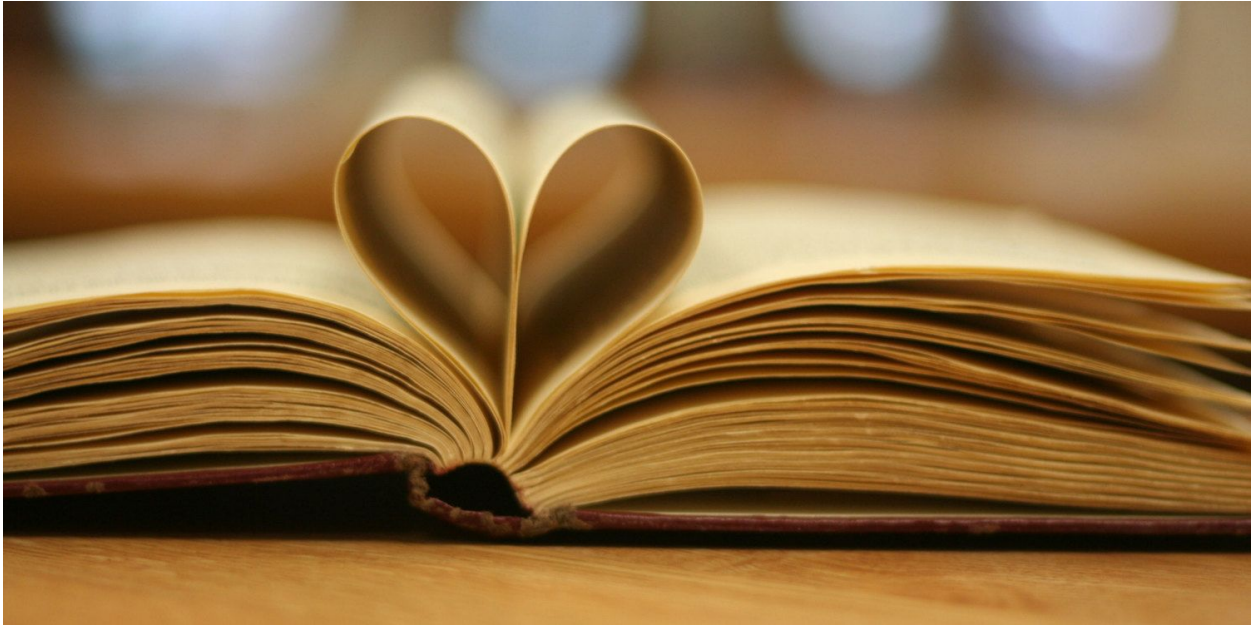


IoNTELLIGENCE Brief | Newsletter 13



Key Points

- **Theme:** The Relationship between Reading and Knowledge
- **Acceleration Tip:** Read every day. Mostly books. Ideally printed ones
- **Thinking Tool:** Thinking *by* Communicating
- **Playlist:** *The Information Diet*, Lifelong Learning and Reading Print Newspapers
- **Philosophical Espresso Shot:** What two of the richest men in the world recommend that *you* do, too
- **Reading Time:** 6 Minutes

Did you know that there is a Japanese word for buying books that you don't read? This habit - one that I exhibit, sadly - is actually so universal that they created a term for it: 積ん読 or [tsundoku](#). It combines the words "tsunde" (meaning "to stack things"), "oku" (meaning "to leave for a while") and "doku" (meaning "to read").

We've always had a complicated relationship with the written word. Socrates feared the arrival of books and favored oral communication, yet his disciple Plato secretly wrote down his famous dialogues (and thanks to him we know what Socrates thought).

Socrates feared what writing would do to our ability to think. I believe that he turned out to be wrong (maybe the only time I'll ever disagree with the great man!), but like him, I am nervous about a similar transition we're making today - from books to screens, emails to text messages, and words to emoticons. Reading is an activity we have to preserve and even increase, however. It allows us to commune with some of the greatest minds across time and space, imparting wisdom and building knowledge. Finally, I submit that reading *books*, in particular, is the antidote to this attention-deficit age because, as Joseph Epstein points out, "we are what we read." *Read on to see why ...*

Acceleration

My Reading Manifesto

Most people I talk to don't have a **reading strategy**. They just pick up something and start reading. The [average American read 4 books last year](#) (across all formats: ebook, print, audio). Studies suggest that even prolific readers will read 'only' about 2500 books over the course of their lifetime. That may seem like a lot, but given how many good books there are out there that's not enough. So here are my considered suggestions for how to read strategically.

