Read ‘Em & Reap

6 Science-Backed Ways Reading Puts You on the Road to Achieving More and Living Longer

Tom Collins

Your Brain on Books! And Your Body, Too!

“This book will help you to re-frame the time you spend reading. Read ‘Em and Reap [shows] you not only why reading helps you live longer, but what to read, and how to read so you can benefit from the longevity effect regular reading delivers.”

– Pamela Wilson, author of Master Content Marketing and Master Content Strategy

“Read ‘Em & Reap provides an important reminder of the many benefits of reading. Part of its value comes from being a short, easy to read treatment, yet I found myself reacting to several research revelations with variations of, ‘Cool! I didn’t know this …’ This book will inspire others, as it has me, to read more.”

– David Gower, Founder, New Clean Earth, LLC and Youbicwitus™

“Whether you read for work or for fun, this powerful little book will affirm the benefits … of both! Because of Read ‘Em & Reap, I’m reading more these days and feeling less guilty about reading for leisure/escape. How’s that for impact?!?”

– Sybil Stershic, author of Taking Care of the People Who Matter Most and Share of Heart, Share of Mind

“There is so much in the book to commend it, reminders for all the reasons to read, leading to Tom’s call to ‘Take Action’ -- which may lead you to friends old and new, vibrant conversations, and as in my case, feeling compelled to write!”

– Bruce Peters, entrepreneurial guide and founder of Beyond Teal: Transform Life at Work™

From Tom Collins: Read ‘Em & Reap grew from research on changes in our learning habits, increasing longevity, emerging science of lifelong brain plasticity, and realities of multi-generational work/life relationships – all shaping my work as “Chief Guide Dog” at Old Dog Learning. Reading dominated my 25-year legal career in research, writing, and oral argument. It remained central to staying current in my subsequent entrepreneurial roles in business consulting, book publishing, and co-founding a pet industry venture that ended in a Fortune 500 acquisition. It continues as a key to adding more “dots” I can connect with my experience when helping individuals and teams who feel stuck learn what they need to find their path forward via our Professional Learning Partnerships.
Early praise for Read ‘Em & Reap:

“Whether you read for work or for fun, this powerful little book will affirm the benefits ... of both! Because of Read ‘Em & Reap, I’m reading more these days and feeling less guilty about reading for leisure/escape. How’s that for impact?!”

– Sybil Stershic, author of Taking Care of the People Who Matter Most and Share of Heart, Share of Mind

“Spectacular news! This book will help you to re-frame the time you spend reading ... strategically to help keep you in tip-top cognitive shape. Read ‘Em and Reap will show you not only why reading helps you live longer, but what to read, and how to read so you can benefit from the longevity effect regular reading delivers.”

– Pamela Wilson, author of Master Content Marketing and Master Content Strategy

“Read ‘Em & Reap: impactful, empirical, and inspirational are just three adjectives I’d use to describe Tom Collins’ new book. Tom has achieved a delicate balance of “educating with elegance,” and I highly recommend this book ... it might wean you off the iPad, after all.”

– James Sugarman, co-founder, 4GenNow intergenerational entrepreneurship organization
“Brilliant! The whole concept of *Read ‘Em & Reap* is so needed. I truly appreciate the intelligent nudge it’s given me to make more time to read!”

– Mia Voss - *Mia On The Go*, Storyteller
Luxury Travel & Lifestyle Writer
Brand Promoter & Speaker

“*Read ‘Em & Reap* is an important reminder of the many benefits of reading, as well a helpful introduction to the love of reading for those who haven’t yet engaged with books. Part of its value comes from being a short, easy to read treatment, yet I found myself reacting to several research revelations with variations of, ‘Cool! I didn’t know this ...’

“This book will inspire others, as it has me, to read more and would make a wonderful introductory book for those new to book clubs, starting high school or college, embarking on career learning programs, etc. With all the things people do to improve and extend their lives, it’s great that reading is one and, hey, it might even motivate you to a better diet and more exercise!”

