

BOOK SUMMARY

Deep Work

by Cal Newport

The ability to focus without distraction is becoming rare — and valuable. Rules for training it in a world built to break it.

Summarized by SUN · [sunapp.ai](#)

Key ideas

1. **Deep work is valuable and rare.** As attention gets scarcer, people who can focus deeply gain an outsized advantage.
2. **Pick a philosophy.** Monastic, bimodal, rhythmic or journalistic — choose a focus schedule that fits your life.
3. **Embrace boredom.** If you reach for your phone at every pause, your brain loses the ability to concentrate.
4. **Quit what doesn't earn its place.** Keep a tool only if its benefits clearly outweigh its costs to your attention.
5. **Drain the shallows.** Schedule every minute, batch email, and make shallow work visible so it stops expanding.



sunapp.ai/download

Introduction

In 1922, Carl Jung began building a stone retreat called the Bollingen Tower near Lake Zurich. Cal Newport stresses that this was not a vacation home. Jung could not afford vacations at the time. He had just published *Psychological Types* in 1921, had broken intellectually from Sigmund Freud, and needed to produce a steady stream of serious work to establish his new field of analytical psychology. His busy city life of lectures and counseling in Zurich did not allow the thinking this required. At the Tower, Jung rose at seven, wrote for two undistracted hours in a private office to which only he held the key, and worked by oil lamp and fireplace, with no electricity at all.

Jung's retreat introduces the book's central idea. Newport defines deep work as professional activity performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that pushes your cognitive abilities to their limit. This kind of effort creates new value, improves your skill and is hard to replicate. Its opposite is shallow work: logistical, noncognitively demanding tasks, often done while distracted, that create little new value and are easy to copy. Newport lists others who built their lives around depth. Montaigne worked in a tower library at his château. Mark Twain wrote much of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in a shed so remote his family blew a horn to call him to meals. Woody Allen made forty-four films between 1969 and 2013 without ever owning a computer, typing on an Olympia SM3 manual typewriter. Bill Gates took twice-yearly Think Weeks in lakeside cottages, and Neal Stephenson makes himself deliberately hard to reach so he has the long, uninterrupted stretches that novels require.

The modern problem is that network tools have broken knowledge workers' attention into pieces. Newport cites a 2012 McKinsey study showing that the average knowledge worker spends more than 60 percent of the workweek on electronic communication and internet searching, with nearly 30 percent spent on email alone. People feel busy, but they act as "human network routers," and serious efforts like strategy or grant writing get split into distracted dashes. Drawing on Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*, Newport warns that enough time spent in frenetic shallowness may permanently reduce your capacity for depth. He declines to argue about whether this shift is good or bad for society. His claim is personal and practical: because most people are drifting toward shallowness, those who resist it have a large opportunity.

Jason Benn shows what that opportunity looks like. A financial consultant in Virginia, Benn realized that his six hours of manual Excel work could be automated into a button click taking under an hour. As long as his skills could be captured in a macro, his career was limited, so he decided to become a programmer with no coding background. His real obstacle was

concentration. He admitted he once spent “98 percent” of his time surfing the web instead of finishing an important business plan. His fix was drastic: he locked himself in a room with no computer, only textbooks, notecards and a highlighter, building up to five or more disconnected hours a day and reading roughly eighteen books on programming. After two months he entered Dev Bootcamp, a hundred-hour-a-week course, finished as the top student in his class, and landed a developer job at a San Francisco startup, raising his salary from \$40,000 to \$100,000.

Newport then states the idea the whole book rests on, the Deep Work Hypothesis: the ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable, so the few who cultivate it and put it at the core of their working lives will thrive. Part 1 argues that the hypothesis is true, and Part 2 teaches you how to act on it. Newport explains his own credentials. Trained in MIT’s Theory of Computation group, he has never had a social media account, did not own a smartphone until 2012, and organizes his days around three to four hours of uninterrupted concentration, pushing shallow tasks to the edges. This has let him publish four books, earn a PhD and win a tenure-track professorship at Georgetown while rarely working past five or six in the evening. He invites readers to build their own version of Jung’s tower, and offers the book’s guiding truth: a deep life is a good life.

Deep Work Is Valuable

Newport opens Part 1 with three economic winners. Nate Silver's election forecasting blog drew more than 70 percent of the New York Times website's traffic during the 2012 election before ESPN and ABC News lured him away. David Heinemeier Hansson created Ruby on Rails, the framework behind Twitter and Hulu, and splits his time between Chicago, Malibu and Marbella, Spain. John Doerr, the Kleiner Perkins venture capitalist, funded Twitter, Google, Amazon, Netscape and Sun Microsystems and is worth more than \$3 billion. To explain their success, Newport turns to MIT economists Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, whose book *Race Against the Machine* describes a Great Restructuring: digital technology is racing ahead of human skills, and instead of destroying jobs evenly, it is dividing the economy into winners and everyone else.

