

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#59 More on My Writing and Reading Habits

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Today I answer a couple of questions following on from my previous video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsmZBUscO9U>), about my reading and writing practices.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to answer a couple of questions related to my previous video on the subject of my reading. The first is, how do you decide what books to read next? Do you keep a list of books you want to read somewhere? I have used Goodreads for this, but I'm beginning to question if Goodreads really helps all that much.

I now have hundreds and hundreds of books marked as to read on Goodreads, and so I'm still sort of unsure what books I should be reading next. Also, do you read a set number of pages per day from each book? How do you go about spending your daily 3-4 hours of reading? Also, last question for me. I recognise that it is important to read widely, but I often find that school assignments prevent me from reading the kind of books I want to be reading.

School can have me reading a bunch of books on one particular subject, for me, theology, and often not the good sort that I'd be inclined to read, but a lot of what I regard as junk books. Any advice for students who feel like they don't have the time to read widely and are being forced, as it were, to read narrowly for the duration of their

academic careers? Good questions. The first questions on how do I decide what to read next, various things.

No, I don't have a system. I tend to just take advice from other people. I have a lot of books in my library that I've had on my to-do to read list for quite some time and they come forward, or something brings an issue to the forefront of my attention and then I read it.

So, there's no set system at all. I don't use Goodreads. I don't use anything else like that.

I just have a large pile of books around me, and there are certain books that come to the surface of the pile, and I pick those up. Often it's just about what I feel inspired to read at the time. There's only so much that you can push yourself to do things.

So, for me, it's trying to feed healthy and positive interests. Without that, I wouldn't be able to get anywhere near as much done, because your body and your spirit can often be like something that is an animal that's not very cooperative. Unless it's happy with what it's doing, it won't actually get that much done.

So, I try and feed my interest in things and develop a passion. Don't force myself to read lots of things I don't want to read at one particular time. I do reading that I find tough and onerous, but I balance that out with a lot of things I'm just passionate about.

I enjoy reading and things that I do for just for keeping my mind limber and interested. And keeping yourself interested in things, not just going on one stale subject all the time, is one of the best ways to read a lot. Because if you're reading widely, if you're reading about things that interest you, and if you're feeding your interests and growing your interests, then you won't be short of the energy that you need.

Whereas if you're forcing yourself all the time to read things that you don't find interesting, if you're forcing yourself in ways that you're not actually deriving any joy from what you're doing and you're not finding interest in what you're doing, then it will be a slog. You won't be able to do it. So, I find I just have to make some sort of peace with my instincts and my spirit on that to recognise, okay, I just don't have the heart to work through this deep book in one shot.

I'm going to have to give myself a number of days to do this. And to balance it out, I'll be reading something that's relatively easy to read by comparison, but something I really want to know about. And that, I find, is one of the best ways for me to get a lot of reading done.

If I'm just forcing myself, it doesn't happen. So, the way I divide up my time, again, there's no system. It depends upon what I'm reading at any given time.

Often, I'll be reading something very short. I'll be reading certain books that I'll get

through in a couple of hours in a day. And then other books that I'll spend a number of weeks working through.

So, for instance, the big book on Jonathan Edwards that I've been working through, I've given myself time to chew that over because it's a book that deserves the time and it rewards the time. Whereas other books, you can breeze through them in a matter of hours quite easily. And so I'll read many books just in one day.

And then other books, I'll give a lot of time to. And again, switching things up, giving yourself breaks and dividing out your time according to your energy levels, attention levels, that sort of thing. I give myself a fairly flexible framework within which to work.

So, depending on my energy level at a particular time of the day, I might read something really light or I might read something a bit more tough. When I have the energy to do it and to focus for a sustained period of time, I will do the tough stuff then. And then the rest of the time, I can do something lighter if I'm tired or I'm having struggle sleeping, which I often do.

I'll just read something lighter at that point. And that helps me to make use of that time, but also to make the most of the time when I really do have the energy and don't waste that on books that really don't require much attention and much effort. For the number of pages, again, it varies.

There are some books you really need to give a lot of time to. And there are many books I'll read at maybe even only 30 pages an hour. Other books, I'll read 100 pages an hour easily and more.

It just depends upon the books. Some books you just need to give a lot of time to. And if you're not giving a lot of time to them, you're not getting much out of them.

So, if I'm reading something like Oliver O'Donovan, every single one of his statements deserves reflection. And so, if you're breezing through a book like that, you've not really read it. You've wasted your time and you've wasted a really good book.

And so, just give yourself the time that the book takes. Most books are not designed for really careful, dense reading. So, you don't need to do that.

Many books you could even just skim read. Many books you find read the first and last sentence of each paragraph in a chapter, and you've got a very good gist of what that chapter has to say. Or pick up a book for the first time, look at the table of contents, look at the conclusion of the book, or look at the introduction, look at the conclusion of the book, and then look at the corresponding sections in each chapter.

And you've got the sum total of the book. In many books, you can do that because you have a sense of how the gaps will be filled. You know the author well enough to know

how things will be filled out, and then you can focus upon particular sections of that.

