



... 🔍 Upgrade 🗨️

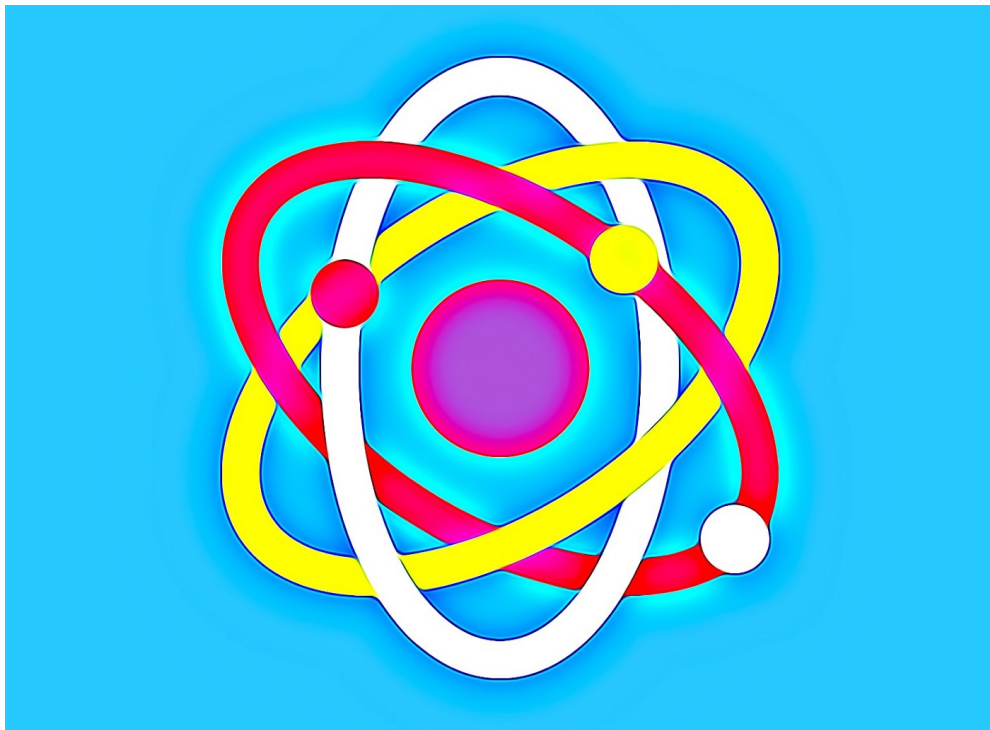
Follow 418 Followers · Hall of Fame On Reading About Writing Books That Can Change Your Life Website Fict

You have 3 free member-only stories left this month. [Upgrade for unlimited access.](#)

I Finally Read Atomic Habits, Here Are My Top 5 Takeaways

#1 — There’s a crucial difference between motion and action

 Tom Belskie Feb 11 · 9 min read ★



Created with [Canva](#) and [BeFunky](#)

Last month, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, surpassed 3 million copies sold worldwide. When I saw the announcement pop up on my Instagram feed, it reminded me of something: I had purchased one of

those 3 million copies about a year and a half ago and never read it. It was sitting on my Kindle, collecting digital dust. Well, better late than never I figured and dove in.

It probably took me less than a week to read, which for me qualifies as quite fast. When I'm able to get through a book that quickly, it's usually a solid indication it's very good. But *Atomic Habits* is more than just very good. In my humble opinion, it's so good that I would motion to file it under the elite category of *books that can actually change your life*. This is a motion that I do not at all take lightly.

That's how good it is.

Self-help and self-improvement can be a bit of a hamster wheel. That is to say, it's easy to get trapped inside the idea of improving your life but without ever doing it because you're too busy reading a pile of *How to Change Your Life* books. But every so often a book comes along in this genre that actually delivers on the promise and provides immense value to its readers.

Atomic Habits is one of those books and it's easy to see why it has sold so many copies in less than three years.

While it is well worth reading cover-to-cover as it is chock full of useful and actionable information about habits, from how and why we form them to how to break them and make them, I've decided to highlight my top takeaways and share with you the lessons I felt were the most profound.

1. Beware of the motion vs. action trap

When you're in motion, you're planning and strategizing and learning. Those are all good things, but they don't produce a result. Action, on the other hand, is the type of behavior that will deliver an outcome. — James Clear

I put this first because I think it's the single biggest reason why, for some

people, “self-help” never really seems to help. It also pairs nicely what that reference to the hamster wheel I just alluded to in my introduction and how it can be easy to get stuck trying to change your life without ever actually changing it.