Brynjolfsson and McAfee name three groups that will thrive, and Newport's examples fit each one. High-skilled workers like Silver can work with complex intelligent machines and extract value from them. Tyler Cowen, author of *Average Is Over*, puts the key question bluntly: "Are you good at working with intelligent machines or not?" Superstars like Hansson benefit because fast networks and collaboration tools let companies hire the best person in the world for a project instead of a local employee. Newport cites Sherwin Rosen's 1981 paper on winner-take-all markets: "Hearing a succession of mediocre singers does not add up to a single outstanding performance." Once buyers can compare everyone, even a small edge in talent captures most of the market, and this now applies to programming, consulting, marketing, writing and design. The third group, owners like Doerr, hold the capital that funds the new technology. Instagram, sold for a billion dollars with only thirteen employees, shows how lopsided the ratio of value to labor has become.

Newport admits he has no secret for quickly becoming the next John Doerr, but he argues the other two groups are open to anyone with two core abilities. The first is the ability to quickly master hard things. Silver keeps a database of thousands of polls from more than 250 pollsters and runs them through the statistical system Stata, which requires subtle skills like writing SQL commands. Because intelligent machines are complicated and keep changing, mastering them is an ongoing process, and the same goes for yoga instructors learning new skills or doctors keeping up with research. Newport's maxim: "If you can't learn, you can't thrive." The second ability is producing at an elite level in both quality and speed. Hansson turned his programming skill into Ruby on Rails, and Silver applied statistics to the new territory of election forecasting

while his peers at Baseball Prospectus did not. “If you don’t produce, you won’t thrive,” Newport writes, no matter how talented you are.

Both abilities depend on deep work. For learning, Newport starts with Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, a Dominican friar who told readers to let the mind “become a lens, thanks to the converging rays of attention.” Decades later, K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University formalized this as deliberate practice. Ericsson rejects the myth of the natural prodigy and argues that expert performance reflects a lifelong effort to improve in a specific domain. Deliberate practice needs two things: attention focused tightly on a specific skill, and feedback to correct your approach. It cannot coexist with distraction. Newport adds the biology, drawing on Daniel Coyle’s *The Talent Code*. When you focus on a skill, cells called oligodendrocytes wrap myelin around the relevant neurons, helping those circuits fire faster and cleaner. Learning with a Facebook feed open fires too many circuits at once to strengthen the right ones.

For production, Newport studies Adam Grant, who became the youngest full professor at Wharton. Grant published seven articles in major journals in 2012 and five in 2013, along with the bestseller *Give and Take*, and had more than sixty peer-reviewed publications by 2014. His key technique is batching. He stacks all his teaching into the fall and devotes spring and summer to research. During research periods he isolates himself for up to three or four days at a time, setting an out-of-office email reply even while colleagues can see him in his office. Newport explains this with a formula: high-quality work produced equals time spent multiplied by intensity of focus. Sophie Leroy’s research on attention residue shows why intensity matters. When you switch from one task to another, part of your attention stays behind, and your performance on the next task suffers. Even a quick inbox glance every ten minutes leaves residue. Newport notes one exception, Jack Dorsey, whose constant meetings suit a CEO’s role as a hard-to-automate decision engine. But executive habits do not transfer to other jobs, and he urges readers not to assume too quickly that their own job cannot support depth.

Deep Work Is Rare

If deep work is so valuable, why do so many organizations undermine it? Newport points to three popular trends. Open offices, like Facebook's headquarters designed for 2,800 employees in one open space, promise serendipitous collaboration. Instant messaging has become a workplace tool, with IBM sending 2.5 million internal messages a day. And content creators are expected to be active on social media: more than 800 New York Times employees tweet, and novelist Jonathan Franzen was widely mocked for criticizing Twitter. Newport argues these trends actively destroy deep work. Gloria Mark's research at UC Irvine found that even short interruptions significantly delay task completion, and New Yorker writer George Packer avoided Twitter entirely while writing his National Book Award winning book.

Businesses tolerate these costs partly because of what Newport calls the metric black hole. In 2012, Tom Cochran, the CTO of Atlantic Media, noticed he was receiving 511 emails and sending 284 each week. He combined company email data with typing speed, reading speed and salary information and found the company was spending more than a million dollars a year on email, about 95 cents in labor per message. The real lesson was how hard it was to get that number at all. Measuring the bottom-line cost of communication habits takes complex modeling, and even then the results cannot account for any offsetting value. As economist Thomas Piketty observed, "it is objectively difficult to measure individual contributions to a firm's output." Since the costs of distraction and the benefits of depth are hidden, business behavior drifts according to whim.

