

Deep Work Book Summary

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The Book in Three Sentences

1. Deep work is the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task.
2. Shallow work is non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style work, often performed while distracted.
3. Deep work is like a superpower in our increasingly competitive twenty-first century economy.

The Five Big Ideas

1. In order to produce the absolute best stuff you're capable of, you need to commit to deep work.
2. The ability to quickly master hard things and the ability to produce at an elite level, in terms of both quality and speed, are two core abilities for thriving in today's economy.
3. "To learn hard things quickly, you must focus intensely without distraction."
4. "Your work is craft, and if you hone your ability and apply it with respect and care, then like the skilled wheelwright you can generate meaning in the daily efforts of your professional life."
5. "The key to developing a deep work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add routines and rituals to your working life designed to minimize the amount of your limited willpower necessary to transition into and maintain a state of unbroken concentration."

Deep Work Summary

Deep Work: Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to

their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.

Shallow Work: Non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend not to create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.

Newport argues if you spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness, you permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work.

“Deep work is not some nostalgic affectation of writers and early-twentieth-century philosophers. It’s instead a skill that has great value today.”

In order to produce the absolute best stuff you’re capable of, you need to commit to deep work.

Newport calls deep work, “the superpower of the 21st century.”

The Deep Work Hypothesis: The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive.

In Newport’s own words,

“I build my days around a core of carefully chosen deep work, with the shallow activities I absolutely cannot avoid batched into smaller bursts at the peripheries of my schedule. Three to four hours a day, five days a week, of uninterrupted and carefully directed concentration, it turns out, can produce a lot of valuable output.”

The ability to quickly master hard things and the ability to produce at an elite level, in terms of both quality and speed, are two core abilities for thriving in today's economy.

“The differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain.”

The core components of deliberate practice are usually identified as follows: (1) your attention is focused tightly on a specific skill you're trying to improve or an idea you're trying to master; (2) you receive feedback so you can correct your approach to keep your attention exactly where it's most productive.

“This new science of performance argues that you get better at a skill as you develop more myelin around the relevant neurons, allowing the corresponding circuit to fire more effortlessly and effectively. To be great at something is to be well myelinated.”

“By focusing intensely on a specific skill, you're forcing the specific relevant circuit to fire, again and again, in isolation. This repetitive use of a specific circuit triggers cells called oligodendrocytes to begin wrapping layers of myelin around the neurons in the circuits—effectively cementing the skill.”

“To learn hard things quickly, you must focus intensely without distraction.”

“When you switch from some Task A to another Task B, your attention doesn't immediately follow—a residue of your attention remains stuck thinking about the original task. This residue gets especially thick if your work on Task A was unbounded and of low intensity before you switched, but even if you finish Task A before moving on, your attention remains divided for a while.”

According to Sophie Leroy, “People experiencing attention residue after switching tasks are likely to demonstrate poor performance on that next task,” and the more intense the residue, the worse the performance.”

“To produce at your peak level you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction.”

The Principle of Least Resistance: In a business setting, without clear feedback on the impact of various behaviors to the bottom line, we will tend toward behaviors that are easiest in the moment.

“Clarity about what matters provides clarity about what does not.”

Busyness as Proxy for Productivity: In the absence of clear indicators of what it means to be productive and valuable in their jobs, many knowledge workers turn back toward an industrial indicator of productivity: doing lots of stuff in a visible manner.

“Deep work is at a severe disadvantage in a technopoly because it builds on values like quality, craftsmanship, and mastery that are decidedly old-fashioned and non-technological.”

“Human beings, it seems, are at their best when immersed deeply in something challenging.”

“To build your working life around the experience of flow produced by deep work is a proven path to deep satisfaction.”

“Your work is craft, and if you hone your ability and apply it with respect and care, then like the skilled wheelwright you can generate meaning in the daily efforts of your professional life.”

“You have a finite amount of willpower that becomes depleted as you use it.”

“The key to developing a deep work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add routines and rituals to your working life designed to minimize the amount of your limited willpower necessary to transition into and maintain a state of unbroken concentration.”

“You need your own philosophy for integrating deep work into your professional life.”

“You must be careful to choose a philosophy that fits your specific circumstances, as a mismatch here can derail your deep work habit before it has a chance to solidify.”

“[Donald] Knuth deploys what I call the monastic philosophy of deep work scheduling. This philosophy attempts to maximize deep efforts by eliminating or radically minimizing shallow obligations.”

“[Carl] Jung’s approach is what I call the bimodal philosophy of deep work. This philosophy asks that you divide your time, dedicating some clearly defined stretches to deep pursuits and leaving the rest open to everything else.”

“[The rhythmic philosophy] argues that the easiest way to consistently start deep work sessions is to transform them into a simple regular habit.”

