

# REALSIMPLE

LIFE MADE EASIER

MONEY  
SPECIAL!  
BEST WAYS  
TO SAVE

## Simplify Your Days

Streamline Your  
Routine, Declutter &  
Reduce Waste



Quick Dinners  
Right from  
the Pantry

Start Your  
Mornings with  
More Energy

Secrets of a  
Relaxing Home



# yes, you can find time to read

Enjoying books doesn't have to happen only when you're on vacation.  
Use these tips to fit a few pages into your busy day.

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illustrations by anne bentley

“I wish *I* had more time to read.”

I hear this almost anytime I mention my job as *Real Simple's* books editor. To decide what titles we recommend in the magazine and online, I finish between one and three books in an average week. That's not counting the 50 pages I might read of a book before I realize it's not for our readers. Or the purely personal reading I do for my monthly book club and to satisfy niche interests.

Even before I made a living reading, I always loved books—the escape they gave me, the perspective even fiction offered on my own life. But a few years ago, I felt I wasn't finishing as many as I used to (having cable for the first time in a decade may have had something to do with it). So I formally set a goal to read more and track my progress. Since then, I've doubled the number of books I read each year (from 40 to 80) by fitting in reading whenever and wherever I have a free minute.

You can make time for more books too. Try the strategies here to get to that satisfying, turned-the-last-page feeling.

## drop misconceptions

Many of us buy into not-actually-real rules that make reading feel daunting—like that we have to finish what we start or that we should only read Serious Literature, says Daniel T. Willingham, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and author of *Raising Kids Who Read*.

You officially have permission on the following: You do not have to finish a book—and if you dread picking a certain one up, that's probably a sign to move on. You can peek at the ending or even skip around. Reading isn't a race, and there's nothing wrong with going slow.

There's also no rule that says you need to read a big book. Glory Edim, founder and creative director of Well-Read Black Girl, a website, online community, and festival celebrating women and black literature, says most of the books she reads are between 250 and 300 pages long, allowing her to average about one a week. She also includes short-story collections and literary journals as part of her reading time. “The beauty of reading is that you can create your own habits and look for innovative new things to discover,” she says.

## break things up

Another misconception is that you need to sit down and focus for long stretches. Ask any insatiable reader for their top tip, and they'll say they read in short bursts, as well as for uninterrupted hours when they're available.

If I'm waiting—for coffee, for the subway, or to get through airport security—I am probably reading a book. Emily May, a top reviewer on Goodreads, the social network for tracking, discovering, and reviewing books, says this method makes even long books feel less intimidating. "When you break a book down into 10-minute sessions, it's much more doable," she says. Thanks in part to squeezing in a few paragraphs anytime she can, May reads about 200 books a year.

## eliminate distractions

For some of us (like me, an admitted Instagram obsessive), phones and devices are just too tempting to be around when you want to crack open a book. Pamela Paul, editor of the *New York Times Book Review* and coauthor, with Maria Russo, of *How to Raise a Reader*, doesn't keep any devices in her bedroom. "Even a phone lying beside me, facedown, notifications off, is a distraction," she says. "Because then you just wonder, 'What's happening in there?'"

Edim simply turns her devices off. "When I am reading, I'm reading," she says. "Like when you walk into the theater for two hours to watch a play, you turn off your phone, and you're not interacting. I try to apply that same principle and give the book author my full attention."

You might also consider an app that tracks and curbs screen time, such as Moment or Flipd (free; iOS and Android).

## or use tech to your advantage

All that said, it's also true that technology has made it easier than ever to always have a book on your person.

Those books I mentioned reading while waiting in line? Most likely, they're e-books I downloaded from my local library using OverDrive's Libby app (free; iOS and Android), which I keep on my phone next to Instagram—a subtle nudge to reconsider boredom scrolling. The free Kindle app from Amazon syncs with your Kindle, so you can pick up where you left off on any device.

Then, of course, there are audiobooks, which I recommend to friends who tell me they don't have time to read but have several podcasts on rotation. Audiobooks turn time spent cleaning, driving, walking the dog, exercising—basically, whenever you can pop in headphones or turn up the volume—into reading time. So yes, they count!