The first force filling that vacuum is the principle of least resistance: without clear feedback, people choose whatever is easiest in the moment. Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow found professionals spent 20 to 25 hours a week outside the office monitoring email, believing they had to reply within an hour. When she persuaded the Boston Consulting Group to give one team a full disconnected day each week, the team resisted at first, but the experiment improved well-being, communication, learning and the quality of their work. Constant connection persists because it is easier. It lets you skip planning and ask for answers whenever you need them, and running your day from your inbox feels productive without the hard work of deciding what matters. Recurring meetings survive for similar reasons, and so does the lazy email forward that simply says "Thoughts?", which costs the sender seconds and the recipient much more.

The second force is busyness as a proxy for productivity. Most knowledge workers lack clear measures of success. Professors have the h-index, a formula combining publications and citations (Newport notes his own is 21), but most people live in what Matthew Crawford calls a “bewildering psychic landscape.” Crawford left a Washington think tank to open a motorcycle repair shop because fixing real machines gave him concrete accomplishment. Without better measures, workers fall back on an industrial idea of productivity: doing lots of visible stuff. Newport cites Marissa Mayer’s 2013 ban on working from home at Yahoo after she checked VPN logs and found too few logins. Adam Grant, who shuts himself away to write, is the opposite of visible busyness, yet his approach produces enormous value.

The third force is what Newport calls the cult of the internet. Alissa Rubin, a serious New York Times journalist investigating French complicity in the Rwandan genocide, was apparently pressured to tweet every few days. Newport explains why this seems normal using Neil Postman’s idea of technopoly, a culture that assumes anything high-tech is automatically good and makes alternatives invisible. Evgeny Morozov extends this with the term Internet-centrism, in which the internet becomes an ideology rather than a set of products from for-profit companies. Newport once saw a “like us on Facebook” graphic painted on an entire fleet of trucks belonging to a refrigerated logistics company. Deep work suffers here because it rests on old-fashioned values like quality, craftsmanship and mastery. Newport ends the chapter on a hopeful note: these trends are bad for businesses, but as depth becomes rarer, it becomes more valuable for any individual willing to cultivate it.

Deep Work Is Meaningful

Ric Furrer, a Wisconsin blacksmith who specializes in ancient and medieval metalworking, once re-created a Viking-era sword using a fifteen-hundred-year-old crucible steel technique. Documentary footage shows eight hours of careful hammering (“You have to be very gentle with it or you will crack it”) ending with the red-hot blade quenched in oil and bursting into flames. “To do it right, it is the most complicated thing I know how to make,” Furrer says. “I don’t need a sword. But I have to make them.” Most people accept that craft work like this is meaningful. For knowledge workers the link is murkier, because their real work is hard to separate from a roil of email and PowerPoint, and because many voices push them toward shallow activity. Newport makes his case for meaning with three arguments: neurological, psychological and philosophical.

The neurological argument comes from science writer Winifred Gallagher. After an advanced cancer diagnosis, she chose to focus on her life rather than the disease, on “movies, walks, and a 6:30 martini,” and found her life during treatment was often pleasant. Five years of research for her book *Rapt* led her to conclude that your brain builds your worldview from what you pay attention to, not from your circumstances. “Who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love, is the sum of what you focus on.” Supporting research includes Barbara Fredrickson’s work on choosing what to focus on after negative events, and Laura Carstensen’s brain scans showing that older people had trained themselves to respond less to negative images. Deep work, with its built-in importance, fills your mind with meaningful material and leaves no room for the petty irritations of daily life. Newport contrasts this with his own last five emails before drafting the chapter, which ranged from a pointless reply to a scam to office gossip.

The psychological argument comes from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In the early 1980s, he and Reed Larson invented the experience sampling method, giving people pagers that beeped at random times so they would record what they were doing and how they felt at that exact moment. Across decades of research, Csikszentmihalyi found that “the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.” He called this state flow. Surprisingly, people were happier at work than while relaxing, because jobs have built-in goals, feedback and challenges, while free time takes effort to shape. The more flow people experienced each week, the higher their life satisfaction. Where Gallagher says the content of your focus matters, Csikszentmihalyi shows that the act of going deep is itself rewarding.

