you could conceivably begin a new book-reading habit, then keep reading in that same context as consistently as you can. ‘Action association is at the heart of a habit,’ says Gardner. ‘If you keep doing it, you keep reinforcing that association. And as that association is reinforced, so control over the behaviour passes from a kind of effortful reflective processing system to a much more automatic system. It becomes impulse driven. You go into the situation that triggers the association and you start doing it, without even thinking about what you’re going to be doing.’

As you build your new reading habit, be realistic about the challenge ahead, and try not to fret too much about any lapses. ‘I think people are often put off by the fact that they think it’s going to be really easy to do and then they can’t maintain it, so they just disengage,’ says Gardner. ‘But if you say to them, actually it is going to be difficult, but it will become easier. That can give some people the motivation to keep going, even if they do experience, you know, initial barriers on the way.’

Key points

- Spend time thinking about why you want to read more books. The more motivation you have, the more likely you are to succeed. Start out reading books you enjoy, and don’t be afraid to quit books you don’t like.
- Lay the groundwork for your new reading habit by making books salient in the physical and digital environments you encounter every day.
- Set modest goals, at least at first. Aim to read just a little each day.
- Look at your daily routines and your existing habits. Consider where you could build in a new habit of book reading, in effect piggybacking on your existing habits. The more specific you can be, the more likely you are to succeed.

- Try as hard as you can to always read whenever you are in that situation, time or place. Eventually, you will form a new effortless reading habit.
- Track your progress by recognising every day that you managed to read, rather than by ticking off completed books. After two weeks, you should start to feel that your new habit is deepening.
- Consider whether your social world supports book reading. You could try joining a book group (see the Links and Books section below) to chat with like-minded readers.
- Cultivate your identity as an avid reader of books. Write a sentence outlining the kind of person you want to be, and think about how book reading will serve that aim.

Learn more

As you work hard to find the time and space in your life to read more books, you might be wondering how long until it gets easier. In his own research, focused on building healthy eating and exercise habits, Gardner has asked people to begin performing a new behaviour once each day, and then report how it feels. ‘We find after a couple of weeks, they tend to say, yeah, this is starting to become part of my routine ... they start to feel like it’s an ingrained part of what they do. So I would put the figure at around two weeks to start seeing a noticeable difference,’ he says.

You might also be thinking about what you’re going to have to give up to make space for more reading in your life. Unless you currently spend time each day sitting around doing nothing, it’s inevitable that, as you increase your book reading, other activities will have to fall by the wayside. You could confront this head-on by revisiting the audit of your everyday routines and identifying unwanted habits that you could give up. And just as it’s helpful to establish new cues to associate with reading, you could look to remove the cues to your unwanted habits, such as keeping the TV remote out of sight in a drawer, or setting a rule not to take your phone upstairs. ‘Recognising that [acquiring a new habit] it is a substitution process is quite useful,’ says Gardner. ‘But then you have to come up with your own strategies based on what the old behaviour is and what the cues are to think about how you can disrupt that old habit.’

Clear recommends a less direct approach to habit substitution. ‘I don’t know that it’s that productive to focus on what you’re giving up or what you’re sacrificing,’ he says. Build your new book-reading habit, he says, and other unimportant things will naturally fall away. ‘The act of building good habits is like a plant. One plant crowding out another. If you just focus on cultivating this new plant, a lot of bad habits kind of fall by the wayside anyway.’

If you’ve been putting the advice in this Guide into practice but you’re finding it difficult to keep going, an effective tool you could use to sustain your motivation is to monitor your progress. At least at first, Clear advises against ticking off each book you read or aiming for an overly ambitious goal, such as reading a certain number of books per month or per year. Far better, he says, is to apply his ‘two-minute rule’ and track a more modest attainment, such as recording each day that you manage to read just a page or just for five minutes. You can adjust according to your own levels (such as each time you finish a chapter or read for half an hour), the important thing is to choose a realistic, easily obtainable target in the early stages and track your success reaching that.

‘Visualising your progress is a powerful and fruitful thing to do,’ says Clear. ‘The feeling of progress is very motivating to the human brain. You want to feel like you’re moving forward, if possible, in that moment. That’s why tracking your daily reading is more productive than tracking when the book is finished, because the book might take you three weeks, but by tracking your reading every day, you get a little signal [of progress and success] along the way.’

A further idea to help you grow your reading habit is to think about your social world. Just as making books prominent in your physical and digital environments will help to lay the foundations for more reading, your social environment is also important, especially for deepening and sustaining the habit. Sharing a pleasure multiplies it. If none of your close family or friends reads books, then reading will only ever be a private activity, separate from your personal relationships and to be squeezed in around them. If this is your situation, I’m not suggesting you ditch all your buddies, but I’d recommend seeking out one or more friends who read, for instance by joining a book group – physical or virtual (see Links and Books below). ‘Reading was, and still is, a way for me to connect with people,’ says Reynolds.

Related to the notion of connecting with other readers is to think about cultivating your own sense of self and identity as a reader. For avid readers, their love of books is often central to who they are, and this shapes their attitude to reading and the priority they give it in life. ‘I say this a lot with habits and identity in general,’ says Clear. ‘Like the real goal is not to run a marathon. The goal is to become a runner. Right? The goal is not to do a silent meditation retreat, but to become a meditator. And that’s definitely true here. The real goal is not to read 30 books, it’s to become a reader.’

Clear recommends spending some time thinking about the kind of person you want to be and how reading more books will help you fulfil that aim. It might not be for everyone to make this too explicit, but if you think it might help, you could try writing out a sentence like ‘I am the type of person who loves reading books’ or ‘I am the type of person who loves reading about other cultures’ and reminding yourself of that identity frequently. This then provides a frame for the actions that you choose to take each day. Is switching on the TV straight after work something a book-lover does? No. Is picking up a book and reading for a few minutes? Yes. ‘What it does, like every action you take, is a vote for the type of person you want to become,’ says Clear. ‘And now suddenly you see reading in this more powerful light. It’s like every time I pick up a book and read a page, it becomes a vote for this, a new identity that I’m trying to build.’

Links & books

- The online reading community [Goodreads](#) features hundreds of book groups and clubs. You’ll need to register (it’s free) and then click the ‘community’ tab.
- [The Rebel Book Club](#) is one of the most popular non-fiction book clubs in the world, and features live physical and virtual events for members. Many newspapers and other organisations also offer virtual book clubs, such as [The Guardian’s](#) reading group (the writer Sam Jordison hosts online discussions on Tuesdays). There are also numerous celebrity book clubs you could try, if that’s to your taste. Popular ones include [Oprah Winfrey’s](#) book club and [Reese Witherspoon’s](#) book group, which is hosted on Instagram.

- [Five Books](#) invites experts to recommend five books in their specialist area. To get a meta-take on your growing reading habit, you could check out their [selection](#) of five books on the history of reading.
- In this [article](#), Goodreads ‘super readers’, who read hundreds of books a year, share their top tips for reading more books.
- If you’re constantly on the go, consider trying Amazon’s [Whispersync for Voice](#) – the company offers more than 30,000 titles that you can read as ebooks in parallel as you listen to them as audio books, with your progress tracked seamlessly between the two formats.
- Finally, if you want to read more about reading, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (2018) by Maryanne Wolf takes a look at the psychology and neuroscience of deep reading in the age of so much digital distraction.