

Atomic Habits Summary – James Clear

11 MINUTE READ

[Atomic Habits](#) (2018)

An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones

by [James Clear](#)

Atomic Habits is a powerful and practical guide to transforming your habits, making change stick and achieving remarkable results – by author and habit-guru, James Clear. ([319 pages](#))

[Paperback](#) | [Ebook](#) | [Audiobook](#)

Note: This **Atomic Habits summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Productivity Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

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Atomic Habits Review

It's not often I summarise books that were published in the last several years, but [Atomic Habits](#) is so good I decided to make an exception.

James Clear's book is concise, thoughtful and well-researched. It's accessible and inspiring. It'll get you winning small victories, changing your beliefs and transforming your behaviour. It'll help you take action no matter who you are or how much you've struggled to e.g., [get healthier](#), [learn new skills](#) or [become more productive](#) in the past.

What follows is a quick book summary organised around 8 major questions:

1. What are habits?
2. Why is habit building important?
3. What are some examples of good habits?
4. What are some examples of bad habits?
5. What habits should I build?
6. How long does it take to build a new habit?
7. How can I build and break habits effectively? and
8. How can I stay motivated when building habits?

I've done my best to distil James's ideas to their essence. And as always, that means losing a great deal of their character in the process.

What you'll miss in particular are the wonderful stories, studies and analogies James uses to bring colour and life to his subject. If you haven't already, they're good enough reason by themselves to [invest in a copy of the book](#).

Anyhow, whether you're looking for an easy and proven way to build good

habits and break bad ones or you'd like to discover how tiny changes can lead to remarkable results – [Atomic Habits](#) is a great place to start.

Enjoy the free summary below. [Grab a copy](#). Go check out some more of **TAoL's** [best book recommendations](#) and [book summaries](#) on the topic.

And whatever you do, don't forget:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." – Aristotle.

Atomic Habits Summary

What Are Habits?

A habit is a behaviour that has been repeated enough times to become automatic.

Every habit can be broken down into four simple steps:

1. **A cue** – that indicates a possible change in state;
2. **A craving** – a desire to reach or avoid that new state;
3. **A response** – that increases the odds of satisfying the craving; and
4. **A reward** – which satisfies the craving (and reinforces the cue).

As we discover and try new responses, we repeat those that trigger the reward most reliably and with the least effort.

With repetition, the response becomes a habit: an automatic response to a specific situation/cue.

Why Is Habit Building Important?

Reason 1: Changing our beliefs is a powerful way to change outcomes.

- Our beliefs determine our identity;

- Our identity determines our actions:
- We act consistently with our identity; so
- Who we believe we are ("*I am a smoker*")...
- Determines our actions ("*I smoke*").
- And our actions determine our outcomes.

But you can't just decide to change your beliefs, it takes proof.

And the only way to generate proof is to take lots of action.

But using conscious willpower to take action is hard and inconsistent.

- The conscious mind is the bottleneck of the brain.

Which is one reason habit building is important:

- Habits make taking action automatic and consistent; which
- Generates lots of proof; which
- Changes beliefs; which
- Alters identity; which
- Influences actions; which
- Change outcomes.

Conclusion: Changing one habit is all it takes to change a belief which can end up changing many new outcomes.

Reason 2: Some people fixate on goals (what; direction) when systems (how; inc. habits) are far more important:

- Goals are shared by winners and losers alike. Habits differentiate who becomes which.
- Goals lead to momentary change. Habits create changes that stick.
- Goals are about the destination; about winning. Habits are about enjoying the journey.

Other people fixate on current results when trajectory is far more important.

- Outcomes are a lagging measure of inputs;
- Inputs determine trajectory; and
- [Trajectory determines outputs](#).

Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement.

- Tiny changes in behaviours create big shifts in trajectory and future results.
 - 1% improvement each day for a year → 37x better
 - 1% impairment each day → zero
- This is true for both one habit pulling in one direction over time;
- AND many habits all pulling together in one direction.

Conclusion: You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your habits.

- Leaving those habits to chance can put us on on a sub-conscious path to disaster.
- Consciously changing our habits to optimise outcomes puts us back in control.
- And putting those outcomes on autopilot frees our minds to focus on other things.

What Are Some Examples of Good Habits?

ARTHUR: James doesn't lay out a single list of good habits anywhere in the book. I've harvested these from the various examples he scatters through the chapters.