– David Gower, Founder, New Clean Earth, LLC and Youbicwitus™
“It’s no surprise to me that Tom Collins has written *Read ‘Em & Reap*. From our many conversations over the years, he’s simply the right person at the right time. ... There is so much in the book to commend it, reminders for all the reasons to read, leading to Tom’s call to ‘Take Action’ – which may lead you to friends old and new, vibrant conversations, and as in my case, feeling compelled to write!”

– Bruce Peters, entrepreneurial guide and founder of Beyond Teal: Transform Life at Work™

“Bravo! *Read ‘Em & Reap* is a winner! I’ll be sharing it.”

– Shawna Schuh - *Ignite* executive coaching, speaker, and author of *51 Ways to Pick Up Your Get-Up-And-Go*
Read ’Em & Reap

6 Science-Backed Ways Reading Puts You on the Road to Achieving More and Living Longer

Tom Collins

WME Books
imprint of
Old Dog Digital, LLC
Binghamton, NY, USA
For Yvonne, whose love, support, and inspiration make everything both possible and worth it.
Gratitudes

“I just want to thank everybody who made this day necessary.”

— Yogi Berra

As many have lamented, it’s not possible to thank everybody who deserves my gratitude, not even if I try to focus only on those who influenced this book. I do recognize the irony that my own thesis on the impact of reading means I owe thanks to a significant swath of humanity over the last 6,000 years or so.

Apologies to all those I’m inevitably omitting. For those still living, let’s (re)connect and I can thank you in person or online. I’ll set up a page on my blog for you to leave a comment and we can go from there.

Here, I’ll start with thanks to my dear friend and mentor, Bruce Peters, whose deeply satisfying conversations and probing questions over many years helped make the writing of this book necessary. He knows what we mean by necessary! And to Lee Thayer, who added that nuance to our lexicon.

To Pamela Wilson for all she’s taught me about design and business over the years; for the link share on Facebook that turned this idea into a project; for
her feedback that forced me to rethink and rewrite what are now Chapters 7-9; and for her Foreword.

To Sybil Stershic, James Sugarman, David Gower, Mia Voss, Dino Dogan, Brenda Lidestri, and Shawna Schuh, for reading and critiquing early drafts. Their contributions to making this book more readable and more useful are immense. All it’s remaining faults are mine alone. My only excuse is knowing that at some point you have to stop and “let the baby be born” and this was my judgment.

To the authors of all the books I’ve read, especially those cited directly in this one. I’ll simply call out Katie Myers, Kimberly Alexander, Anastasia Button, Erika Armstrong, and Eric Meade as authors I got to meet personally while we lived in Colorado, whose vibrant spirits and the books they published helped inspire me to get this one done!

I’ll amend the thanks to the authors of all the books I’ve read or cited. No, to the authors of all the books. Period. To understand why, skip to the Conclusion and find the quote I shared from Galileo. Then turn that page to my Marvel-esque “extra” scene.

To my family and the blended one I now share with Yvonne. You’ll see more in the Introduction how my Mom drove my earliest reading. And my Dad instilled my DIY-er mentality that pretty much any problem is “figure-out-able” with the right manual.

To my two kids, Brendan and Elizabeth, whose insatiable curiosity kept me on my toes and made life-long learning necessary for me, too.
And to Yvonne’s three, Chloe, Maggie, and Don, who accepted me into their lives and inspired me with their varied approaches, stimulating talks, and occasionally challenges to my own thinking – always a valuable gift.

To Yvonne . . . well, she’s here by my side and there aren’t enough trees left to thank her properly in print, so I’ll just have to try my best to show her.
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Foreword

Want to live longer?

“Alternate between an hour of aerobic exercise and an hour of strength training every day.”

“Sleep at least eight hours every night.”

“Eat eight portions of vegetables and five portions of fruit every day.” “Eat red meat.” “Follow a plant-based diet.”

Actually ... “Don’t eat at all – fast.”

When it comes to longevity advice, we have heard it all. Sometimes the same “live longer tips” we heard just last year are contradicted by this year’s newest study.

That’s why, when Tom Collins mentioned a habit I already cherish – reading – might actually help me live longer, I was delighted.

