



By Joe Byerly

This month, as I transition out of another decade, I'm taking the opportunity to reflect and write on those things I adopted in my thirties that have proved beneficial to me. In this post, I want to share some of the practices that improved my reading habits, my retention of knowledge, and ultimately led to improvements in my overall quality of life. I recognize that last claim is a bold statement, but it's the truth.

Reading has served me well both professionally and personally over the years, but more recently it has played an even greater role in my well-being. Within the last year, I've come across books that brought attention to behaviors I wanted to adopt, while helping me take steps toward stopping the ones that were preventing me from being content in life. Using a combination of reading, writing notes in the margins and in my "green notebook," and reflecting on how these lessons applied to my own life, I was able to supercharge these changes.

I hope you find something useful in this post.

Read more than one book (just in case one of them takes a little more effort to finish). This method completely changed my reading habits and increased the number of books I read from five a year to more than forty. When I started making an effort to read for professional growth, I only read one book at a time, but found myself starting and stopping the habit because I would hit boring parts of books and lose energy around finishing it. Sometimes I would go weeks without picking up the book again because I couldn't stand the thought of battling those pages. Now, I read 3-4 books at once which allows me to tackle a tougher book, while concurrently reading some faster-paced titles in the process. If I get tired of one book, I pick up one of the other titles. I no longer beat myself up if it takes me six months to finish a book, because I'm able to finish a few other books in the process.

Pay attention to what people read. I love asking people, especially other leaders, what they are reading and I even pay attention when they share pictures of their books on social media. Curating a reading list from others is a great way to learn about titles you may not hear about otherwise. It's also great to see how these books influenced the mental models of other leaders. For instance, I chose to read [Radical Candor](#) after I saw a command sergeant major post a picture of the book on facebook along with his endorsement. One of the benefits of writing my [Monthly Reading List Email](#) is that many subscribers reply to them with their own book recommendations, which grows my reading list even bigger.

Disregard the advice of your grade school teachers and write in your books. [According to the forgetting curve](#), within 24-48 hours after finishing a book, we will forget 75% of what we read. However, we can take steps to mitigate memory loss and actually retain what we took the time to read. Researchers have found that writing or highlighting while reading, creates multi-sensory pathways in the brain that can increase learning and memory by up to 50%. So, when I read I always keep a highlighter and pen ready to mark

those passages that I think I can apply to my life or that I find interesting. Once I started doing this, I found that I retain way more than by passively reading a book.

Pretend like you host a podcast. I know this one sounds ridiculous, but hear me out. Ever since I started hosting [From the Green Notebook](#) and interviewing authors, I approach reading a little differently. For instance, when I interviewed [Nancy Sherman](#), [Sebastian Junger](#), and [Steven Pressfield](#), I wanted to be able to speak intelligently about their work. I read their books and highlighted and marked those passages that contained some of the more important points of the books. I even wrote questions next to the paragraphs I marked. I found it helped me to get to the reason they wrote the book in the first place and increase my own understanding in the process.

While most of you probably won't launch a podcast, you can still approach reading in the same manner, helping you to reach a deeper level of meaning with the material

Remember that a book can be a time capsule. When we read, we meet the books at our current level of life experience. For instance, a senior leader and a more junior leader can read the same book and walk away with completely different lessons and insights because they have different perspectives. By writing and highlighting in our books, we're essentially leaving notes for our future selves. I've gone back and reread books that I read several years earlier and enjoyed seeing my margin notes and highlights (I even sometimes disagree with my old self). These notes help me remember where I was developmentally and see how much I've grown and changed since the last time I picked up the book.

Get a green notebook. Typically when I finish a book, I return to it and transfer some of my margin notes, highlighted passages, or additional reading (footnotes and endnotes are great for this) into my notebook. This extra step takes about thirty minutes, but it's worth it. This habit helps me retain what I read by "generating" the words myself, which increases the amount of cognitive effort, thereby increasing retention ([generation effect](#)). It also

allows me to make connections across multiple books and disciplines, something I learned from [Leonardo Da Vinci](#). Returning to the forgetting curve, everytime we make an effort to write down quotes, passages, or insights, we're essentially etching the lessons in our brain, making it more likely that we will incorporate them into our lives -as evidenced by my experience.

When reading books by dead people, translation matters. There are so many great books written long before the invention of the printing press that can help us live better lives. However, on more than one occasion, I've picked up a "classic" and felt completely lost from the beginning. It's easy to download free versions of books written before 1925 such as Clausewitz' *On War*, Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, or even the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (Because these titles are considered public domain and therefore free). However, some of these books are really hard to read because the free translations are in Victorian English; or the free version lacks an introduction that provides context or a section on "how to read" this book, which is critical for reading complex classics . So it helps to be picky and consider quality when selecting a translation.

For instance, I've read the *Meditations* before, and honestly didn't see what the big deal was. Then I read a book by Donald Robertson that provided historical and philosophical context, and more recently, I read a new translation by Robin Waterfield that included extensive footnotes and a great introduction. I now understand why so many leaders include that book on their reading list. The translation and the context made the difference. I learned this lesson through trial and error, and eventually figured out that it's best to ask someone who might have more experience in a field which translation to read. I've emailed many authors and professors over the years with questions, and every single one has pointed me in the right direction.

Again, I hope you find something in this post that can boost your reading game. I didn't get serious about reading until I was thirty-two years old. By that point, I had already led a

platoon and a company in combat. I recognize now that I would have been a much stronger leader if I would have been more thoughtful about the habit much earlier in my career. Thankfully, I picked up the practice of reading for growth and as I cross over into the “Big 4-0”, I’m in a much better place as a result of it. I remain humble about all the things I’ve year to learn, yet feel confident in my preparation for the challenges the military and life will throw at me. I hope the habit of reading will do the same for you.

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