

The Art of War Summary – Sun Tzu

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by [Sun Tzu](#)

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One-Sentence Summary

The Art of War is THE classic guide to military strategy that has inspired soldiers, politicians and business leaders worldwide for millennia. Its timeless (and time-tested) lessons in outthinking and outflanking your adversaries are as valuable in the boardroom as on the battlefield - by Chinese Qi Dynasty military general and master strategist, Sun Tzu. ([273 pages](#))

Contents

- 1. One-Sentence Summary**
- 2. The Art of War Review**
- 3. The Art of War Summary**
- 4. Chapter 1: Laying Plans**
- 5. Chapter 2: Waging War**
- 6. Chapter 3: Attack by Strategem**
- 7. Chapter 4: Tactical Dispositions**
- 9. Chapter 6: Weak Points and Strong**
- 10. Chapter 7: Manoeuvring**
- 11. Chapter 8: Variation of Tactics**

12. Chapters 9 through 12: Tactical Warfare

13. Chapter 13: The Use of Spies

14. The Art of War Contents

15. The Art of War FAQs

16. Is The Art of War a True Story?

17. What Is Sun Tzu's Philosophy?

18. What Is Sun Tzu's Law of Nature?

19. Best The Art of War Quotes

20. The Art of War PDF Summary

21. Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?

Note: This **The Art of War summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Leadership Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

The Art of War Review

The Art of War is filled with powerful strategies for succeeding in war and life. Its author, Sun Tzu, led a victorious army during the Chinese Qi dynasty in the sixth century B.C. and is one of the greatest military strategists in history.

I was 19 years old when I first read this book and had just finished training at boot camp. But that was just the beginning. Nothing had prepared me for the sleepless nights of schooling and training that lay ahead.

The Art of War landed on my desk just when I needed it most. It gave me a manuscript to succeed in the military and (later) in civilian life. It helped me graduate from further training with a 98% pass rate, despite the hard ground I had to cover.

Whether it's feigning weakness when I'm strong, attacking like a thunderbolt, or avoiding rash decisions, I still use Sun Tzu's principles today when challenged at work or at school.

Reading this book helped me understand what it means to be a good leader and prepared me for life's many battles, Navy training included.

Best of all? At just 80 pages (core text), The Art of War is a book that changed my life (and can change yours) in just a handful of hours.

Short on time? Learn its key points with the full, free The Art of War summary below...

The Art of War Summary

Chapter 1: Laying Plans

Strategizing is a matter of life and death in war and an important skill in life. As we say in the military, *"Proper Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance."*

That's why good leaders plan for success.

In his first chapter, Sun Tzu lays out 5 factors that set any plan up for success...

Moral Law – Moral law is also known as the mission. It's a unifying cause that helps armies follow leaders without question. Through moral law, you create common ground with your troops so they remain disciplined and follow you into battle, even if death is imminent.

Heaven and Earth – You know these as weather and terrain. Every successful strategist must prepare for unfavorable circumstances. From packing essential gear to scouting what lies ahead, considering and preparing for tough conditions is critical to ensuring success.

The Commander – The best leaders are benevolent and kind, yet without cowardice. They embody virtue and courage, marching into hostile territory. They enforce discipline and punish insubordination. Their

strictness instills fear and respect. They assign duties fairly.

Method and Discipline – These elements help leaders avoid disorganization in their teams. According to Sun Tzu, proper method and discipline keep highways clear, prevent delays, and lead to victory. The best leaders divide their teams into proper ranks and subdivisions and rule them with iron command.

Sun Tzu also describes the importance of **never underestimating your enemy**. Although it can be hard to accurately judge your opponent, this skill is essential for success. Which of two sovereigns (meaning two sides of the war) has the largest army? Which leader has the best moral law and is held in high regard by his troops? If you know the advantage of the enemy, you have a better chance of predicting victory or defeat.

Chapter 2: Waging War

In this chapter, Sun Tzu reminds us that... *"There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare."*

Sun Tzu valued rapid victories over extended confrontations. Rapid victory is the essence of war.

To apply this concept to your life, think about how much effort it takes you to accomplish a task. Is the trade-off in time, effort, and energy worth the reward?

According to Sun Tzu, we should all take time to consider whether winning is really worth the cost. As he states, *"In war, let your great object be victory, not lengthy campaigns."*

Chapter 3: Attack by Strategem

In this chapter, Sun Tzu details specific strategies to help leaders win wars

without head-to-head conflict. As he says, *“Supreme excellence is breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”*

His suggestion for avoiding conflict? Learn when to attack and when not to. Distinguishing between likely victory and defeat is the essence of great leadership.

Sun Tzu tells us that quick-tempered generals are the downfall of any army. These types of leaders lead their soldiers into battles they know they can’t win.

As Sun Tzu says, asking troops to go into battles they’re certain to lose creates resentment and leads to anarchy. So know when to and when not to lead your team into a battle.

To improve at this, Sun Tzu suggests following the five characteristics of being a good commander.

According to Sun Tzu, the five best characteristics of any leader are:

1. Knowing when and when not to fight;
2. Knowing how to handle superior and inferior forces;
3. Being the person whose entire army rallies behind them with the same fighting spirit in every rank, from the most experienced officer to the newest recruit;
4. Preparing yourself and waiting to take advantage of any sign that the enemy is disorganized and unprepared; and
5. Having military autonomy that is never interrupted by the sovereign (i.e., no red tape, you can work independently).

Sun Tzu also reminds us that it’s not enough to know ourselves. We must do all we can to actively learn about our adversaries.

Not knowing your enemy is an act of recklessness, which leads to destruction and ruin.

