

How to Read a Book Summary – Adler & van Doren

17 MINUTE READ

[How to Read a Book](#) (1940)

The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading

by [Mortimer J. Adler](#)

How to Read a Book is THE classic guide to reading faster, deeper and more effectively than you ever realised was possible - by deep-thinkers, philosophers and life-long learners, M. Adler and C. van Doren. ([426 pages](#))

Note: This **How to Read a Book summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Books on Learning](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

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How to Read a Book Review

"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." – Dr. Seuss

I know what you're thinking...

"I've been reading my whole life. I think I can handle a book."

And the fact is you're probably right. If you're reading this, you obviously can read.

[You may even read quite a lot.](#)

But you're probably not very good at it.

And, unfortunately, like the 90% of people who think their driving is "above-average", there's a good chance you're blind to your failings. What's more, even if you know you have room for improvement, you may have no idea how to get started.

Fortunately, it's precisely this blindspot that Mortimer J. Adler and Charles van Doren's [How to Read a Book](#) sets out to cure.

Why is learning to read well important? Because your mind is the most wonderful gift nature gave you. It will outlast your body for decades. It will almost continuously grow, shape and transform your entire experience of life.

And books aren't an optional extra – they're the key to unlocking your mind's full potential. They're a source of unending insight. They're a limitless well of flash-frozen wisdom from mankind's best thinkers and doers.

The good news? Reading is a skill – one you can greatly improve. [Like all](#)

[skills](#), it can be broken down, practised and mastered – no matter who you are, how much you read or where you're starting from.

So open your mind, grab a pen and get ready – because despite the decades of reading behind you, it's finally time to learn...

How to Read a Book Summary

Reading can be done for three reasons, for:

- **Entertainment** – to relax, hear a story or “*just because*”;
- **Information** – to acquire facts (to see more of the world); and
- **Understanding** – to develop insight (to see the world differently).

Of the three, reading for understanding is hardest – and the focus of this guide.

Why? Because cognitive leaps are hard work. They begin with books that are beyond us, they lead us to new and occasionally uncomfortable truths and they force us to adopt new perspectives.

To close your understanding-gap with an author, you must answer four questions:

1. **What is their book about as a whole?**
2. **What is being said in detail, and how?**
3. **Is their book true, in whole or in part?** and
4. **What of it?**

How do we answer those questions? We tend to think of reading as passive. But the secret is to realise it's a *two-way* exchange. The author's job is to throw, yours is to catch – a book's success depends on *both of you* playing your part.

The *more active* your reading, the *better* your reading. The better your

reading, the better your answers to the questions above. And the better your answers, the more likely you are to start seeing the world in new ways.

The 4 Levels of Reading

But *how*? Reading actively means mastering four levels of reading:

1. **Elementary reading** – Turning symbols into information;
2. **Inspectional reading** – Getting the most from a book in a given time;
3. **Analytical reading** – Thorough and complete reading for understanding; and
4. **Synoptic reading** – Exploring a subject through wide reading.

Let's discuss three general active-reading tips and then examine each level in turn.

General Reading Tips

The first general active-reading tip is so important, we've mentioned it already and will come back to it at the end. Always **approach reading as a conversation with the author**. Approach every book with an open mind and *remember that books are the imperfect creations of imperfect creatures*.

***Don't* treat everything you read as inflexible statements of fact**. Do question and challenge. But do also make sure you understand what you've read before criticising. Active-reading is like active-listening. **If you can't restate the author's position better than they can, you don't know it well enough to help fix it.**

The second active-reading tip is this – **make every book you read your own**.

To do so, use:

- **Highlighting** – underline, circle, star, asterisk and fold pages;
- **Linking** – number arguments on the page, reference other pages or sections; and
- **Synthesising** – write in the margins, top and bottoms of pages and front and endpapers.

Making a book your own as you read improves concentration, encourages thinking (through words) and forces active engagement.

The final active-reading tip is to **set your reading environment up for success**. Make sure your reading-space is well lit, tidy and allows you to focus. Treat every session with the same respect as a life-changing meeting of minds.

