

*How to
Read a
{Business}
Book*

BY TODD SATTERSTEN

The Kid From Out of Town

During my sophomore year of high school, a family moved into our rural, southeastern Wisconsin school district. Their two kids had been educated in the fancy private schools in the inner suburbs of Chicago, which was immediately evident by the books they were reading.

The son was a year older than me and our daily interaction took place when he pulled his French horn from the instrument locker next to the one where my baritone was stored. He was always reading until the last possible moment before band class started. His selections of Poe, Twain, and Fitzgerald were distantly familiar, but one day he entered reading Mortimer Adler's *How To Read A Book*. You can only imagine the number of times he was sarcastically asked, "How do you read a book about reading books if you don't know how to read a book?" Everyone took their shot. The cheap and easy laughs at his expense showed just how insecure the rest of my classmates and I were.

I may have been one of the kids mocking that boy, but twenty years later, my view could not be more different. During the year it took to write *The 100 Best Business Books of All Time*, Jack and I had to start reading a new book at the beginning of each week and compose a thoughtful review of the book's premise and arguments by week's end to reach our contractual deadline. While we had both reviewed books for years, the pace of the book project made it essential for us to discover a set of reading rules that could be used to save time and improve comprehension as you navigate the thousands of business books that are published each year.

Here are some of the things we learned along the way.

Get a Recommendation

Publishers are very good marketers. They spend enormous amounts of time constructing clever titles and designing shiny dust jackets in the hopes you will pick up—and ultimately buy—their books. This is precisely the point where most readers make their first mistake.

Think about the first business book you read. It was probably *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey or *Good To Great* by Jim Collins, or maybe *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman. In any case, I bet you read that first book because someone you trusted recommended it, and reading that first book was likely a meaningful experience for you. It shook your world up just enough that you saw things a little differently.

After your experience with that first valuable business book, you likely logged onto Amazon or ran down to Barnes & Noble in search of more solutions and good reads. And this is where things go bad for most business book readers. Undoubtedly, your second book purchase was a less satisfying experience than your first.

The problem? 11,000. That is the number of business books published in the United States every year. Placed one atop another, the stack would stand as tall as a ninety-story building.

Recommendations reduce the noise. Suggestions from friends and colleagues are best, because they know you and your circumstances. Reliable media sources that regularly review business books, like *The Wall Street Journal* and *BusinessWeek*, are also a great source for slimming the pile. Blogs, tweets, and Facebook statuses can be just as valuable. Online booksellers offer customer reviews on their product pages, and physical bookstores have helpful employees who can help you find a book

Worthwhile as they are, recommendations merely reduce the size of the pile. Our next step is to determine which book is right one.

The Promise

All books that are worth your time deliver a clear promise. The author and publisher use several mechanisms to make that promise clear and, when well-executed, these cues align to show the reader what they'll get from their time spent with the book.

Start with the cover. The title gives the book a name. The subtitle tells you what the book is about. Observe the colors used and the fonts chosen. Most business book covers are simple with only text. Sometimes, you'll see an image or author photograph that provides additional clues to the promise. Again, this is all marketing, but if executed properly, you should know what you are getting yourself into.

Next, quickly scan the Table of Contents. The authors provide the outline of the book in a couple of pages. You can see, in bullet-point form, the topics and arguments the authors intend to make. The order and length of the arguments is clearly displayed. Most business books are made up a three to five major sections, each containing a number of chapters. Chapters are always titled and often subtitled to provide additional context. Some authors go even further and telegraph the contents of each chapter. You might be surprised how often a scan of the Table of Contents will rule out a book and send you onto the next.

All books that are worth your time deliver a clear promise.

The introduction is THE most important part of any book. Seriously. I am always amazed by the number of people who tell me they skip the introduction and jump right to Chapter One. You may have gotten accustomed to skipping the introductions to Penguin Classics at university, but in business books, introductions are something different. You can immediately sense the tone and pace the author is going to use. Most use a story to illustrate the difficulty or challenge the book is going to tackle. More importantly, the introduction should provide an explicit promise and the path by which it will be delivered. If you can't make it through the introduction, and if it doesn't leave you intrigued, chances are the book isn't going to turn you on either.

In the Introduction to *The 100 Best*, we said:

“The endless stream of new books requires a filter to help discern the good and the better from the absolute best. The solution to that problem is this book, The 100 Best Business Books of All Time.”