The philosophical argument draws on Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, whose book *All Things Shining* traces how the West lost its sense of the sacred. They blame Descartes, whose skepticism put the individual in charge of deciding truth. The Enlightenment brought real goods, but it left people to decide arbitrarily what is meaningful, which leads to a creeping nihilism. Their answer is craftsmanship. A master wheelwright learns the character of each piece of wood and discovers meaning that is already there rather than inventing it. Newport argues that nothing about this is limited to manual trades. Any pursuit that supports high skill can generate the same meaning. Programmers describe beautiful code as short and concise like a poem, and one programming book quotes a medieval quarry worker's creed: "We who cut mere stones must always be envisioning cathedrals." You do not need a rarefied job, only a rarefied approach to the job you have.

All three paths lead to the same place. Newport coins the phrase *Homo sapiens deepensis* to express the idea that humans flourish in depth and wallow in shallowness. The first two chapters of Part 1 made a pragmatic case built on economics. This chapter adds something more personal, because the hard transition to a depth-centered life needs a goal that resonates at a human level. He closes with Gallagher's words, which serve as a summary of the whole argument: "I'll live the focused life, because it's the best kind there is."

Rule #1: Work Deeply

Architecture professor David Dewane designed a building called the Eudaimonia Machine, named for the Greek idea of reaching your full human potential. It is a narrow row of five rooms with no hallway, so you must pass through each: a gallery showing deep work done in the building, a salon with coffee and couches for debate, a library holding everything produced there, an office for shallow work, and finally deep work chambers with eighteen inches of soundproofing, used for ninety-minute sessions of total focus. The machine exists only on paper, but it shows what an ideal environment for depth looks like. Why not simply resolve to concentrate more? A study by Wilhelm Hofmann and Roy Baumeister gave 205 adults beepers and collected more than 7,500 samples of their desires. Desire “turned out to be the norm, not the exception,” and people resisted the pull of the internet and television only about half the time. Baumeister’s earlier work shows willpower is finite and gets used up like a tired muscle. The answer is to build routines and rituals that reduce the willpower needed to start and sustain deep work.

The first step is choosing a depth philosophy that fits your circumstances. The monastic philosophy eliminates or radically minimizes shallow obligations. Computer scientist Donald Knuth quit email on January 1, 1990, after fifteen years of use; an assistant sorts his mail and he handles non-urgent items about once every three months. Neal Stephenson refuses email and speaking requests for similar reasons. This suits people whose contribution is discrete and individual. The bimodal philosophy splits time into clearly defined deep stretches of at least a full day, with everything else left open. Jung wrote at Bollingen while otherwise living a busy life in Zurich, and Adam Grant takes two-to-four-day monastic stretches during his research semesters. Perlow’s consultants found that clients did not mind a full disconnected day each week. People respect your inaccessibility if it is well defined and you are easy to reach otherwise.

The rhythmic philosophy turns deep work into a regular habit. Jerry Seinfeld told a young comic to write jokes every day and mark each day with a red X on a calendar, with one rule: don’t break the chain. Doctoral student Brian Chappell, working a full-time job with a new baby, produced only one dissertation chapter in a year using ad hoc ninety-minute blocks. Once he began waking at 5:30 (later 4:45) and working until 7:30 every weekday, he produced four to five pages a day and a chapter draft every two to three weeks, calling it “both astronomically productive and guilt free.” Rhythmic work may not reach the peak intensity of daylong sessions, but it often logs more total deep hours. The journalistic philosophy fits deep work into any free

moment. Walter Isaacson wrote his 864-page book *The Wise Men* while rising at *Time* magazine, slipping away during a summer beach rental to type for twenty minutes or an hour. Newport warns this is not for beginners, though it is his own main approach: he maps deep work at the start of each week.

Next, ritualize. Robert Caro's office is governed by strict rules on everything from where his books sit to what he wears. Charles Darwin, while writing *On the Origin of Species*, followed a rigid daily schedule of study periods and a set walk to think through hard ideas. As David Brooks puts it, great creative minds "think like artists but work like accountants." A good ritual answers where you will work and for how long, how you will work once you start (for example, no internet, or counting words per twenty-minute interval), and how you will support the work with coffee, food, exercise or organized materials. Sometimes you need a grand gesture. J.K. Rowling checked into a suite at Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel to finish the last Harry Potter book. William Shockley locked himself in a Chicago hotel room and emerged with the junction transistor design. Peter Shankman booked a \$4,000 round trip to Tokyo and wrote an entire book manuscript in thirty hours of flying. The commitment itself raises the task's importance in your mind. "Sometimes to go deep, you must first go big."