ARTHUR: I've organised these good habits according to the 8 areas of **TAoL's** [wheel of life](#).

- **HV** – Healthy eating, cooking, exercise, taking medication, drinking water, sleeping early;
- **TE** – Meditating, [journaling](#), relaxing;
- **FF** – Sending thank you notes;
- **GL** – [Practising a skill](#) (e.g., drawing, playing an instrument);
- **PP** – Decluttering, [waking up early](#); and
- **WL** – Saving money.

NOTE: Check out **TAoL's** [Ultimate Guide to Habit Tracking](#) for more examples.

What Are Some Examples of Bad Habits?

ARTHUR: James doesn't lay out a single list of bad habits anywhere in the book. I've harvested these from the various examples he scatters through the chapters.

ARTHUR: I've organised these bad habits according to the 8 areas of **TAoL's** [wheel of life](#).

- **HV** – Eating junk food, smoking;
- **TE** – Stressing, negative thinking, getting angry;
- **PP** – Watching too much TV, playing video games, procrastinating;
- **BC** – Overworking; and
- **WL** – Overspending.

Which Habits Should I Build?

You are who you are and you love what you love. Don't fight that. *Use it.*

First, give yourself permission to explore habits and approaches that work for you. Ask:

- “What feels like fun?”

- “What makes me lose track of time?”
- “Where do I get greater returns than the average person?”
- “What comes naturally to me?”

Then, specialise; focus your effort on habits and approaches that excite you and align with your personality and strengths.

You still need to put in the work. But the easier and more enjoyable you find it to build habits, the greater your odds of success.

How Long Does It Take To Build a New Habit?

Every habit is different but all habits depend on building progressively stronger associations between response and reward.

It could take 1 repetition or thousands to build a habit, but behaviours that are...

- **Simple** – Easy to learn and repeat;
- **Connected** – Have a quick and clearer cause/effect relationship with the reward; and
- **Strongly emotional** – Trigger big rewards (either attaining or avoiding an outcome);

...require fewer repetitions to reach high levels of automaticity.

ARTHUR: James’s answer misses some important points here (frequency is **NOT** always the major determinant of memory/habit formation) so I’ve supplemented these notes from my neurophysiology major.

How Can I Build and Break Habits Effectively?

To change habits successfully, you must:

- Change the right habits; and

- Change habits the right way.

To change the right habits, focus on identity (who) and processes (how), not outcomes (what):

- Outcomes are what you get (What: *"I want to read books"*).
- Processes are what you do (How: *"I'll read every day"*).
- Identity is what you believe about yourself (Who: *"I am a reader"*).

Every moment, every choice drives a powerful feedback loop where:

- Your habits shape your identity; and
- Your identity shapes your habits.

New identities require new evidence. To change yours, first ask:

- *"What kind of outcomes do I want?"* then
- *"What kind of person do I want/need to become?"* then
- *"What quick wins/habits can I work on to reinforce those beliefs?"*

Then get to work and correct your trajectory every day by asking:

- *"Am I becoming the type of person I want to become?"; and*
- *"What would the kind of person I want to become do in this situation?"*

To change habits the right way, make good/bad:

1. **Cues:** Obvious/invisible;
2. **Cravings:** Attractive/unattractive;
3. **Responses:** Easy/hard;
4. **Rewards:** Satisfying/unsatisfying

NOTE: Before you change anything, use a habits scorecard to build awareness of existing responses:

- **Point-and-call** – Write a granular list of your daily habits;
- **Evaluate net long-term outcomes** – Label each habit as good (+), bad (-) or neutral (=);

Then re-arrange, add to and design new, written plans of action by:

- **Setting clear implementation intentions:**
 - *“I will [BEHAVIOUR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION]”.*
- **Habit stacking:**
 - *“After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT]”;* or
 - *“When I [ACTION], I will [NEW HABIT]”.*

TIP: Make your new habits as specific as possible (what, when, how, how much).

Then to maximise your odds of success...

1. How to make habits obvious/invisible:

Pick existing cues that:

- Occur with the same frequency (daily, weekly, monthly) as your desired new habit; and
- Are highly specific and immediately actionable.

(Re-)design cues to be:

- **Visual** – Vision is our most powerful sense; and
- **Obvious** – Make it easy to spot them

Engineer your environment to minimise reliance on will-power and self-control:

- Move yourself someplace without competing/undesirable cues;
- Remove competing/undesirable cues from your environment;
- Fill your environment with your new/desirable cues; and

- Avoid creating contexts that trigger multiple habits.

