

## Reading for effectiveness

Many of us feel overwhelmed by our stack of pending reading. We want to get to everything. We try several methods of getting through it. We devote specific time every week. We utilise summary services. We use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to reduce the load. Still, we feel as if the task is never done, and we wonder whether we're reading effectively. This article, at as little cost to your reading time as possible, recommends a focused approach. Read what's right for you.

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We must read. Leisure reading is not difficult for those who enjoy it. This is about reading for work, for studies, for research or for other productive objectives. Where to start? Social media, top book lists, the recommendations of our colleagues and friends, research, even the material passing through out inbox, all of these can feel like too much. Consider this no more than a few thoughts for consideration from somebody who, like you, must read. In my view, the key is to read to your objectives.

### A few don'ts

**Do not chase all the possibilities.** Reading is not an obligation. Do not read to keep up with your neighbour or office competitor. (You shouldn't have any competitors, but that's another subject.) Do not set yourself impossible goals and do not get caught up in the social media vortex. You cannot read everything.

**Do not read everything in full.** You are not obliged to finish everything you start. You should probably be skim-reading most of the books, articles or web sites that you explore and keeping just a few of them for completion. That way, you improve your ability to scan material and prioritise your deeper assessments.

**Do not depend on summaries.** Yes, you can ask AI to precis a source or a hundred sources into 250 words and convince yourself that you know them. That is little better than trying to read everything. Such pseudo-reading is not helpful because it doesn't change anything in your thought process.

### Read to think

The heart of the problem surely is the mindset that reading is its own objective. "If I read this article, I have achieved something." That is not true. Reading is only beneficial to the extent that it engages the thoughts of the reader, bringing fresh information, changing her perspective, and transforming her own way of thinking or doing things. Reading is only beneficial if it represents helpful food to the brain.

That in turn suggests that we should read with purpose, and that everything we read should be helpful to

our thinking or actions. We should read what is useful to us, deepening our views on our working context.

### A few dos

**Assess sources at a high level.** Determine the value of your newsfeed, article or book before you delve into it, remembering that everything aims to sell itself up front. Some sources deserve very careful attention, but we are to assess them at different levels before giving them all our time and effort.

**Choose your detail and commit to it.** While I am convinced that you should not read everything in full, when something is important, clear away everything else and give it your full attention. If it is the thinking that matters, then read with focus to provoke that thought.

**Use a range of media.** Try to vary your sources. We tend to slip into habits, themselves informed by herding tendencies, and then stay there. Not all material available in podcasts is helpful. Not all news web sites are equal. Not all business books are good. Get out of your comfort zone. Listen to the radio from time to time, especially if you haven't done so for a while. Reading (and listening) should be enjoyable and stimulating. You would surely learn more if it were.

**Aim to find contradictory views.** From academic research to news feeds, we tend to stick to what we know. That is almost always bad for us. It strengthens our biases and echo chambers. Read left- and right-wing press, preferably from several countries. In South Africa, expose yourself to the opinions of Julius and Corné. Be ready to understand both sides of any argument *before* framing your view on the issue.

AI should be considered a guide, not a short cut. AI is a dictionary, stenographer, entertainer and librarian all in one, but it is not to be used simply to make your life easier. AI can point you towards wider sources, particularly sources with different views, but AI alone cannot give us the richness provided by careful examination. Read for understanding and read for change.

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Do you need specialised knowledge and an intimate understanding of current affairs to be better at your work? You don't have time to read everything, and you don't have the luxury of leaning on a flawed summary. You need to read with purpose, skimming a range of sources, but choosing for depth those that best serve that purpose. [Rob Rusconi](#)