Chapter 4: Tactical Dispositions

According to Sun Tzu, the key to winning a war with no mistakes lies in preparation. Only a loser enters battle trusting providence and hoping for victory.

Successful strategists plan ahead before taking action. They know **EXACTLY** how they will win and do not stray from their strategy.

Ask yourself: Have I prepared enough to take on the task at hand? Can I envision myself winning a victory, be it getting that new job or accepted into college?

To prepare for victory and war, Sun Tzu recommends:

- **Measurement** of budget, time, effort, the enemy's soldiers;
- **Estimation** of quantity (supplies, money, soldiers);
- **Calculation** of the your and your enemy's strength;
- **Balancing chances** – What are the odds of you winning?); and
- **Victory** – Using the above to determine a clear plan of action.

Measure twice and cut once to set yourself up for success.

Chapter 5: Energy

It's more challenging, but you can always beat an enemy in their territory, no matter how small or large your army.

All it takes is communication (which Sun Tzu calls signals), subdividing (or breaking up your group into teams), and using indirect and direct attacks.

Sun Tzu describes how five primary colors create the entirety of the color spectrum through simple variations.

The lesson? As a leader, you must combine the resources you have and

form “variations” to come up with unlimited strategies. Use the “combined energy” of your team to aid in victory.

Sun Tzu also recommends using a combination of direct and indirect attacks to forge a limitless number of war strategies.

Direct attacks involve attacking the enemy during battle.

Indirect attacks include tactics that incorporate hiding and secrecy, starving your enemy, or fooling them into thinking you are weak when you're strong. Sun Tzu calls this “*feigning weakness*,” and it is an essential component of any battle.

Chapter 6: Weak Points and Strong

Attack the unguarded spots that your enemy doesn't know how to defend, and defend yourself against an enemy by fortifying your weak spots. This summarizes war and is one example of the many attack strategies Sun Tzu teaches.

Sun Tzu's core message in this chapter is to fight battles on your own terms. (For example, by securing higher ground to get an advantage over your enemies.)

If you must fight, confuse your enemies with unexpected routes or gambits such as suddenly modifying your tactics. This is crucial (and far easier) if attacked in your own territory. In real life, never let those around you know your next move.

Sun Tzu also teaches the importance of caring for your army. He states, “*Whoever is first in the field and awaits the coming of the enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted.*”

This statement offers a valuable lesson in self-care. Leaders must

remember to keep themselves and their team well-rested before entering battle. Sun Tzu reminds us that it's easier to win wars when you don't make things harder than they need to be.

Chapter 7: Manoeuvring

The best leaders know how to take advantage of difficult circumstances. They do so by turning *"misfortune into gain."*

This chapter is one of the most metaphorical in the book. Sun Tzu says you must have *"immovability like a mountain,"* and when you move, *"fall like a thunderbolt."*

Sun Tzu mentions limiting the ground your army covers to preserve its strength. When your army must cover large distances, take breaks to have enough strength to defend against attacks. A tired army with low morale never wins battles.

Sun Tzu also states, *"We are not fit to lead an army on the march unless we are familiar with the face of the country."* He teaches the importance of studying moods, being prepared for the terrain, and maintaining secrecy.

Leaders should also know when to attack an enemy when they are their weakest. They should know how to preserve their supplies to keep morale high amongst their troops.

The crux of this chapter, Sun Tzu states, is to deliberate before making a move.

Chapter 8: Variation of Tactics

Sun Tzu reminds us there are many paths to victory. However just a few common character flaws in a leader can lead to the collapse of their army.

Dangerous faults in leaders that result in failure include:

- **Recklessness**, which leads to destruction;
- **Cowardice**, which leads to capture;
- **A hasty temper**, which leads to being vulnerable to attacks (so don't be easily angered by insults from the enemy);
- **A "delicacy of honor,"** which means a leader will be too shameful to quit when necessary; and
- **Excessive worry over your soldiers**, since this can cause a wise sovereign to prioritise the well-being of their team over not on the war at hand (in war, people are expendable).

Identifying and mitigating these faults in yourself and your officers is essential to winning in war, business and life.

Chapters 9 through 12: Tactical Warfare

This is one of the more tactical parts of the book. These chapters teach the reader to position themselves so they cannot be defeated.

Sun Tzu offers specific battle strategies, for example:

- Reminding soldiers and commanders to stay in areas with precipitous heights (meaning those covered on all sides, like a mountain valley);
or
- Encouraging leaders to keep their armies battle ready with iron discipline (undisciplined armies can't win battles, no matter how forgiving the battlefield).

These chapters also cover the different types of "Earth," or terrain in battle. Sun Tzu teaches his readers how to be a good fighter in the deepest valleys, swamps, marshes, and other environments.

Narrow passes? Take them first. Open ground? Guard your line. The main

takeaway from this portion of the book is to find specific strategies to help defend you in any type of terrain. Learning terrain is essential for higher officers leading their troops.

Chapter 13: The Use of Spies

In the final chapter of The Art of War, Sun Tzu states, *“What enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.”*

Information is power. And foreknowledge is what lets leaders understand their enemy's strengths and weaknesses and predict their next moves. It creates an “enlightened ruler.”

To gain foreknowledge, a leader should use the cleverness of spies.

Sun Tzu lays out five types of spies:

[Veronica Huerta](#)

I'm a Navy Veteran turned freelance writer. I work full-time helping veterans recover from mental health and substance abuse, and was once in recovery myself. Through past traumas, I've learned to give back to the community of veterans that I now call my brothers and sisters and teach them what I've learned over the years: how to believe in yourself and how to overcome the odds.