

# How I Digest a Book in 15-30 Minutes

By Gary Hoover | [Hooversworld.com](http://Hooversworld.com)

When I talk to people about books, or give a tour of my way-too-big personal library (over 50,000 books), the question I am asked most frequently is, “How do you have time to read all these books?” When I reply that I spend an average of 15-30 minutes with each of the 20-30 books I add each week, the response is usually, “So you are a speed reader?” In fact, I am an incredibly slow reader, so slow that they put me in remedial reading classes when I was a kid. In many ways, the crux of my method is about slowing down, *not* speeding up. So what is my method?

First of all, I should say my method, which I have come to call “digesting” a book, will not work for everyone, all the time, and it won’t work for every book. But it may prove useful to you.

You need to understand that I am first and foremost an information junkie. I love facts and ideas, and I want to get to them and get my head around them as quickly as I can. I do not try to apply my method to fiction books and stories. When I read something that has real meat to it, I usually read each sentence at least twice, sometimes more. I stop and ponder the concept, think hard about the idea and its implications. You can see why I am such a slow reader.

Every book I buy, I buy with the expectation that it will become a reference book, something I will refer back to. So my first task is to get my hands (and mind) around the content of the book, and to remember that content.

At the same time, my conclusion from “digesting” thousands of books is that many books, particularly business books, should have been a 10 to 20 page article rather than a 200 to 300 page book. They contain one basic idea, or a very short list of ideas, and then give example after example after example. Sometimes the author will write book after book, often taking what was a fundamentally sound nugget of an idea and turning it into a career where the idea loses its potency by being applied to anything and everything. As much as an author or expert might fall in love with an idea, there are no panaceas out there.

My first step when I get a book is to gather the key data about the book – I guess today they might call it the metadata. I read the flaps if it is a hardcover book. The front flap most often contains a purported summary of the book, although you have to be very careful: it is not unusual that this summary (or “blurb”) was written by someone on the publishers’ staff who did not really understand the book, and is trying to find something spicy or controversial to help sell the book to

bookstore browsers. A serious and long autobiography might contain only “in this book the great Mr. so-and-so reveals his long-secret liaison with the equally famous Ms. So-and-so” when in fact that particularly story was the shortest and least interesting one in the book. (Much of the press coverage of Alan Greenspan’s book was a great example; many reporters missed what mattered because they were more interested in stirring up controversy.) Nevertheless, the blurb is a start, and one way to view the book.

The back flap, or sometimes the back cover, often contains the short author’s biography (in the case of a paperback it will usually show up on the back cover or on a separate “about the author” page). Stop and think about what you read, about the author and where they live and what they have done, what their basis is likely to be for the book. Are they a journalist who fell in love with a story, are they an experienced industry practitioner, are they a consultant or an academic? How might that impact their take on the story contained in the book?

Of course I read the front cover and the back cover, which contain more puffery and summarization. These days it is all the rage to put page after page of quotes, endorsements, and testimonials by others. Publishers seem to think “the bigger the celebrity the better.” Here I am very careful about what I believe, as it is so easy for authors and their friends to swap compliments with no depth. But if I see a Nobel Prize winning economist praising another economist’s book, or Richard Branson saying this is a great book on entrepreneurship, I tend to take that a bit more seriously. So I look at the names before I read what they have to say. But I always know that NO ONE can prejudge a book for me.

It will surprise some people that I look at the name of the publisher. While the big publishers like Random House and Doubleday publish a huge array of books and they may be ones I love or ones I hate, they usually will not publish books that are horribly written, or books full of typos. With the rise of self-publishing and print-on-demand – trends that I encourage – there is more tripe out there, stuff that never should have seen the dark of ink.

Where knowing a publisher comes in handy is in reference books, in series books, and in specialized subjects. If Oxford University Press publishes a book called a “Handbook of ...” – on almost any subject – you know it is going to be a good one. Lonely Planet, Eyewitness, and Rough Guide travel guides may vary a bit in quality from country to country, but they will never be bad and will often be exceptional. If you want great car books, start with Motorbooks; if you want great books on collectibles, you can count on Schiffer Publications; if you want to understand railroads, check out the catalogs (usually available online) of Indiana University Press, Johns Hopkins University Press, and a couple of dozen specialty publishers.

I stop briefly on the page after the title page, the one that has the publication date on it. Here you can also figure out if this is a first edition, and you can usually find the dates of prior editions. It is important to know when the book was written. A book about the rise of Hitler published before 1939 might have a little different take on him. A book about high definition video published two years ago will talk at great length about the format war between Blu-Ray and HD DVD, a war now ended. And your old astronomy book will talk about the planet Pluto, now stripped of its title. Still, you may learn things from these older books, or get insights you would not otherwise gather. So don't throw them out; just be aware of their age.

The above steps take varying amounts of time depending on the book, but I would guess that on the average book I will have spent under 5 minutes doing these things. Doing them becomes a habit. In many cases, I do all these things in the bookstore or online before I make my purchase decision. Then I start the real work of getting my mind around the ideas and facts in the book.

