

How to Read a Long Book



I Read This Over Shabbos is a weekly newsletter from Rivka Bennun Kay about Jewish book culture, book recommendations, and modern ideas. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing [here](#). Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

On a flight home to Israel recently, I discovered (much to my chagrin) that the WiFi on my computer wasn't working and I had no choice but to watch a movie on the in-flight entertainment. I decided to do something bold—to watch a very long movie.

The film in question was *Interstellar*, which is the type of movie you can't really space out for (pun intended). It's so scientifically dense and so theoretical that I needed to pay great attention to all two hours and 49 minutes of the film. I sat in the darkness of the airplane, my husband sleeping next to me, and focused on one film for nearly three hours.

I did this partially because I felt it was high time I watched the movie, but partially to test my attention span. As someone who—in recent years and with the growing busyness of life—is constantly doing 15 things at once and walks into a room and often forgets why I'm there, could I really sit through a movie that long? Is there any remnant of my rapidly declining attention span?

The question applies to long books just as much as long movies. I have found it so hard to get through a good long novel—mostly because I can't pay attention for that long. Before I had a phone I knew I could breeze through *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and fans know well that this is the longest book in the series, at a whopping 845 pages (give or take).

I did some research into what I consider my declining attention span, and it turns out that the theory that technology is ruining our attention span is not so simple. In fact, the science journalist David Adam posited recently that while people are significantly more distracted today, our fundamental ability to pay attention has not utterly collapsed. What matters most, beyond biology, is our environment. Our capacity for attention hasn't changed, but our habits have.

That's why I started thinking about my attention span as something that can be improved if I only set up my surroundings correctly. This isn't always possible, but when I'm in a place of calm, a place where I know my thoughts won't be interrupted (such as 30,000 feet in the air in the dead of night), I try to take advantage of the circumstances to work on my attention span. More specifically, I'm trying to train myself back into the art of reading a long book. I had the skill as a child, and I'd like very much to regain it as an adult.

I, for one, care deeply about the future of long books, and so I set out to discover the art of reading them, especially in an age when we are surrounded by so much noise and distraction. I therefore present to you my tips on how to read long books, and I wish us all *hatzlacha* in these lofty endeavors.

Read on Shabbos!!!

This seems obvious and integral to the *I Read This Over Shabbos* brand, but it's still often overlooked. It's very easy to find other things to do on Shabbos, like take long naps. For some, a long Shabbos nap is essential for survival, and for setting oneself up for a successful week. For others, like myself, a long nap is a trap we'd rather avoid. I like to walk to a local park and read there, as I am less likely to fall asleep outside. I also find that the outdoors are a very calming environment for settling into a good book without immediately falling into a Shabbos afternoon fever dream nap.

Don't discredit the power of a Shabbos afternoon read, especially on these long summer Shabboses.

Use the Pomodoro Technique

When I started working full time, I discovered the Pomodoro Technique, which is a time management method that breaks work into 25-minute intervals, with five-minute breaks in between. When I feel overwhelmed by a pile of tasks, I find this method is very helpful for getting things done without collapsing under pressure.

The Pomodoro Technique could work just as easily for a book, if it's long and dense. You'd be surprised by how much you can read if you focus deeply for just 25 minutes. If you don't want reading to feel like work (which is understandable), just setting timers could be tremendously helpful.

Pick books that you actually want to read

This sounds obvious, but I often feel a pressure to read certain books, because those are the books that the intellectual community is reading, and I want to be in the intellectual community. To successfully read a long book, it is crucial that you pick books that actually interest you. Find the genre/style/author that speaks to you, and consider it a long-term investment of your time.

By the same token, know when it's time to stop. I'm talking about the infamous DNF (Do Not Finish) list, which I personally have a very hard time with. You don't need, as a matter of pride, to finish a book just for the sake of finishing it. If it's no longer speaking to you, if the investment is no longer worth your time, move on. (Am I just talking to myself now? Perhaps.)

Try audiobooks, if that's your thing

I've tried in the past to become an audiobook person, but it just doesn't work for me—I need the words in front of me, otherwise I forget things that are said. However, audiobooks are awesome and help a lot of people get through long books that they otherwise wouldn't bother touching. Some have questioned whether listening to a book is really considered reading. Regardless, it is unquestionable that audiobooks are a great way to consume more books and learn new things. If you're looking for something to listen to during the mundane parts of your day—your commute, your dishes, your laundry—try an audiobook.

Find a reading buddy (it's like an exercise buddy, but for the mental exercise of reading)

I have one friend who has become my reading buddy—we talk about what we're reading, how we're feeling about it, what it does to our inner world. Find a friend with the same lofty goals as you and pick a long book to read together. Whether you spontaneously send each other long voice messages reflecting on the book, or you incorporate it into your FaceTimes or your coffee dates, a friend reading alongside you is your best cheerleader. Reading long books is hard, but as it turns out, we can do hard things!

Create a Long Book Reading Club

Similar to finding a reading buddy, you can also find a reading group—that is, a group of people as crazy as you who also want to embark on this journey. A lovely essay in the *New York Times* explores book clubs for long books as a place to illuminate the text through other perspectives. Find your people, and enter the reading club humbly. Don't assume anyone is smarter than anyone else. Approach with curiosity and a desire to learn from others. You'll learn, you'll grow, and—importantly—you'll create community.

Bring your book everywhere

You never know when the opportunity to read will arise. As someone who spends a lot of time in Jerusalem traffic, that opportunity finds me quite often. If your book is too heavy to carry around due to its sheer length, Kindles are an excellent alternative. (I happen to love the aesthetic of the big chunky book, even at the cost of my bag feeling heavier all day. What can I say? I'm a sucker for aesthetics.)

Mark what moves you

Noting parts of a book that stand out to you is a very easy way to not just get through a long book, but also to retain what you read. If you're reading on Shabbos, you can use 18Forty's very own book darts to mark your reading. If you're worried about the halachic implications of using book darts on Shabbos, Rabbi Gil Student went ahead and did the important work of researching this issue. He concludes that book darts are permitted to be used on Shabbos. So you have no excuse!

Reading a long book is like running a marathon

I never ran a marathon, but I did work at summer camp, where I was told that it's not a sprint—it's a marathon. In other words, we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves and work ourselves to the point of collapse. Consider reading a long book like running a marathon—which means you're pacing yourself, you're taking breaks, and you remember that unless you're a professional, you're here for the joy of it. You are here to push yourself to do something big, and to embark on a journey with the mind—what a privilege!
