
You Can Read

#95BOOKS

This Year

7 ways to win at the #95books challenge

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What Is #95BOOKS?

The #95books reading challenge is simple: commit to reading 95 books over 12 months.

*You can **start anytime** (although most people start January 1, as a New Year's resolution) and you can post about your reading using **the hashtag #95books**.*

How did it begin?

On Dec. 26, 2008, Karl Rove published an article titled “Bush is a Book Lover” in *The Wall Street Journal*. Furious on a good day, I read this and became enraged — at myself. I was sure Bush was out-reading me. Out-reading a writer working on a PhD in literature!

What was my excuse? No matter what you think about Bush, one thing cannot be disputed: he was America's president, and more busy than me.

As 2009 began, I enlisted my friend Ryan Fitzpatrick in a resolve to read 95 books that year. Like Rove and Bush, we'd make it a competition (that's where we ended the Rove and Bush emulation, I promise ...) and the winner would buy the loser sushi.

Shockingly, I read 119 books that year. Ryan read 110. We continued the competition every year. Here are my reading totals:

2009: 119 books

2010: 128

2011: 140

2012: 112

2013: 95
2014: 109
2015: 95
2016: 78
2017: 95

(I failed in 2016 because I was struggling with a family emergency, had a new baby in the house, and a pregnant wife/second baby on top of it all. My free time suddenly disintegrated. Even so, I read 78 books that year.)

In 2018, I will plan to read #95books again. **So can you.** This #95books handbook will give you 7 tips to help you meet your goal. But first, let's talk about *why* you should read #95books this year.

Why Read #95books?

The best reason to read more is for the sheer joy of reading itself. That said, there are a host of practical advantages to reading more.

If you are a writer, like me, or aspire to become a writer, then you need to read. You need to read *a lot*. Reading isn't a distraction: it's fundamental to your creativity and productivity. Even though reading takes time, I accomplish *more* when I read more.

If you're not a writer, reading remains fundamental to your success. Put aside the value of the information you can gain through reading, which is not unimportant, but still put it aside for the moment. What you read matters somewhat, but even more important than *what* you read is the *act* of reading. Reading calms the body and trains the mind to focus, process, and analyze. No matter *what* you read, reading more will improve every area of your life.

But why 95? Seems excessive, doesn't it?

Basically, it *is* excessive. It's an excessive, lofty, but achievable goal. I'm a busy husband and father with two jobs, and I read 95 books every year (except that one year my two babies basically tore them out of my hands).

Do I sacrifice other things to accomplish this? Sure. I barely watch any television — I don't have any channels and I don't have Netflix. You can still watch television if you want, although maybe not as much. You're going to have to prioritize reading over other things. That's the point of this, right? You are deciding to set a reading goal in order to prioritize reading more highly in your life. Be honest with yourself. Wouldn't you be better off reading more and doing less of other things?

The point is, if you want to read more, why not start with a lofty, seemingly ridiculous goal? It won't seem so ridiculous when you hit it, and if you fail then you will still achieve your root goal of reading much, much more than you have in the past.

Just last week, somebody reached out to me on social media to say that she “only” read 70 books this year. 70 books is more than most people read in their whole lives! She had the right attitude, though — she wasn't bummed about it, she was excited, because it was more than she ever imagined she could read in a single year.

95 is a number, so the goal is quantifiable. You read all the books in a year-long period, so there is a definite start/end and you know clearly whether you succeed or fail. It's attainable, but ambitious, so motivating. Other people are doing it, so you can feel bolstered by that, and accountable to your social circle. Just pop onto Twitter or Facebook and search for the #95books hashtag and you've found some like minds.

Think of reading #95books like an intellectual marathon: pretty much everyone *could* do it, but it is hard, and so almost nobody *does*. **You can read #95books this year, and you should.**

What Constitutes a Book?

People in this challenge always get hung up on what constitutes a book. This is a flexible thing that you'll have to make a personal choice about, especially as digital media evolves. Ryan and I decided to go with the UNESCO definition of a book, which is anything over 48 pages in length.

So, I count a 50-page poetry collection as one book, and an 800-page novel as one book. Sometimes I have to make a call. I have a hardcover collection of Cormac McCarthy's three *Border Trilogy* books — if I read it this year, I'll count it as three books, because originally this was published as three separate books.

I don't count children's picture books, like *Green Eggs and Ham*, although technically I could. I do count graphic novels that contain no words. There's really no logic to counting the graphic novel but not *Green Eggs and Ham* — except that my daughter makes me read *Green Eggs and Ham* roughly 95 times every month, and this is supposed to be a challenge.