If the book is well-thought-out, the most important pages to grasp are the table of contents. Here is listed the key ideas contained in the book. Stop and take some real time on the table of contents. Take 4 or 5 minutes if you have to. Some textbooks even contain a summary table of contents followed by a more detailed table of contents, taking more time to digest but proving most worthwhile. Stop and think about each chapter title – what do I think that means? Is that a subject I already know something about – or think I know something about?

And as I do this – this is a big idea, and perhaps revolutionary for many readers – I give myself the *freedom* to jump into the book. Often I find that one chapter heading really hits me in the middle of the head: This is just why I bought this book! This is what I was hoping the author would tell me more about! I know all about this subject – I bet this author has it all wrong! I had no idea this person was interested in this aspect of the subject! Usually keeping one finger in the table of contents so as to not lose my place, another finger is off holding open that chapter, and off I race.

The biggest change for most readers who try my method may be giving themselves this *freedom* to free-range through a book. Think about the old days when music was on cassette tapes – you had to listen to the first song before you listened to the second one, or go through the agonizing process of fast-forwarding. This was the era of sequential thinking. Today we have CDs, and better yet MP3s, and we are into random access. You can go wherever you want, whenever you want. The book is *your* book, you have begun a conversation with the author, and you should feel free to interrupt, skip around, and ask questions at any time. If you give yourself this freedom, I believe you will be amply rewarded.

(Also note that the use of my fingers to hold onto multiple places in a book – it is not unusual for me to put 3, 4, or even sometimes 5 fingers to work – is one of many reasons I am unlikely to read books on a computer or a Kindle, as cool as those gadgets may be. They are fundamentally built to be used sequentially, insofar as I can tell.)

But back to the table of contents. Make sure you really grasp it, make sure you have a crystal clear idea of what the author will tell you in the book, what his or her key points are, and in what order he or she will tell you their points. A close and thoughtful reading of the table of contents will move you way ahead in efficiently getting your mind around a book and its contents.

If the table of contents leaves you clueless as to what the book is about and how the story unfolds, or leaves gaps in your mind – I hate books which only use “chapter one, chapter two, ...” – then you have to read the first several pages of the book, or more. However much it takes to get the basic drift. Most well-written nonfiction books will have an introduction, forward, preface, or first chapter that tells you what they are going to tell you later in the book. However, such sections are often burdened with fluff that tells you nothing, so even a sluggish reader like me can often zip right through most of this material.

So now I have spent maybe 5-10 minutes with the book and I can say to myself, “So this is where this author is coming from, this is her background, this is her basic take on things, this is her message, these are what she considers the key points for me to understand, these are the subject areas within the broader topic that she focuses on.” *Do not go any further* until you can honestly say that to yourself about this book. If you have to read the first few paragraphs or last few paragraphs – or pages – of each chapter to get there – do it. If you have to take an hour with this book instead of 15 minutes, do it. Do whatever it takes.

If the book has illustrations and appendices, scan these. They can go a long way toward grasping the message of the book. For example, any biography worth its weight – and some of them are very weighty – will have illustrations and photos, sometimes scattered through the book but often consolidated in a set of glossy pages inserted mid-book. If the author and publisher have done their job, these illustrations alone will tell the story of the person’s life – the high points, the kids, the houses they lived in, the concerts they performed, the awards and prizes they won, the famous people they met. I recently spent time with an excellent geography book, and soon realized that if someone – anyone – just sat down and flipped through the book, taking a few minutes with each color map, they would learn almost as much in an hour or two as they could in weeks of reading the text.

Look closely at any charts, graphs, or tables. Spend time on each, think deeply, draw your *own* conclusions *before* looking at the author's interpretation. Look at the appendices, with an eye especially for chronologies, glossaries, and bibliographies which tell you the authors' sources and give you gateways for further knowledge.

As I do all these things, I am always first and foremost looking for things I already know something about, people places events and topics that I have already studied. This is THE key to remembering what you learn. *If new information does not find a place to hang on the huge tree of knowledge in your head, it is never going to stick.* I even read the author's acknowledgements to see if his or her friends include people whose books I have read before. I guess this advice would not be too helpful to someone just reading their first book, but as you read more and more books – or online sources, magazines, and newspapers – the connections in your head begin to add up, to make sense. Such connections – anticipated or surprising – are the most valuable things you can acquire in your efforts to learn and to understand the world around you.

By all these steps, I gradually have a clear feeling for the book, it is encapsulated in my head. I have 50,000 books, and I believe I could give you a recap of some sort on at least 60% of them. I remember their covers – mainly the color – for life. At least it has worked so far, and I have been buying books and magazines for about 50 years now (since I was 7).

(Here I have to add that people also say to me, “You must have a photographic memory.” But my observation is that those same people remember thousands of musical tunes, hundreds of movies and stars, zillions of baseball or football games – whatever interests them. We all remember huge amounts of information. It is just a matter of what engages and intrigues us, and how well we connect it to everything else in our heads.)