So, with *those* thoughts in mind, it's time to get started with...

Step 1: Elementary Reading

Elementary reading is the skill of turning symbols into information. If you can get from the first to the last page of a book (or if you're reading this) you're already there. But one major improvement we can all make is to **read with appropriate speed**.

The majority of speed reading courses focus on two tricks:

1. **Reducing fixations** – The number of jumps your eye makes; and
2. **Reducing regressions** – The time you spend rereading.

The solution to both is as simple as running a pencil down the page as you read at a slightly faster rate than feels comfortable. With practice, this will help you reduce bad habits like [sub-vocalising](#) and increase your reading speed by hundreds of percent.

But the key word in the sentence above isn't speed, it's appropriate.

"Every book should be read no more slowly than it deserves, and no more quickly than you can read it with satisfaction and comprehension," Adler and van Doren tell us.

Not all books are created equal. When reading for understanding, one 300-page book may deserve just an hour of skimming, another may deserve days or even weeks of your time. Grasping this marks the difference between those who are **widely-read** (lots of reading, little understanding) and those who are **well-read** (less reading, more understanding). It's a vital distinction to make.

Learning to spot and adjust your reading approach at each end of the spectrum is critical.

The secret? It all hinges on...

Step 2: Inspectional Reading

Inspectional reading is the art of getting the most from a book in a given time.

You should inspect every book you are thinking of reading before reading it.

Why? Doing so helps in two ways:

1. **It primes you with an overall framework of the book;** and
2. **It tells you if and how you should read it.**

The first will greatly speed up your reading if you decide to dig deeper. The second will save you many hours reading books better skipped. Both lead to more insights from more books that most deserve your time and attention.

So how does it work? Inspectional reading has two parts:

- **PART I: Systematic skimming;** and
- **PART II: Superficial reading.**

Let's look at each one in turn...

PART I: SYSTEMATIC SKIMMING

Takes: *Ten minutes to an hour.*

Answers: *What kind of book is it? What's it about? How is it structured? Is it worth reading?*

To begin your systematic skimming, first study the:

- **Title** – Take a moment to read it aloud. What does it tell you to expect?
- **Contents** – How has the author structured their work? How does it flow? What are the pivotal chapters?
- **Index** – What terms are most frequently referenced? Do any surprise you?
- **Publisher's blurb** – What does the publisher think is important? How have they synthesised the work? and
- **Author's preface** – What does the author want you to take away? How do they want you to read?

At this stage, try to avoid other people's syntheses, commentaries and reviews as these will bias your ability to come to your own conclusions.

The next step is turning the pages, as you do so:

- **Read titles, sub-titles, figures and tables;**
- **Read a paragraph or two, sometimes several pages** – Never more;
- **Skim pivotal chapters in full** – Especially opening and summary statements); and

- **Read the last two or three pages in the main part of the book.**

Third, pencil some brief, structural notes (blank front pages are a great place to do this):

- **Classify the book** – is it:
 - Non-fiction, narrative non-fiction, fiction?
 - Prose, verse, theatre, other or a mix?
 - History, science or philosophy?
 - Theoretical or practical?
- **Write a short synthesis of its contents** – One to three sentences at most; and
- **Bullet its high-level structure.**

By this point, you should have a good idea of what kind of book this is and what it's about. That's helpful because the final step in skim reading is to:

- **Decide whether to read the book or not.**

If you only live for 700,000 hours (~80 years), do you really want to invest ~6 of them in this book? Is reading this book going to rock your world? Is it one of the ~1,000 good or ~100 truly great books that [Adler and van Doren suggest might exist](#)? If not, you may want to read something else.

Hopefully, you can see how a quick upfront skim and one simple question can save hundreds of hours of frustration and effort.

If you do decide to read the book, that's great!

The next step in inspectional reading is...

PART II: SUPERFICIAL READING

Takes: *Depends on the book, but at a faster rate than comfortable.*

Answers: *What does it say (big picture)?*

Superficial reading is as simple as reading the whole book, all the way through without stopping.

DO take notes and make the book your own but...

DON'T look things up or puzzle out bits you don't immediately understand.

