
Why do we read

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I love reading. Immersing myself in a paperback and temporarily blocking out the outside world is one of the most enjoyable activities I know of, but there's one problem: I often agonise over whether I'm getting the most out of my reading.

I typically don't read fiction, not because I think fiction is trivial or anything, but rather because I've long been drawn to books that discuss broad concepts in great detail. Since I learn new things from every book I read I find it essential that the valuable information I read stays locked in my memory, but I doubt it does.

Shortly after reading a book, I can only give a general summary of the message that the book tries to convey. I'm glad that I can do this even with books that I read years ago, but the troubling thing is that if all I can remember is a personalised blurb, then what separates me from someone who simply reads book reviews? Surely that would be a more efficient way of mentally collecting book summaries.

In his book, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, author Joshua Foer explores the sub-culture of memory competitions and the ancient techniques that these self-described mental athletes use to memorise uncanny amounts of information. The book also explores the role that memory has played in the history of mankind, and the insight it reveals is intriguing.

There was a time when a strong memory was considered to be one of the fundamental indicators of a person's intelligence. This was because books were so scarce that most people who valued knowledge, with the exception of elites who could afford to build their own libraries, had no choice but to literally memorise whatever information they discovered in written form. Then in the 1440s Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press and dramatically changed man's relationship with information. Books became widely available, and an external method of storing information was made accessible to almost everyone, severely diminishing the importance of memory.

The advent of the printing press was positive because it greatly aided the progression of human civilisation, but it's debatable whether its effect on human beings' approach to reading was beneficial. As Foer so perceptively puts it, "Until relatively recently, people read "intensively." They had only a few books - the Bible, an almanac, a devotional work or two - and they read them over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness. Today, we read books "extensively," without much in the way of sustained focus and, with rare exceptions, we read each book only once. We value quantity of reading over quality of reading."

People used to read so that the information at hand could literally be imprinted in their minds, but as for us, the people of today, why do we read? As a writer, the primary hope I have for any piece of writing I produce is for whoever reads it to find it captivating enough for all their anxieties and worries, and all the pressures and distractions of the world, to momentarily be turned off.

It's becoming harder to achieve this sort of reprieve from reality. We spend more time either in a state of distraction, or chasing after what we think will make us better off, or stressing over the idea that our lives aren't progressing as quickly as we would like.

So, there's something magical in producing something that can briefly allow one's mind to escape the world around us. That on its own would be reason enough for me to fold my arms and triumphantly announce that my work is done, but beyond that, I also hope that my writing can open someone's mind to a way of looking at the world that may have never occurred to them before. If it has occurred to them, then they just as quickly brushed it aside out of fear that its absurdity would waste their time or make others think them strange for even considering it.

Maybe that's the purpose of reading – to open our minds to ways of thinking that are different from those we know all too well, to give us a new lens through which this world that often seems so monotonous and predictable, suddenly comes to life in fresh vibrant colour. The exact words we read might not become imprinted in our memories, but at least the ideas conveyed stay with us.

Though they may not directly seem to change the course of our lives, they add to the collection of experiences we've had and the concepts we've explored. In some sense, the person you become is nothing more than the sum of these parts. So perhaps we read as a way of enriching our very identity. On the other hand, perhaps the piece you just read is merely idealistic rambling that you'll barely remember a week from now. Hopefully though, it will get you thinking, if only for a moment.