John Paul Newport on Walter Isaacson, “It was always amazing ... he could retreat up to the bedroom for a while, when the rest of us were chilling on the patio or whatever, to work on his book ... he’d go up for twenty minutes or an hour, we’d hear the typewriter pounding, then he’d come down as relaxed as the rest of us ... the work never seemed to faze him, he just happily went up to work when he had the spare time.”

The journalist philosophy: you fit deep work wherever you can into your schedule.

“To make the most out of your deep work sessions, build rituals of the same level of strictness and idiosyncrasy as the important thinkers mentioned previously.”

“Your ritual needs to specify a location for your deep work efforts.”

“Regardless of where you work, be sure to also give yourself a specific time frame to keep the session a discrete challenge and not an open-ended slog.”

“Your ritual needs rules and processes to keep your efforts structured.”

“By leveraging a radical change to your normal environment, coupled perhaps with a significant investment of effort or money, all dedicated toward supporting a deep work task, you increase the perceived importance of the task.”

“[Peter Shankman] booked a round-trip business-class ticket to Tokyo. He wrote during the whole flight to Japan, drank an espresso in the business class lounge once he arrived in Japan, then turned around and flew back, once again writing the whole way—arriving back in the States only thirty hours after he first left with a completed manuscript now in hand.”

The Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX)

These deep work rules include the ability to:

1. Focus on the Wildly Important
2. Act on the Lead Measures
3. Keep a Compelling Scoreboard
4. Create a Cadence of Accountability

“For an individual focused on deep work, the implication is that you should identify a small number of ambitious outcomes to pursue with your deep work hours.”

David Brooks: “If you want to win the war for attention, don’t try to say ‘no’ to the trivial distractions you find on the information smorgasbord; try to say ‘yes’ to the subject that arouses a terrifying longing, and let the terrifying longing crowd out everything else.”

“In 4DX, there are two types of metrics for this purpose: lag measures and lead measures.”

“Lag measures describe the thing you’re ultimately trying to improve.”

“Lead measures, on the other hand, ‘measure the new behaviors that will drive success on the lag measures.’”

“Lead measures turn your attention to improving the behaviors you directly control in the near future that will then have a positive impact on your long-term goals.”

“At the end of the workday, shut down your consideration of work issues until the next morning—no after-dinner e-mail check, no mental replays of conversations, and no scheming about how you’ll handle an upcoming challenge; shutdown work thinking completely.”

1. **Reason #1:** Downtime Aids Insights
2. **Reason #2:** Downtime Helps Recharge the Energy Needed to Work Deeply
3. **Reason #3:** The Work That Evening Downtime Replaces Is Usually Not That Important

Deep work training must involve two goals: improving your ability to concentrate intensely *and* overcoming your desire for distraction.

“Schedule in advance when you’ll use the Internet, and then avoid it altogether outside these times.”

The Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection: Identify the core factors that determine success and happiness in your professional and personal life. Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweigh its negative impacts.

“The first step [to the Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection] is to identify the main high-level goals in both your professional and your personal life.”

“The key is to keep the list limited to what’s most important and to keep the descriptions suitably high-level.”

“When you’re done you should have a small number of goals for both the personal and professional areas of your life.”

“Once you’ve identified these goals, list for each the two or three most important activities that help you satisfy the goal. These activities should be specific enough to allow you to clearly picture doing them. On the other hand, they should be general enough that they’re not tied to a onetime outcome.”

“The next step in this strategy is to consider the network tools you currently use. For each such tool, go through the key activities you identified and ask whether the use of the tool has a substantially positive impact, a substantially negative impact, or little impact on your regular and successful participation in the activity. Now comes the important decision: Keep using this tool only if you concluded that it has substantial positive impacts and that these outweigh the negative impacts.”

“After thirty days of this self-imposed network isolation, ask yourself the following two questions about each of the services you temporarily quit: Would the last thirty days have been notably better if I had been able to use this service? Did people care that I wasn’t using this service?”

“If your answer is ‘no’ to both questions, quit the service permanently. If your answer was a clear ‘yes,’ then return to using the service.”

“The shallow work that increasingly dominates the time and attention of knowledge workers is less vital than it often seems in the moment.”

How long can deep work be sustained by an individual in a given day?

“[Anders Erickson] note[s] that for someone new to such practice (citing, in particular, a child in the early stages of developing an expert-level skill), an hour a day is a reasonable limit. For those familiar with the rigors of such activities, the limit expands to something like four hours, but rarely more.”

“We spend much of our day on autopilot—not giving much thought to what we’re doing with our time.”