For those of us who already love to read, this is spectacular news. This book will help you to re-frame the time you spend reading not as passive downtime, but rather active “uptime” you’re using strategically to help keep you in tip-top cognitive shape.

If you’re someone who enjoys reading but lacks motivation to do it regularly, this book will light a
fire under you to schedule regular reading time and stick to it.

If you’ve ever wondered whether reading print or digital made a difference, you’ll find some answers in these pages. And if you’ve wondered whether your entertainment or sports magazine was going to help boost your brainpower, you’ll find that answer, too (but you may not like it!).

All in all, Read ‘Em and Reap will show you not only why reading helps you live longer, but what to read, and how to read so you can benefit from the longevity effect regular reading delivers.

Here’s to a long, healthy, word-filled future!

— Pamela Wilson

Founder, BIG Brand System
Nashville, TN | March, 2019
Preface: on Deep Reading (and “MWe”)  

“Deep reading ... is a process of inquiry built around the exploration of ‘challenging questions’ and ‘troublesome knowledge.’”  
— Patrick Sullivan  

“We are an inherently collaborative species ... collaboration is at the heart of what MWe can do ....”  
— Dr. Daniel J. Siegel  

You’ll find the term “deep reading” mentioned throughout this book. In fact, for you to enjoy many of the benefits of reading we’ll be exploring, the science suggests that deep reading is key.  

When I ran into the term in my research, I felt I understood it and you would, too. But then, readers of earlier drafts posed one of those “challenging questions” to me:  

What do we really mean by deep reading?
Deep reading as an interactive process

Turns out to be more complicated than I thought, as well as a controversial topic in academic and political circles. I’m not going to delve into the politics here and will touch on the academic disputes only to note two main approaches to reading that you might think of when you see the term deep reading.

One is labeled “close reading,” where the reader carefully examines a text to find its main points, themes, or ideas, and identify the arguments, evidence, or narrative that supports or conveys the meaning. This approach assumes there is a single, objectively discoverable meaning in the text itself, resulting in the one right answer that standardized testing depends on.

Critics decry this as an “answer-getting disposition,” where the reader is extracting a fixed meaning from the text.

Even critics of answer-getting agree that close reading is a useful part of a reader’s skillset. But they object to stopping there, to limiting the role of the reader to a passive recipient of meaning.

The second approach ascribes to readers a “problem-exploring disposition” and more fully captures what I mean using the term “deep reading.” This approach treats the reader as an active participant in constructing meaning.
from text. In *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*, the editors build on Louise Rosenblatt’s theory of reading as

“an event in the life of a reader, as a doing, a making, a combustion fed by the coming together of a particular personality and a particular text at a particular time.”

This “coming together” is unique to each reader and inherently differs over time or context. With a problem-exploring disposition, readers generate meanings from

“curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error, and ... a recognition that more than one solution can ‘work.’”

Marcel Proust helped us see how writer and reader work together through a text to construct meanings:

“Indeed, this is one of the great and wondrous characteristics of beautiful books ... for the author they may be called Conclusions, but for the reader, Provocations. We can feel that our wisdom begins where the author’s ends, and we want him to give us answers when all he can do is give us desires.

... [B]y a strange law ... we cannot receive truth from anyone else, ... we must create it ourselves.”

“... our wisdom begins where the author’s ends”
Note that this formulation of deep reading as active involvement by readers in creating meaning and producing knowledge applies to all types of writing:

• Hawking to Hemingway
• Aristotle to Asimov
• King (Carole) to King (Stephen) to King (Martin Luther)
• Shakespeare to Seuss

I purposely ended this list with Dr. Seuss. I want to presage my call later on, urging you to pass on both the love and the ability for future generations to engage in deep reading. You’ll learn why the “deep reading circuits” in our brains are not hard-wired at birth, but must be nurtured in our kids.

