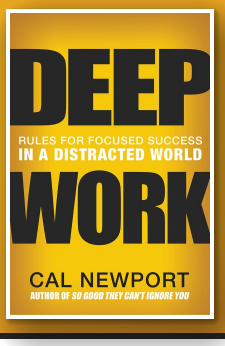
DEEP
RULES FOR FOCUSED SUCCESS
IN A DISTRACTED WORLD
WORK

CAL NEWPORT *Grand Central Publishing, 2016*

THE DEEP WORK HYPOTHESIS

"The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy."

So the few who build the skill will thrive. Part 1 argues why; Part 2 gives four rules for training your attention and rebuilding your week around deep work. Newport, a computer science professor, writes from his own practice.



PART 1 THE IDEA *why depth pays*

DEEP WORK *new value, hard to replicate*
"Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit."

SHALLOW WORK *little value, easy to replicate*
"Noncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted."

1 VALUABLE

Winners **quickly master hard things** and **produce at an elite level**, which takes depth:

> High-Quality Work Produced = (Time Spent) x (Intensity of Focus)

Attention residue: every switch, even to e-mail, leaves part of your mind behind.

2 RARE

A **metric black hole** hides what distraction costs, so offices follow the **principle of least resistance** and treat **busyness as a proxy for productivity**. Perlow's BCG consultants took a full day a week off-line; clients stayed, and the result was *"a better product delivered to the client."*

3 MEANINGFUL

"Who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love—is the sum of what you focus on." Depth brings **flow** (people proved happier at work than they suspected) and turns skilled work into craft: *"You don't need a rarified job; you need instead a rarified approach to your work."*

PART 2 THE RULES *willpower is finite, so replace good intentions with routines and rituals*

RULE #1 WORK DEEPLY *put depth on the calendar and protect it*

DECIDE ON YOUR DEPTH PHILOSOPHY

MONASTIC eliminate shallow work. Knuth has had no e-mail since 1990; an assistant passes on only the truly urgent and he batches the rest every three months or so. For one clear, discrete goal.

BIMODAL clearly defined deep stretches of a day or more, the rest left open. Jung's stone tower; Adam Grant goes monastic two to four days at a time behind an auto-responder.

RHYTHMIC the same time every day, so there is nothing to decide. Seinfeld's chain of red Xs; Chappell wrote 5:30–7:30 a.m. before his full-time job. Most common in office jobs.

JOURNALISTIC go deep whenever a gap opens, as Isaacson did at a beach rental. Newport's own way; not for novices.

Pick the one that fits your circumstances; a mismatch derails the habit. Unreachable stretches are accepted when they are **well defined and well advertised**.

RITUALIZE

Settle three things in advance: **where and for how long**; **how you will work** (no Internet? a word count?); **how you will support it** (coffee, food, a walk). Darwin kept fixed study blocks and a daily thinking walk.

> *"[Great creative minds] think like artists but work like accountants."* David Brooks

MAKE GRAND GESTURES

A radical change of setting, often costly, makes the task feel important. Rowling finished Harry Potter at the Balmoral Hotel; Shankman flew to Tokyo and back, writing a book in 30 hours. *"Sometimes to go deep, you must first go big."*

DON'T WORK ALONE

Hub-and-spoke: meet ideas in the hub, go deep in the spoke. At a whiteboard, a partner pushes you deeper.

EXECUTE LIKE A BUSINESS · 4DX

1. **Focus on the wildly important.** *"The more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish."*
2. **Act on the lead measures:** hours of deep work on the goal, not lag measures like papers published.
3. **Keep a compelling scoreboard:** a weekly tally of deep hours on the wall.
4. **Create a cadence of accountability:** review it weekly. His result: nine papers, up from four.

BE LAZY · THE SHUTDOWN RITUAL

Stop work thinking at day's end: downtime restores attention, and evening work is rarely deep anyway.

> last inbox check for anything urgent › capture loose tasks › skim all lists and the next days' calendar › rough plan for tomorrow › *"Shutdown complete"*

A plan quiets the **Zeigarnik effect** of open tasks. *"When you work, work hard. When you're done, be done."*

RULE #2 EMBRACE BOREDOM

Focus is a trained skill, and a brain that grabs the phone at every idle moment is rewired against it. Nass on heavy multitaskers: *"They're suckers for irrelevancy."*

TAKE BREAKS FROM FOCUS, NOT DISTRACTION

Schedule Internet blocks in advance and note the next one on a pad; between them, no network at all. Stuck? Move the next block up, but at least five minutes away. Works even with e-mail checks every 15 minutes.

WORK LIKE TEDDY ROOSEVELT

Give a deep task a deadline drastically shorter than usual, with a timer in view. Once a week at first.

MEDITATE PRODUCTIVELY

Walking or driving, hold one well-defined problem; catch **distraction** and **looping**; ask the next-step question. Even memorizing a deck of cards trains attention.

RULE #3 QUIT SOCIAL MEDIA

ANY-BENEFIT	CRAFTSMAN
use any tool with any possible benefit	know your core factors; *"Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweigh its negative impacts."*

Farmer Forrest Pritchard sold his hay baler; buying hay was better for his fields. *"Soil fertility is my baseline."*

APPLY THE LAW OF THE VITAL FEW

For each main goal, name the two or three activities that matter most; keep a tool only if it substantially helps them.

QUIT SOCIAL MEDIA FOR 30 DAYS

Stop cold, unannounced. Then: was the month notably worse? Did anyone care? No to both: quit. And plan your evenings (Arnold Bennett's *day within a day*) so the Internet is not your entertainment.

RULE #4 DRAIN THE SHALLOWS

SCHEDULE EVERY MINUTE OF YOUR DAY

Each morning give every minute a job, in blocks of 30 minutes or more; when the day breaks the plan, redraw the rest.

QUANTIFY THE DEPTH OF EVERY ACTIVITY

"How long would it take (in months) to train a smart recent college graduate with no specialized training in my field to complete this task?" Few months means shallow; budget it at 30–50%.

FINISH YOUR WORK BY FIVE THIRTY

Fix the end of the day, then work backwards. Say no clearly, keep the excuse vague, offer no consolation prize.

BECOME HARD TO REACH

Sender filters; **process-centric** replies that close the loop in one message; silence for the vague. *"Develop the habit of letting small bad things happen."*

Use it Monday

- Pick a philosophy; with a full day job, rhythmic usually works.
- Tonight, run the shutdown ritual.
- Tomorrow, block every minute on paper; redraw when interrupted.
- Tally deep hours by your screen; review on Friday.
- Schedule e-mail checks; stay off-line between them.

Read with care

- Willpower depletion and unconscious-thought theory, both used here, have replicated poorly since. The routines stand on their own.
- He exempts executives as *decision engines*; an owner is partly one.
- **Don't respond** is for a professor's inbox, not safety reports, regulators or clients.
- The social-media advice is personal and dated 2016.

HOW THIS PAGE WAS MADE. Read in full (introduction, both parts, conclusion, notes and footnotes) from the Grand Central Publishing ebook of *Deep Work*, first ebook edition, January 2016. Every quote checked word for word against that text by script. Cover from the same ebook. The replication caveat is general knowledge, not from the book.