

OTHER

Notes On Reading

by Hantian Zhang



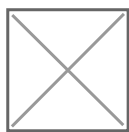
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Recently, a friend found on [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com) my 2023 reading list, and it seemed long to him. Interested, he asked me to share a tip or two on reading: How to read efficiently? Where to find the time? I welcomed the idea, as it was an opportunity to reflect on my favorite activity. Some background of me: I am a data scientist and writer based in San Francisco, originally from China. I came to the U.S. to study statistics and anthropology, then found employment in finance. I write after work and read about 50 books in a year.

Why I Read

First and foremost, for self-betterment. To gain information on interesting topics, from psychoanalysis to fin-de-siècle Vienna to the Greek Revolution of 1821; to develop expertise in a few fields, from China's Cultural Revolution to affect theory to machine learning; and to learn more about writing, from genre expectations to word choices and to plot design. The goal is to retain enough information and apply it to my life in some way after I'm done with the book, to have my writing improved or my mind broadened. On this point, I have been told more than once, by different people and on various occasions, that what you write reflects what you read. This makes intuitive sense to me, as if we conceive the human brain as a machine that transforms inputs into outputs, the quality of what goes in shapes, if not determines, the quality of what comes out.

Then, I read for entertainment. Unwinding time, vacation time, you might want to take things not too seriously, and you might feed yourself easily enjoyable materials of lesser merit. Experientially, this second reason might not really be that clean-cut from the first, as to learn about something new is also to delight the mind, and to appreciate the masters' brilliance is also to excite the brain. Thomas Edison, the great American inventor, made sure he took a nap after a span of focused work. When he woke, he often found he had had the answers he had been looking for. A simple logic might be working here: you think you are relaxing, but you are still bettering yourself, right in the middle of the cycle of concentration and diffusion, getting ready for the next burst of creativity.



Hantian's bedroom in San Francisco © Hantian Zhang

Last but most important reason, I read to live. Beyond work and family duties, all the rest should be “me-time.” How it is used says a lot about who you are, and how you actually use it matters if you stay on track—remember the 10,000-hour rule? You cook to be a chef, you taste to be a gourmet, and you read to be a writer who perceives, comprehends, and reflects on life through the infinite combination and recombination of words. To read widely and voraciously is the way to become this self; to open another book is to live the life I want to the full.

How I Read

I do make a New Year’s resolution when the time comes. Not meant as a binding contract but more a guideline, my New Year’s resolution allows contingencies and accommodates changes; newly released hits can still find their way in. In a typical version of it, I list a few topics to gain more knowledge on in the following year, a few issues I would like to write about. With this plan in hand, I then build a reading list around each topic, align my writing plan with my other projects in life.

I advocate for planning like this. We plan at work. We plan where to go on vacation and what to eat for dinner, so why not do the same for reading and writing? We can, of course, read whatever bestselling titles on impulse, but my experience is that this often scatters our efforts and diverts our focus. You are left with random snippets that do not necessarily connect to each other, and hardly anything meaningful would come out of the pile. I prefer a more structured approach like the New Year’s resolution, so the reading effort can be more focused, and this focused effort would lead to more precise and organized thoughts. The planning would show in your writing, as I believe results would show in your life.

When I Read

Finding time to read can be challenging in this era of short attention span, information overflow, and constant distractions. Currently, I have a full-time job and no children, so I claim the pre-breakfast morning and the post-dinner nighttime as my “me time.” I find my mind at its clearest in the morning, so I set this time as my writing time. Since I am the kind of writer who reads others for inspiration, my pre-breakfast writing time is also when I engage in serious, analytical reading. Before sitting at the computer, I need coffee and tea to bring me to full wakefulness, and I put on music (instrumental, Philip Glass type) to create the mood. I choose the desk over the sofa for my morning reading-writing, as the upright posture creates tension in the body, and I hope it can propel my mind to the next level of

clarity. I do all these to open my mind to creativity, to wake up knowledge and memory from their nooks of slumber. When I actually read, I plug in for immersion and hope that the brilliance of others can inspire similar qualities in my own words. I read for a while and then attempt a few sentences, a paragraph. The results are not always satisfying, but I sometimes do get a good line or two.



Hantian's living room in San Francisco © Hantian Zhang

My nighttime reading is more for information gathering and entertainment, since 10% of my brain cells have died in coding Python during the day, 10% have been killed in putting up the show of a good worker, and still another 5% have died in running all the errands. Given that an alert mind cannot be taken for granted during this time of the day, I read in the comforts of the sofa and a warm room. My phone is intentionally left elsewhere, so social media cannot stand in the way. If I can sit in the same posture and finish one more chapter and look forward to the ritual of the following morning, the next book to be read, I deem it a success and call it a day.

Such a division of productive and entertaining reading helps me to stay on my reading plan, as it respects and aligns with my bodily rhythm. That my work schedule is stable and predictable also helps. There is, of course, crunch time at work, when I have to start work earlier or finish later than usual. Social obligations sometimes run longer than expected, and I get home only at my usual bedtime. In such situations, I refrain from pressing myself to stay on my reading schedule, since there is a physical constraint on how long you can stay sufficiently awake. What's the point of scanning over ten pages and comprehending nothing, retaining nothing? I would just try to sleep well to start fresh the next day. My experience is that you can always catch up that way.

Reflecting on my reading experience, I realize the importance of planning: A reading list, planned and updated yearly, guides my reading and writing efforts while allowing breathing space. Trying my best to stay on track, I am glad my concentrated reading efforts have led to enhanced topic knowledge, better writing, and more contentment with life.