If you were standing in the middle of your Barnes & Noble business section reading this and didn't think you needed help finding good books, we made it very easy for you to discern that this was not the book for you.

Let's look at a few other introductory promises from some very good business books:

From *The Art of Woo* by G. Richard Shell & Mario Moussa:

“Our attention in this book is squarely on the problems you face when you must persuade others who are, at least nominally, on your team.”

(If you were looking for car salesperson skills, perhaps another book would be more up your alley.)

From *The Halo Effect* by Phil Rosenweig:

“Think of it as a guide for the reflective manager, a way to separate the nuggets from the nonsense ... The central idea in this book is that our thinking about business is shaped by a number of delusions ... The ones that distort our understanding of company performance, that make it difficult to know why one company succeeds and another fails.”

(If you are in the market for a “how to” guide to business success, Rosenweig is telling you to look elsewhere because he intends to puncture our false hopes that there is just such a guide.)

Read the whole introduction—generally only around ten pages—and once you combine that with the cover and content elements, you can determine if this is the right book for your problem. If the promise is unclear, or if there is a conflict between cover and copy, move on. If no promise can be found, run as fast as you can the other way, because murky intentions lead to murky execution.

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One last note: There are many elements of a book’s packaging that are not worth spending time on. The marketing copy on the inside flap is always well-written and persuasive, but don’t think it substitutes for hearing what the author has to say in the introduction. Forewords are usually just friends or acquaintances of the author saying nice things about the author or idea. And the endorsements on the interior or exterior of the book offer the same biased references as forewords, doing little to help you triangulate the promise and path.

Starting at the End

A couple years ago, Les Tuerk—the co-founder of speaker’s bureau, BrightSight Group—told me that he started every book at the end. Not at the last chapter or couple of pages, but in the index. Les said that all the key concepts included in the book were easily recognizable, from companies mentioned and famous people cited, to pre-existing concepts specifically called out. And the citations show you exactly where they can be found.

That insight really struck me as novel. And, as I began to apply that advice myself, I found the chances are good that, if there is some version of the problem you are wrestling with described in the index, you are holding the right book in your hands.

Chapter summaries have a similar and equally valuable potential to show you where the meat of the material lies within the book. With the exception of CEO biographies and Malcolm Gladwell narratives, business books are not meant to be read from cover to cover. Skimming is a perfectly acceptable method of reading this genre and chapter summaries can make the process go even faster. More and more books are including short, bulleted lists at the end of every chapter to improve memory retention, but these also act as a substitute for intensive reading. Most people argue that they don’t have time to read business books, so don’t think of it as cheating, but instead as the time-saver that it is.

Whether you start at the end of a chapter or the end of the book, you will still need to read the book. And the good news is that you will want to once you’ve perused these fertile areas and found that this really IS the book for you.

It Is Not About You

Congratulations! You are done with the tough part of sorting through the pile of recommended reading you gathered from various sources. If you have done it right, you may have spent ten to fifteen minutes looking through those recommended titles to find the book that is best for you.

Now, while you may think this is finally the moment when you can settle into your comfy chair at home and soak up the solution to your problem, I want you to stop and do something a little counterintuitive: I want you to think about someone else *while* you're reading.

One of the best ways to improve retention of the material you are about to read is to imagine yourself having to tell someone else about it. That act of imagining yourself as teacher completely changes the way you read. As you turn the pages, you start to anticipate what would be most interesting and applicable to your "class." You begin to organize the structure by which you are going to share this new information. The logical result of this strategy is to record memorable and valuable highlights.

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Leave Your Mark

Recording what it is you learned from reading a book should happen both inside and outside that book.

First of all, get over any fear you have of writing in a book. Business books are meant to be interacted with. Take a pen and leave notes in the margins. Get out that pink highlighter you used in college and mark up passages that strike you. The guys at Brand Autopsy used to keep a Dog-Ear Score for the number of pages folded over by the time they reached the end. Tim Sanders, in his book *Love Is the Killer App*, suggested that important learning points be written on the first blank page in the front of the book and great quotes for future presentations be recorded on the inside back cover. Personally I became a fan of 3-M Post-It Flags in writing *The 100 Best* for quickly marking pages that I needed to return to later.

Now you need to share what you have learned with the world. It doesn't matter how. Pick a form and a medium and go with it. Steve Cunningham at readitfor.me decided videos were the best way to share his passion for business books. Chris Yeh builds book outlines on the aptly titled wiki, bookoutlines. Sean wrote short reviews and provided mind maps drawn on brown paper bags at stickybusinessbooks.com. John Moore uses SlideShare and creates quick presentations with the “money quotes.”

