

MANAGING YOURSELF

# How to Read a Book a Week

by Peter Bregman

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It was the late 1980s and I was sitting in a university lecture hall listening to Abbie Hoffman, an author and an activist, ranting about my generation's indifference. Next to me was Gloria Emerson, a brilliant and eccentric journalist and author. We were discussing Hoffman's talk when I told her how much I loved being in the thick of all these ideas.

“It’s such a unique opportunity to be here,” I said to her, “to be part of these conversations with smart, thoughtful people.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” she responded. “Anybody can be part of these conversations. Just read some books!”

Ironically, as a history major, I was reading three to four books a week. And Gloria was right: through these books, I had a seat at the table. I was part of a cutting-edge conversation that was going on between great minds.

Flash forward too many years, and I am now back in that conversation. Since I started my podcast, I read as many nonfiction books as I can – at least one a week. It’s a requirement, first, to decide if I want to speak with an author and share their ideas, and, second, to make the conversation valuable if I do decide to have them on as a guest. (This may seem obvious, but you might be surprised at how many times I have been interviewed by people who have *not* read any of my books.)

I am richer for all this reading. I know more and take more risks as I apply what I’m learning. I also feel more confident in my own views and actions, as well as empathize and understand others better, since I have more context.

But reading is time-consuming. I was already over-busy *before* I started reading several books a week. And I am a slow reader.

I tried the traditional shortcuts, but none of them worked. Reading the PR materials is insufficient for understanding a book, and executive summaries are awful. I have never read an executive summary that came close to conveying what’s interesting and useful about an author’s work.

So how can we read a book or more a week? It turns out that what works best for me is following some advice I got while I was still in college. Michael Jimenez, a professor of Latin American history, was one of the best professors I ever had. One day I told him that I was struggling with the reading load.

“I hope you’re not reading these books word-for-word like they’re fiction books,” he told me.

I told him I was.

He looked around the room and the other students sheepishly nodded alongside me. So he pulled a number of us together and taught us how to read nonfiction.

“Listen,” he said, “you don’t need to *read* these books. You need to *understand* them.”

He explained more: Fiction demands that we enter a world of the author’s making, inspiring a more immersive experience. Nonfiction – at least the type we tend to read to support our work as business leaders – makes a point and asks us to learn from it.

As readers, we gain momentum with each book we read. The more we read, the more quickly we can understand their perspectives and where they fit into a conversation they’re having with other authors, and the more informed we are when we use their advice or incorporate their perspectives into our work.

In other words, the more books we read, the faster it goes.

Here’s Professor Jimenez’s advice on reading nonfiction, with a few additions of my own:

1. **Start with the author.** Who wrote the book? Read his or her bio. If you can find a brief interview or article online about the author, read that quickly. It will give you a sense of the person’s bias and perspective.
2. **Read the title, the subtitle, the front flap, and the table of contents.** What’s the big-picture argument of the book? How is that argument laid out? By now, you could probably describe the main idea of the book to someone who hasn’t read it.

3. **Read the introduction and the conclusion.** The author makes their case in the opening and closing argument of the book. Read these two sections word for word but quickly. You already have a general sense of where the author is going, and these sections will tell you how they plan to get there (introduction) and what they hope you got out of it (conclusion).
4. **Read/skim each chapter.** Read the title and anywhere from the first few paragraphs to the first few pages of the chapter to figure out how the author is using this chapter and where it fits into the argument of the book. Then skim through the headings and subheadings (if there are any) to get a feel for the flow. Read the first sentence of each paragraph and the last. If you get the meaning, move on. Otherwise, you may want to read the whole paragraph. Once you've gotten an understanding of the chapter, you may be able to skim over whole pages, as the argument may be clear to you and also may repeat itself.
5. **End with the table of contents again.** Once you've finished the book, return to the table of contents and summarize it in your head. Take a few moments to relive the flow of the book, the arguments you considered, the stories you remember, the journey you went on with the author.

Throughout my reading, I take notes in preparation for my conversation with the author. Where do I agree? Where do I disagree? What questions are still simmering? What might I want to discuss with others or think more about in the coming days? These notes are a good idea for every reader to take.

Here's the interesting thing about reading a book like this: while it's much faster than a traditional reading (it takes me 1-2 hours to read a book, instead of the usual 6-8), you will retain far more.

That's because you're not simply reading the material; you're actively engaging with it. Your mind is alert the whole time and you're able to see the book more holistically. You're not just taking it in; you're figuring it out.

When I started my podcast, it was with the intention of giving people spectator seats to conversations I was having with smart, thoughtful people about their passions, learnings, and perspectives. What took me a little by surprise is how much we all already have access to those people simply by reading them. Yes, I am enriched by these conversations. But 90% of that is because I have read what

the author has written.

We can all read books and listen to podcast conversations with smart, thoughtful people. We can all have access to great ideas and apply them to our lives.

In other words, with a little effort, we can all go to back to college.



**Peter Bregman** is CEO of Bregman Partners, a company that strengthens leadership in people and in organizations through programs (including the Bregman Leadership Intensive), coaching, and as a consultant to CEOs and their leadership teams. Best-selling author of 18 Minutes, his most recent book is Four Seconds (February 2015). To receive an email when he posts, [click here](#).

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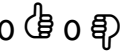
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**16 COMMENTS****Chris Colborne** 4 hours ago


Mind blown!

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There's a great little app that does something similar to this called Blinkist. Synthesises books into a 15 minute summary of the key insights.  
(<https://www.blinkist.com/>)

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