Deep work does not mean always working alone. Open offices rest on a theory of serendipitous creativity, and MIT's Building 20 and Bell Labs are famous examples of chance encounters producing breakthroughs, from Chomsky grammars to the transistor. But neither used open offices. Both had private offices connected by shared hallways, and MIT faculty in the newer Stata Center insisted on soundproofing gaskets for their doors. Newport calls this the hub-and-spoke model: expose yourself to ideas in shared hubs, then retreat to a private spoke to go deep. Collaboration can also deepen focus through the whiteboard effect. At Bell Labs in 1947, Walter Brattain and John Bardeen invented the point-contact transistor by working side by side for a month, each pushing the other further. Newport then borrows from *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* to turn strategy into action. Focus on a small number of wildly important goals. Track lead measures, especially hours of deep work, rather than lag measures like papers published. Keep a visible scoreboard, which for Newport was a card taped by his monitor with tally marks and circled milestones. Hold a weekly review. Using 4DX, he aimed for five papers in the 2013 to 2014 academic year and ended with nine.

The last strategy is to be lazy. Essayist Tim Kreider wrote that "idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence or a vice; it is as indispensable to the brain as vitamin D is to the body." Newport's advice is to shut down work thinking completely at the end of the day. Three reasons support this. Ap Dijksterhuis found that people who were distracted before a complex decision did

better than those who deliberated, suggesting the unconscious mind handles complex problems well when given room. Attention restoration theory shows that directed attention is a limited resource; in one study, people who walked through an arboretum did up to 20 percent better on a concentration task than those who walked through a city, and restful activities like conversation, music or play have the same effect. Finally, Ericsson's research shows experts can sustain only about four hours of deep work a day, so evening work is usually low-value anyway. Newport ends each day with a shutdown ritual: a last email check, capturing tasks in his lists, reviewing the lists and his calendar, making a rough plan for tomorrow, and saying "Shutdown complete." Research by Baumeister and E.J. Masicampo shows that making a plan for unfinished tasks frees the mind from them. When you work, work hard. When you are done, be done.

Rule #2: Embrace Boredom

Adam Marlin rises at six every weekday to study a page of Talmud, often with a study partner. He describes it as the hardest mental strain of his day, harder than running his business, and his rabbi says the duty is fulfilled only when he reaches the edge of his mental capacity. Marlin holds three Ivy League degrees but came to serious study late, and he noticed that congregants with little formal education could “dance intellectual circles” around him, which he credited to daily study begun as early as fifth grade. Over time he found himself having more creative insights in business. From this, Newport draws the rule’s central idea: concentration is a skill that must be trained, not a habit you can adopt overnight. And efforts to deepen your focus will fail unless you also wean your mind off its dependence on distraction.

Research by the late Stanford professor Clifford Nass supports that second point. Chronic multitaskers, he found, “can’t filter out irrelevancy,” cannot manage their working memory and are chronically distracted, yet they believe they can focus whenever they need to. Newport argues that if you relieve every moment of boredom with your phone, your brain gets rewired to crave distraction, and scheduled deep work becomes impossible. Rule #2 therefore has two goals: improve your ability to concentrate and reduce your desire for distraction.

The first strategy is to take breaks from focus rather than breaks from distraction. Newport criticizes the popular internet sabbath, one offline day a week, because gorging on distraction the other six days is like eating well once a week and expecting to lose weight. Instead, schedule in advance when you will use the internet and stay completely offline outside those blocks. Distraction itself is not the damage; constantly switching to it at the first hint of boredom is. This works even for jobs that need frequent email: someone checking every fifteen minutes can still get about ninety minutes of offline training in a two-hour stretch. If you need something online during an offline block, do not look it up. Switch to another task or move your next internet block earlier, but always wait at least five minutes between the urge and going online. Do the same at home, too. Newport calls waiting in line during an offline block especially valuable training, because enduring boredom with only your thoughts has become rare.

The second strategy is to work like Teddy Roosevelt. As a Harvard freshman, Roosevelt boxed, wrestled, took dance lessons, attended poetry readings and was serious enough about naturalism to publish *The Summer Birds of the Adirondacks*. He studied no more than a quarter of a typical day, yet earned honor grades in five of seven courses, because he used the fragments of time left over with fierce intensity. To copy him, pick a deep task, estimate how

long it normally takes, then set a much shorter hard deadline, ideally public or enforced by a countdown timer. Newport suggests starting with one such Roosevelt dash per week, keeping deadlines at the edge of what is possible. These dashes act as interval training for your attention.

