

THE BIG IDEAS

Deep Work

vs. Shallow work.

A Workout

For your neurons.

Attention Residue

Time to clean it up!

The Four Rules

To get your deep work on.

Routines

What's your approach?

The #1 Discipline

What's wildly important to you?

"Shut-Down Complete!"

Work hard. Rest hard.

The Deep Life

Let's make the dive!

Deep Work

Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World

BY CAL NEWPORT · GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING © 2016 · 304 PAGES

"The Deep Work Hypothesis: The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly *rare* at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly *valuable* in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive.

The book has two goals, pursued in two parts. The first, tackled in Part 1, is to convince you that the deep work hypothesis is true. The second, tackled in Part 2, is to teach you how to take advantage of this reality by training your brain and transforming your work habits to place deep work at the core of your professional life."

~ Cal Newport from *Deep Work*

Deep Work.

It's the key to how you get [So Good They Can't Ignore You](#)—which, of course, is the title of another one of Cal's great books.

Cal is an assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown. He got his Ph.D. from MIT and writes with the clarity and logical precision that you'd expect from a guy with that kind of background.

I learned about this book at the end of the interview Cal and I did on *So Good*. I wrap up each chat by asking the author how our community can learn more about them. Cal laughed and said, "Well, I'm hard to find." Hah.

He told me that he's never joined Facebook. Or Twitter. And that this commitment to doing deep work was actually the subject of his next book. Of course, I was excited to read about THAT and here we are.

I got this book less than 24 hours ago (thank you Hachette!) and I read it in less than a day—in between an interview with Steven Kotler on [The Rise of Superman](#) and another interview with Dan Coyle on [The Talent Code](#).

It's a super inspiring read. In many ways, it's a manual on how to get into the flow and grow the talent that Kotler and Coyle talk about. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I think this subject is REALLY (!) important and an absolutely key component to optimizing and actualizing. The fact is, most of us are drowning in the shallow end of the work pool—allowing ourselves to be distracted by trivia that prevents us from doing the great work we're here to do in all aspects of our lives.

It's time to dive into the deep end!

Of course, this book is a guide to helping us do that. It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

"Deep work is so important that we might consider it, to use the phrasing of business writer Eric Barker, 'the superpower of the 21st century.'"

~ Cal Newport

DEEP WORK VS. SHALLOW WORK

"Deep work is not some nostalgic affectation of writers and early-twentieth-century philosophers. It's instead a skill that has great value today."

~ Cal Newport

"Deep Work: Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.

Deep work is necessary to wring every last drop of value out of your current intellectual capacity. We now know from decades of research in both psychology and neuroscience that the state of mental strain that accompanies deep work is also necessary to improve your abilities."

Deep work. Distraction-free concentration. Stretches your cognitive capabilities to their limit. Creates new value. Improves your skill. And the products of this type of work are hard to replicate. Let's compare it to its opposite:

"Shallow Work: Noncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.

In an age of network tools, in other words, knowledge workers increasingly replace deep work with the shallow alternative—constantly sending and receiving e-mail messages like human network routers, with frequent breaks for quick hits of distraction."

How much time are you spending as a human network router—constantly sending emails and otherwise distracting yourself with every new little push notification and text message and attention-paper-cutting distraction imaginable? :)

DEEP WORK = A WORKOUT FOR YOUR NEURONS

"To understand the role of myelin in improvement, keep in mind that skills, be they intellectual or physical, eventually reduce down to brain circuits. This new science of performance argues that you get better at a skill as you develop more myelin around the relevant neurons, allowing the corresponding circuit to fire more effortlessly and effectively. To be great at something is to be well myelinated.

This understanding is important because it provides a neurological foundation for why deliberate practice works. By focusing intensely on a specific skill, you're forcing the specific relevant circuit to fire, again and again, in isolation. This repetitive use of a specific circuit triggers cells called oligodendrocytes to begin wrapping layers of myelin around the neurons in the circuits—effectively cementing the skill. The reason, therefore, why it's important to focus intensely on the task at hand while avoiding distraction is because this is the only way to isolate the relevant neural circuit enough to trigger useful myelination."