On that point, my research uncovered a helpful book on teaching deep reading, *What Readers Really Do: Teaching the Process of Meaning Making*. Not only is it filled with tips for bringing deep reading skills to students, but one chapter title nicely connects the how of deep reading to the writing process:

> How Readers Draft and Revise Their Way from Confusion to Clarity

We’ll return to this connection later. But consider this draft-revise approach to working with authors through the books you read. Can their imagined characters pose the “challenging questions” or their researched insights and arguments offer up the sort of “troublesome knowledge” that deep reading
addresses? Will drafting and revising your understandings from the text as you read connect your wisdom to the author’s? Will you construct new meanings together?

Will MWe?

The mind we share

The term “MWe” comes from Daniel Siegel’s *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*. His exploratory journey ranges across many scientific fields including neurobiology, anthropology, quantum physics, and complex systems theory. He carefully builds his case for concluding that our minds are more than enskulled brain activity, more than embodied nervous system impulses flowing within us.

Incorporating both these enskulled and embodied aspects, he proposes a broader working definition of mind as:

“an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information.”

Connecting his relational view of mind to deep reading (without using that term), Siegel explains that

“this view embraces the interactive ways in which both other people and the artifacts they create move the mind beyond the interior of the individual ... ‘into the material world and into the social world’ ...”
He also makes clear that these “artifacts” include books, repeatedly using phrases like “as I write and you read these words” to converse with his readers through his book.

This concept of a social or distributed mind and its connection to reading is not new to Siegel. Another place it appears that inspires my call for intergenerational reading is in Thirty Million Words: Building a Child’s Brain. In a chapter on neuroplasticity, the authors cite research showing the need for human interaction, not merely exposure through audio or video devices, in the acquisition of language.

“The brain may be brilliant, but ... it’s a social creature. ... It does not learn language passively, but only in an environment of social responsiveness and social interaction.”

Connecting this to reading and, indeed, to learning in general, they note:

“[C]hildren begin school by learning to read with the ultimate goal of reading to learn.”

Their practical advice on how parents and adults should engage in an interactive reading process they call “book sharing” is founded on science showing how children benefit if they

“take a more active role in telling the story, including asking questions
and talking about what they see, think, and feel.”

Deep reading from day one, eh? Another aspect of our relational mind.

To encapsulate his active and interactive relational mind, Siegel offers the pronoun \textit{MWe}. It’s a way to maintain as true the paradox of both our separate and our social selves.

“\textit{MWe} can be viewed as our integrated identity, the linkage of a differentiated \textit{me} with a differentiated \textit{we}, all in one integrated and integrating self.”

Pulling together these ideas about deep reading and its relationship to writing, I’ve come to think of books as social synapses. Within us, a synapse fires when the sending neuron builds enough electro-chemical “action potential” to transmit a signal across the space between it and the receiving cell. When a writer puts enough potential into the words on the page and readers bring their own active participation close enough, sparks of meanings can come alive between.

Energy and information flow, both within and between us.

Which prompted me to move my version of an “About the Author” section here. If \textit{mwe} are to construct meanings together, it may help to give you a glimpse of what’s gone into
forming the axons and dendrites on my side of the synapse.

**My side of MWe**

I think of reading as part of my compulsive “dot” collecting. I adapted that notion from a couple of ideas promoted by Steve Jobs.

In his famous 2005 commencement speech at Stanford, he touted the value of learning things that might not seem relevant to the students’ current work or planned careers. He used the example of a calligraphy course he took after dropping out of college and suggested without that earlier experience, the Mac would not have featured beautiful typography.

Jobs emphasized the importance of accumulating diverse experiences over your lifetime to draw upon when needed, saying,

“You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward.”

In *Organizing Genius*, Warren Bennis picked up on another Jobs quote about creative people simply having accumulated more experiences, which they can connect to synthesize new ideas. Applied to Alan Kay, the leader of the personal computer team at Xerox PARC, Bennis wrote:

“Exposed to art, music, and science from birth and a voracious and far-ranging *reader*, Kay had a vast number of experiential dots to connect.”
After 25 years practicing law, I built my first solo legal consulting practice around that theme and wrote about it in my inaugural blog post back in 2003. The tagline for that blog:

“Thinking about how legal knowledge workers collect, and then connect, the dots.”