Just write a review—100 characters or 1000 words—and give it to someone to read. You get the idea.

Leaving marks in the book and leaving your own mark about what you learned will help you solve your problem and, in tandem, help others solve theirs.

Choose Your Own Path

Many people take a lot of pride in being able to speed-read. Others flaunt it when they read a book cover to cover in 1 day. And many books get recommended with the following sentiment: you won't be able to put it down!

But that's not the way to read a business book. Instead, set at least fifteen minutes aside to read and don't spend much longer than 45 minutes. Too short a time and you can't get your brain calmed down enough to pay attention to what you are reading. Too long and you'll exceed your cranial buffer and start to forget important pieces. One of the common excuses executives give for not reading more business books (which are the most economical way to get new ideas) is not having enough time. Reading for less than an hour at a time means you can move through a chapter in one or two sittings, and an entire book in about a week's time. Just think of the inspiration and information you can gather reading 52 books a year.

If the book isn't working for you, stop reading it and choose another. It doesn't matter if you are 20 pages or 200 pages in. Ignore the \$20 and couple hours you've invested and move on. And don't bother to fool yourself into thinking you will return to the book at some later date. There will always be another book on the same subject worth more in its unexpectedness and execution. Always remember that if you took the time and care to choose the right book to solve your problem, the reading should be enjoyable too.

Business books are meant to be interacted with.

Connect the Dots

Remember those summer book reading challenges staged by your elementary teachers? Those posters on your classroom wall on which you got a star sticker for every book you completed. Since the third grade, you have been told you should read more. It's still great advice. As working adults, one reason you should read more business books is so you understand more about business books.

Books are about context, the greater meaning. Being able to connect multiple books together improves our ability to compare and contrast approaches and philosophies.

The biggest risk in this ocean of workplace self-help is choosing a course of action that doesn't work for you. You can't know if you are headed in the right direction unless you have a key to the map and know what else is out there.

Professor Albert Madansky at the University of Chicago says, "You can only truly comprehend and evaluate a business book after you have read many of them. Fortunately, as you become better at reading them, you also become better at selecting them."

Again, we return to the importance of selection in the process of reading.

“You can only truly comprehend and evaluate a business book after you have read many of them.”

—ALBERT MADANSKY

You Only Need One Idea

I've been a passionate advocate of business books for years, way before I started working for a business book retailer. And here I've argued that business books offer the solutions to your business problems. But now, I want to lower your expectations as to what business books can deliver. Even with all the precautions that we have discussed here to help you choose the right book for you, you are still going to read books that don't deliver on their promise, or offer prescriptions similar to numerous other books. You are going to spend some money and time that you will not be rewarded for. You are going to read deeper into some books than you should. There is nothing you can do about it.

So let's set the goal as something very modest: **One good idea. That's all you need.**

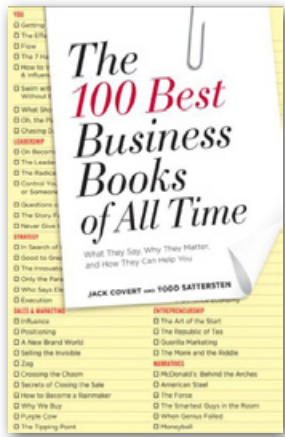
Let's do the math to prove it. The book is around \$25 and the time you spent reading it is worth \$400, so let's round it up to \$500. I can guarantee that you will find at least one idea in each book you carefully choose and sit down to read that can deliver \$500 worth of benefits.

Let's set the goal as something very modest:
One good idea. That's all you need.

So, let's summarize how to read a business book:

- Spend more time choosing books to avoid reading the wrong books.
- Search for the promise the author makes.
- The end can be a great place to start.
- Read as much for others as yourself.
- More books read means more understanding gained.
- You only need one good idea.

I hope that helps you set your expectations right from the start and spend more time reading great books. 📖



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Sattersten is the co-author of *The 100 Best Business Books of All Time* (Portfolio 2009), and just published a new eBook titled [Fixed to Flexible: Four Simple Lessons About Cost, Price, Margin and The Options Available to The 21st Century Business](#). Todd writes regularly about business and books at [toddsattersten.com](#). You can find him tweeting at [@toddsattersten](#).

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