“At the beginning of each workday, turn to a new page of lined paper in a notebook you dedicate to this purpose. Down the left-hand side of the page, mark every other line with an hour of the day, covering the full set of hours you typically work. Now comes the important part: Divide the hours of your workday into blocks and assign activities to the blocks. For example, you might block off nine a.m. to eleven a.m. for writing a client’s press release. To do so, actually draw a box that covers the lines corresponding to these hours, then write “press release” inside the box. Not every block need be dedicated to a work task. There might be time blocks for lunch or relaxation breaks. To keep things reasonably clean, the minimum length of a block should be thirty minutes (i.e., one line on your page). This means, for example, that instead of having a unique small box for each small task on your plate for the day—respond to boss’s e-mail, submit reimbursement form, ask Carl about report—you can batch similar things into more generic task blocks. You might find it useful, in this case, to draw a line from a task block to the open right-hand side of the page where you can list out the full set of small tasks you plan to accomplish in that block. When you’re done scheduling

your day, every minute should be part of a block. You have, in effect, given every minute of your workday a job. Now as you go through your day, use this schedule to guide you.”

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The Rules of Deep Work

Rule #1: Work Deeply

Decide on your depth philosophy.

1. Monastic. Maximize deep efforts by eliminating or radically minimizing shallow obligations
2. Bimodal. Divide your time, dedicating some clearly defined stretches to deep pursuits and leaving the rest open to everything else
3. Rhythmic. Transform deep work sessions into a simple regular habit
4. Journalistic. Fit deep work wherever you can into your schedule

Ritualize

Build rituals of the same level of strictness and idiosyncrasy as the important thinkers mentioned previously

Decide:

1. Where you'll work and for how long
2. How you'll work once you start to work
3. How you'll support your work

Make Grand Gestures

Increase the perceived importance of a deep work task by leveraging a radical change to your normal environment.

Don't Work Alone

1. **Focus on the Wildly Important.** identify a small number of ambitious outcomes to pursue with your deep work hours.

2. **Act on the Lead Measures.** Turn your attention to improving the behaviors you directly control in the near future that will then have a positive impact on your long-term goals.
3. **Keep a Compelling Scoreboard.** “People play differently when they’re keeping score.”
4. **Create a Cadence of Accountability.** Put in place a rhythm of regular and frequent meetings

Be Lazy

At the end of the workday, shut down your consideration of work issues until the next morning—no after-dinner email check, no mental replays of conversations, and no scheming about how you’ll handle an upcoming challenge; shutdown work thinking completely.

Rule #2: Embrace Boredom

Train your ability to concentrate.

Don’t Take Breaks from Distraction. Instead Take Breaks from Focus

Schedule in advance when you’ll use the Internet, and then avoid it altogether outside these times.

Work Like Teddy Roosevelt

Identify a deep work task that’s high on your priority list. Estimate how long you’d normally put aside for an obligation of this type, then give yourself a hard deadline that *drastically reduces* this time.

Meditate Productively

Take a period in which you’re occupied physically, not mentally and focus our attention on a single well-defined professional problem.

Memorize a Deck of Cards

Use the [Method of Loci](#).

Rule #3: Quit Social Media

Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweigh its negative impacts.

Apply the Law of Vital Few to Your Internet Habits

1. Identify the main high-level goals in both your professional and your personal life.
2. Once you've identified these goals, list for each the two or three most important activities that help you satisfy the goal.
3. The next step in this strategy is to consider the network tools you currently use. For each such tool, go through the key activities you identified and ask whether the use of the tool has a substantially positive impact, a substantially negative impact, or little impact on your regular and successful participation in the activity. Now comes the important decision: Keep using this tool only if you concluded that it has substantial positive impacts and that these outweigh the negative impacts.

Quit Social Media

After thirty days of this self-imposed network isolation, ask yourself the following two questions about each of the services you temporarily quit: Would the last thirty days have been notably better if I had been able to use this service? Did people care that I wasn't using this service?

Don't Use the Internet to Entertain Yourself

Give your brain a quality alternative.

Rule #4: Drain the Shallows

Treat shallow work with suspicion.

Schedule Every Minute of your Day

1. At the beginning of each workday, turn to a new page of lined paper in a notebook you dedicate to this purpose.
2. Down the left-hand side of the page, mark every other line with an hour of the day, covering the full set of hours you typically work.
3. Divide the hours of your workday into blocks and assign activities to the blocks.
4. When you're done scheduling your day, every minute should be part of a block. You have, in effect, given every minute of your workday a job. Now as you go through your day, use this schedule to guide you.

Quantify the Depth of Every Activity

Make clear and consistent decisions about where given workflow tasks fall on the shallow-to-deep scale.

Ask yourself, "How long would it take (in months) to train a smart recent college graduate with no specialized training in my field to complete this task?"

Ask Your Boss for a Shallow Work Budget

Ask yourself, "What percentage of my time should be spent on shallow work?"

The answer to the question will be somewhere in the 30 to 50 percent range.

Finish Your Work by Five Thirty

Say no to the non-essential.

Become Hard to Reach

1. Make people who send you email you do more work
2. Do more work when you send or reply to emails
3. Don't respond