My earlier experiences include Boy Scout leadership roles, high school team sports, car repair and maintenance, drum and bugle corps soloist, meat market clerk, swimming pool and backyard deck and patio construction, SLR photography and dark room work, youth soccer coaching, along with my more formal education through a B.A. in History, my J.D., and 31 credits toward a Masters in Informatics.

Just about every one of these jobs and roles involved reading.

When I was driving junkers that required serious maintenance work on most weekends, I kept the Chilton DIY manual for my current make and model in the trunk. When I was running pool installation crews, I quickly learned that every yard was a little different and kept the installation manual handy for rechecking how a certain step needed modification to fit the landscape. Music and marching showed me whole different languages and notation to learn and read.

This reading-biased approach to learning what I need to know to accomplish a task
has not changed much. Most products arrive these days with a single sheet of instructions, often less than helpful. I’ve learned to hunt down more detailed versions online and read (or watch the video) there. And if the job is more complex, download them, and print out the sections I need to assemble, adjust, or repair the item in question (including still screen shots from the videos, with my own notes from the voice over).

Thus, my bookshelves now include an ever growing collection of DIY manuals, Dummies-style books, and folders of printed downloads. Topics range from construction trades to web-design to business and marketing to human development and neuro-science. Glancing around, I rediscovered books on camping skills, SCUBA diving, youth soccer, furniture finishing, and ... well, you might understand why our kids groan each time we move!

You’ll see in several chapters how and why I’ve returned to reading fiction, as well. With all the benefits we’ll cover, I’m most happy that writing this book gave that old and wonderful habit back to me. My default daily reading pattern has become non-fiction books, blogs, newsletters in the morning, fiction books in the evening. More on that in Chapter 2.

That should give you some idea of who I am and how I came to write this book. I’ll be sharing other “experiential dots” I’ve gathered
along the way, as we explore the benefits of reading. And you can take our deep reading, interactive learning further by connecting via the Old Dog Learning blogsite.

**CUE your side of this synapse**

Over to you. Of course I hope these pages will build enough potential for energy and information flow to set off sparks of meaning. But that depends equally on you.

Your “CUE” comes from *What Readers Really Do*. The reading process begins with Comprehension, described by the authors very similarly to the “answer-getting disposition” of extracting a literal meaning from the text.

Calling this “the floor, not the ceiling, of meaning making,” they urge us to continue to Understanding. This step involves

“inferring on a larger scale, as readers recognize patterns and ... connect the dots of their line-by-line, page-by-page comprehension to help them see a bigger picture that may not have been apparent before.”

And still, you won’t be done. Evaluation is

“when readers take what they’ve come to understand about a text and consider its worth or merit, personally, intellectually, socially, or politically.”
Indeed, the authors remind that the C-U-E process “isn’t linear.” You’ll shift among them as you draft and revise your way toward clarity.

They point out that this draft and revise reading process often requires us to postpone our desire for clarity, as new ideas and more information are revealed. Thus, “we may find the answers if we read on attentively.”

And they warn that

“the process doesn’t ever quite end. We continue to make meaning as texts live within us, informing and coloring our lives, our choices, our opinions, even our actions.”

That is my BHAG (big hairy audacious goal) for us: that this book will prompt you to new insight and understanding of how reading benefits your brain, body, and life. And that it will inspire you to take action.

I know this book will live on in me. Let’s see if the potential energy and information flow it contains is enough to spark meaning for you.

Read on.
Introduction

“My secret weapon is that I read.”
— Joan Westenberg

Mine was Donald Duck comic books. I learned to read and to love reading with that irascible Disney character, his troubles with the misadventures of Huey, Dewey, and Louie, Uncle Scrooge, and Daisy’s way of smoothing things over.

Reflecting the longevity theme we’ll focus on in Chapter 6, these characters have staying power. Donald is now an octogenarian, born in 1934 and still going strong since 2017 on the *DuckTales* TV cartoon series reboot.
When I was three my grandpa bought me a subscription to *Donald Duck* comics. My mom started out patiently reading them to me, but I can still remember struggling to sound out words myself and later running to the kitchen in frustration, demanding to know how some new word sounded or what it meant.

