



READ MORE BOOKS NOW

Lesson #3

Challenge Yourself

If you're like me, you find it difficult to read for a long period of time. I knock out around 75 books per year, but that's not because I have some superhuman reading endurance. And it's not because I finish whole books in one sitting. I don't.

In fact, I don't think I've ever read over 100 pages in one sitting. I'm not wired that way. I can't just sit down for five hours and read a book from beginning to end. And chances are, you're not wired that way either. Our attention spans are short, our time is precious, and thanks to the digital world, it's becoming harder to read for long periods.

Everyday we skim hundreds of emails, websites, blog posts, and social media updates. We train our minds to prioritize volume over substance. On the Internet, we read a mile wide but an inch deep, right? It's no surprise then that when we finally sit down with a book, aiming to read deeply, we find it extremely difficult.

The technology writer Nicholas Carr wrote a provocative article in *The Atlantic* titled, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" He summed up our dilemma: "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski." That describes our frustration, right? "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."



So what can we do? How can we battle against these difficulties and actually get ourselves to read deeper and for longer? The main way is by challenging ourselves. We need to set reading challenges—or goals—to keep pushing us along.

Probably the simplest challenge is to read a certain number of pages per day.

The average American reads 250 words per minute, and the average book happens to average around 250 words per page. That means if you commit to a solid 30 minutes of reading per day you'll conquer about 30 pages per day, enough to breeze through a new book each week.

You can definitely do that. Don't have to be intimidated by reading 50 books in a year. Just focus on 30 minutes per day. That's it! (By the way, the Bible, probably the most daunting book in Western literature, contains around 775,000 words. So if you read the Bible for just 30 minutes per day, you'll get through it in a year—three times over!)

Another way to challenge yourself is to commit to finishing a set number of pages in each sitting. In most cases, I push myself to finish at least 20 pages per sitting. I rarely have trouble with that. Or I determine to finish my current chapter before finishing. This sort of challenge provides a definitive end, some goal to shoot for. It gives you a way to track your progress ("I'm halfway done with this session!") and a finish line to push toward ("Just two more pages!").

If you're reading on a Kindle, this is even easier. The Kindle, and the Kindle app if you're using other devices, shows several markers to track your progress. It tells you what percentage of the book you've finished, so you can commit to finishing a certain percentage each day. It also calculates your actual reading rate, and uses that to estimate how many hours and minutes you have left in each chapter and in the whole book. So as you're reading, you can instantly determine whether you have 10 minutes to go in the chapter, or 30 minutes. Audible does the same thing for audiobooks, telling you how many minutes you've completed and how many you have left, both in the chapter and in the book. You can use this data to push yourself on to the finish line.

Another good challenges, which I haven't done by lots of my friends have, is participate in a Shelf Challenge each year. Once a year—and it doesn't have to be on January 1; you can start today—you clear out an entire shelf and determine to fill it within the next year. Each time you finish a book, you add it to the shelf. Throughout

the year, the shelf provides a visual reminder of all the books you've finished. It will also identify how much you have left to fill. Some people even decide to keep the books on the shelf after the year is over, turning their bookshelf into a literary time capsule. Imagine five years from now being able to look at five shelves in your house, instantly seeing what books you read at five different periods in your life. That's pretty cool. Books shape our lives, and this is one way to remember their effects.

Finally, an effective way to challenge yourself is by joining a reading group.

Reading groups hold you accountable because you know you have to finish the book, or the assigned reading, to discuss it at the next meeting. Knowing you'll have to speak about it with others will ensure you finish the reading on time. Chances are, there are lots of reading groups connected to your local library, church, or field of interest. Call around and do a few Google searches. But if you can't find any, create your own! Email a group of friends, even a group of friends online, and see if they'd be willing to meet on a regular basis—weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly—and discuss good books. Even better, decide to discuss the book at a local restaurant or bar (you'll get far more interest!)

About five years ago, I helped start a local G.K. Chesterton reading group, which meets at a local Irish pub. Chesterton was already one of my favorite authors but the reading group pushed me to read several new titles I hadn't yet discovered. Now, having read one book each month, I've finished over 60 books by and about Chesterton. I've also made tons of new friends, and we've shared great discussions about the books.

I used to be in another book club with a friend who shares my love for philosophy, but ours was one-on-one. Since he lived over a thousand miles away, we decided to connect monthly via Skype, and discuss one chapter per month. We loved it, and it was especially great because we didn't have to drive anywhere for the discussion. You probably have at least one friend, somewhere in the country, willing to discuss new books with you. Connect with them, settle on a book, come up with a reading schedule, and then decide on a regular time when you'll chat about it, either through phone or video.

Setting challenges, or joining book groups with assigned readings, will definitely help you read more. But at the same time, you also have to ward off threats that distract you from reading deeply. In other words, you have to play defense as much as offense.

Probably the biggest culprits are cell phones. Having a cell phone near you while reading is like putting a strobe light on your night stand. Good luck focusing. At worst, when you sit down to read, you need to turn your phone to silent, put it in your pocket, or leave it face down on the table. Shut off notifications, turn off text alerts, set your ringtone to silent—not vibrate. (This is easy on many phones, like the iPhone—just set it to airplane mode and it shuts off everything.)

But even better—and this is what I do—leave your phone in a different room so you won't even be tempted to touch it while reading. I've basically come to the realization that if my phone is near me, or even in the same room, I won't be able to read more than 10-15 minutes without being strongly tempted to check it. The only way I can sit down for deep reading is to turn it completely off or put it in another room.

Likewise, if you're distracted by TV or radio, turn those off too. Some people like to listen to music while they read. That's fine, but make sure it's soft, reflective, instrumental music—think movie soundtracks or a calm, quiet coffee shop. Don't choose music with loud vocals, which tend to make reading difficult since it's hard for your mind to juggle the singer's voice, the author's voice, and your internal voice.

Now, is all that hard to do? Is it difficult to shut off your phone, TV, and favorite music while reading? Absolutely. It's tough. And here's what makes it even more difficult: I guarantee the moment you turn off your electronics and commit to reading, all sorts of random thoughts will flood your mind. You'll suddenly think of pressing to-do items, random questions you'd like answered immediately, emails you want to send, or important ideas that demand attention. You can't avoid them. It's not a matter of *if* they'll come, but when.

Don't let them derail you, though. Keep a little slip of paper and a pen next to you while reading, so you can jot down these random thoughts with them totally derailing your reading time. If you need to look up a word or website, write it down. If there's something you need to do, or someone you need to call, write it down. Then, after you've finished your reading—only after you've hit your goal—you can address them.

C.S. Lewis once said that, "The only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while the conditions are still unfavorable. Favorable conditions never come."

It's fun to dream of periods when we're sitting in a calm, undistracted environment, with a devoted will, producing several hours of uninterrupted reading. But that almost never happens. More often than not, you have to battle against the incessant distractions that keep you from reading books. You have to conquer the allure of your cell phone. You have to set specific goals and drive toward meeting them.

The good news is that this gets easier over time. Neuroscientists have shown how the mind is like a muscle, and the more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes. Practice deep reading over and over, and eventually reading for 30 minutes will seem like a breeze. In fact, you'll start carving out more time because a half hour will no longer be enough.

Once you've reached that point, you're then ready to move on to the next reading key, which is to master your books instead of letting them master you. That's what we'll cover in the next lesson. See you there!