The third strategy is to meditate productively. As an MIT postdoc, Newport walked or ran across the Charles River daily and used the time to outline book chapters and solve research problems. Productive meditation means taking a period that occupies you physically but not mentally, like walking, jogging, driving or showering, and focusing on a single professional problem, bringing your attention back when it drifts. Newport suggests two or three sessions a week and warns it takes about a dozen before you see results. Watch for distracting thoughts and especially for looping, where your mind rehashes what you already know instead of pushing forward. Structure helps. First, review the relevant variables and hold them in working memory. Next, define a specific question to answer. Then, once you answer it, consolidate the result and start the cycle again at a deeper level.

The final strategy is to memorize a deck of cards. Daniel Kilov, an Australian memory athlete, can memorize a shuffled deck, one hundred random digits or 115 abstract shapes in five minutes, and won back-to-back silver medals at the Australian memory championships. He was not born this way. He was forgetful in high school and diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, but after training he graduated with first-class honors and entered a PhD program. Joshua Foer won the USA Memory Championship in 2006 after a year of training, and Henry Roediger's lab found that memory athletes differed mainly in attentional control. Memory training improves concentration in general. Ron White's method: fix fifty-two memorable items along a walk through five rooms of your home, link each card to a memorable person, and imagine each person doing something vivid at each spot. Nothing is special about cards; any structured task that demands unwavering attention will do. Your ability to concentrate is only as strong as your commitment to training it.

Rule #3: Quit Social Media

Baratunde Thurston, a digital media consultant friends called “the most connected man in the world,” had more than fifty-nine thousand Gmail conversations and fifteen hundred Facebook wall posts in 2012. Burnt out, in 2013 he went offline for twenty-five days: no Facebook, no Twitter, no Foursquare, not even email. Within a week the quiet felt normal. He talked with strangers, enjoyed food without photographing it and bought a bike. But within six months he had slid back into his old habits. Newport draws two lessons. Mastering deep work requires reclaiming your time from these diversions. And the public conversation about the problem is stuck in a crude choice between quitting the internet completely and accepting constant distraction as inevitable.

Newport offers a third option. Network tools are not evil, and some may be vital, but the bar for letting any of them regularly claim your time and attention should be much higher. Most people should use far fewer. When he wrote about never joining Facebook, readers defended it with small, random reasons: entertainment, a fiction-writing forum, reconnecting with high school classmates. He calls this the any-benefit mind-set: using a tool whenever you can name any possible benefit, while ignoring its costs. These services are engineered to be addictive. Newport argues they are simply tools, like a blacksmith’s hammer, and skilled workers have always been skeptical about adopting new ones.

Forrest Pritchard shows what that skepticism looks like. He runs Smith Meadows, a grass-finished meat farm an hour west of Washington, D.C. Under the any-benefit mind-set, a hay baler is obviously worth owning. But Pritchard weighed fuel, repairs, storage and taxes, and also opportunity costs. Making hay all summer would keep him from raising broiler chickens that brought in cash and manure for his soil, and buying hay brings nutrients onto his land and avoids compacting his fields with heavy machinery. “Soil fertility is my baseline,” he said, so he sold the baler. Newport turns this into the craftsman approach to tool selection: identify the core factors behind success and happiness in your life, and adopt a tool only if its positive effects on those factors substantially outweigh the negative ones.

The first strategy applies the law of the vital few. Writers like Malcolm Gladwell, Michael Lewis and George Packer, who called Twitter “crack for media addicts,” avoid the service. Lewis says, “There’s a lot of communication in my life that’s not enriching, it’s impoverishing.” To apply the approach, list a few high-level goals in your professional and personal life, then two or three key activities for each, and test every tool against those activities. For Lewis, whose work depends

on patient research and careful writing, Twitter has no impact at best and harm at worst. Newport also runs the math on Twitter as book marketing: ten personal tweets a day, five days a week, with a 50 percent conversion rate for two years yields only about two thousand sales. For a personal goal of maintaining close friendships through long talks, meals and real sacrifice, Facebook offers little. There are exceptions, like a college freshman building new friendships or a deployed soldier staying in touch with family.

The 80/20 principle explains why low-impact benefits are not enough. In many settings, 80 percent of an effect comes from 20 percent of causes. If you can list ten to fifteen helpful activities for a goal, only the top two or three drive most of your results. Because time and attention are zero-sum, every hour spent finding old friends on Facebook is an hour not spent taking a good friend to lunch. The second strategy borrows from minimalist Ryan Nicodemus, who boxed up everything he owned, unpacked only what he needed over a week and threw the rest away. Newport asks readers to quit all social media for thirty days, cold turkey, without deactivating accounts or announcing it. Then ask of each service: would the last thirty days have been notably better with it, and did anyone care that I was gone? If both answers are no, quit for good. Most people discover that no one outside close friends and family noticed. The average Twitter user has 208 followers, and the feeling of an audience is addictive, but it is a trade of mutual attention rather than attention earned by real value. Newport's first blog, started in 2003, went long stretches with zero readers, and building Study Hacks took a decade.