By the time I started school, I was reading *Donald Duck*, *Archie*, and all the superhero issues that our local barber shop had on its table.

I’ve always described reading as something like an addiction – I’m simply unable to avoid reading. I read just about anything with English text that appears in my field of vision. Books, magazines, CNN screen tickers, milk cartons, cereal boxes, billboards, ads on benches, brick walls, and buses (inside and out), labels on shipping boxes, quotes on t-shirts, you name it.

So, what is it that makes reading a secret weapon?
Readers are . . .

You’ve probably heard the saying that leaders are readers, right?

Or maybe it’s the other way around, readers are leaders? Harry Truman is supposed to have nixed that, quoted as saying, “Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers.”

Another version, usually attributed to female journalism pioneer Margaret Fuller, proposes this sequence and perhaps a causal relationship, “Today a reader, tomorrow a leader.”

Whichever end they start from, such statements describing the benefits of reading in practical, career- and business-oriented terms. That limited focus continues in many articles and blog posts through the present.

Just a few recent titles:

- Why Leaders Must Be Readers, Forbes
- For Those Who Want to Lead, Read, Harvard Business Review
- 5 Ways Reading Makes You a Better Leader, Michael Hyatt blog
- 4 Reasons Good Leaders Are Readers, Jeremy Kingsley blog
• 5 Science-Backed Reasons
  Why Readers Do Better in Their Careers, The Muse blog

However, I think this work-related mindset actually understates the benefits of reading. And the emerging science investigating how reading affects our brains, our emotions, and our overall health backs me up.

A work-related mindset **understates** the benefits of reading.

**Your brain on books**
  **(and your body, too)**

The articles on reading listed above, use titles focusing on leadership and career advancement. But they point to scientific papers finding benefits that are **not** limited to our work lives. So let’s dig into them a little deeper.

The first five chapters will build and expand on the points outlined in the 5 Science-Backed Reasons article listed above. Plus, I’m adding a sixth reason uncovered in my own reading and research. The six are organized into chapters 1–6, as follows:

1. Reading Reduces Stress
2. Helps You Sleep
3. Improves Your Decision-Making Capacity
4. Makes You a Better Leader
5. Makes You Smarter
6. Helps You Live Longer

That last one might surprise you. It sure surprised me, when I first saw the headline connecting reading with living longer.

But when we get through the first five, I’m confident that #6 will fit in comfortably for you, too.

During the writing, I decided to expand a section comparing how we read printed material (especially books) with scanning digital text across the many screens we all spend time looking at these days. That became chapter 7.

Chapter 8, offers specific suggestions on how you can adopt your own reading plan, or adapt your current reading habits, so that you can reap the rewards we’ll be exploring together. Then in Chapter 9, I’ll urge you to “take action” on your reading and pass the rewards on, with some steps you can apply at work and life.

I’ve worked really hard to keep this book as short as possible. My goal is to provide you with some compelling reasons to add more reading time, especially more books, to your busy life. Not have you spend it reading this one!
You may note the outside margins are a bit wider than usual. That’s to encourage you to take notes, right here in the book. Yes, I hear some gasping about writing in a book. But you’ll see why I favor that practice in my tips for expanding and improving your reading habits.

My title, of course, plays on the poker expression, though I hope I’ve avoided any hint of the smug “gotcha” tone often heard with, “Read ’em and weep.” But I am confident that reading more will help you reap substantial benefits.

And some may surprise you.

So please do, read on.

* * * *

Note on references:

To minimize distractions in the text, you’ll find a detailed list of books, research papers, and other references at the end of the book. I’ve indexed them to the page numbers where they are cited or supplement the text. I’ve also provided urls to online versions where available.
Reducing stress sounds like a huge benefit from reading, right?

Yes, but . . . let’s start by recalling that stress has both positive and negative effects on us.

A double-edged sword

On the up side, stress experienced in the right moments and processed in the right ways can help us thrive in a variety of ways. In his book *Before Happiness*, Shawn
Achor cites studies showing that some stress can improve memory and cognitive performance, narrow our attention and increase brain processing speed, and enhance our resilience and immune systems. All these effects increase both our physical and psychological thriving.

