HOWTO: Read more books

March 2, 2010

read so many books. Do I read unusually quickly? Do I spend an unusual amount of time reading? I did a simple calculation: The average person spends 1704 hours a year watching TV. If the average reading rate is 250 words per minute and the average book is 180,000 words, then that's 142 books a year. To my surprise, I wasn't reading nearly enough books. So I've taken some steps to read more:

1. **Block your favorite blogs.** I definitely have the mental habit noted in this xkcd cartoon: at the first sign of mental difficulty, I tab to a different window and begin typing the URL of a favorite blog. This habit is purely automatic, I do it without even thinking about it. As a result, I spend many, many hours a day reading blogs and following their links.

   To overcome this habit, I added all my favorite blogs to an `/etc/hosts` file that redirects them to a bogus IP. Now when I type their URLs, I get an error message. I did the same with Hulu and other sites I use to watch TV shows; if you have a real television, be sure to get rid of it too. Now I usually try visiting a couple different blogs before my conscious self realizes what's happening, but this happens soon enough and, over the past couple weeks, I've managed to pretty much train myself out of this bad habit.

   Now I either focus on the problem at hand or think enough about it to take a break and go for a walk, eat something, drink some water, read a book, or take a nap.

2. **Order lots of books at the library.** Most people think the way you read more books is by spending more time reading. But I've found that, like exercise, this is an effect and not a cause. I spend time reading when I have a great book to read. When I don't, I feel no urge to read and when I do start reading something, I put it down quickly. But if I'm reading a great book, I spontaneously come up with times and places to read it.

   But figuring out which books are great in advance is hard. People's experiences about which books they find compelling depend somewhat on their interests and finding accurate critics is problematic. So the best way I've found to see whether a book is good is to just start reading it.

   My local library system (Minuteman) allows you to request up to 20 books online and then delivers them to the branch library nearest you. So whenever someone makes a book recommendation or I hear about a book that seems interesting, I request it online. Then I go and pick up a stack of books at the library every week or so.

I begin reading them and finish the ones that are exciting enough to finish and return the ones that are unpromising enough to give up on. Then I return them all and get some more.

I also find that the due dates and the growing pile of books provides additional impetus to read them. And the habit doesn't cost me any money this way, so I don't feel guilty about it. (I'm sure you can come up with reasons I should feel guilty, but the fact remains that I don't.)

3. **Alienate everyone close to you.** The biggest consumer of time is undoubtedly other people, in large measure because talking to other people is so fun that you don't notice time going by. By keeping yourself away from other people (living alone is a good start), you free up an enormous amount of time for reading. I find this is particularly useful in reading books, since books can usually substitute for human company: you can take them with you on the train and to meals and curl up with them at night and so on.

   Getting rid of other hobbies no doubt also helps. (And, unlike people, books don't encourage you to have other hobbies.) I didn't have any other hobbies, so this was less of a problem for me, but you may want to think about the things you do instead of reading books and stop doing them.

4. **Keep the temperature low.** A common problem is falling asleep while reading. But I find it's difficult to fall asleep when I'm cold (whereas it's very easy to sleep when I'm warm), so I keep the temperature quite low in my apartment during the day. Even when I'm snuggled up in bed, I'm usually cold enough that I can't fall asleep.

I suspect few people will take all of this advice, but hopefully some of it is useful to you.