The third strategy is not to use the internet to entertain yourself. Arnold Bennett's 1910 book *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* argued that office workers wasted their sixteen free hours by treating them as a prologue and epilogue to the workday, and urged them to treat those hours as a day within a day for self-improvement. Newport admits Bennett sounds antiquated, but the logic holds. Sites like BuzzFeed, Business Insider and Reddit are designed to keep you clicking, and using them in every idle moment weakens your ability to resist distraction. You cannot quit them, since they are always a click away, so the answer is to plan your leisure: hobbies, a reading program, exercise or time with people. Newport reads three to five books at once in the evenings. As Bennett wrote, the mind does not need rest so much as change.

Rule #4: Drain the Shallows

In summer 2007, the software company 37signals, now Basecamp, cut its workweek to four days from May through October. When a Forbes writer objected that packing forty hours into four days is inefficient, cofounder Jason Fried explained that the goal was four “normalish 8-hour days,” and less work overall. “Very few people work even 8 hours a day,” he noted, since meetings, interruptions, web surfing and office politics fill the time. Fewer hours made employees stingy with their time, which cut shallow work while leaving deep work intact. The company then gave everyone the whole month of June to work on their own projects, and two of the results, including a customer support tool and a data visualization system, went into production. “How can we afford to put our business on hold for a month to mess around with new ideas?” Fried asked. “How can we afford not to?”

Newport draws limits around this idea. Some shallow work is unavoidable, so the goal is to shrink its footprint, not eliminate it. And because Ericsson’s research caps deep work at about four hours a day for experts, there is room for shallow tasks. Still, fixed commitments fragment days more than people expect. On one random day, Newport’s meetings and teaching took four of his eight hours before he opened his email. So treat shallow work with suspicion. The first strategy is to schedule every minute of your day. People misjudge their time badly. Young British adults estimated watching 15 to 16 hours of TV a week when the real figure was closer to 28, and people who claimed 75-hour workweeks worked fewer than 55. Each morning, mark the hours down the side of a notebook page and give every block of at least thirty minutes a job, batching small tasks into task blocks. When the plan breaks, redraw it. Use overflow blocks and generous task blocks to absorb surprises. If an important insight strikes, Newport abandons the schedule to pursue it, then rebuilds the plan. The point is to keep asking what makes the most sense right now.

The second strategy is to quantify the depth of each activity by asking: how many months would it take to train a smart recent college graduate with no special training to do this task? Editing an academic article might take fifty to seventy-five months, so it is deep. Building a PowerPoint of quarterly sales figures takes about two months, and attending a routine status meeting about three, so both are shallow. Tasks that require long training use your hard-won skills and return more value. The third strategy is to ask your boss for a shallow work budget. For most knowledge workers who are not entry level, Newport expects the answer to be 30 to 50 percent. Sticking to the number forces changes like declining shallow projects, replacing status meetings

with results-driven reports and spending mornings out of contact. The conversation also gives you cover to say no. If your boss says all your time should be shallow, that tells you the job cannot support deep work, and you should plan a move.

The fourth strategy is fixed-schedule productivity: set a firm end time for your workday (Newport uses 5:30 p.m.) and work backward to fit everything in. In one week he sent only five emails after 5:30 across sixty-five email conversations, and between 2011 and 2014 he published roughly twenty peer-reviewed papers, won two competitive grants and wrote two books without working nights or weekends. He contrasts this with a junior professor he calls Tom, who spent twelve hours at the office with five meetings, three hours of administration and only ninety minutes of real research. Harvard professor Radhika Nagpal capped her work at fifty hours a week, limited herself to five trips a year when junior faculty typically take twelve to twenty-four, and still earned tenure on schedule. Newport's own tactics include being very careful with the word yes, telling colleagues "Talk to me after tenure," and being clear in refusing but vague in explaining why. A fixed schedule forces you to cut shallow work ruthlessly and makes no your default.

The final strategy is to become hard to reach, starting with email. Newport's website lists no general email address and directs specific requests to specific people, like his literary agent. He uses a sender filter: a special address with clear conditions and a note that he will reply only to proposals that match his interests. This turned his inbox from a source of obligation into a set of opportunities. Consultant Clay Herbert asks correspondents to read an FAQ, fill out a survey and pay a small fee, and Antonio Centeno of the Real Man Style blog makes senders promise they are not asking questions Google could answer. Newport also advises doing more work when you send or reply. Before responding, ask what project the message represents and what process would finish it with the fewest messages, then lay that process out. For a coffee request, propose specific times and treat the reply as confirmation. This cuts email volume and closes the loop so the task stops cluttering your mind.

