



READ MORE BOOKS NOW

Lesson #6 Change It Up

In the last video, we've learned some key lessons, namely that few books deserve to be read, and even fewer deserve to be finished. X-raying helps us determine which books are worth deeper reading.

Yet I know you might be thinking, "OK, but then what? What do we do *after* we've found valuable books? How do we ensure we actually get through them?" Well, that's what the second half of this video course will cover, lessons 6-10.

In this lesson, we'll focus on one key strategy for maintaining a strong reading rate: **variation**.

Take a second, and picture a bodybuilder. Good bodybuilders know that you can't work out the same muscles, in the same way, every day. That's because when you lift weights, and do strength training, you create tiny tears in your muscles. When you rest after a tough workout, your body pumps extra blood into those muscles, resulting in new tissue growth, which produces bigger muscles. But if you don't rest between workouts, the rejuvenation process never occurs and your muscles won't grow. Instead, they'll tire and break down.

A similar thing occurs with reading. If you read the same books, at the same speed, in the same place, in the same format, your reading rate will slowly atrophy over time.



You won't grow. You'll get bogged down and burnt out. But if you change things up, you'll constantly reinvigorate your reading muscles. And that means you'll read more books.

Specifically, good readers typically vary four things: genre, format, novelty, and depth. Let's look at those one by one.

First, vary the genre. My two favorite reading topics are philosophy and theology. I could spend weeks reading nonstop about life's big questions: What's the meaning of life? Why does the universe exist? Is there a God, and if so, what is he like? But the truth is, whenever I read a few books in a row on either topic, theology or philosophy, I usually get burnt out. So, in order to recharge my mental batteries and prime myself for this heavy sort of reading, I always need to sprinkle in lighter books.

That's why I usually juggle around 4-7 books at a time. Now, when I tell people that, they're shocked. They'll say, "I could never read that many books at once! How can you possibly remember what's going on in each book?" The answer is, "It's easier than you think." And this variation provides a huge boost to your reading rate.

Here's why: First, the multiple books usually means different genres. For example, my current reading stack includes a philosophy book, a theology book, a novel, some young adult fiction, a biography, a business book, and a book on writing. It's easy not to mix up the books because they're so different; the topics rarely blur into each other.

Another reason why juggling multiple books helps you read more is that you can easily match the right book to your current mood. G.K. Chesterton once said, "There is a great deal of difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and a tired man who wants a book to read." If I'm tired or mentally drained, I typically grab something light and fun—novels, sports books, or simple fiction. These are the books I keep on my nightstand, or read on my Kindle, because they're easy to dip in and out of.

However, if I'm hungry for more serious reading, I turn to my stack of heavy philosophy, theology, biographies, and science. These books I keep next to my reading chair, or bring with me while flying on an airplane. I know they require extended periods of focus and uninterrupted reading, since they're more challenging genres.

By switching from book to book, and genre to genre, you'll ensure that one single book won't drag you down. You're diversifying your literary portfolio.

On a side note, this is why I like e-readers and audiobook apps, because they allow you to carry multiple books, from multiple genres, all on one device. So, it's extremely easy to flip from genre to genre, and you don't have to lug around several books.

So that's the first thing to vary, the genre. **Second, it's good to vary the format.** If you asked me five years ago about e-reading, I would have given you an earful about how digital reading is a sad substitute for *real* reading (i.e., print reading.) I would have told you how e-readers deprive you of the sensory benefits of paper books—the smell, the sight, and the feel of a large library. And I would have complained about how difficult it is to take notes within eBooks.

But my mind has totally changed. I've become an e-convert, and do roughly half my reading on digital devices. What happened? Well, several things turned me around. First, the convenience of digital. We've already seen how mobile devices like phones, tablets, and e-readers make it easy to always have a book, which is a huge benefit to your reading. Second, the price. In general, eBooks cost significantly less than their print counterparts. You can get many classics for free through Project Gutenberg, or just a couple dollars in the Amazon Kindle store. Third, the ability to synchronize my notes and highlighting across all my devices, and access them anywhere through the web (thanks to Amazon's free Kindle cloud service.)

Those are all great, but one more benefit, which people often pass over, is that eBooks simply offer a *different* reading experience than print. Switching back and forth between print and digital creates a nice rhythm for me. After spending a long day staring at a computer screen, I pick up a paperback. But when I'm tired of propping up a thick print book, I jump onto my e-reader. Thus the format itself can become one more thing to vary, and one more way to keep you from being stuck in a rut.

By the way, all of that applies to audiobooks. I personally find it difficult to sit down for three straight hours and read a print book. But I can easily spend one hour reading a paperback, another hour in the car listening to an audiobook, and then a final hour, at the end of the day, using my Kindle. It's far easier and more sustainable.

A third thing to vary is the novelty. We live in a culture that supremely values the “new.” We want the newest car, the newest phone, the newest clothes. But this can become poisonous when it comes to reading. When we only read the latest bestsellers, or the newest book on a particular topic, we often fall victim to “chronological snobbery,” which involves thinking that newer is automatically better.

C.S. Lewis, who coined that term, said, “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.”

Elsewhere, Lewis suggests, “A new book is still on its trial. . . It has to be tested against the great body of thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light. . . If you join at eleven o'clock a conversation which began at eight you will often not see the real bearing of what is said.”

The solution is to keep a nice balance between newer books and older ones. Lewis says, “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.”

For Lewis, an “old book” is one written before your current century. For me, it usually means a book written at least one decade ago. But either way, the more you vary the novelty of your books, the less likely you’ll get trapped in the narrow perspective of the current age.

Finally, a fourth thing to vary is the intensity or depth of reading. Francis Bacon famously said, “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some are to be chewed and digested.”

His point was that not all books deserve to read at the same level of depth. Some books we skim, like a jet-skier sailing across the surface. Others we browse, casually dipping in. But then some books we dive into, shooting down like a deep-sea diver.

Many factors determine how deep we should go into a particular book. One is our familiarity with the genre or topic. If we’re a novice, we probably can’t or shouldn’t dive too deep, but if we’re more experienced, we have the necessary tools for deep

exploration. Another factor is the quality of the content. Maybe we *could* go deep, but the content doesn't deserve it. Maybe it's disorganized or poorly written. Whatever the case, by varying our depth, we keep our reading muscles fresh.

It's also important to affirm that sometimes we need to push ourselves to read deeper than normal. As Mortimer Adler says, "You will not improve as a reader if all you read are books that are well within your capacity. Only books of that are above you will make you stretch your mind. And unless you stretch, you will not learn."

In the end, when we changed it up, when we vary our genre, format, novelty, and depth, we become like an expert bodybuilder, working out certain muscles on certain days so as to maximize our output. We're able to find the right book, at the right time, in the right format, whether that means a light spy-thriller on our Kindle, an ancient philosophy book in print, or the latest audiobook in the car.

Varied reading leads to better reading, and better reading leads to more reading.

Next up, we'll focus on the question of speed. Lots of people ask me about speed reading. Should we do it? Is it good? Bad? That's what you'll learn in the next lesson. See you there!