So now I have spent 10 minutes or so and am ready to really delve into the book. Many times, the above steps have already driven me into the text of the book. My fingers – and mind – may really be flying. A chapter heading in the table of contents, a photo in the illustrations section, a historical chart in the text, made me stop and read the surrounding or relevant paragraphs. I have the *freedom* to read or *not read* any paragraph at any time in any order (sometimes I have to keep telling myself “It's my book, I can do what I want with it”).

At the same time, the book is worthless to me if I cannot savor it. So I have a pen and tablet nearby – or whatever method works for you – to make notes, copy quotes, argue with the author, sketch out my own ideas, or list books or other references I need to buy or seek out at the library. If I start reading a story in the middle of the book, and find it fascinating – particularly if it is linked to

something or someone I already know about – then I am free to spend all day with the book if I want. ***I do not put limits or boundaries on myself, other than my desire to learn, to get fresh ideas and insights.*** If I am reading the book along and realize that I am not really learning anything, that the text is either repetitive or full of gibberish, it is time to move on. (Just like lazily watching movies on late night TV and realizing halfway through that they are trash – I wish I knew how to give myself the freedom to not know the ending, to turn them off and go to sleep!)

*With all this momentum, I then go to the guts of my digesting system – the index.* First I look up every topic that I can think of, that I know something about, that I expect to find in this book. If it's a history of hotels, I look up Conrad Hilton. If it's a book about Ford, I look up Alfred Sloan, the man who built General Motors and passed up Ford in 1927. If it's about the United Arab Emirates, I look up Dubai. If it's about Bill Clinton, I look up his position on NAFTA, one of my favorite things about him. If it's about Chrysler products, I look up the PT Cruiser, which I drive. If it's about the history of Indiana, I look up Anderson, the city where I grew up. If it's about Paris, I look up the Bon Marche department store or the St. Sulpice Church, two of my favorite places. If it's a travel guide to Bali, I look up the hotel I stayed in. If it's about math, I look up my beloved Fibonacci series. In other words, ANYTHING and EVERYTHING that I can link to, anything that I can hang my hat on. People, places, events.

As I go through the index in this manner, the fingers are flying and I am reading the references in the book to these items. If I do not understand the story, or cannot figure out why Henry Ford loved (or hated) Sloan, I read paragraphs before or after – I get the context required to understand what's going on. Sometimes I have to make lists of page numbers that I have found, pages I need to read, and gradually tick them off as I flip through the book.

And I ALWAYS see things in the index I did not expect. What is Indianapolis doing mentioned in a book about the history of chemistry? Why would a book about hotels mention my teacher, the economist Milton Friedman? More fingers, more lists, more readings.

You can see why I HATE nonfiction books where the publisher was too cheap to compile an index; they are almost useless for my purposes. They should be banned and burned!

I have actually read entire books this way, never reading more than 3 or 4 pages sequentially, but ultimately reading almost every page.

Once I have “locked onto” a book in this way, the book is mine for life. I can go back to it over and over, and always find joy in it. I know when I need to turn to it, I know what answers I can find in

it. Every book becomes a reference book. I cannot ever remember selling a book, and I haven't given away too many. That's why my library now takes up about 3,000 square feet at my house just outside of Austin.

The books build upon each other. When I ran a bookstore chain, the publishers tended to send me free books until I convinced them to stop. The last thing I want is a book that does not fit into my library, that does not match my knowledge-seeking needs. At the other extreme, I have spots all over my library where the book I am looking for has not yet been written, but I leave the shelf open for the day it is published. You'd be surprised at how often my dreams come true and the blank spot is filled in. (I hope to start a list of the most important books that have not yet been written and published at [www.hooversworld.com](http://www.hooversworld.com).)

Perhaps the reason this system works – at least for me – is that I am passionate. I am having the time of my life. Each page takes my existing knowledge to a new level, takes my explorations one step deeper into the jungle of understanding. I started reading under the covers with a flashlight as a kid, seeking to avoid parental detection. The only thing that has changed is now I can read all night without getting into trouble, so I shucked the flashlight and covers.

I mentioned that there are some books this method does not work for; even some nonfiction books. I love textbooks and alphabetical reference books (dictionaries and encyclopedias), and I don't use this method on them (you can imagine how fast I fly from one entry to another as I explore some subject area, putting dozens of bookmarks or fingers in the pages). Another favorite type of book are what I call "toolchests" – basically catalogs of ideas or techniques, rather than being a single long essay on one topic or point of view like most nonfiction books. On this site I will review one book called *Universal Principles of Design* and another titled *Turning Numbers into Knowledge* that are amazing toolchest books. I would like to think my own book, *The Art of Enterprise*, fits in this category.

When I open the new issue of Fortune magazine – I have been subscribing for 45 years, since I was 12 – I use parallel but very different methods. And I read very few novels but love a good short story, where all these methods go out the window.

In the meanwhile, I hope the thoughts on the preceding pages will spur you to some new insights and ways of doing things. If you really give yourself the freedom to control and own your books and magazines, you will find that you can turn such methods on and off at will.

For more articles visit: [Hooversworld.com](http://Hooversworld.com)