"To be great at something is to be well myelinated."

Myelin.

This is the secret sauce to greatness we learned about in Dan Coyle's *Talent Code* (which Cal references in the book).

In my chat with Dan, he told me a story about LeBron James and how he deliberately practiced developing his inside game with Hakeem Olajuwon. He slowed everything down, intensely focused on certain moves like he was a 7th grader picking something up for the first time.

It's IMPOSSIBLE to imagine LeBron kinda sorta showing up, munching on an Oreo while dribbling with the other hand, stopping to respond to his latest text then going back to passively dribbling the ball. He's INTENSELY FOCUSED.

Likewise, of course, WE are not going to create *anything* of value when our attention is fragmented by the latest push notification or email or whatever. We. Must. FOCUS!!!

"Two Core Abilities for Thriving in the New Economy
1. *The ability to quickly master hard things.*
2. *The ability to produce at an elite level, in terms of both quality and speed."*

~ Cal Newport

Remember: Deep work = distraction-free concentration that stretches your cognitive capabilities to their limit while improving your skill and creating new value that is hard to replicate.

ATTENTION RESIDUE

*"High-Quality Work
Produced = (Time Spent) ×
(Intensity of Focus)"*
~ Cal Newport

"The problem this research identifies with this work strategy is that when you switch from some Task A to another Task B, your attention doesn't immediately follow—a residue of your attention remains stuck thinking about the original task. ... 'People experiencing attention residue after switching tasks are likely to demonstrate poor performance on that next task,' and the more intense the residue, the worse the performance.

The concept of attention residue helps explain why the intensity formula is true and therefore explains Grant's productivity. By working on a single hard task for a long time without switching, Grant minimizes the negative impact of attention residue from his obligations, allowing him to maximize performance on this one task."

Attention residue. This is a really cool and Big Idea.

So, at this stage, most of us are pretty aware that multi-tasking is simply not possible. Although we can rapidly shift from one thing to another (diminishing our performance in both tasks!), we can't do two things at once.

Let's assume we get that and strive to focus on one thing at a time. Research shows that we STILL run into sub-optimal attention issues as we move from one meeting/project to another. A part of our attention is still focused on the last project. There's a "residue" from it that diminishes our capacity to fully focus.

As Cal advises: "To produce at your peak level you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction. Put another way, the type of work that optimizes performance is deep work."

Here's to cleaning up the residue on our attention! (One key way? Create time blocks!!)

THE FOUR RULES OF DEEP WORK

"Rule #1: Work Deeply

Rule #2: Embrace Boredom

Rule #3: Quit Social Media

Rule #4: Drain the Shallows"

*"To make matters worse
for depth, there's increasing
evidence that this shift
toward the shallow is not
a choice that can easily
be reversed. Spend enough
time in a state of frenetic
shallowness and you
permanently reduce your
capacity to perform deep
work."*

~ Cal Newport

After establishing the *why* of Deep Work in Part 1 of the book, Cal moves into the all-important practical HOW. Those are the four rules. Each has its own chapter with practical stories/implementation tips. Quick re-cap:

Rule #1: Work Deeply. It's not enough to have the intention to work more deeply. We need to systematically install new routines and rituals to create the new habits that will lead to more and more deep work. This is a hallmark of great humans.

Rule #2: Embrace Boredom. For some reason these days, the MOMENT we have a lull in our lives—whether that's a few minutes before a friend arrives for lunch or in line at the grocery store or whatever—most of us *immediately* grab our smart phone and compulsively check out whatever we think we need to see right.this.second. We have about a hundredth of a second of tolerance for boredom.

If we want to create the capacity for more deep work, then feeding that beast is NOT a good idea. Cal tells us that rather than immediately flail around in the shallow end of the distraction pool, we need to EMBRACE BOREDOM. Use those moments to think or breathe deeply. Anything other than our habitual, addictive, impulsive, attention paper-cutting behaviors.