2. How to make habits attractive/unattractive:

Combine habit stacking with temptation bundling to pair actions you want with actions you need:

1. *"After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [HABIT I NEED]."*
2. *"After [HABIT I NEED], I will [HABIT I WANT]."*

Proactively manage band-wagon effect:

- Be aware that you have a strong natural desire to conform with:
 - **The close** – the people directly around you;
 - **The many** – the culture/society you immerse yourself in; and
 - **The powerful** – the successful people you look up to.
- Use this to your advantage. Proactively join groups where:
 - Your desired behaviour is already a norm; and
 - You have something in common with the group.

Reframe:

- **Good habits** – to highlight benefits ("I get to") instead of drawbacks ("I have to").
- **Bad habits** – to highlight drawbacks instead of benefits.

Use motivation rituals:

- Practice doing something enjoyable before a difficult habit; then later
- Use the enjoyable action to trigger cravings for the difficult habit.

3. How to make taking action easy:

Show up and get started.

- The best way to start, is to start;

- Don't get caught up in planning or perfectionism;
- Identify and start with the easy, 2-minute version, then build on those wins.

Engineer your environment to make it easy to perform good habits:

- List and take any one-time actions that will pay-off again and again;
- Schedule habits for times and places that fit easily into your existing routine;
- Organise and lay out what you need in advance so it's easy to access;
- Use technology to automate/incentivise good behaviour.

(Do the opposite to make it harder to perform bad habits)

Examples of decreasing (↓) and increasing (↑) friction:

- ↓ Lay your gym clothes out the night before;
- ↓ Prep healthy foods/snacks on the weekend;
- ↓ Pay for a gym session ahead of time;
- ↓ Automate e.g., prescriptions, savings, meal delivery;
- ↑ Leave your phone in a different room;
- ↑ Delete social media apps and games;
- ↑ Take the batteries out of your remote control;
- ↑ Put your WiFi router on an outlet timer.

4. How to make habits satisfying:

Reinforce good behaviour with instant and pleasurable rewards.

- **EITHER** make the action itself satisfying and pleasurable e.g.,
 - Invest in tools that are satisfying to use;
 - Make progress satisfying and visual (e.g., with [habit trackers](#)); or
 - Design the habit so it's satisfying to perform.
- **OR** instantly reward yourself for taking the desired action e.g.,
 - Transfer money towards buying something you want; or

- Treat yourself to something you enjoy.

(Note: Be sure the reward doesn't conflict with your identity or another habit e.g., getting a bowl of ice-cream when you're trying to lose weight)

Use accountability partners to create immediate social rewards/costs for taking action.

Use a formal habit contract to strengthen (dis)incentives:

- Set (e.g., financial) penalties for performing bad habits/missing targets;
- Put the criteria and penalties down in writing; and
- Find a judge to co-sign and hold you accountable to the contract.

Keep streaks alive by rebounding quickly when your habits break down:

- **Don't think "*all or nothing*"** – *something* is always better than *nothing*;
- **Never miss twice** – make a commitment to never miss two repetitions in a row.

How Can I Stay Motivated When Building Habits?

When you start a new habit, make it easy so you're more likely to stick with it.

As you start learning a habit, [get into flow](#) by aiming for The Goldilocks Zone.

- Review and adjust the challenge so it sits on the perimeter of your ability;
- Aim for a 50/50 ratio between failure and reward.

As you approach habit mastery:

- Show up and keep going even when the work isn't exciting.
 - **Don't be an amateur** – don't let "*life*" get in the way of your progress.
 - **Be a professional** – show up and stick to the schedule even if you don't feel like it.
- Reflect and review regularly; ask:
 - "*What went well?*"
 - "*What didn't go well?*"
 - "*What did I learn?*"

Once you've mastered a habit:

- Master the next one; practice new habits deliberately until you master the field;
- Redefine and expand your sense of identity:
 - "*I am an athlete*" → "*I'm the type of person who is mentally tough and loves physical challenges.*"
 - "*I am a CEO*" → "*I'm the type of person who builds and creates things.*"

And finally, manage your expectations:

- Habits take compounding effort and produce compounding results;
- The most powerful outcomes in compounding are delayed;
- Accept that noticeable change can take years, until you cross a critical threshold...
- ...before it happens all at once.