So, I don't have a set amount of reading that I set in terms of words or pages. I find I need to tailor that to my energy levels, to the books that I'm reading, and give myself the flexibility within which to work. Otherwise, I just end up beating myself up.

And the more these things become attended with guilt and frustration, the less joy you'll find in it, and the less you'll do. So, give yourself the time, give yourself the end, take account of your energy levels. If you can't do it one day, that's okay, do it the next day.

But try and build up the resources that you have within yourself, the energy and the attention, the focus, and the interest, more than anything else, the interest that will enable you to really read a lot. And if you don't have those things, you're fighting an uphill battle. But if you're feeding those things, and you're developing a wide interest in things, reading isn't tough.

You'll enjoy doing it, and you'll do it for fun. You'll want to do reading in your free time, and you'll fill gaps in your time that you would not have found otherwise, because you actually care about doing it. And a lot of the reading that we do is, we don't use the time and the resources that we have, because we're not actually working with the fuel of our interest.

And so, that is something that I'd really recommend, thinking about how can I become more interested in this? How can I feed my interest? How can I become passionate about this particular area of study? Spend time with people who do find it interesting, and inspire yourself that way. Catch some of the flame of their passion for the subject, their enthusiasm, and then work with it along those lines. And so, working with the grain of your interest is very important.

When you're in an institution where you're expected to read a lot of books that aren't really inspiring you, that are going along lines that you're fairly familiar with, that aren't actually pushing you further, that are merely reinforcing your existing perspectives, that is difficult. And I've never really been fully in a position like that. I've had to read things that I found a struggle, and I've not really gained anything from, because they've not challenged me, they've not pushed back against me, they've just reinforced particular perspectives, but without actually expanding anything.

That can be really frustrating, and fortunately I've never had to do that to the degree that the questioner seems to. In that situation, I would focus more upon just trying to get out of it what you can. Try and have a sense of the broader context of a particular debate, where certain people are coming from.

I mean, many times when I'm coming to a book, I'm not really interested about the shape of the debate so much as the substantive issues that are at stake within it. And so

I don't really care about knowing what so-and-so has to say and how they interact with this other character. I pay attention to that, but it's not my primary interest.

Whereas if you're reading in depth on a particular subject like that, that's probably what I'll generally focus upon. And then try and develop these things as voices in your head that you're constantly dialoguing with. My head is constantly in a conversation with itself.

I'm constantly arguing with myself, arguing with things that I'm reading, and having these debates within my head and populating your head with voices that you're can be very helpful. Even if those voices are very limited, try and understand what makes them tick. And as you understand what makes them tick, what makes people tick is always interesting.

People are very interesting if you actually pay attention to them. And so just paying attention to things along that line and then understand why people arrive at these positions. Why is it that this position is fairly stale? What makes it stale? What is it about the publishing industry? What is it about the particular context of formation? What is it about that particular theological frame that produces boring work like that? I mean, there's always something to be found, and that's generally the place I look at it where I'm struggling to read something that's not really giving me much.

I then just try and populate my imagination with different voices to argue with, to understand where they're coming from and why they're coming from the particular place that they're coming from in the ways that they are. That's all I can really advise. I'm not the best person to ask on this, perhaps, but that's what I've done in my own experience.

Another question is, as a follow-up to your video on reading, could you discuss some of your writing habits? For example, once you have read a book, how do you organize your reading notes? Do you use a particular app or program to store them digitally? Could you also discuss how you organize writing projects, both small and large? I think people have a bit too much of a faith in my organizational skills. I don't usually organize things that much. For the most part, things just happen around me, they all fit together in my mind, but there's a sort of creative ferment and that's the place that things emerge from.

Often it's the cross-pollination between things. The fact that it is disorganized allows for unusual and serendipitous things to happen. Things cross-pollinate, things rub off each other or voices that I'm reading alongside each other argue with each other in very strange and surprising ways.

That's one of the ways that I do make the most of the things that I'm reading. I try and internalize the voice and think about how that voice would argue with this voice and develop them as sort of mental voices and constructs of positions and then think out from those positions, if I had that particular mental cast of mind, if I were thinking in

terms of these assumptions, how would I approach this, that or the other subject that the author hasn't tackled? How would I read this passage? I'm always asking myself those questions and for me the best way to metabolize the information and the insights of a book, it's not so much focusing upon the information as focusing upon where that comes from and what drives it, what are the assumptions and other things like that at work within a book and then thinking about how to bring that into some form of creative work of your own. So I'm not thinking about how can I just summarize what this book has said, occasionally I do, but most of the time what I'm thinking is how can I take a conversation with this particular voice and the illumination and the insight that arises in the space between me and that other voice and then use that insight to speak to something that this author hasn't spoken about and that's usually what I do and I find that is incredibly helpful.

So after I've read a book, often in my letters, in my blog posts, in my comments, in my discussions and email and discussion lists, things like that, I'm trying to process this work by bringing it into bringing it into my own thought, making it part of my own mind and taking on its strengths, being aware of its weaknesses. So it's through that mental argument, that mental debate with that particular voice and understanding the illumination that arises from the space between my voice and its voice, actually internalizing those insights, counterbalancing some of the problems within my own thought and thinking about the ways they can be corrected or qualified and that is generally what I do and then bring that into creative work and that's how I really make the most of what I've read. It's not so much in writing notes in any other format.

