

The
COMPLETE GUIDE
to Remembering
WHAT YOU READ



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If you read a lot, but quickly forget most of the information you so eagerly soak up, this is for you. In 2016, writing about what I learned from 365 different books or their summaries taught me one, big lesson:

Read It When You Need It

Rhymes are easier to remember.

Nowadays, facts are available at the click of a button. A vast knowledge of facts might make you fun to talk to, but...

Being book-smart just for the sake of being book-smart is a vanity metric for your ego.

Don't learn solely for the sake of learning. Be a practitioner. Use the information you consume. Ironically, learning things right when you need them will also help you remember them better.

Why? To find out, let's look at...

How Memories Are Created

There are two types of memories:

1. Memories you make a *conscious* effort to form.
2. Memories you form *unconsciously* through experience.

The first type of memory is stored in your hippocampus. It's what happens when your new neighbor John introduces himself to you and you go: "John, John, John, John, John..." in your head, over and over again, to not forget it.

The second type is stored in your neocortex. When you went to Disneyland with your grandparents for the first time, got ice-cream, it fell on the floor, and the nice lady behind the counter gave you a new scoop, this experience ends up there.

Memories stored in the neocortex are *much stronger*, because each part of your memory is stored in a different section. For example, the taste of the ice-cream is stored in the synapses of the taste section, while the 1920's design of the ice-cream parlor is saved in the visual processing section.

More synapses in more locations means better recall, and that's why experiences are easier to remember.

Experts in any field, be it chess, kung fu or sales, become experts through repetition and deliberate practice. It's their experience of using what they learn that builds their memory. So don't just cram your hippocampus. Take what you learn and form experiences with it.

Read it when you need it.

Think of it in terms of input and output. When you have an output you're trying to generate (like a marketing plan for your business), you have something to tie the input to (a book about marketing).

Of course you can make up a reason to need it—like I did with writing every day last year. As long as it leads you to directly *apply* what you learn and turn it from nothing into something, that's fine.

Only then will learning be meaningful.

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As you can see, consuming information in a just-in-time manner with a strong reason to do so is the first and most important step towards retaining more of it. That said, once you've decided something you're about to read is important, you'll want to boost your memory to the max.

Here's how.

A Complete Guide to Remembering What You Read

When I look at the process from reading to retention, I see five phases. Let's walk through them, break them down and optimize our behavior along the way.

1. Previewing

In [10 Days to Faster Reading](#), before she covers any speed reading exercises whatsoever, Abby Marks-Beale reveals the most powerful way to read more:

Read less of the stuff you don't need to.

Before you even begin to run your finger across the paper or your eyes from pixel to pixel, ask:

1. Why am I reading this?
2. Why do I need the information that's in here?

This is your chance to truly live up to the “Read It When You Need It” motto. Once material passes the most important filter, you can do what Mortimer J. Adler called an inspectional read in his 1940 masterpiece How to Read a Book.

The goal of an inspectional read is to answer two more questions:

1. What is this book about?
2. What kind of book is this?

You can do this by skim-reading the following sections:

- The title page.
- The editor's blurb.
- The cover text.
- The table of contents.
- Introductory sections and important paragraphs of chapters that interest you.

This equips you with one of the most important enablers of information:

Context.

Having an idea of the overarching theme of a book, as well as the purpose its author had in mind, while writing it, will significantly improve how you catalogue its contents.

“Content is king, but context is God.”—Gary Vaynerchuk

2. Reading

The most common reason a book gets frustrating and we throw in the towel is that it takes too long to read. Let me clarify: It takes *us* too long to read.

Hence, Adler suggests you read the book cover to cover on your first pass through, but don't look up things you don't understand. Even without perfectly aligning every single piece of the puzzle right away, remaining aware of the context will allow you to arrange the final bits and details later on.

That said, there is one, massive counterpunch to be thrown here, which will strike a balance:

Pause after every paragraph.

This idea stems from Francine Prose's Reading Like a Writer. Let me explain.

In a paragraph, all the emphasis lies on the first and last few words. Therefore, a paragraph instantly exposes what the author thinks is important. It's like listening to someone talk while paying attention to which words they pronounce more clearly, more slowly, and which ones they repeat for emphasis.

The best way to catch these accents of importance and reflect on them is to think of paragraphs as literary breathing guides. When you start a

new one, you slowly breathe in and then gradually exhale as you read on and on, before coming to a full exhale upon the last word.



Might be longer than a mile, though.