Atomic Habits Contents

***Atomic Habits* contains 20 main chapters in 6 parts...**

Introduction: My Story

Part 1: The Fundamentals – Why Tiny Changes Make a Big Difference

1. The Surprising Power of Atomic Habits
2. How Your Habits Shape Your Identity (and Vice Versa)
3. How to Build Better Habits in
4. Simple Steps

Part 2: The 1st Law – Make It Obvious

4. The Man Who Didn't Look Right
5. The Best Way to Start a New Habit
6. Motivation is Overrated; Environment Often Matters More
7. The Secret to Self-Control

Part 3: The 2nd Law – Make It Attractive

8. How to Make a Habit Irresistible
9. The Role of Family and Friends in Shaping Your Habits
10. How to Find and Fix the Causes of Your Bad Habits

Part 4: The 3rd Law – Make It Easy

11. Walk Slowly, but Never Backward
12. The Law of Least Effort
13. How to Stop Procrastinating by Using the Two-Minute Rule
14. How to Make Good Habits Inevitable and Bad Habits Impossible

Part 5: The 4th Law – Make It Satisfying

15. The Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change
16. How to Stick with Good Habits Every Day
17. How an Accountability Partner Can Change Everything

Part 6: Advanced Tactics – How to Go from Being Merely Good to Being Truly Great

18. The Truth About Talent (When Genes Matter and When They Don't)

19. The Goldilocks Rule: How to Stay Motivated in Life and Work
20. The Downside of Creating Good Habits

Conclusion: The Secret to Results That Last

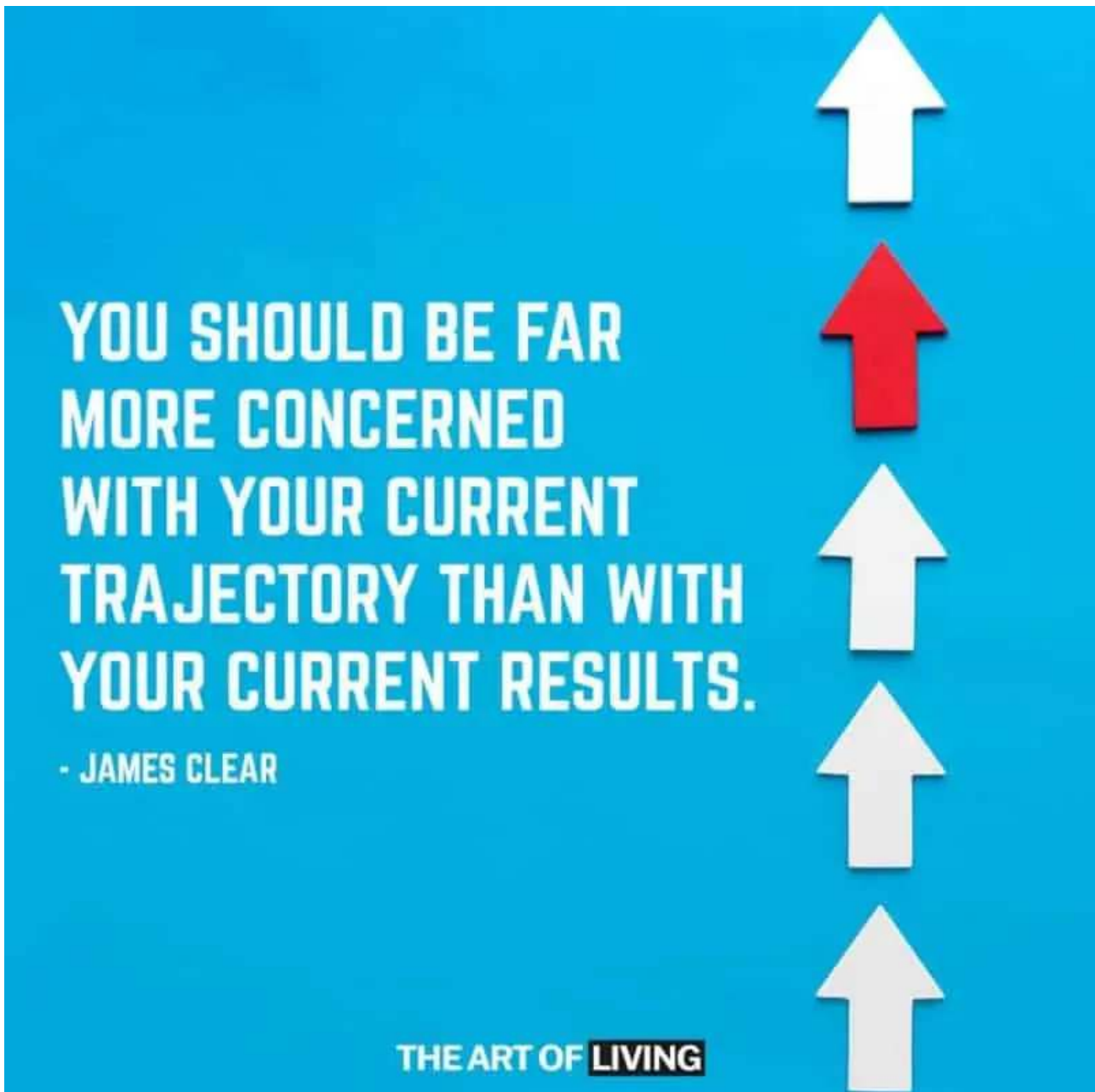
Clear, James. Atomic Habits (p. iii). Random House. Kindle Edition.