Last, consider not responding at all. Famous professors Newport observed at MIT did not reply by default. The sender had to show that a reply was worthwhile and make it easy to give. A vague "Are you available?" got silence, while a specific request to stop by the last fifteen minutes of Thursday office hours got a yes. Newport's professorial email sorting says to skip a reply if the message is ambiguous, if it does not interest you, or if nothing good would happen by replying and nothing bad would happen by not. There are exceptions, like an unclear message from your CEO. Some people will be confused or upset, and Newport quotes Tim Ferriss: "Develop the habit of letting small bad things happen. If you don't, you'll never find time for the

life-changing big things.” People quickly adjust to your habits, and you end up sending fewer emails and ignoring the ones that are hard to process, which loosens your inbox’s grip on your attention.

Conclusion

In the winter of 1974, Bill Gates saw the Altair, the first personal computer, on the cover of Popular Electronics and spent the next eight weeks with Paul Allen and Monte Davidoff writing a version of BASIC for it. The story is usually told as one of insight and boldness. Newport argues that the deciding factor was Gates's extraordinary capacity for deep work. According to Walter Isaacson, Gates would fall asleep on his keyboard in the middle of a line of code, sleep an hour or two, then wake and continue exactly where he left off. Paul Allen called it "a prodigious feat of concentration," and Isaacson summed up the difference between the two as focus: Allen's mind flitted among ideas, while Gates was a "serial obsessor."

Newport uses the story to restate his thesis. Deep work is not a moral stance or a statement about technology, and he rejects the debate between digital curmudgeons and digital enthusiasts. It is a practical recognition that concentration is a skill that gets valuable things done. It helped Gates launch a billion-dollar industry in less than a semester. Newport's own career shows the same pattern. As a graduate student, he published two good papers a year while rarely working past five on weekdays and never on weekends. As an MIT postdoc, he deliberately trained harder, keeping his no-night-work rule, taking long midday runs and signing a contract for a fourth book. He protected deep work hours, thought through problems while walking, worked in isolated spots like MIT's Barker Engineering Library dome and the Lewis Music Library, and even bought a \$50 lab notebook for proofs, hoping its cost would make him think more carefully. When he joined Georgetown in fall 2011, his output rose to an average of four good papers a year.

His third year at Georgetown, from fall 2013 to summer 2014, pushed the habit to an extreme. He was writing the seventy-thousand-word manuscript of this book, facing a tenure decision and stung by losing a grant many colleagues received. He declined time-consuming commitments ruthlessly, worked away from his office, kept a visible tally of deep work hours, and worked through problems on the subway, while shoveling snow, while pacing the yard during his son's naps and in traffic. That year he published nine peer-reviewed papers while writing a book, raising a two-year-old, expecting a second child and still not working evenings. He admits the year was probably too extreme and expects to ease off, but it convinced him that deep work is far more powerful than most people realize.

Newport closes by admitting that the deep life is not for everyone. It demands hard work and drastic changes to your habits, and it forces you to face whether your best work is good enough. Busyness through email and social media feels safer. But for those willing to make the trade,

depth brings a life rich in productivity and meaning. He ends by returning to Winifred Gallagher: “I’ll live the focused life, because it’s the best kind there is.”

About Cal Newport

Cal Newport is a computer science professor at Georgetown University. He trained in MIT's Theory of Computation group, earned his PhD at MIT and stayed on as a postdoctoral associate before joining Georgetown's faculty in fall 2011. His academic work is in theoretical computer science, and during the year he wrote *Deep Work* he published nine peer-reviewed papers.

Newport practices what he writes about. He has never had a social media account, did not own a smartphone until 2012, and builds his days around three to four hours of uninterrupted concentration while rarely working past the early evening. He started his first blog in 2003 and spent about a decade building his Study Hacks blog to hundreds of thousands of monthly readers.

Before *Deep Work*, he wrote books including *How to Become a Straight-A Student*, based on interviews with high-performing college students, and *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, which argues that skill matters more than passion in building a satisfying career. He later expanded on the ideas in *Deep Work* in books such as *Digital Minimalism*, *A World Without Email* and *Slow Productivity*, and he writes and speaks widely about technology, focus and the future of work.

Listen to this summary, or turn the book into a podcast or course, at webapp.sunapp.ai/books/deep-work-by-cal-newport

 **sun** | *Intelligent Audio*



sunapp.ai/download