Even severely traumatic experiences can deliver positive results: greater mental toughness, better social relationships, revised priorities, and sense of meaning. Researchers have dubbed this “post-traumatic growth” and they’ve identified ways of responding that can make growth more likely following these extreme stresses.

Peterson, et al., described these growth attributes as:

- improved relationships with others
- openness to new possibilities
- greater appreciation of life
- enhanced personal strength
- spiritual development

On the down side, Achor acknowledges the important and “equally true” science showing that stress, particularly chronic, long-term stress, has been linked to a host of serious physical and mental health problems.
To investigate what might influence such contrasting effects from stress, Achor constructed a simple experiment. Dividing workers in a high stress job environment, he showed one group a video warning of the debilitating effects of stress on health and work. The second group saw a video presenting several of the positive impacts of stress discussed above (e.g., increased mental focus and longer-term resilience).

The results were stark. The negative video group showed the expected ill effects of their stressful work environment. But simply making the other group aware that stress could have positive effects on them reduced their level of negative responses by 23%. And their productivity improved by nearly 30%.

Achor’s advice: learn to recognize when you’re feeling stress and identify the reason behind it, then refocus on how the stress might help you. You might be stressed about a work deadline or interviewing for a new job. But the reason behind the stress could be caring for your family, or your desire to move to a new city, or changing the life of your client.

Those are not random examples. At the same time I started work on this book in 2018, my wife Yvonne and I were dealing with major stress caused by our planned move back across the
country to be closer to our families. I’m fortunate; having Yvonne at my side and knowing about the stress-management research discussed here kept the move from being totally overwhelming.

Armed with Achor’s advice and aware of how stress can be a positive, we could harness the short-term stress to stay focused on the multitude of details. We could apply our brains’ increased processing speed to stay calm and adjust on the fly to inevitable glitches, especially in the last days of packing and the four day drive from Colorado to upstate New York. And we could take comfort that neuro-science agrees, as long as it didn’t kill us, the stress could make us stonger!

Plus, we both read daily, tapping into a key tool for reducing harmful stress. Now let’s look at how that works.

**Reducing negative stress helps more than our careers**

A 2013 report from Canada’s National Reading Campaign summarized research from Sussex University on how reading reduces stress as follows:

“Reading was proved:

- 68% better at reducing stress levels than listening to music;
1. **Reading Reduces Stress**

- 100% more effective than drinking a cup of tea;
- 300% better than going for a walk and
- 700% more than playing video games.

“Reading for as little as 6 minutes is sufficient to reduce stress levels by 60%, slowing heart beat, easing muscle tension and altering the state of mind.”

Now, I certainly do agree that reducing – or at least better managing – stress at work can help us perform our jobs better.

But what about other areas of our lives?

The most ominous effects of too much stress are not poor performance on the job. To get more specific about the downside dangers, in *Healthy Brain, Happy Life*, Wendy Suzuki catalogs an alarming list of physical and mental disorders that chronic stress can lead to:

- heart disease
- depression
- cancer
- ulcers
- reproductive issues
- damage to specific areas of your brain (hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, and amygdala)

Reading for **as little as 6 minutes** is **sufficient to reduce stress levels by 60%**
While major illnesses related to stress can certainly diminish our performance at work, our overall health impacts every aspect of our lives.

More immediate, day-to-day effects of stress – irritability, distractedness, moodiness – likewise impact our personal relationships and outside activities as much as our work.

**Reaping the stress-reducing rewards of reading**

Dr. Suzuki offers several types of Brain Hacks (four minute exercises and activities) for overcoming stress. She designed hers to “interrupt [stress’s] effects on our brains and bodies to lessen its impact.” Her suggestions for interrupting stress include dancing to your favorite song, or savoring a cup of tea or coffee.

And according to Dr. David Lewis, a similar interruption of stress occurs in our brains when we read. He explains:

“Psychologists believe this is because the human mind has to concentrate on reading and the distraction of being...”
taken into a literary world eases the tensions in muscles and the heart.”

