



READ MORE BOOKS NOW

Lesson #10

Retain What You Read

Welcome the final lesson in our course! By now, we've learned tons of strategizing for reading more books. We've seen how to build a great library, how to increase our reading rate through variation and by setting challenges, and we've learned how to mark up a book and engage the author.

But here's the big problem you'll inevitably face as you start reading more books: how do you remember all that you read? Without retention, our reading is mostly worthless, right? After all, would you rather finish and *remember* 50 books a year, or finish and *forget* 300?

Thankfully, there are four simple steps to remembering what you read: revisiting the book immediately, reviewing the book, saving your notes, and applying the book's main ideas.

First, revisit the books you read. As soon as you finish the last page, turn back to the beginning and briefly skim through the book. This will only take a few minutes but it's the best key to retention. Some readers just flip through and read their notes, focusing only on the most important terms and sentences. Others read the chapter summaries they recorded at the beginning of each chapter. Other readers do what I call a "Post X-ray," which is similar to the X-ray strategy we covered before, except



you do it *after* finishing a book instead of before. You review the book summary, the Table of Contents, and the first and last paragraphs of each chapter.

However you do it, spend 15 minutes with a book after finishing. It will crystalize the main points and offer a huge return for a small investment of time.

It's also worth returning to each book after a substantial break. Most of us need a little time for ideas to settle in our minds, for them to really stick. Tony Reinke has a good analogy. He says:

"Like driving down a gravel road, reading a book kicks up a lot of dust in the brain, and it's helpful to let the dust settle before we evaluate the book. Often the book's value will become clearer after a few days, after your mind has processed the details. The thoughts that linger in your mind about a book are the thoughts that you want to capture."

Sometimes a book won't make sense at first, or its full value will not reveal itself until months after finishing. So when you finish it, do a quick skim immediately, but then return again after the book has had time to settle in.

The second step to remembering what you read is to immediately write a short review. You can do this on Amazon.com, another online book service, or on a blog, or even on your social media profile. Ideally, you want to do this within a day or two after finishing the book. Try to constrain your review to only 4-6 sentences. This will force you to discern the book's Big Idea—what it's *really about* in the end. You'll also want to analyze how well the author communicated that Big Idea, and how, or whether, the idea is valuable.

Finally, in your review, commit to a response: Do you agree or disagree with the book? Would you recommend it to friends or advise against it? Summarize the book, settle on your view, and perhaps add a powerful quote or two from the book, and voila! You have your review. And that succinct and memorable summary isn't just for others; it's for you, too. The very act of writing the review will lock the summary in your mind.

The third step to retention is to save your notes and make them easily accessible. You can take notes in your books, but they won't be much help if you lose them, or when you're away from your personal library. Your notes should be

convenient, organized, and preferably searchable. There are several ways to do this. Some authors go through a book and manually copy their notes onto notecards. Ryan Holiday uses this method. He says:

“I have the same schedule with every book I read. After a mandatory 1-2 week waiting period after finishing, I go back through the book with a stack of 4x6 index cards. On these cards, I write out—by hand—all the passages I have noted as being important. It might seem strange but it’s an old tactic used by everyone from Tobias Wolff to Montaigne to Raymond Chandler. (Who once said: ‘When you have to use your energy to put those words down, you are more apt to make them count.’) Each one of these cards is then assigned a theme and filed in my index card box. The result of 4-5 years of doing this? Thousands of cards in dozens of themes—from Love to Education to Jokes to Musings on Death. I return to these pieces of wisdom when I am writing, when I need help, or when I am trying to solve a business problem. It has been an immense resource.”

Personally, that’s too much for me. I still keep my notes in the books themselves, but I also like storing them digitally. Digital notes won’t deteriorate or get lost over time and, unlike physical notecards, you can quickly search through them. That’s why I created a massive spreadsheet where I stored all my notes, using columns such as “Author,” “Book,” “Quote,” “Page Number,” “Topic,” etc. and I dumped all my notes in there. However, the spreadsheet quickly became unmanageable and I gave it up.

I next turned to Evernote. Evernote is a free tool that captures online “notes”—which can be articles, pictures, bullet-pointed lists, or even voice memos—and stores them online, in the cloud. You can then access your notes, and search them, on any device.

Here’s how I use it: when adding book notes into Evernote, I type three things into a blank “note”: an outline of the book, a list of important terms and topics, and my favorite passages or quotes. The best part about Evernote is that all the text you enter is immediately searchable. That means I can pull out my phone or tablet (using the Evernote app), or turn on my computer, and search for a particular author, word, or quote and see every place it shows up in my note collection. Evernote also has a strong text-recognition service, which means instead of transcribing your notes, you can just snap a picture of a book page, upload it to Evernote, and the program will automatically recognize the text (and, again, add it to your searchable collection.)

So for saving notes in print books, Evernote is the way to go. But eBooks are much easier to handle. I read most of my eBooks on my Kindle, which offers note-taking features, but most people don't know you can go online, into your Amazon account, and see all the notes and highlights you've made, all in one place.

For example, if you visit your personal Kindle Notes and Highlights page, which I'll link below this video, you'll find a chronological list of all the passages you've marked up in your entire eBook collection. Good luck trying to create something like that for your print books! The service also allows you to find a quote, then jump back into the book, onto the exact page where the note is from, so you can read the passage in context—pretty cool.

The fourth and final step to remembering what you read is to apply the book's main ideas. Take your favorite quotes, or your favorite ideas, and implement them in the real world. Ryan Holiday has several suggestions:

“Drop them in conversation. Allude to them in papers, in emails, in letters, and in your daily life. How else do you expect to absorb them? Try adding a line to a report you're doing, find solace in them during difficult times, or add them to Wikipedia pages. Do something.”

Don't quote books just to sound smart. But dropping a well-placed reference can illuminate your writing or speaking.

In the end, it might only take a few days to finish a book, but if you read it well, and take good notes, it can provide years of value in return. Anatole Broyard says, “A good book is never exhausted. It goes on whispering to you from the wall.” That's your ultimate goal with reading—to find valuable books that pay dividends for years to come.

John Lowes, professor of literature at Harvard, beautifully describes the result of all these tips working in tandem, when you finally have your own personal library full of books you've enjoyed, with your own notes and thoughts. He says:

“To be able to turn at will, in a book of your own, to those passages which count for you, is to have your wealth at instant command. Your books become a record of your intellectual adventures, and a source of endless pleasure

when you want, as you will, to turn back to the things which have given delight, or stirred imagination, or opened windows in the past.”

Thanks for joining me on this course, and I wish you happy reading as you embark on your own literary adventures.