Noted polymath [Tyler Cowen](#) recommends that we **read in bunches**. Don't just skim one book on evolution - devour several so that the lessons really sink in. I started doing this recently and have noticed that my overall understanding of the issue improved, as well as my ability to suss out important linkages between theories (what I call horizontal thinking).

Read eclectically: there are diminishing marginal returns to reading only one genre of book. While I recommend reading a few books on one topic, don't *just* read in that section of the bookstore, so to speak. Throw in some fiction (I need to take this advice more) and dip into a field that may have no immediately obvious application to your work. In the same vein, **read magazines that you have never bought before** to think more creatively. These two practices will stretch your mind and allow you to have what one person memorably called "idea sex."

If you *must* read something other than books, read longform articles (or listen to audiobooks). We all know that most online reading is not *really* reading - [we're actually skimming and scanning](#). That's why they're often in the form of 'listicles'. Online reading is frequently superficial - the intellectual equivalent of eating junk food

and empty brain calories. Books and the best magazines pieces, on the other hand, give you a complete argument as well as a sense of accomplishment. *What's better than that?*

Bonus points for eschewing the Kindle and reading physical books, which help you retain more of the information if you mark them up and highlight them maniacally (as I do). They even aid recall by being helping you picture the words on the page (we evolved to have a much better visual memory than an abstract one).

Conclusion: Read every day. Mostly books. Ideally printed ones.

Thinking Tool

Thinking by Communicating

A great family friend once gave me a wonderful piece of wisdom. A world-class university professor, eminent psychologist and successful futurist, he was exceptionally creative but also extraordinarily generous with his ideas. These two characteristics were linked, he explained. He used to believe that people thought deeply, and when the insight was ripe and fully formed, they then communicated it to others through a talk, a blog post or a book. But he then realized that we have it all wrong: we think *by* communicating. Only by forcing ourselves to verbalize the germs of the ideas rattling around in our heads can we hope to come up with fully formed arguments. Yet we frequently do the opposite: we hesitate to share a half-baked observation with others - even in casual conversation - afraid that the protean state of our insight is not ready for prime time. I learned from my friend [Scot Gardiner](#) that the only way to refine an idea is to expose it to the sunlight, both because it forces me to articulate the concepts with careful consideration, but also because some of my smart friends could then refine it with their incisive collective intelligence.

Conclusion: The next time you have the beginning of a breakthrough, don't hoard it - share it. **'Think by communicating' rather than 'think, then communicate'**. You'll put your ideas in order, and your argument will be better off for it.

This Month's Playlist

Here are the 'speed reads' from some of my favorite articles and books on the topic of reading and knowledge.

[The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption](#) | Clay Johnson

Key Idea: Just as we need to be mindful of the mix of sugar, salt and fat in our diet, so too should we monitor and manage what we feed our minds. While this was written in 2011, before the recent explosion in fake news, the lesson about thinking carefully about what information we ingest is even more relevant today.

[Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain](#) |

Maryanne Wolf

Key Idea: This is a very meta recommendation - I'm suggesting that you read a book about reading! I recommend focusing on Part I (Parts II and III are dry and technical), which unwraps the how the brain learned to read and covers the utterly fascinating history of writing.

Pair This With: Alberto Manguel's [A History of Reading](#). What Jeff Bezos is to selling books, Manguel is to writing about reading them. And for good reason: dude's got a personal library of 35,000 books(!) that he once had to move (!!). Respect.

[For Two Months, I Got My News From Print Newspapers. Here's What I Learned](#) | Farhad Manjoo | *New York Times*

Key Idea: This technology writer jumped off the Twitter and Facebook merry-go-round and learned to love 'slow' news. He then distilled those lessons into three short instructions: Get news. Not too quickly. Avoid social. (I couldn't agree more).

[If you're not spending 5 hours per week learning, you're being irresponsible](#) | Michael Simmons | Quartz @ Work

Key Idea: Don't let the clickbait title fool you: this is an important article that will make you rethink how you spend your recreation time. As I've written before, one of the signature skills of the 21st century will be your propensity for lifelong learning. This article will crystallize that argument in your mind if I haven't convinced you already.

Philosophical Espresso Shot (a double):

"In my whole life, I have known no wise people who didn't read all the time—none. Zero." (*Charlie Munger*)

"Investing in yourself is the best and most important investment you'll ever make in your life." (*Warren Buffett*)