Breathing in sync with paragraphs gives your reading a nice rhythm, and reveals what makes a good paragraph: too many one-liners and you're hyperventilating, too many drawn out walls of text and you're out of air too soon.

I guess the metaphor to use is to think of a book as a long, winding road with the occasional set of speed bumps. You don't want to fly over them, as it'll damage your car, but you don't want to come to a full stop at each hump either.

3. Note-Taking

The question is not whether you should take them, but *when*. Two options come to mind:

While reading

Given our conclusion in the previous section, we'll want to keep on-the-go note-taking to a minimum, which, even if done in the book, is distracting.

However, one thing that won't block your flow and will be of huge benefit later, is highlighting.

spring training as a walk-on the next spring, would he get a fair look? They replied that he shouldn't be playing baseball at his age. He repeated the question: *Be straight with me, if I come down there, would I have a chance?* The baseball officials answered, *Fine, yes, you'll get one look.*

So Tommy John was the first to report to camp. He trained many hours a day, brought every lesson he'd learned playing the sport for a quarter century, and made the team—as the oldest player in the game. He started the season opener—and won, giving up a scant two runs over seven innings on the road at Minnesota.

The things that Tommy John could change—when he had a chance—got a full 100 percent of the effort he could muster. He used to tell coaches that he would die on the field before he quit. He understood that as a professional athlete his job was to parse the difference between the unlikely and the impossible. Seeing that minuscule distinction was what made him who he was.

To harness the same power, recovering addicts learn the Serenity Prayer.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot
change
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

This is how they focus their efforts. It's a lot easier to fight addiction when you aren't also fighting the fact that you were born, that your parents were monsters, or that you lost everything. That stuff is done. Delivered. Zero in one hundred chances that you can change it.

A sample page with my highlights from [Ryan Holiday's](#) *The Obstacle is The Way*.

While reading, some sentences naturally feel more important than others. Phrases pop out, paragraphs demand: “Remember me! I’ll be important later.”

Follow your gut. Be spontaneous. Let your subconscious do the work, your eyes point out the result and your fingers make the mark.

After reading

Speaking of subconscious, while I'm sure you're eager to take notes right after closing the last chapter, waiting for a few days until you extract a book's lifeblood comes with a few advantages.

The following two I found in Benedict Carey's book, How We Learn.

First, there's the Zeigarnik effect, which is your brain's *tendency to remind you of things you've left unfinished*.

In learning, this means while you're taking a break after a 4 hour hardcore math session, your subconscious keeps processing the last problem you got stuck on and the solution might come to you in the shower the next morning.

Letting the impressions of a good book sit for some time holds them in your subconscious and makes later drawn conclusions stronger.

Second, the spacing effect rushes to your side, which indicates *learning works better spaced out over time*, rather than limited to a single event.

Ever forget someone's name right after they introduced themselves? That's because mumbling it over and over again right away doesn't help. It just makes your brain *bored*. Your brain needs breaks to remember things.

Sending yourself a reminder with John's name two days after you heard it the first time will be much more efficient. And so will leaving the book on the shelf.

Third, this gives you the opportunity to *explore other, topically similar books in the meantime*.

Why is that helpful? As Nat Eliason points out, reading related books, or select chapters of them, allows you to *identify universal constructs*. After all, timeless philosophical advice won't be written about just once. This is what Thomas C. Foster refers to as *intertextuality*, the dependency of all texts upon one another, in How to Read Literature Like a Professor.

By the time you get back to your original book, you'll have a solid idea of which concepts have stood the test of time so far.

Keeping these advantages in mind, two note-taking systems in particular deserve your attention:

System I: Question/Evidence/Conclusion

Designed for streamlining note-taking in non-technical college classes, this system designed by Cal Newport translates well to non-fiction books.

The concept is simple: instead of transcribing exactly what the professor says, capture the big ideas. To do so, reduce your notes to a series of questions paired with conclusions. Between each question and conclusion should be a collection of evidence that connects the two. —Cal Newport

What's remarkable about this idea is that it lets you file almost *every* sentence into a mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive classification scheme.

us, what is not up to us.
And what is up to us?

Our emotions E
Our judgments E
Our creativity E
Our attitude E
Our perspective E
Our desires E
Our decisions E
Our determination E

This is our playing field, so to speak. Everything there is
fair game.

What is not up to us?

Well, you know, everything else. The weather, the economy, circumstances, other people's emotions or judgments, trends, disasters, et cetera.