I consider a book to be a conceptual unit, not a technological unit. So, if I read the *Humument* app, an ebook-like multimedia app that adapts [a printed art book by Tom Phillips](#), I'll count it as one book. You might count various other things as books.

When in doubt, you could do worse than default to the actual UNESCO definition of a book (48 pages), but it's up to you. Do what feels right in terms of counting. Just do it 95 times!

7 Simple Tips to Succeed

In nearly a decade of doing this challenge, I've found a few simple tips have helped me succeed where so many failed. Here are 7 simple ways to make your #95books reading challenge a success.

TIP #1: START YOUR LIST

If you're the kind of person that's still reading this, then you probably read more than you think. Start a numbered list. Add all the books you already read this year, or since whenever you decided on as your start date.

I keep my list on iCloud in my Notes app, so that it syncs and is easily accessible. When I finish a book, I grab the closest device and add it to my list. You can keep your list in any format you want, but this is how I keep mine:

#. Title of Book (Authors)

E.g.:

1. [The Politics of Knives \(Jonathan Ball\)](#)
2. [Fake Math \(Ryan Fitzpatrick\)](#)
3. [The Castle \(Franz Kafka, trans. Mark Harman\)](#)
4. [Will I See? \(David Alexander Robertson, G.M.B. Chomichuk, Iskwé, & Erin Leslie\)](#)

You'll be surprised how often you add things to the list. You'll see that you're making regular progress. It'll feel good.

If you need motivation, add a line at the top of the list that summarizes why you want to read more books. Here's mine:

I'm the #95books guy, so I had better read 95 books this year!!!

You might have something more like these:

I want to become an expert on science fiction.

I need to relax before bed so I can sleep better.

I miss school.

Personally, I keep a second copy of my list on [Goodreads](#). (Click this link and “friend” me up!) Goodreads offers an option where you can set a “reading challenge” for the year, so I set 95 as my target. As I complete and log my reading, Goodreads tells me where I am at with my goal.

(If you do this, and when you finish books they don’t show up in your “challenge” list, then you have to double-check that the system is including the date you read the book, or it won’t know to include it in this year’s count.)

Goodreads supposedly has a number of ancillary options that make this reading challenge function exciting and cool, but I don’t know about them and just use it as a public list. I give every book I finish reading a 5-star rating so that my writer friends don’t know how much I really liked or disliked their books!

TIP #2: DON’T DO TOO MUCH MATH

Avoid the temptation to do a ton of math to see if you are where you think you should be, and when you should be where in your reading, and how far on or off track you feel, etc. It sounds counter-intuitive, right? You should be keeping tabs to see if you need to pick up the pace, shouldn’t you? Not really. It’s a trap.

The math is intimidating. And it’s wrong. You have to estimate an average book length, and the time you think it should take to read an average book ... All of your estimates will be wrong. The books are different lengths, and you’ll read them at different speeds. Forget about it. It’s not important. It’s just a distraction, and it will sap your strength.

Besides, it all sounds crazy. 95 books! That’s almost 100! (Yes, it’s specifically NOT 100.) Who could read that many books in a year? Well, *you can* ... but the more you think about it the less you will *believe* that you can. Best not to think about it, and just read.

At the same time, it’s worth doing a little bit of math — if you read 16 books every two months, you’ll make 96 books in a year, one over your goal. So check to see how you’re doing every month. Have you read eight books in the last month? More? Less? Try to keep on pace without worrying too much if you’re a little behind.

If you are *really* lagging behind, read some shorter books (maybe some poetry collections or graphic novels) to catch up. That's really all the math you need to do: counting pages now and again to make sure you read a few shorter books.

TIP #3: CARRY YOUR BOOK

The simplest, most effective method to read more is to carry a book with you. It sounds stupid and obvious. But let me ask you this: *Do you have a book with you right now? Is it in your hand?* **Carry your book in your hand.**

If you want to put it down, put it down in front of you. If it's in your bag, you won't read it. If it's in another room, you won't read it.

You might need to take a break sometimes — you can really annoy some people/spouses if you take this too far — but the point is that you need to become comfortable dipping into the book now and again, to read a paragraph or a page.

I do almost all of my reading on the bus and whenever I have to wait for something. Instead of doing nothing, or checking my phone, I read. It's easy — because I have a book in my hand.

If you think you're not the kind of person that can just dip into a book ... well, carry your book in your hand, and become that kind of person. I don't know what else to say to that specious argument. People use dispositional excuses when they don't desire to change, and you are now a person engaged in a challenge to change, so ... carry your book in your hand.