Why? First, your questions may solve themselves as you keep reading.

Second, the important thing here is to get a view of the forest without getting lost in the trees. It's a good tip because, as Adler and van Doren note, *"even if you never go back, understanding half of a really tough book is much better than not understanding it at all."*

But as you finish, if you decide you *do* want to go back – if this book is really worth pulling apart – then it's time to start...

Step 3: Analytical Reading

Analytical reading is the art of thorough and complete reading for understanding.

The goal of analytical reading is to close the gap in understanding between you and an author. By the end of the process, you should be able to explain what the author said, what they meant and why they said it. You should also be able to clearly state your position on their work with specific reasons for any criticisms.

There are three parts to the process:

- **PART I: What is the book about as a whole?**
- **PART II: What is being said in detail and how?**
- **PART III: Is the book true, in whole or in part?**

You may feel like you do many of these steps mostly well. The goal here is to make them explicit; to deconstruct reading so you can see, practice and master its sub-skills.

Challenge yourself to practice each step below (especially where you're most resistant) the next few times you really dive into a book.

Doing so will make you a better, faster and smarter reader.

Let's double-click for more details...

PART I: WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AS A WHOLE?

There are 4 sub-steps to clarifying what a book is about:

1. **Classify the book;**
2. **Synthesise it briefly;**
3. **Identify, organise and outline the parts;** and
4. **Define the problems the author is trying to solve.**

Now that you've read the whole book once through, the first step in analytical reading is to revise and extend your notes from inspectional reading.

First, check you still agree with your classification. This will help you calibrate the rest of your approach.

Second, review your synthesis. What is the main theme or point? What is the author trying to achieve? How do they get there? Make this as brief, accurate and comprehensive as possible (no more than a few sentences or a short paragraph).

Next, revisit and expand your high-level structure. Identify the main parts of the book. Break each bullet into sub-bullets. Split those sub-bullets further until you have a solid outline of the book's contents and

flow.

Finally, make a list of the questions you think the author is trying to answer. What are the main questions? What are their sub-questions? Which questions are primary and which secondary? Don't just do this in your head. *Write them down.*

With this birds-eye view in hand, it's time to move on to...

PART II: WHAT IS BEING SAID IN DETAIL AND HOW?

The next 4 sub-steps in analytical reading will help you clarify exactly what the author is saying and how they're saying it:

5. **Spot all the keywords and understand what the author means by them;**
6. **Distil the key propositions from the author's most important sentences;**
7. **Find or build the author's arguments from sequences of sentences; and**
8. **Decide which problems the author has, hasn't and knew they couldn't solve.**

Where part I of analytical reading is top-down, part II tackles the task bottom-up.

Just as writing uses words to build sentences and paragraphs, so logic uses terms to build propositions and arguments. Your task is to find and relate these back to part I.

COMING TO TERMS

First, make a list of, then define all the unfamiliar or important keywords in the book – technical, antiquated and otherwise. Use the title, headings, figures, glossary and formatting to help spot them. Once

listed, make sure you understand exactly how the author is using these words; *be sure you understand what they mean.*

Glossaries, dictionaries and reference books can help (especially for technical jargon). But the most important clue here is context. What do the words around the keywords say about how the author is using them? What about the rest of the book? The combination of keywords and the specific way an author uses them are the author's **terms**.

IDENTIFYING PROPOSITIONS

Second, find, highlight and dissect the sentences *whose meaning is either not immediately obvious or that are clear declarations of knowledge or opinion.* These are the author's **propositions**, the foundations that support their main arguments. A good way to spot these is to look for high concentrations of the terms that you gathered above.

Once you've found them, puzzle away at these propositions until you can re-state them clearly in your own words. Alternatively, challenge yourself to exemplify the general truth they imply with a specific personal example. Both exercises will challenge you to show true understanding.

CONSTRUCTING ARGUMENTS

Third, find or piece together the collections of sentences or paragraphs in the book that connect one or more propositions in support of a particular conclusion. These chains of logic are the author's main **arguments**.

