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## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING YOURSELF**

# 8 Ways to Read the Books You Wish You Had Time For

*by Neil Pasricha*

**MANAGING YOURSELF**

# 8 Ways to Read the Books You Wish You Had Time For

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You need to read more books.

When I tell people this, most say, “Oh, yes, for sure, yes.” But then two seconds later, they say “I just wish I had the time.”

Well, you know what? I'm calling shenanigans on that excuse. Because the truth is we do have the time. A University of California [report](#) shows we're consuming more information now than we ever have before — more than [100,000 words](#) per day. Think about how many texts and alerts and notifications and work emails and personal emails and news headlines and fly-by tickers and blog feeds and Twitter spews and Instagram comments you're reading each day.

With all that garbage reading, who has time for books anymore?

In an earlier HBR piece called "[8 Ways to Read \(a Lot\) More Books This Year](#)," I shared how for most of my adult life I read five books a year, tops. I had a few slow burners on my nightstand, and read a couple of books on vacation if I was lucky. But then three years ago, I read fifty. Fifty books! In one year. I couldn't believe it. I could suddenly feel books becoming this lead domino towards being a better husband, a better father, and a better writer.

Since then, I've tried doubling down on reading. I'm now reading somewhere above 100 books a year. Sure, I sometimes hit slow patches, and bare patches, and slip into social media black holes. But here are eight *more* things I do to get back on track:

**1. Live inside a world of books.** Most people have a bookshelf "over there," where the books live. But one day last year, my wife just dumped a pile of about ten picture books in the middle of our coffee table. What happened? Our kids started flipping through them all the time. So now we just rotate them and leave them there. It's a path-of-least-resistance principle, much like how Google leaves [healthy snacks on the counter for employees, while chocolates are hidden away in cookie jars](#). We've put the TV in the basement, installed a bookshelf near our front door, and slipped books into car seat pouches and various nooks around the house. Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges [said](#): "I cannot sleep unless I am surrounded by books." This is how we now choose to live. (Even if you're trying to declutter, or don't have a lot of space to store books, you can always visit your local library for books and return them when you're done.)

**2. Go "red" in bed.** My wife generally falls asleep before I do, and that's when I strap my red reading light on my forehead. Why red? Michael Breus, author of [The Power of When](#) says the theory is that red light aids melatonin production. And bright lights have the opposite effect, according to [The Sleep Health Foundation of Australia](#). Too-bright lights, or a bright screen, can make you feel more alert. Bedtime reading should help you wind down, not wind you up.

**3. Make your phone less addictive.** Cell phones are a distraction machine. Our cell phones are designed to be smooth, sexy, and irresistible. Don't believe me? The book [Irresistible](#) by Stern School of Business associate professor Adam Alter will quickly raise your awareness of the addictive designs going into smartphones. They're like pocket slot machines. So how do you resist the urge to reach for it? Make it less appealing. Move all of the apps off the main screen so it's blank when you open it. Leave your cracked screen cracked. Move your charger to the basement so it's an extra step in your low-resilience nighttime and morning moments. If you must have your phone in the room while you

sleep, [enable “Do Not Disturb” mode](#) to automatically block calls and texts after 7 p.m. Slowly, slowly, slowly, you can prevent your phone from becoming so seductive.

**4. Use the Dewey Decimal System.** How do you organize your books? By color? By when you bought them? By big random piles everywhere? There’s a reason every library uses the [Dewey Decimal System](#). It makes sense. Books fall neatly into [ever-more-thinly-sliced categories](#) around psychology and religion and science and art and...everything. What’s the benefit? You make connections. You see where your big gaps are. I spent one Saturday organizing my books according to the Dewey Decimal System and, in addition to scratching an incredibly deep organizational itch, I now find books faster, feel like my reading is more purposeful, and am more engaged in what I read, because I can sort of feel how it snaps into my brain. What tools do you need to do this? Just two: I bookmarked [classify.oclc.org](#) to look up Dewey Decimal Numbers for any books which don’t have a DDC code on the inside jacket, and I use the [Decimator app](#) to look up what that number means. Oh, and I use a pencil to write the Dewey Decimal code and the category on the inside jacket of each book before putting it on the shelf.