Rule #3: Quit Social Media. If there's a poster child for shallow living, it's social media. Cal walks us through a logical analysis of the fact that just because there's a little benefit to things like social media (e.g., staying connected to old friends, etc.), doesn't mean it's actually worth the time we give it.

If we REALLY want to live deeply—working and loving—we can do better than fritter away our time on social media. The bold among us shall quit it! I've never really engaged on the personal side of Facebook and, via the exercises in the book, got even more clarity that, if I'm committed to my deep work, it's time for my social media time to be nearly eliminated. FUN! (You?!)

Rule #4: Drain the Shallows. *The Shallows* is the name of a book written capturing the essence of superficial living. (Written by a guy in retreat doing deep work, btw.) As we cultivate deep work, we need to systematically drain the shallow from our lives.

One of Cal's big tips here? SCHEDULE EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY. Not to drive yourself crazy, but to bring more mindfulness to your day.

We want to create big ol' time blocks (remember: *The ONE Thing* guys call this the #1 power tool of time management). Then, of course, be flexible as things evolve during the day but bring yourself back to your commitment to use your time consciously as you drain the shallows!

ROUTINES TO RITUALIZE DEEP WORK

"An often-overlooked observation about those who use their minds to create valuable things is that they're rarely haphazard in their work habits."

~ Cal Newport

"That brings me to the motivating idea behind the strategies that follow: The key to developing a deep work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add routines and rituals to your working life designed to minimize the amount of your limited willpower necessary to transition into and maintain a state of unbroken concentration. If you suddenly decide, for example, in the middle of a distracted afternoon spent Web browsing, to switch your attention to a cognitively demanding task, you'll draw heavily from your finite willpower to wrest your attention away from the online shininess. Such attempts will therefore frequently fail. On the other hand, if you deployed smart routines and rituals—perhaps a set time and quiet location used for your deep tasks each afternoon—you'd require much less willpower to start and keep going. In the long run, you'd therefore succeed with these deep efforts far more often."

This is from Rule #1 of the how: We need to create routines and rituals to consistently rock it. Cal presents four different "depth philosophies" and gives examples of each—encouraging us to figure out which approach is optimal for us and go out and rock it. Super quick look:

Monastic Philosophy: Think of a monk in a monastery—removed from the little distractions of normal life. You're essentially unplugged from the matrix and focused. It's (obviously) not for everybody but an extraordinarily productive approach if you can pull it off. (This is basically me in my hermit-mode.)

Bimodal Philosophy: In this mode, you alternate between a monastic approach and a normally engaged mode. Cal shares the story of Carl Jung who alternated between a very engaged therapy practice/social life in Zurich and a totally removed monk-mode in his retreat house for writing.

Rhythmic Philosophy: Basic idea here is captured in Jerry Seinfeld's "chain method" habit of writing a joke every day. In this mode, we're less attached to a particular schedule and committed to having a "rhythm" of consistently creating—where, like, Seinfeld, we don't want to break the chain of successful showing up and completing our daily deep work.

Journalistic Philosophy: In this mode, like a journalist who's ready to write on deadline whenever the situation arises, you fit deep work into your schedule whenever you can. This is Cal's main approach.

Obviously, check out the book for more. For now, know that we need to find our own philosophy. *Monastic/Bimodal/Rhythmic/Journalistic:* Which one of those resonates the most for you?

"Don't take breaks from distraction. Instead take breaks from focus."

~ Cal Newport

DISCIPLINE #1: FOCUS ON THE WILDLY IMPORTANT

"As the authors of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* explain, 'The more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish.' They elaborate that execution should be aimed at a small number of 'wildly important goals.' This simplicity will help focus an organization's energy to a sufficient intensity to ignite real results.