To spot them, look for things the author states they must assume, can prove or need not prove because they are self-evident; look for conclusions where you find reasons (and vice versa).

REVIEWING PROBLEMS

Finally, relate your analysis back to your observations from part I.

What problems has the author solved? Which have they missed? Where did they know that they failed?

Following this rigorous process of deconstruction will put you in an excellent place to tackle...

PART III: IS THE BOOK TRUE, IN WHOLE OR IN PART?

When deciding how much truth an author has touched on (or failed to touch on) in a book, you'll find it helpful to start with some...

PART A: GENERAL MAXIMS OF INTELLECTUAL ETIQUETTE

9. **Understand before you "agree", "disagree" or "abstain";**
10. **Be open-minded and collaborative, even when you disagree; and**
11. **Be specific in any criticisms you make.**

A general rule for criticism is to always approach a book like a light-hearted and constructive problem-solving session with a friend.

Begin with an open and collaborative mind, assume benign intent and be able to state the other person's position better than they can *before* weighing in with your own.

Remember that both you and the author are (usually) just as curious about and interested in finding the truth. Focussing on that, and not who is right or who is wrong, will help you get more from your reading.

Where you do disagree, monitor your emotions. Remember, just because you don't like someone's arguments, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're wrong.

Always criticise with an eye towards resolution and keep your own propositions and arguments to the same standards as you hold the

author's.

And remember, there's a very good chance that it's *you* that may misunderstand or be ignorant on some important point.

The best way to keep yourself logical and honest is to...

PART B: MAKE YOUR CRITICISMS SPECIFIC AND DETAILED

An author and their arguments can fall short by being:

12. **Uninformed** – The author does not know something important;
13. **Misinformed** – The author states something that is incorrect;
14. **Illogical** – The author's arguments are inconsistent or don't follow; or
15. **Incomplete** – One or more important additional conclusions omitted.

One or all of these may be true, but only for specific parts of a book.

"The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks," Adler and van Doren remind us.

So when you criticise, make sure you can clearly explain where your criticism applies, what kind of shortcoming you've spotted and (for extra points) how you might improve or rewrite the argument. If you can't, be as suspicious of yourself as you would of *someone else* criticising *your* work whose best explanation is *"a general sense of unease"*.

And remember, until you can level at least one of the first three points at a work, you cannot (logically) disagree with its conclusions, even though you may dislike them.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

If you've successfully applied the three parts of analytical reading you should find the gap between you and an author has closed considerably.

Congratulations! Using nothing but the power of your mind, you've

conquered a book that was once well beyond you. You've elevated yourself from student to peer. You've met the mind of the author as equal and seen the world through the eyes of a giant. That's pretty amazing.

But what of it? What of the fourth and final question active-reading must answer? To take a step back and connect not just one dot but many, to use your new-found powers of reading to transform not just one part of your world but the whole thing we must move on to the last level of reading...

Step 4: Synoptic Reading

Synoptic reading is the art of exploring a question or subject by reading widely. It's not about reaching conclusions. Instead, it's about putting together a really good map. It's about discovering and noting the landmarks, the sights and the hazards so that when you do set out on the journey, you're the best-informed traveller on the road.

The most significant shift here is from a book-focused perspective to a subject-focused one. Where analytical reading treats a book as an end in itself, synoptic reading treats a book as a means; as an input to a wider discussion.

That's why the first part of synoptic reading is less about "how" and more about "what". It begins with...

PART I: SETTING UP FOR SYNOPTIC SUCCESS

Like any good project, synoptic reading starts with good planning. The following six-step process will help set you off on the right foot:

1. **Roughly identify the subject you want to tackle** – Try to be as specific as possible, but don't worry – you'll be refining this as you go along;

2. **Realise more than one book is necessary to tackle it** – Sounds obvious, but how many people do you know (including yourself) that read one book and then regurgitate it like it's the single, objective authority on a topic?
3. **Draw up a long bibliography** – Draw from libraries, advisors and bibliographies in other books. Use [the Synopticon](#) ([Vol 1](#), [Vol 2](#)) to identify references to particular themes in [The Great Books of The Western World](#) (N.B., [this is exactly what I've been doing here](#));
4. **Systematically skim all the books on your list** – Do this before reading anything on your list superficially, let alone analytically. Add any extra sources you discover to your long-list as you go;
5. **Solidify the subject you're tackling** – List the questions *you* want to address. These will set your boundaries and define your terms; and
6. **Shorten your bibliography** – Include only those books that say something important about the questions you've asked.