**5. Use podcasts and BookTube to solve the “next book” dilemma.** As you start ramping up your reading rate, the biggest problem soon becomes “Well, what should I read next?” Going beyond piles in airport bookstores and what’s trending on bestseller lists means plunging into backlists and bookstore side-shelves to get intentional about finding the books that really change your life. In an era of infinite choice, the value of curation skyrockets. Podcasts and BookTubers (a subset of YouTubers focused on books) are now a reader’s curation dream machine. Where to start? In podcasts, [“What Should I Read Next?”](#) by Modern Mrs. Darcy tackles the problem head on and [“Get Booked”](#) by Amanda Nelson at BookRiot offers custom book recommendations. I also have my own show [“3 Books,”](#) during which we ask guests like Chris Anderson of TED, Judy Blume, or Chip Wilson to share three books that most shaped their lives. And: BookTube? Yes, BookTube. There’s [a great overview of it here](#), and some starter channels to get you hooked are [Ariel Bissett](#) and [polandbananasBOOKS](#).

**6. Unfollow all news.** Sure, sure, I [preached before](#) about how I cancelled my five magazine and two newspaper subscriptions to focus solely on books. But you know where the news followed me? Online. That’s where you need to go hardcore: Unfollow every news site on social media, and remove all bookmarks to news sites (remove all passwords, too). Remember what political scientist Herbert Simon [said](#): “What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.” (Want to go deeper here? I recommend reading [“Why You Should Stop Reading News”](#) on Farnam Street and [“Five Things You Notice When You Quit The News”](#) on Raptitude.)

**7. Read on something that doesn’t do anything else.** As author Seth Godin told me in an [interview](#), “People rarely read a book in iBooks because you’re one click away from checking your email.” If we can be interrupted, alerted, or notified, we will. That’s not good for diving deep into new worlds. So

what do I suggest? Real books. Real pages. On real paper. Yes, I'm OK with killing trees if it means gaining the ability to disappear into your own mind. Only real books let you be the full director of the show, after all. No voice replaces your mental voice, no formatting or display screen affects the artistic intentions of the writer. Sure, I get it if you need bigger fonts, or if you drive all day and prefer audiobooks, but I'm just saying that if you want to be a real book snob for the rest of your life just like me, actual books are where it's at. And, if you must use a device, just make sure that e-reader can't receive texts.

**8. Talk to your local booksellers.** My favorite bookseller of all-time is [Sarah Ramsey](#) of [Another Story Books](#) in Toronto. I walk in, I start babbling, I start confessing, I share what I'm struggling with, and she hmms and hahs and sizes me up as we wander around the store talking for half an hour. She finds: a good book after my divorce, a good book before my trip to Australia, a good book as I struggle with my kids. And then I walk out with an armload of books that completely fit my emotional state, where I want or need to grow, and those that resonate with me on a deeper level. If you believe humans are the best algorithm (as I do), then walking into your local independent bookstore, sizing up the Staff Picks wall to see who's interests align with yours, and then asking them for personal picks is a great way to find books you'll love faster. (Here's [a list of indie bookstores in the U.S.](#) if you want a place to start.)

So are you ready to read? Raring to go? Or are you one of those people who first needs to hear some rock-solid science to help change your behavior? If you need another couple of reasons: In 2011, [The Annual Review of Psychology](#) said that reading triggers our mirror neurons and opens up the parts of our brains responsible for developing empathy, compassion, and understanding. Reading makes you a better leader, teacher, parent, and sibling. Another [study](#) published in *Science Magazine* found that reading literary fiction helps us improve our empathy and social functioning. And, finally, an incredible 2013 [study](#) at Emory University found that MRIs taken *the morning after* test subjects were asked to read sections of a novel showed an increase in connectivity in the left temporal cortex — the area of the brain associated with receptivity for language. Just imagine the long-term benefits of cracking open a book every day.

Most of us want to read more books. And we absolutely can. You are what you eat, and you are what you read.

Keep turning the page.

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**Neil Pasricha** thinks and writes about failure, resilience, happiness, trust, and gratitude. He is *The New York Times* bestselling author of six books, including [The Happiness Equation](#) and [The Book of Awesome](#), which have sold more than a million copies and have spent more than 200 weeks on bestseller lists. He hosts the award-winning Top 100 iTunes podcast [3 Books with Neil Pasricha](#), where he's on a fifteen-year long quest to uncover the 1,000 most formative books in the world. He gives more than 50 keynote speeches a year at places such as [TED](#), [SXSW](#), and [Google](#). Visit him online and get his book recommendations at [Neil.blog](#).

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