If what's up to us is the playing field, then what is not up

More from The Obstacle is The Way.

In the upper example, the question “What is up to us?” is paired with the listed evidence to arrive at the conclusion that those things resemble our playing field and are therefore under our control.

You can do this on paper or directly in the book, as I did, but will either way arrive at a big set of interconnected conclusions.

System II: The Morse Code Method

Another contribution Cal Newport has made to the note-taking world, this method is designed to take notes *fast*.

A	·—	O	— — —	4	· · · —
B	— · · ·	P	· — · ·	5	· · · · ·
C	— · — ·	Q	— — · —	6	— · · · ·
C_h	— — — —	R	· · ·	7	— — · · ·
D	— · ·	S	· · ·	8	— — · · · ·
E	·	T	—	9	— — — — ·
F	· · — ·	U	· · —	0	— — — — —
G	— — ·	V	· · · —	.	· · · · ·
H	· · · ·	W	· — —	,	· — · — · —
I	· ·	X	— · · —	;	— · — · — ·
J	· — — —	Y	— · — —	:	— — — · · ·
K	— · —	Z	— — · ·	?	· · — — · ·
L	· — · ·	1	· — — — —	!	— — · · — —
M	— —	2	· · — — —		
N	— ·	3	· · · — —		

Dot or dash—what's it gonna be?

Instead of a lengthy alphabet though, the Morse Code Method only relies on the original elements—the dot and the dash—to denote ideas and support for those ideas.

1. *If you come across a sentence that seems to be laying out a big, interesting idea: draw a quick dot next to it in the margin.*

2. *If you come across an example or explanation that supports the previous big idea: draw a quick dash next to it in the margin.*—Cal Newport

means iterating, failing, and improving. Our capacity to try, try, try is inextricably linked with our ability and tolerance to fail, fail, fail.

On the path to successful action, we will fail—possibly many times. And that's okay. It can be a good thing, even. **Action and failure are two sides of the same coin.** One doesn't come without the other. What breaks this critical connection down is when people stop acting—because they've taken failure the wrong way.

When failure does come, ask: *What went wrong here? What can be improved? What am I missing?* This helps birth alternative ways of doing what needs to be done, ways that are often much better than what we started with. **Failure puts you in corners you have to think your way out of.** It is a source of breakthroughs.

This is why stories of great success are often preceded by epic failure—because the people in them went back to the drawing board. They weren't ashamed to fail, but spurred on, piqued by it. Sometimes in sports it takes a close loss to

Yup. Ryan Holiday. Again.

In this example, the idea is that failure can be a good thing. The support is presented in the form of questions, which, if answered, will provide a learning benefit. Additionally, Holiday says failure pressures us to think—which is a good thing.

. . . .

Which system you use, or whether you design your own, is up to you. Regardless of the implementation, notes are a big part of this complex system of recognizing, then classifying key ideas and sending them to long-term memory by putting pen to paper.

So even if you never went back to the notes, you'd find you remember a book's most important ideas a lot better, thanks to the act of extracting them alone.

Beethoven explained this phenomenon well. He left behind hundreds of sketchbooks filled with notes. Yet, he admitted he never looked at them while composing. When someone asked him why he took notes in the first place, he responded:

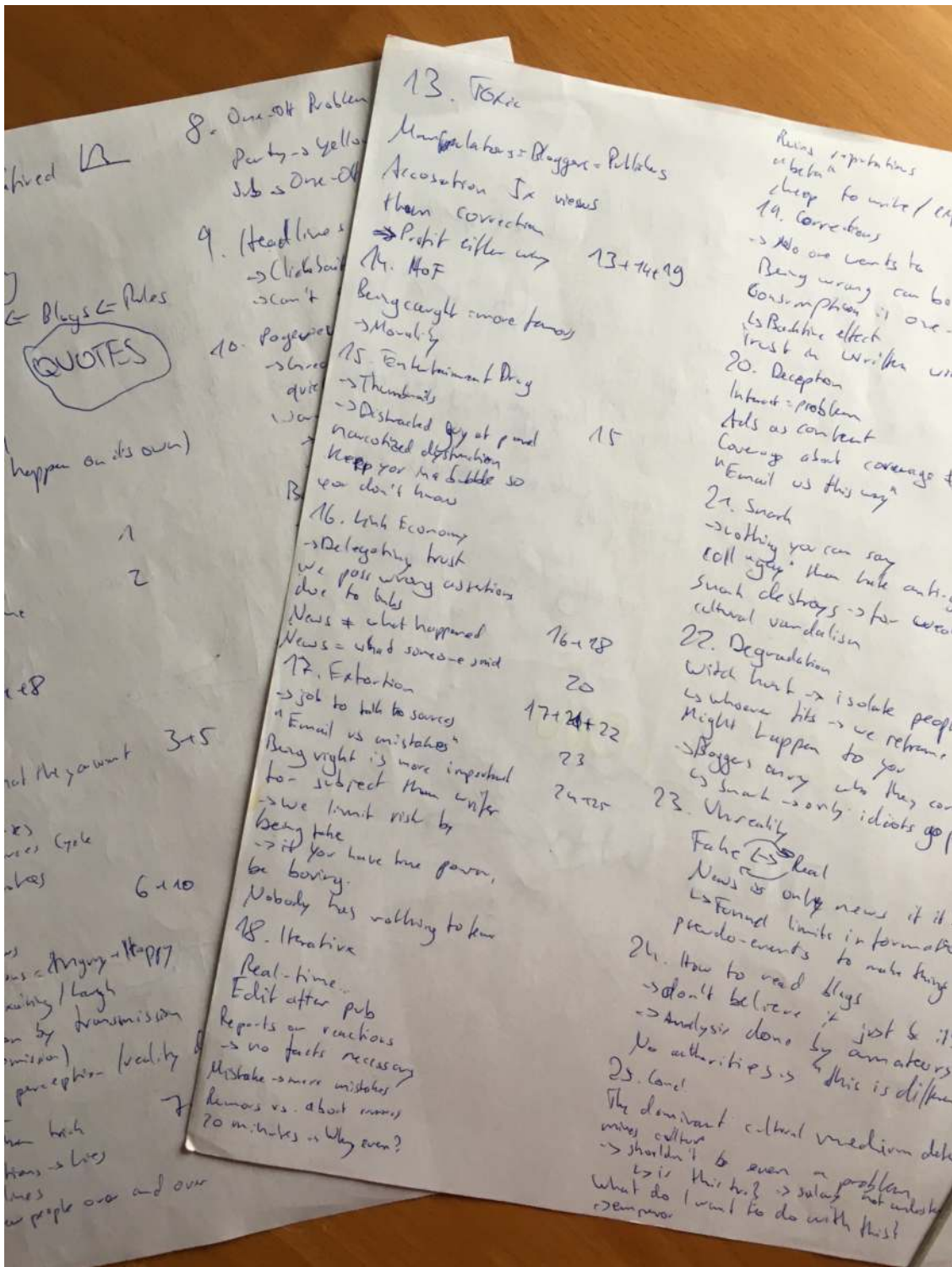
“If I don’t write it down right away, I instantly forget it. If I write it down, I never forget it and don’t have to look at it ever again.”

However, unless you’ve reached Beethoven-status already, let’s *do* take a look at them again.

4. Condensing

However many pages of notes you end up with, distilling them one last time will show you what the entire book ultimately boils down to and give you an easy tool of reference.

I like to artificially limit myself to 1–2 pages per book.



What remained of the 25 chapters of the two separate books inside Ryan Holiday's Trust Me, I'm Lying.

In your summary, you can include:

- Each chapter's premise in one sentence.
- A highlight reel of the most important notes.

- A quote or keyword that's easy to recall.

Of course you could also draw sketches, create mind maps, or write a continuous text.

| *Make things as simple as possible, but not simpler.—Albert Einstein*

5. Remembering

At this point, you've set your memory up so well, remembering should come naturally. Nevertheless, taking out your notes in increasingly delayed intervals and reviewing them will go a long way to cement your takeaways.

There's one more thing you can do, to make even that easier:

Visit the Memory Palace

Early on we established that experiences are the most powerful way to remember. But nowhere does it say they have to be *real*. You can just as well create them in your head to observe a somewhat similar effect. Joshua Foer calls this *the Memory Palace* in [Moonwalking With Einstein](#).

For example, walk along a route you know really well in your mind, maybe through your house, and place the lessons from your notes along the way. You can even tie those to objects—a lesson about perseverance might go as a stone into your closet, one about creativity as a color chart onto your kitchen table.

Whenever you then need to recall one of the lessons, all you have to do is take your mental walk again and pick up the right items as you go along.

However, even the best memories must once come to an end. As does this guide.

I hope it was helpful. Even more so, I hope you'll remember it. That way, you can...

Read it when you need it.