## tweak your habits

In his book *The Power of Habit*, journalist Charles Duhigg took a deep dive into the research around habits: how they form and change and how they shape our lives. What he found was that every habit has a cue (something that triggers the activity, like the time of day or an emotion) and a reward (a treat to eat, a new emotion, a change of scenery) attached to it. Rewards especially signal to our brain that this is an activity to turn into a habit.

You can try this system when starting a reading habit. You might leave a book on your bedside table as your cue and, after 20 minutes of reading, do a favorite yoga pose or watch a TV episode or funny video as a reward. The act of buying a book can be both cue and reward (*I finish this book and I get to buy another one*). For some, celebrating an accomplishment—thinking about how good you feel after reading—is reward enough. "Say to yourself, 'I just read 10 pages, and that's not a small thing,'" says Duhigg. "Our brain pays attention to stuff like that."

## organize and track your progress

Every year, millions of readers pledge to complete a reading challenge on Goodreads. Setting my own yearly challenge (currently 80 books), I get a motivation boost as I approach the goal, or when I realize I'm two books behind schedule.

May goes a step further and uses Goodreads to organize lists (what the website calls bookshelves) to meet her challenge. She has a short to-read list and a longer to-read list for books she hopes to get to in the future. "I'm much more likely to stick to my goals when I set myself a short list of, say, 10 high-priority books than I am when I just have one seemingly never-ending list," she says.

Craving a less numbers-driven challenge? Check out the Read Harder Challenge from the website Book Riot. It encourages trying new genres and reading more diverse books, among other things.

If you're in a reading rut because you don't know what to read next, ask a bookseller or librarian for recommendations. Follow a few "bookstagrammers" on Instagram who read your favorite genre. Download sample chapters whenever you hear or read about an interesting-sounding book so they're waiting when you're ready. Sign up for BookBub to get ideas from authors you love.

Keep a list too: Paul has a diary of every book she's read since she was 17 (she published a memoir about this, *My Life with Bob*, in 2017). "Over the years, this diary has come to tell the story of my own life and has even enhanced the experience of reading itself," she says. "I love thinking of my life as a trajectory of other people's stories—their influences, their thoughts, their words enriching my own."



## make it interactive

A book club is great if you're the kind of person who likes a deadline; plus, of course, it's enjoyable to get together and discuss a book. Edim is in one and also has a more informal group text with friends to discuss what they're reading. Paul, a mom of three, does what she calls "parallel reading" with her children. She reads side by side with each of her children before bed to wind down. "I love that our evenings end with this quiet, shared together time. I would get a lot less reading in if we didn't do this," she says.

## remember to have fun

Tracking books, setting goals, and using new reading tools aside: Don't let your desire to read "enough" take the enjoyment out of it, says Willingham.

Even regular readers fret about this. Many books editors and friends of mine finish way more books than I do. Some weeks I cannot stop scrolling Instagram, or I get home and just want to watch whatever prestige TV show I keep reading about on Twitter, all the while beating myself up about how I should be reading. Sometimes my attention span wanes to the point that it's hard to focus on any book. (In these cases, I'll pick up an absorbing thriller or a book with short paragraphs to feel motivated again.)

But what's actually "enough" is this: If for five minutes or 50, you get lost in a story—whether it's a 10-line poem or a multigenerational family drama the size of a brick—you're doing it right.

## WHAT'S YOUR BEST READ-MORE TIP?

**If we're starting a family road trip**, my husband and I will both pop in an earbud and listen to my latest Audible pick while the kids are playing and reading on their tablets.  
—Chelsea Humphrey, Goodreads top reviewer

**I make little stacks of books** in places where I will see them to remind myself I have a list I'm working through.  
—Lisa Lucas, executive director of the National Book Foundation

**I read in the bathtub** before bed every night!  
—Jasmine Guillory, author of *The Wedding Party* and *The Wedding Date*, among other books

**We went several years without a TV**. I reclaimed my evenings in bed purely as reading time, and it's a habit that has stuck. Last year we broke down and got a TV again. But now, even when I want to watch a TV show or movie, I usually want to read my book more, so the TV has not taken over, not at all.  
—Maria Russo, New York Times Book Review children's books editor and coauthor of *How to Raise a Reader*

**I borrow e-books from my local library** so I always have a book on my phone and a deadline to finish it by.  
—Reera Yoo, cohost of the podcast *Books & Boba*

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