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How to Read a Book in Two Hours or Less

Submitted by Shira Lurie on January 14, 2014 - 9:08pm

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Shira Lurie is a guest author for GradHacker who recently received her MA in History from The University of Western Ontario and will begin her PhD at The University of Virginia next fall. Her research focuses on popular political dissent in the early American republic. You can find her on Twitter [@shirby9](#) ^[3] and at her blog [ShirbysDreamWorld](#) ^[4].

Most graduate students' time, especially those in the liberal arts, is spent reading books, talking about books, or panicking about the books they have not yet read ^[5]. In my first year of graduate study, I often found myself doing all three simultaneously (with heavy emphasis on the last). I came to revere the ability to read quickly as a rare superpower, akin to being able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, except doubly as useful. I tried everything to expedite my reading, including speedreading software ^[6], timers, and noise-cancelling headphones (you know, like my own fortress of solitude). These methods served only to increase my stress and frustration; they did nothing, however, to improve my reading speed. I then realized that I didn't need to develop superhuman abilities in order to crush multiple books in a day. All I had to do was pair my normal speed with a good reading strategy ^[7] to become an efficient, as opposed to fast, reader.

The following are four timesaving tips that helped me increase my reading efficiency. Adapt them, add to them, and become the superhero scholar of your department!

1. DO NOT start with the book at all! INSTEAD, read some book reviews.

Before you even pick up the book in question, read what other academics are saying about it. Use book reviews to help you summarize its argument, understand its organization, place it in its academic context, and learn what others have been most critical about. The more familiar you are with the book ahead of time, the easier it will be for you to tackle it quickly and retain its contents.

2. DO NOT begin at the beginning; do not end at the end. INSTEAD, read for argument.

Resist the temptation to start on the first page and see how far you get. Tailor your reading to what you wish to get out of the book [8]; in most cases, this is the author's argument. Begin by carefully reading the title, the back of the book, the table of contents, the introduction, and the conclusion - all places where the author reveals his/her argument and its structure. This step will hopefully reinforce the information you gleaned from the book reviews.

3. DO NOT try to read everything. INSTEAD, read the chapters that seem the most important and skim the rest!

Once you understand the author's argument and the way it is structured, pinpoint the chapters that seem the most important and read those as in-depth as you deem necessary. If there is a groundbreaking or deeply problematic section, the book reviews will have pointed it out to you already. As for the rest of the book, skim as much of it as time will allow. A good strategy is to read the beginning and end of each chapter, and the first sentence of each paragraph in between.

4. DO NOT write down everything. INSTEAD, answer questions about the book.

It can be tempting to try and fill your notes with as much detail as possible, but this is not the most efficient use of your time. Instead, jot down answers to some useful questions like: What are the author's main ideas and arguments? What concepts or theories does the author introduce or utilize? How is the book structured? What other major works does the author reference? What

does this book do well? What critiques do you have? You may also find it helpful to jot down quotes and page numbers from any place in which the author states something of particular importance, eloquence, or controversy.

Perfecting your individual reading strategy may take some trial and error, but it will be well worth the effort. As you improve your efficiency, you will not only free up more time to read, but also to *think* about what you have read. As you tackle more and more books, don't forget to keep track of those you've read [9]. Soon enough you will be crushing books faster than a speeding bullet, with insights more powerful than a locomotive! (Sorry, I couldn't resist).

Other helpful resources: Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren's *How to Read a Book* [10] and Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read* [11].

Have any other tips for efficient reading? Let us know in the comments!

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