For an individual focused on deep work, the implication is that you should identify a small number of ambitious outcomes to pursue with your deep work hours. The general exhortation to 'spend more time working deeply' doesn't spark a lot of enthusiasm. In a 2014 column titled, 'The Art of Focus,' David Brooks endorsed this approach of letting ambitious goals drive focused behavior, explaining: 'If you want to win the war for attention, don't try to say 'no' to the trivial distractions you find on the information smorgasborg; try to say 'yes' to the subject that arouses a terrifying longing, and let the terrifying longing crowd out everything else.'"

Remember: It's a HECK of a lot easier to say "No!" to shallow distractions when you have a REALLY BIG YES!

So, what WILDLY (!!!) important thing fires you up?

Seriously. Let's slow down and capture this.

What's the #1 (challenging but feasible!) thing you'd most like to achieve over the next 6-12 months that would have a wildly awesome positive impact on your life?

My #1 WILDLY IMPORTANT goal = _____.

Fantastic. Here's to going deep and prioritizing our lives around that #1—crowding out the distractions in the process.

"SHUT-DOWN COMPLETE!"

"At the end of the workday, shut down your consideration of work issues until the next morning—no after-dinner e-mail check, no mental replays of conversations, and no scheming about how you'll handle an upcoming challenge; shut down work thinking completely. If you need more time, then extend your workday, but once you shut down, your mind must be left free. ...

Decades of work from multiple different subfields within psychology all point toward the conclusion that regularly resting your brain improves the quality of your deep work. When you work, work hard. When you're done, be done. Your average e-mail response time might suffer some, but you'll more than make up for this with the sheer volume of truly important work produced during the day by your refreshed ability to dive deeper than your exhausted peers."

"When you work, work hard. When you're done, be done."

As Steven Kotler said in our chat, although being in flow is incredibly rewarding in terms of creativity, productivity, learning and pure enjoyment, it's also REALLY EXPENSIVE.

Dan Coyle echoed this as well. He laughed as he told a story about how he once wrote a piece on the world's fastest men. He said when these guys weren't racing they barely moved—they were professional nappers! (Hah.)

It takes a ton of energy to perform at a high level. And that demands a deep level of recovery.

One GREAT way to do that is to have a hard stop at the end of every day. Cal makes a strong case for why this is so important and walks us through his personal end of the day ritual in which he basically does one final check of email to make sure he's handled anything that's urgent, looks over what was left undone and plans some time the next day to complete it then, as he turns off his computer for the night, he says to himself, "Shut-down complete!"

*"I propose an alternative to the Internet Sabbath. Instead of scheduling the occasional break *from distraction* so you can focus, you should instead schedule the occasional break *from focus* to give in to distraction."*

~ Cal Newport

"Great minds like Caro and Darwin didn't deploy rituals to be weird; they did so because success in their work depended on their ability to go deep, again and again—there's no way to win a Pulitzer Prize or conceive a grand theory without pushing your brain to the limit."

~ Cal Newport

LOVE that. I do something similar. With my digital sunset, I turn off the computer and return it to its not-gonna-see-you-till-tomorrow home, appreciate all that's been done, look ahead to the next day, clean up my desk so it's in a ready-state for tomorrow morning and #done. Time to recover. I may need to add: "Houston. We're shutting down. 3. 2. 1. Shut-down, complete." :)

How about you?

Ready to start shutting down completely and giving that big, awesome brain of yours a chance to rest and recover?

THE DEEP LIFE

"The deep life, of course, is not for everybody. It requires hard work and drastic changes to your habits. For many, there's a comfort in the artificial busyness of rapid e-mail messaging and social media posturing, while the deep life demands that you leave much of that behind. There's also an uneasiness that surrounds any effort to produce the best things you're possible of producing, as this forces you to confront the possibility that your best is not (yet) that good. It's safer to comment on our culture than to step into the Rooseveltian ring and attempt to wrestle it into something better."

The deep life.

You ready to make the plunge?

Here's to diving into the deep end as we optimize, actualize and give our greatest gifts in greatest service to the world!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.