Best Atomic Habits Quotes

These Atomic Habits quotes come from **The Art of Living**'s ever-growing central library of thoughts, anecdotes, notes, and [inspirational quotes](#).

"You should be far more concerned with your current trajectory than with your current results."

- [James Clear](#), Atomic Habits



"Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. No single instance will transform your beliefs, but as the votes build up, so does the evidence of your new identity."

- [James Clear](#), Atomic Habits

"Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are best for making progress."

- [James Clear](#), Atomic Habits

"All big things come from small beginnings. The seed of every habit is a single, tiny decision. But as that decision is repeated, a habit sprouts and grows stronger. Roots entrench themselves and branches grow. The task of breaking a bad habit is like uprooting a powerful oak within us. And the task of building a good habit is like cultivating a delicate flower one day at a time."

- [James Clear](#), Atomic Habits

"Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way."

- [James Clear](#), Atomic Habits

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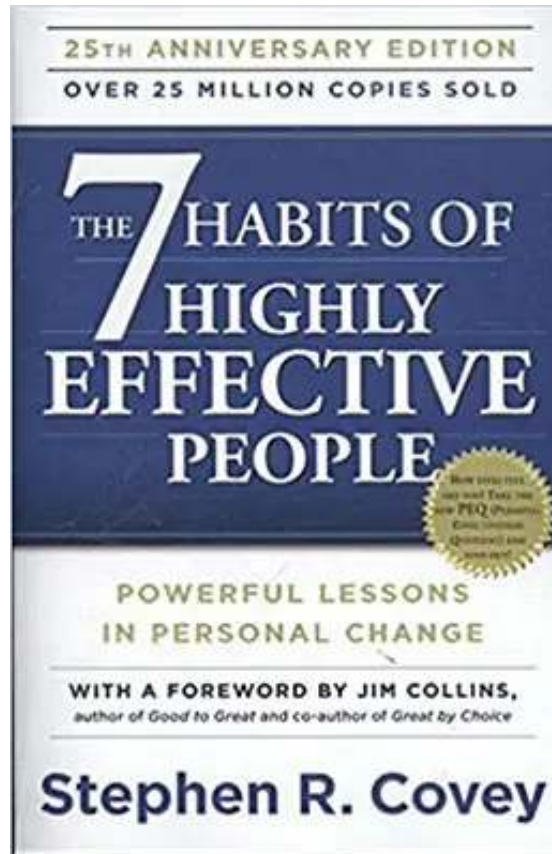
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Read More: 5 Books Like Atomic Habits

Enjoyed this Atomic Habits summary? You might enjoy the rest of the books on these lists of the [Best Productivity Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

And in the meantime...

Here are 5 top books like Atomic Habits...



1. [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) - [Stephen R. Covey](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

Powerful Lessons in Personal Change

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People is a perennial masterpiece on leading a happy, productive and purposeful existence and an unmissable stop for any pilgrim of personal improvement - by educator, author and speaker, Stephen Covey.