By now, you should have a solid idea of:

- The subject you're tackling;
- The angle you're tackling it from;
- The sources that have something important to say about it; and
- Roughly what side of each question those sources fall on.

So with your mission and short-list in hand, it's time to start...

PART II: READING SYNOPTICALLY

Synoptic reading is the fourth level of reading because it involves a skilful combination of elementary, inspectional and analytical reading. To do it:

1. **Find the relevant passages** – *Do not* read every book on your short-list analytically. How much time you spend with a book in synoptic reading depends on how much of and how well it relates to your questions;

2. **Bring the authors to *your* terms** – “*Translate*” each author’s terms to bring everyone on to the same (*your*) page (this can be the hardest part of the process);
3. **Get the questions clear** – Refine and order your questions to shed the greatest light possible on the subject;
4. **Define the issues** – Set out the different ways each author answers each question; and
5. **Analyse the discussion** – Order the debate to throw as much light on the subject as possible.

Remember, synoptic reading is like drawing a map – keeping it as objective as possible will give you the best chance of safely navigating your subject.

With this in mind, take particular care in step 5. Watch out for soft biases when ordering your questions, the debate and especially in the tone of your writing. Cast the facts as you wish, but remember, your thinking will thank you if you can resist adding bias too early.

Conclusion

So there you have it! Still feel like your reading has no room for improvement?

Hopefully, this summary of Adler and van Doren's [How to Read a Book](#) has shown you how much more there is to reading than meets the eye. But also that reading is a skill – one you can greatly improve, no matter who you are or what your current experience.

The big secret? Activity is the essence of good reading – the more active the better. And to get there, we’ve explored not just four levels of reading (elementary, inspectional, analytical and synoptic), but also a huge number of practical ways to get started right away.

"Aw man, that sure feels like a lot of hard work!"

I hear you. There's no escaping the fact that learning to read well is a challenge. But so is learning or perfecting any new skill.

And sure, you could happily get through life with average or even below-average reading skills. But the benefits of learning to read well are so enormous that any effort you make is well worth it.

Because tackling books that are beyond you won't just improve your reading. It will make you a better, more passionate person. It will make you *"wiser in the sense that you are more deeply aware of the great enduring truths of human life."*

So don't just settle for average.

Become a good reader.

Heck, become a great reader.

Because doing so won't just make the next book you read a more interesting, valuable and meaningful experience.

It will elevate your mind to the level of humanity's greatest thinkers and doers.

And it may just transform your whole life.

Best How to Read a Book Quotes

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

["We do not have to know everything about something in order to understand it; too many facts are often as much of an obstacle to](#)

