

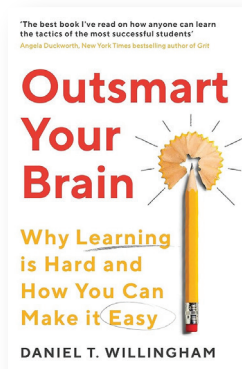


## OUTSMART YOUR BRAIN

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## THE BOOK

**Outsmart Your Brain: Why Learning is Hard and How You Can Make It Easy**

By Daniel Willingham



## INTRODUCTION

Wish you had access to clear and concise guidelines for how to learn and study better? Pick up a copy of Professor Dan Willingham's *Outsmart Your Brain*.

This book provides concrete and accessible advice that is straightforward to put into practice. Any student who is motivated to get excellent results or finds they struggle to study independently will find the tips helpful and effective as they figure out how to side-step the 'tricks' our brains use that make learning feel exhausting.

While *Outsmart Your Brain* is mostly focused on university students and their instructors, the guidance is still useful for anyone who wants to get better at absorbing information so they can do better in tests, exams and life.



## 5 BEST QUOTES

"When you're trying to learn, your brain tells you to do the mental equivalent of push-ups on your knees. Your brain encourages you to do things that feel easy and feel like they are leading to success. That was why my students, left to their own devices, drifted toward the same ineffective study strategies. Outsmarting your brain means doing the mental exercise that feels harder but is going to bring the most benefit in the long run."

"When you ask a question, you're not just helping yourself. Questions provide feedback to the instructor."

"An impulse is a plan your brain creates that meets an immediate desire but has bad consequences in the long run."

"You don't procrastinate doing routine actions because there's no act of choosing."

"Some anxiety is not just normal, it's helpful. Anxiety prepares you for action by mobilizing your body to either flee or fight. What's more, it sometimes informs you...Anxiety tells you that there's a problem so you can scan the environment to learn more about it."



## 8 BIG IDEAS

## 1. LEARNING IS A SKILL

It may sound ironic, but to get the most out of any form of education, you need to learn how to learn.

Some educational institutions don't provide students with enough teaching about learning itself. In many ways, they are expected to understand all the difficult facets of learning and undertake them on their own. There are actually a lot of skills involved in learning efficiently. Some may come more naturally, but others may take time. However, students who put in a little extra effort will reap the rewards.

## 2. HOW TO TAKE LECTURE NOTES

Note taking is another skill to master. Willingham suggests five mental processes students need to work through to take effective notes:

1. Evaluate the content for importance so you can decide what to include and what to omit.
2. Decide how to paraphrase the ideas in the lecture.
3. Physically write or type your notes.
4. Shift your gaze between your notebook or laptop and the instructor.
5. Coordinate all the processes listed above and shift your attention among them. In other words, decide when to do each of these mental processes and for how long during a lesson.

When taking notes, the first thing to do is to be ready when the class starts so you don't lose time to unnecessary tasks.

Think about the content of the lecture. If it is heavy on detail, take lots of notes. If it is more abstract, focus more of your time on understanding what is being said. Willingham's advice is to avoid using a laptop. The temptation of the internet can be great, so write notes out longhand and type them up later. This can help 'upload' them to your brain as well as your computer.

Other recommendations include:

- Review your notes sooner rather than later. How many times have you gone over your work only to wonder, "What on earth did I mean by that?"
- Work out a personal shorthand system to make note-taking faster.

## 3. HOW TO READ DIFFICULT BOOKS

Why is reading textbooks so hard? Willingham shares that it's because your brain initially wants to read it for pleasure, the way you would read a novel. However, there are strategies to help students get through complex texts.

Firstly, students can try asking questions of the text as they go, which will help to think more deeply and engage better with the book.

Next, avoid highlighting and take notes while reading instead. This gives your brain a reason to absorb the information.



## 8 BIG IDEAS

#### 4. HOW TO STUDY FOR EXAMS

Willingham says that the most commonly used memorisation strategies are the least effective. This includes:

- Repeating information
- Reading over notes
- Rereading the textbook
- Highlighting notes
- Summarising
- Taking a practice test

Instead, he says students should start with a complete study guide so they won't have any surprises during the exam. He says to avoid any materials created by others that may be inaccurate or outdated and instead ask and answer meaningful questions as a way to help memories stick.

Willingham is also a big advocate of study groups, which he says are useful to stay motivated.

#### 5. HOW TO TAKE TESTS

Willingham has a few major tips for successfully taking tests:

- Devote time to reading and understanding questions before attempting to answer them.
- Don't believe any of the tricks to 'beating' multiple choice answers as there isn't a formula to follow.
- If you struggle to recall a fact, think about the place you were when you studied it.
- Don't give up. Keep trying. Often when you come back to a question you had been struggling with, the answer will come to you.
- Ask for clarification but not help.
- For essays, know how you will end before you begin.

#### 6. HOW TO PLAN YOUR WORK

It is very easy to underestimate the time it will take to complete a task. Willingham brings up construction sites that always run over time and budget. This isn't because their planning skills are poor but because something always goes wrong.

Willingham says getting enough sleep is the first step in successfully planning your work. If you are overtired, plans will go out the window.

He then recommends plan work be planned by allotted hours, not by assignment. That way, you are always doing work at the same time, regardless of what is due, and you are less likely to skip getting work done and end up behind. Think of study as a job and plan it out accordingly.

Students should also set a to-do list for each work session to keep focused and on track.

**8 BIG IDEAS****7. HOW TO DEFEAT PROCRASTINATION AND STAY FOCUSED**

Procrastination is the enemy of productivity.

Willingham suggests establishing safeguards rather than relying on willpower alone to prevent procrastination.

For instance, when you write a schedule, don't create study blocks that are too long for any human to maintain concentration. Willingham suggests working times to be between 20 minutes and one hour long and no longer. Give yourself breaks and save rewards such as checking your device for these times.

Another outstanding piece of advice is, "Just get started." Once you start your study session, you will usually find it is not as tedious as you were expecting.

Finally, create accountability. Tell others what you are up to and ask them to check in so you stay motivated to get your work done.

**8. OUTSMART YOUR CONFIDENCE**

Intelligence is never set in stone.

Many people believe they just aren't smart or they aren't good at taking tests.

Willingham says to reshape the way you perceive yourself as a learner. To start with, he reminds students that learning is something you do, not something you are.

He also encourages students to seek the company of other learners for help and inspiration, but not to compare yourself to them.

As a student and in most areas in life, you only need to compare yourself to your own past self. No one else matters.

**3 ACTION STEPS****1. CHANGE YOUR APPROACH TO LEARNING**

First, understand that it takes work to learn effectively. Think of it as learning to learn.

Your brain will tell you to do things the easy way, but giving in to this temptation will result in less efficient and successful learning.

**2. CHOOSE THE CHAPTERS IN THE BOOK THAT ARE MOST RELEVANT TO YOU**

Depending on your current success in learning, you may want to focus on a select few chapters in *Outsmart Your Brain*, or you might choose to work through them all.

Either way, read through and assess what it is that you need to change to improve your learning skills.

**3. REMEMBER THAT INTEREST DOESN'T HAVE TO COME FIRST**

You don't have to start out interested in a topic to learn more about it.

Follow the strategies in *Outsmart Your Brain*, and learning will come more easily. As a result, subjects will start to feel more compelling.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

Learning is a skill and must be developed and nurtured in the same way as any other ability.

The key takeaway of *Outsmart Your Brain* is that while learning may be difficult, it will become easier if you follow the right strategies and keep at it.



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