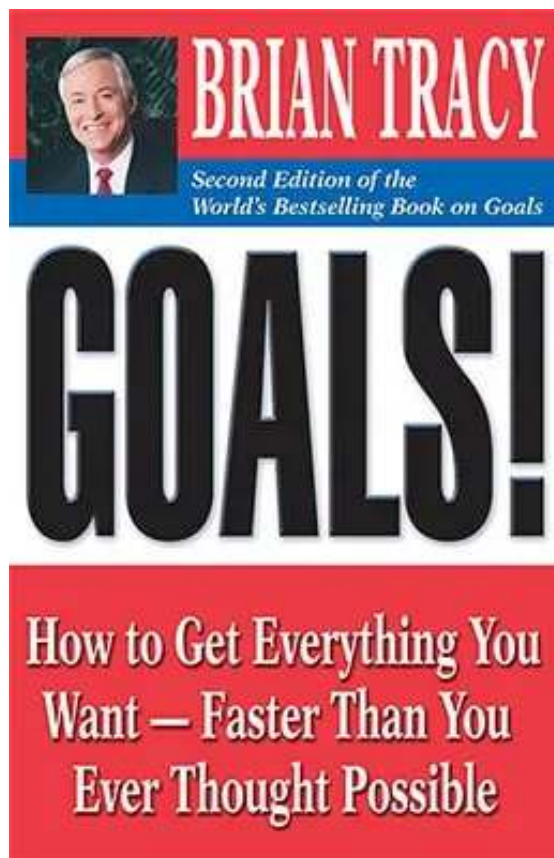
Published 1989 // 372 pages // Rated 4.1 over 624,500 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



2. [First Things First](#) – [Stephen R. Covey](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

First Things First is an action-oriented time-management manual, filled with frameworks and exercises to help you do more of what matters and less of what doesn't - by the author of the #1 book on this list, Stephen Covey.

Published 1993 // 384 pages // Rated 4.1 over 40,400 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

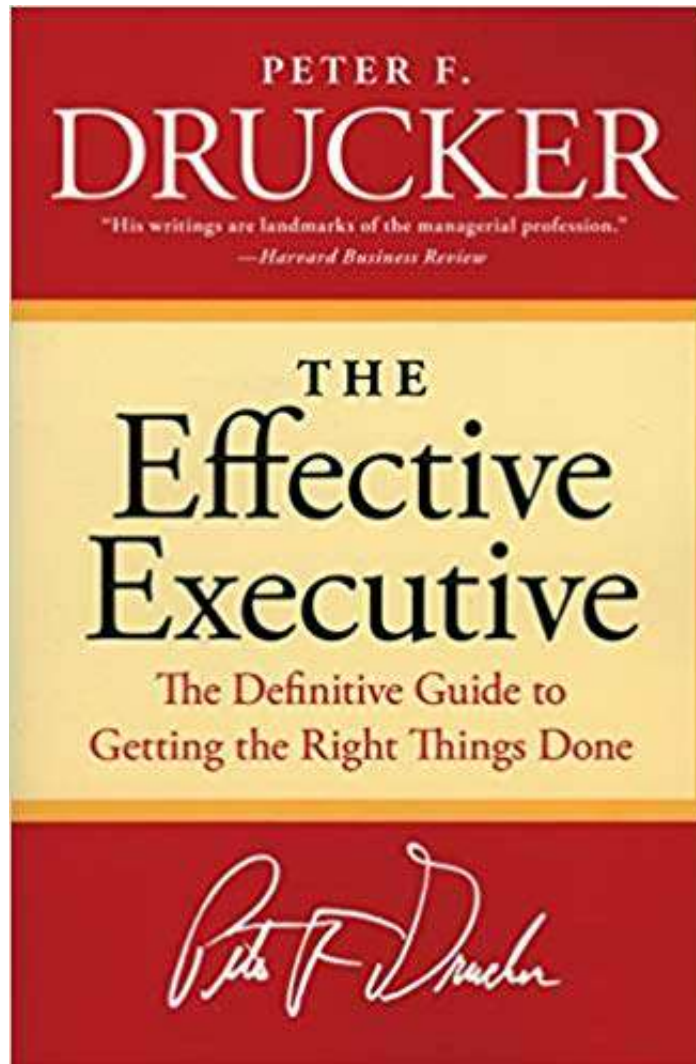


3. [Goals!](#) - [Brian Tracy](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

How to Get Everything You Want Faster Than You Ever Thought Possible

Goals! was the first book I ever read on productivity and probably the most readable and complete guide to goal-setting ever written - by sales legend and time-management master, Brian Tracy.