True, the relaxing effect of reading was measured as taking six minutes, rather than the four that Dr. Suzuki’s recommendations promise. But then, those two extra minutes of reading produced 68% more stress reduction than listening to music and 100% more than savoring a cup of tea!

**Fact or fiction?**

The Lewis quote describes one effect of reading as “being taken into a literary world.” When Yvonne reached that phrase in her editor role, she raised a question about the value of reading non-fiction, business or self-development books, as opposed to the fictional stories (whether or not they ascend to the level of “literature”).

As you’ll see in several later chapters, whenever “either/or” questions arise, my answer is often, “Yes.” Or, both. In this case, I have a couple of reasons.

First, we’ll be exploring several benefits of reading for which I think the key driver is learning. I hope most will agree that we learn useful skills, like empathy, from fiction. But it seems fair to say that for learning, the scale tips more in favor of non-fiction.
We’ll cover several ways that reading both supports and directly delivers “learning” in later chapters, too. But recall the Joan Westenberg quotation at the beginning of the Introduction, “My secret weapon is that I read.”

Now add this one from Rick Hanson,

“Learning is the superpower of superpowers, the one that grows the rest of them. If you want to steepen your growth curve in life, it pays to learn how to learn.”

Keep that last phrase in mind as we journey through the benefits of reading and connect the dots on what our brains are up to when we read.

My second reason for saying read both, however, may bring the scale back to balance. Because the best non-fiction work often relies on stories. The best writers of non-fiction employ both true accounts of real-life examples and fictional tales used as analogies, metaphors, thought experiments, and the like.

True story: When I was in law school, I frequently had a good friend read over a draft of a class paper or legal article I was writing. He knew I wanted honest criticism and suggestions for improvement.
But he also knew that I would take one particular favorite phrase of his as the highest compliment he could give for feedback:

“Reads like a novel!”

Relax, as you read on.
2 Helps You Sleep

“There’s something really intoxicating about getting lost in someone else’s world for an hour or two before you get lost in your own dreams.”

— Jayne Helfrick

Some of my favorite childhood memories involve bedtime stories being read to me and later reading myself to sleep. I continued the tradition with my own kids, to the point of reading both *The Hobbit* and the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to them, aloud. I know, I’m weird.

But somewhere in adulthood I kicked the bedtime part of my reading addiction and followed the rest of our culture into
closing out the evening with a lit screen, usually the television, in front of my face.

Then my business book meetup group chose *The Power of When*, by Michael Breus, in which he develops his theory of “chronotypes” and the best times of day (and night) for different types to engage in common activities. No surprise, sleep rhythms play a big role in his advice.

So I’ve revived my end of the evening reading habit, focusing this new reading time on fiction, since most of my other reading involves books, blogs, and other work-related information sources.

I confess the TV is usually still on until after Colbert’s monologue. For some reason, that whole blue light problem has never seemed to keep me awake. If you suffer from insomnia, or even just take longer than you’d like to fall asleep, but don’t want to turn off your devices, Breus’s website has some technological solutions to the blue wavelength issue.

For me the renewed joy of reading fiction adds a bonus to the benefits from sleeping well.

What are those other benefits?
6 Science-Backed Ways Reading Puts You on the Road to Achieving More and Living Longer

Tom Collins

Read 'Em & Reap

“Impactful, empirical, and inspirational – a delicate balance of ‘educating with elegance’ … highly recommended!”
James Sugarman, co-founder of 4GenNow

Tom Collins: Read ‘Em & Reap grew from research on changes in our learning habits, increasing longevity, emerging science of lifelong brain plasticity, and realities of multi-generational work/life relationships – all shaping my work as “Chief Guide Dog” at Old Dog Learning. Reading dominated my 25-year legal career in research, writing, and oral argument. It remained central to staying current in my subsequent entrepreneurial roles in business consulting, book publishing, and co-founding a pet industry venture that ended in a Fortune 500 acquisition. It continues as a key to adding more “dots” I can connect with my experience when helping individuals and teams who feel stuck learn what they need to find their path forward via our Professional Learning Partnerships.