I do have notes in various folders on my computer of books that I've read and I'll have a detailed chapter by chapter outline. I occasionally do that. That's not usually what I do.

Occasionally I'll have these cue cards where I'll have notes on things that I've been reading and I'll use those just to remind myself of certain things. I put those in a little box that enables me to sort them according to topic. So that's helpful.

Whenever I'm writing, whenever I'm reading a book, I'll underline and both underline sentences and underline in the margins and write notes in order that I might re-read that book very quickly. I can refresh my mind on that book just by picking up the book and seeing the things that I've underlined which will give a precis of the argument and enable me to get my bearings again very quickly because your memory is very much about the connections that you can draw with things and it's not so much, I don't focus upon having all the information in my mind. What I want is to be able to reassemble things very quickly when I need to.

So I want to have the particular threads that I could pull upon and everything else will be drawn up into my memory with it. It will take a while but I know how to go about it and so that's the important thing for me. It's just having those means by which you can bring

something back to mind and that doesn't involve having everything in your mind.

Rather it involves knowing where to find certain things, knowing, having sketched a route through that material where you can refresh your mind on it very quickly and that's generally what I do. There's not a great organised process to it. It's very informal, it's working with my weaknesses and my strengths and learning how to take advantage of memory, how to compensate for the weaknesses of it and that is usually what I do in the way of notes.

So I don't have extensive bodies of notes on books, occasionally I do but usually it's just the book itself. I can look at it very quickly and I can get my bearings within it by the notes that I've left within it, the things that I've underlined, other things like that. How about my writing projects? How do I organise writing projects both small and large? Again this presumes that I organise them.

Often again it is a process of working with the grain of my attention, my energy levels, other things like that on a particular day and I tend to write with my passions. So I'll have a number of writing projects on the go, they'll be on the back burner for quite some time and then suddenly I'll have a burst of insight and interest and then I'll run with that and that gives me momentum and often if you're just going into it as a slog trying to get through it you just won't get enough done. But if you're going with the burst of energy you can write 2,000 words an hour at that sort of level but when I'm just having to write it, it's considerably slower and it can be like pulling teeth and so it's like maybe like sailing.

You have to go with the wind, you have to recognise the wind and turn your sails to the wind and take advantage of the elements of your personality, of your passions, your interests, what particularly is driving you at a particular time and so I'll usually have half a dozen documents open on my computer, word documents and I'll just visit them at different points and at certain points I'm just, they're dormant, I'll leave links and other things I've read that are relevant to the topic in the bottom of the document and then I'll return to it maybe in a week's time and then I'll just do it in one fell swoop when I have the passion for it. But a lot of it is just working with my energy, working with my interest and realising that I can get a lot more done that way. It is a sort of creative procrastination, it's working with, and it doesn't have to be creative procrastination but procrastination works, happens because of just our general modes of avoidance, of fear, of project, things like that and it's a psychological process and so you need to learn to work with your psychological processes, to be patient with yourself, don't go too hard on yourself because if you go too hard on yourself you won't actually work for yourself, you need to work for yourself and so you need to give yourself rewards, you need to give yourself the joy of achieving something in a particular day and so I set myself targets but I'm fairly generous with myself in allowing myself flexibility about how I go about these things and recognising that not every day will be when I'm working through a current

project.

I'll often leave it dormant for a while and say okay I had intended to get that project finished today but the energy wasn't there, the mindset wasn't there and I could use my state of mind far more fruitfully on this other project for that period of time and so that's okay. I've maybe not done what I intended to do at the outset but I've used my time and that is probably not something that works for everyone but it works for me and I get a lot done by it but it just involves knowing yourself, knowing your limitations, being patient with yourself and then working with what you have and building the resources that you can do more. So your interest is like a muscle and if you work with your interests and strengthen your interests and become someone who's more passionate about things then you'll be able to read a lot more, you'll be able to write a lot more and then also practice these things a lot.

I find just having a blog for such a long period of time has enabled me to write a significant amount. So I write in the average week at least 20,000 words in some form or other, most of that in correspondence but much in articles, in other things like comments and things along those lines and so I also have a lot of conversations, meet up with people, talk on Skype and these videos in some sense are a reflection of things I'm doing in the day anyway and ways of metabolising what I've learnt and giving it out because to truly learn something is to teach it, to pass it on, to take it into yourself and pass it through yourself and so for me the process of learning has been a process of passing on what I've learned and so the writing and the reading are very much meshed up together and again those are all connected to energy levels, to interest levels and these sorts of things and that is how I go about things. I hope that helps.

I wonder if anyone else has advice and recommendations for what they found useful and thoughts on whether they've tried similar things to me, whether they found it useful. Please leave comments on my blog or elsewhere and Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with another question and answer or maybe a review. I was thinking of doing a review on the Theology of Jonathan Edwards book and apart from that I would recommend that you leave any questions on my Curious Cat account and if you'd like to support this in future videos please do so using my Patreon account and the links for both of those are below.

God bless and thank you for listening.