Published 1989 // 291 pages // Rated 4.2 over 14,200 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

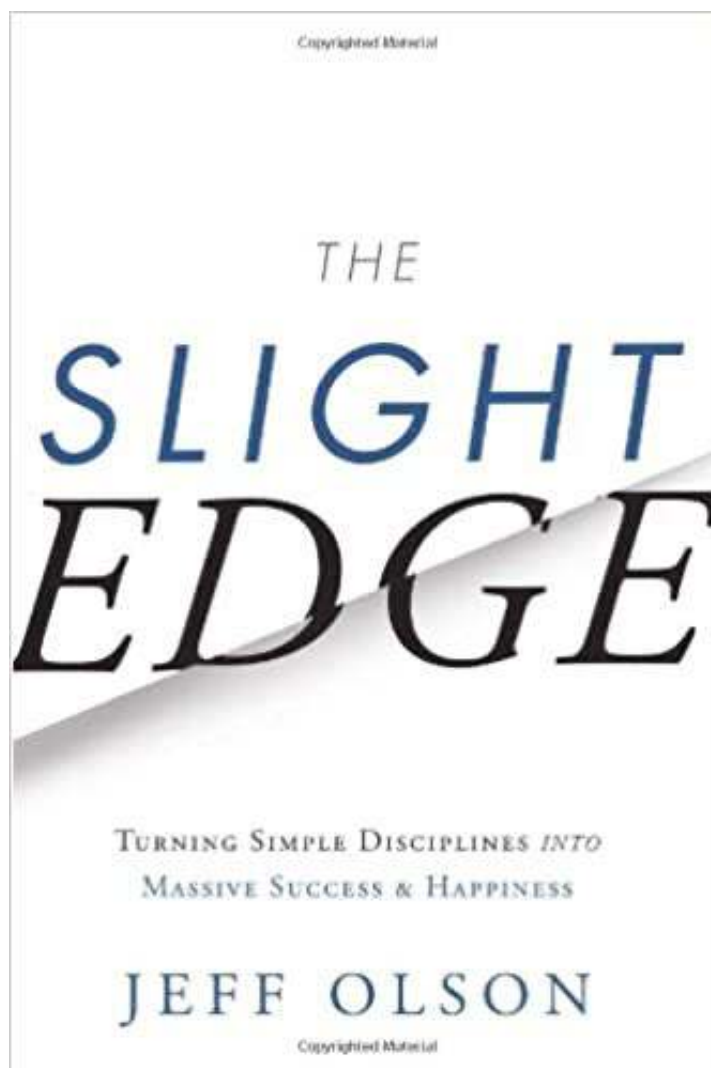


4. [The Effective Executive](#) - [Peter F. Drucker](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done

The Effective Executive is THE timeless classic on leadership and management; on getting the right things done - by the dean of business and management philosophy, Peter F. Drucker.

Published 1966 // 208 pages // Rated 4.1 over 32,700 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



5. [The Slight Edge](#) - [Jeff Olson](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

Turning Simple Disciplines Into Massive Success & Happiness

The Slight Edge is a short, punchy, practical guide to the why, what and how of using simple daily disciplines to achieve breakthrough success - by serial entrepreneur, speaker and author, Jeff Olson.

Published 2005 // 168 pages // Rated 4.3 over 21,900 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?

Whenever you're ready, here are four ways I can help you be more productive, find more balance and live life more on purpose...

1. **Curious? Discover how productive you really are...** Take this free, 2-minute assessment to unlock your PQ and discover the top 25 habits you need to get big things done. [Take the 2-minute quiz →](#)
2. **Overwhelmed? Get a free chapter of my book...** Let me show you how to beat procrastination, permanently, with this free sneak peek inside **TAoL**'s ultimate productivity primer. [Download your free chapter →](#)
3. **Stuck? Grab a 90-Day TRACKTION Planner...** Get the tool thousands trust to help them take control of their time, master their habits and hit goals in every part of their lives. [Order your 90-day planner →](#)
4. **Burned out? Join the TRACKTION Community...** Take the 6-week masterclass, get weekly group coaching, find accountability partners and connect with like-minded self-starters. [Get started FREE →](#)

[Arthur Worsley](#)

I founded **TAoL** to discover and share the best wisdom on how to live long and prosper. Before that I studied Psychology, Philosophy & Physiology at Oxford and consulted at McKinsey. **Still curious?** [Learn more](#) or [take my FREE productivity quiz](#).