"understanding as too few."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Reading can be more or less active, and... the more active the reading the better."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"We can roughly define what we mean by the art of reading as follows: the process whereby a mind, with nothing to operate on but the symbols of the readable matter, and with no help from outside, elevates itself by the power of its own operations. The mind passes from understanding less to understanding more. The skilled operations that cause this to happen are the various acts that constitute the art of reading."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is the same, in what respects it is different, and so forth."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Enlightenment is achieved only when, in addition to knowing what an author says, you know what he means and why he says it."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"There have always been literate ignoramuses who have read too widely and not well."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"With the help of the books read, the syntopical reader is able to construct an analysis of the subject that may not be in any of the books... Syntopical reading is probably the most rewarding of all reading activities. The benefits are so great that it is well worth the trouble of learning how to do it."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Every innovation carries in its train a posse of suspicious and, one feels, unpersuadable observers."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"A good liberal arts high school, if it does nothing else, ought to produce graduates who are competent analytical readers. A good college, if it does nothing else, ought to produce competent syntopical readers."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Every book should be read no more slowly than it deserves, and no more quickly than you can read it with satisfaction and comprehension."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"It is not the stretching that tires you, but the frustration of stretching unsuccessfully because you lack the skill to stretch effectively."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"In order to forget [skills] as separate acts, you have to learn them first as separate acts."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Propositions are nothing but expressions of personal opinion unless they are supported by reasons."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Many persons believe that they know how to read because they read at different speeds. But they pause and go slow over the wrong sentences. They pause over the sentences that interest them rather than the ones that puzzle them."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"For the disputatious and the contentious, a bone can always be found to pick a quarrel over. It makes no difference whether the bone is really a chip on your own shoulder."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"No higher commendation can be given any work of the human mind than to praise it for the measure of truth it has achieved."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"A person who has read widely but not well deserves to be pitied rather than praised."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"A good student frequently becomes a teacher, and so, too, a good reader becomes an author."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"On the whole, it is best to do all that you can by yourself before seeking outside help; for if you act consistently on this principle, you will find that you need less and less outside help."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"Many authors write only for readers who agree with them."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"The very best articles, like the best books, cannot be condensed without loss."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"One of the most remarkable things about the great philosophical books is that they ask the same sort of profound questions that children ask."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

"You will not improve as a reader if all you read are books that are well within your capacity. You must tackle books that are beyond you, or, as we have said, books that are over your head."

- [Mortimer J. Adler](#), How to Read a Book

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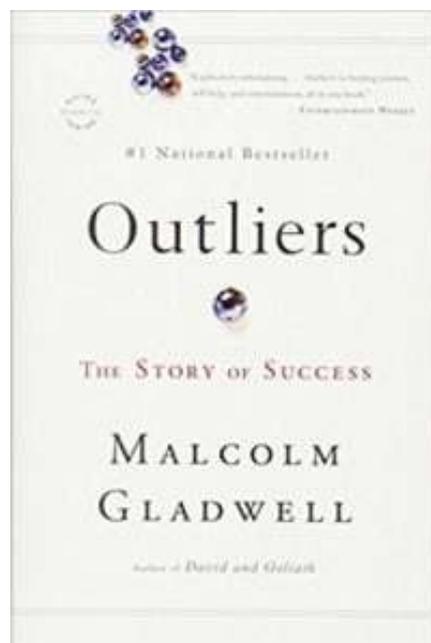
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And in the meantime...

Here are 5 top books like **How to Read a Book**...

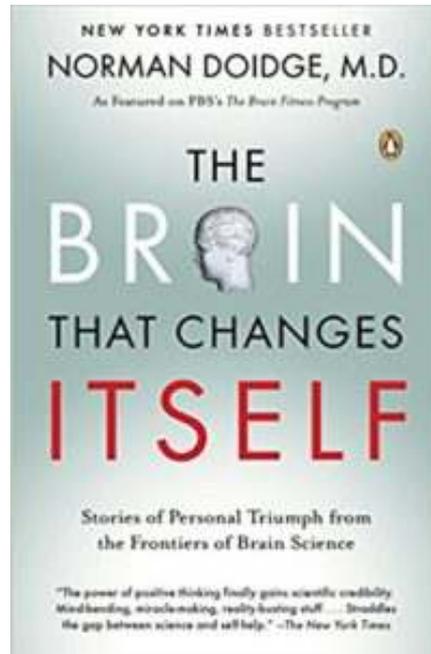


2. [Outliers](#) - Malcolm Gladwell ([FREE Summary](#))

The Story of Success

A systematic debunking of the myth that success is mostly determined by talent and hard-work - with quantitative and qualitative evidence from medicine, sport, business, history, music, science and more - by journalist and author, Malcolm Gladwell.

