Essentialism Summary

1-Sentence-Summary: *Essentialism shows you an entirely new way of productivity and life, by giving you a systematic discipline to help you be extremely selective about the essential things in your life and then ruthlessly cutting out everything else.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:

> "Remember that if you don't prioritize your life someone else will."
>
> – Greg McKeown
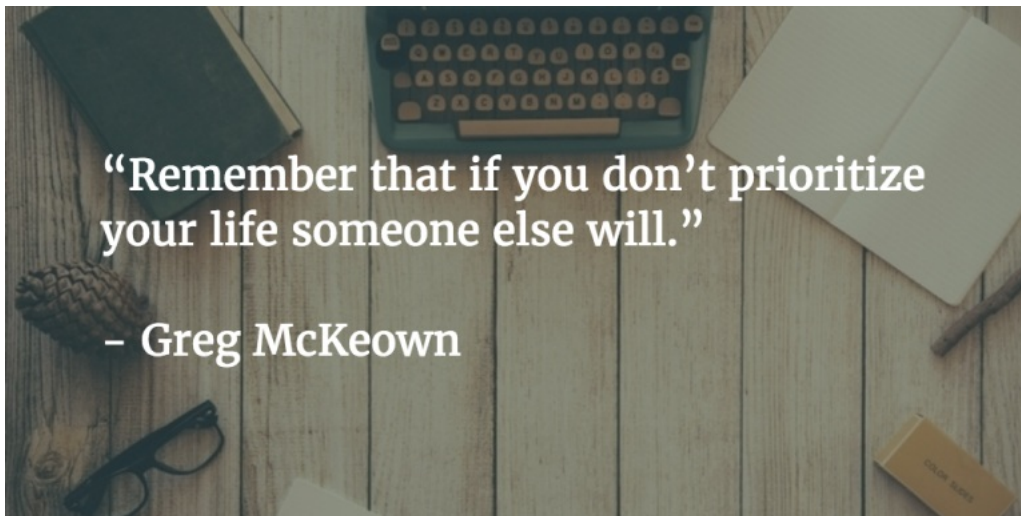
Published in early 2014, *Essentialism* is one of the most recent books on how to get more out of your life by doing less. Remember how Steve Jobs said focus was about saying no? This book is all about how you can take this concept and apply it to your whole life.

Comparing essentialist with non-essentialist from chapter to chapter, this book slowly, but surely gives you a set of principles and tools to identify everything in your life that's not important and cut it it out.

Here are 3 great starting points:

1. Doing nothing and doing everything are both signs of learned helplessness.
2. Become the editor of your own life with the 90% rule.
3. Always give yourself a buffer of 50%.

Ready to step on to the essentialist path? Let's take a hike!

Lesson 1: Doing nothing and doing everything are both signs of learned helplessness.

If you're not doing anything, that of course means you're not getting important things done.

However, so does doing everything.

Both camps are equally bad and a result of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is a concept first observed by Martin Seligman, happiness researcher and author of Learned Optimism.

It was originally observed in an experiment where dogs were administered electric shocks. All dogs had a lever they could pull, which would stop the shocks for one group, but not for the other.

Later both groups of dogs were placed in a large box with a low divider between a shock zone and a shock free zone. The dogs who had had the chance to stop the shocks before instantly jumped to the shock free zone – the ones where the lever had been of no use didn't.

They had learned to be helpless and just accepted their fate.

Whether we're doing nothing or trying to do everything, we're giving up our power to choose, just like the dogs.

When you find yourself throughout your day, saying "I have to do X, I have to do Y", over and over again, it's likely you've to some extent given others the power to choose for you.

Here's how to go from "I have to" to "I choose to".

Lesson 2: Become the editor of your own life with the 90% rule.

Jack Dorsey explained the job of being the CEO of Twitter as being like an editor.

He has to edit teams, financials, and the company's vision on a consistent basis. Being an editor is about adding, but mostly about removing what's not adding.

Essentialism teaches you to become the editor of your own life, and one of the rules it gives you to do so is the 90% rule.

For every item, to do, or decision you consider, only look at the most important criterion and give it a value between 0 and 100.

Everything that's under 90 is considered a 0, and has to go.

For example, when sorting out your closet, you could calculate the likelihood of ever wearing a piece of clothing again – if it's below 90%, why keep it?

Similarly, for your to-do list, you can ask: "How likely is this to really help me make progress towards my most important goal?"

This is very similar to Steve Jobs's advice about focus and Derek Sivers's "It's either hell yes, or no" approach and will help you say no more often, to leave only the things in your life which are adding the most value to your overall story.

Lesson 3: Always add 50% of the time you think you need as a buffer.

You know what the most beautiful part about saying no is?

The feeling of having enough time to attend to the things that you do say yes to.

However, focusing on few things does not mean you'll end up idle. You still have to plan them.

For example even when you just pick 3 tasks for your day, it's easy for them to take more time than you expect. Thinking we're able to estimate how much we can get done in a day and that everything will go as expected is one of our major flaws as humans.

That's why McKeown suggests always **adding 50% of the time you think a task takes as buffer, in order to account for the unexpected.**

When you think writing an article will take you 1 hour, plan 1.5 hours in your calendar. Estimate a Skype call to go for 30 minutes? Plan 45.

And so on.

This buffer will leave you room to breathe and help you not freak out when things run long, which they often do.

But for the essentialist, this is okay, because he or she knows that planning extra time for the unplannable, is the essentialist way of making time for what is, well, truly essential.

Essentialism Review

The very core idea of *Essentialism* is embedded in one beautiful and utterly clear graphic, which I used as the foundation of a guest post for Productivityist.

It shows 12 arrows for the 12 hours in your day. In one case they all point in different directions, in the other they all point in one direction, showing the magnitude of focus.

A lot of time management books are about prioritizing, but do it in the form of "Do this, then that." This book says "Do this, and nothing else."

In theory we all know what really matters to us, we just tend to overestimate ourselves and lift a lot of things from "nice to have" to "this is important". Essentialism helps you stop doing that.

The Blinkist summary is a massive collection of tools and ideas, and you can feed off of that for months, but if you want the stories, anecdotes and cool drawings, go for the book – both highly recommended.

What else can you learn from the blinks?

- The four pillars of essentialism
- Why Southwest Airlines would've been a better stock bet 30 years ago than Apple
- A consequence all essentialists have to accept
- Why boredom is good for you and a new approach to journaling
- How much sleep you can deprive yourself of, before acting like a drunk
- The minimum criteria approach
- What you can do to not feel bad when saying no
- Why goals have to be specific
- How the sunk cost bias ruined the Concorde
- A cool essentialist case study using boy scouts as an example
- What an essentialist life looks like day to day

Who would I recommend the Essentialism summary to?

The 24 year old with many goals in life, but who already feels like he's chasing to-dos and constantly behind, the 33 year old young professional, who keeps year-old clothes around, because she might wear them again, and anyone who keeps underestimating how much time things take.

Learn more about the author

Read the full book summary on Blinkist

Get the book on Amazon