TIP #4: READ WHATEVER YOU WANT

When I see people fail at this, often they fail because they make the #95books challenge part of a self-improvement plan that includes reading certain types of books. They plan their reading in some way that they think is going to help them in the challenge and in their lives.

They should just read whatever they want. You can be strategic — as long as you are still doing whatever you want. I write a poetry column every month, where I review four books. So I have a deadline — I have to read at least four

books each month (at minimum, then, 48 books a year) and poetry books are short.

But I won't let my editor assign me books. He can suggest them, but he doesn't dictate them. I read the books I want. And I often stop reading books I don't love.

A lot of people complain that they *have* to read certain books. I hear this complaint a lot from graduate students. If you are reading books you *have* to read, instead of books you *want* to read, then guess what? You need to make serious life changes. You need to fundamentally rethink *how* you are proceeding in the world.

During my degree, I often signed up for classes that I dropped once I saw the booklist. I quickly learned to get ahold of the reading list before deciding to join a class. **Life's too short to read books you don't love.**

TIP #5: DON'T BE AFRAID TO STOP READING

I made this mistake the first year I did this. I felt that if I had read so far into a book, and it didn't really grab me, I had to finish it in order to add it to my list. It's a trap! You'll avoid reading the book, which will slow you down in a best-case scenario, and might fully stall you. It'll certainly stress you out.

You didn't decide to read 95 books so you could spend more time reading books you don't love, that aren't interesting to you, and don't hold value in your life. So stop. Put the book down. Back away from the book.

Your time spent with that book is a sunk cost. You can't get that time back. If you abandon it (literally — leave it on a park bench for someone else to pick up and enjoy, get it far away from you!) then you will re-energize yourself. Otherwise, you'll either trudge through it slowly, or keep putting it aside and reading something else instead.

Either you'll still never finish the book (but you'll feel bad because it sits there, accusing you) or you'll waste your time finishing it. You would get more reading done, and *better* reading done, if you threw that boring book away and found yourself a more exciting book.

I still read books I dislike — if I dislike them in some sort of active way, that means I'm still engaged in them, and find wrestling with them productive somehow. But I don't finish a lot of books — sometimes I'll get near the end, and then quit. I don't get to add it to my list, but so what? I'm still reading 95 books per year, easy, *because I don't feel like reading is a chore.*

Along different lines, don't be afraid to read part of a book. Not many academic books show up in my lists, because with many of them I just read a few chapters or the introduction — whatever I really want to read, or have determined will be most useful. I don't stress out and force myself to finish reading them just to add them to the list.

The list doesn't reflect all of my reading. It won't reflect yours. Make your peace with that now before you drive yourself to drink and turn this #95books thing into a part-time job you start to loathe.

TIP #6: READ ONE BOOK AT A TIME

If you're a reader, you probably dip into multiple books. You read one for a while, then you skip out to another. Stop. *Stay focused on a single book.*

Not only will you deepen your relationship with that book, by focusing on it, but you'll read it more quickly, and you'll see your count going up. Which will energize you to keep going.

If you skip around, you'll be making progress — but you won't see your progress. So you won't make as much progress, because instead of abandoning a book (you're abandoning books now, remember?) you'll just set it aside for a while. It's another trap!

If you don't want to read the book you're reading anymore, then quit it forever. Otherwise, take it to the finish line, then move on.

I make two exceptions to this rule. One, if I have to finish reading a book on deadline for some reason, it cuts ahead of the book I'd rather read. Two, I keep a second (e)book on my iPhone. A second book on some mobile device is great, because you'll find yourself in situations where you don't want to read (or just aren't carrying) your paper book, but you could (and should) read from your phone for a bit.

I read from my phone a lot when I have to stand on the bus, because I only need one hand to do it easily and comfortably. This also has the added benefit of keeping me off social media, since I get the dopamine hit of looking at my phone linked to reading books instead.

TIP #7: REMEMBER THE HASHTAG

Reading is a solitary act — I like to call books “anti-social media.” So don’t forget that you’re not alone in this. *Everyone else* who’s doing the *same* challenge is only a hashtag away. Search #95books and you’ll find us.

I see people on Twitter more than Facebook with this, but there are people on both — and on GoodReads, and Instagram, and other places I’m sure. Here’s where I am at:

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/jonathanballcom>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/jonathanballcom/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/jonathanballcom/>

Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/583427.Jonathan_Ball

I’m always at www.jonathanball.com as well ...
and don’t forget about the www.95books.com
page, where I post a book review every week.

Have a great time reading your #95books!!!