Published 2008 // 309 pages // Rated 4.2 over 636,600 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

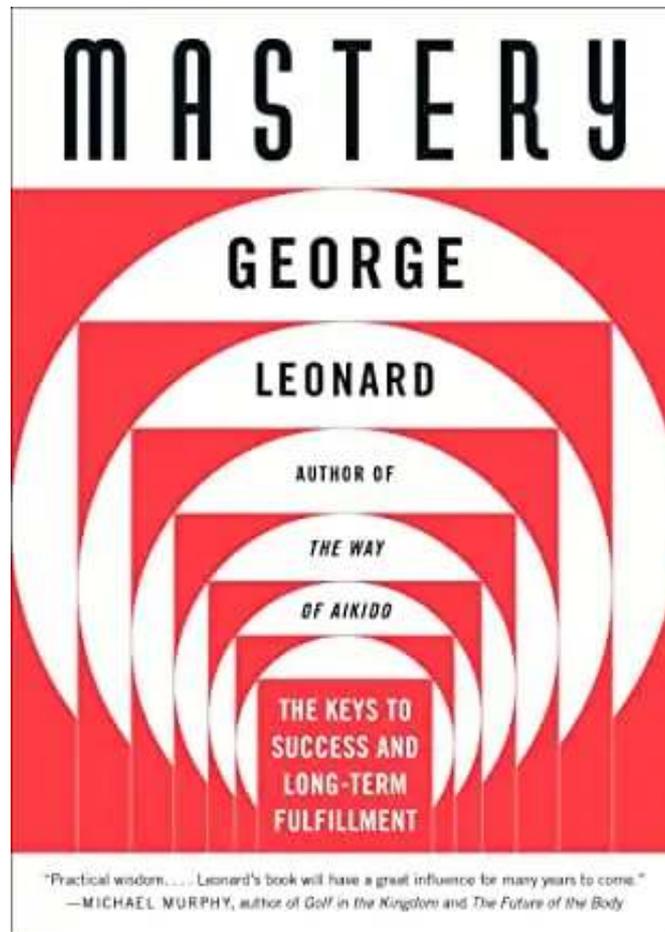


3. [The Brain That Changes Itself](#) - Norman Doidge ([FREE Summary](#))

Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science

An informative and readable journey into the history, science and consequences of recent research in neuroplasticity - the brain's incredible ability to change and reorganise itself - by psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and researcher, Norman Doidge.

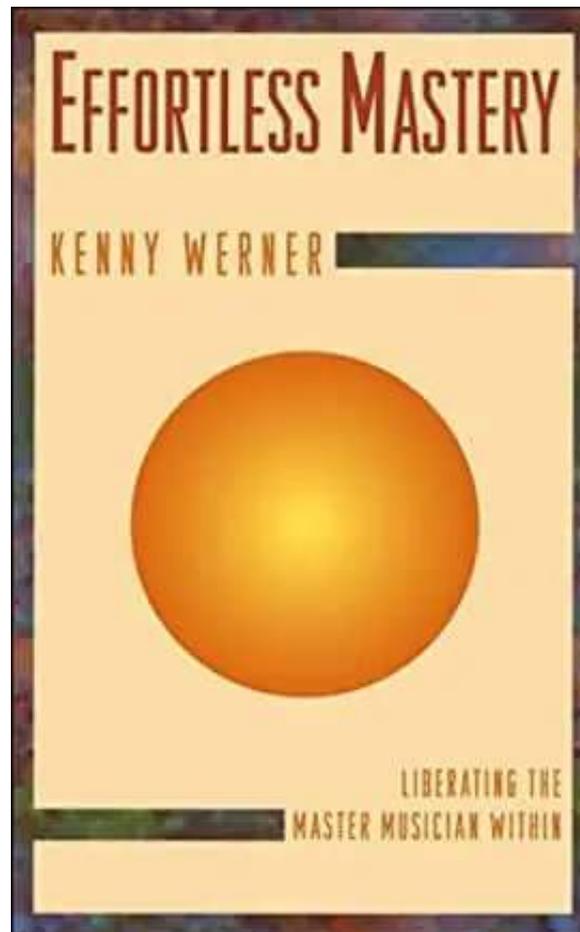
Published 2007 // 427 pages // Rated 4.2 over 34,200 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



4. [Mastery](#) - George Leonard

The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment

Published 1991 // 176 pages // Rated 4.1 over 8,500 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



5. [Effortless Mastery](#) - Kenny Werner ([FREE Summary](#))

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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](#).