Tom Belskie

technical writer by day | indie author & blogger by night

Follow

I was about midway through the book and the chapter entitled, *Walk Slowly, but Never Backward*, contained a pearl of wisdom that really resonated with me. And it was one of those rare moments that we as

TOM BELSKIE FOLLOWING



Jason Weiland



Sean Kernan



Mark Starlin



Douglas Rushkoff



Isaiah McCall

See all (324)

readers live for (and we as writers strive to deliver) where someone says something you always knew to be true but could never articulate yourself, but once you see it in writing, something inside you clicks and you have that very satisfying *aha* moment that feels magical.

He warned about the difference between *being in motion* and *taking action* and he explained it perfectly. **Motion** is all about planning and learning and theorizing. **Action** is all about deliberate practice to deliver an outcome. It's all too easy to fall into the trap of *being in motion*, of fooling yourself into thinking you're making progress towards something.

Top highlight



542



I know the feeling. Eating healthy, sleeping well, meditating, going to the gym, journaling, reading books, writing to-do lists, etc. — all great things. But for someone like me, whose real aim is to write and publish books and blog posts, that's all motion. It can help me be in a better headspace once I sit down to write, which is again, great, but it doesn't type the words for me.

I can get up early, journal, meditate, get to the gym, do yoga, meditate, write a kick-ass to-do list and drink smoothies till my skin turns green, but if I haven't written anything by day's end, what have I done with my day that is going to finish that post I want to write or move the story in my novel along?

Nothing.

I still have to sit down and think and type and edit and read and rewrite and type. I still have to take action, I have to actually write because that is the only thing that delivers the outcome I want.

Sometimes we do need motion to plan or understand our path better. But

it's a fine line. It's easy to use motion as a crutch to, "feel like we're making progress without ever running the risk of failure."

If you aren't very careful about avoiding this trap, I think it's all but inevitable that you'll develop a very jaded, cynical view of the whole self-help, hustle culture, you-can-do-it-if-you-just-work-hard culture. While the industry itself is not without its nefarious actors and dubious motives, there are a lot of good people with great messages that get implemented improperly and with lackluster results. Because you get caught up in the safe feeling of progress that *being in motion* gives you.

Don't get fooled by this feeling. Take action and you'll be alright.

2. We live in a delayed return environment

Imagine you're an animal roaming the plains of Africa...On any given day, most of your decisions have immediate impact....You are constantly focused on the present or very near future. You live in what scientists call an immediate-return environment.

In modern society, many of the choices you make today will not benefit you immediately...You live in what scientists call a delayed-return environment because you can work for years before your actions deliver the intended payoff.

— James Clear

"What is *immediately* rewarded is repeated. What is *immediately* punished is avoided," this, according to James Clear, is the Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change.

It used to make sense to place a premium on instant gratification. Our very survival often depended on it. So, our brains evolved over time to prefer quick hits of pleasure to the kind of satisfaction one might get from long-term accomplishments.

Clear mentions that behavioral economists call this warped sense of

evaluation, *time inconsistency* (also known as dynamic inconsistency). Meaning, how our brains process and evaluate potential rewards is, “inconsistent across time.” We naturally place a higher value on the present and discount the future.

This is often a mistake and places a premium on virtually any habit we pick up over the course of our lifetimes — for good or for ill. Low time preference individuals will thrive, while high time preference individuals will get crushed. The reason being that the rewards from a bad habit, like for example smoking, are immediate while the consequences may take decades to manifest.

And the inverse is true for good habits, like saving and investing. In the short term, you might not be able to buy the shiny new gadget you want or eat at that fancy new restaurant, but over decades that amount of saving and investing may very well make you rich.

How deeply you understand and design your life around the simple fact that most of the decisions you make on a daily basis will not immediately benefit (or harm) you is going to be one of the primary factors in determining your success in life.

Of course, the cheeseburger you ate at lunch won't make you fat. The grueling workout you did yesterday morning won't make you trim and muscular. The \$100 you transferred to your retirement account won't make you wealthy. A night out with your friends, a few too many drinks, and a poor night of sleep won't wreck your health.

The key is seeing very clearly and understanding at a fundamental level that, over a long period of time, these decisions have serious consequences. Which reminds me of a quote Warren Buffett often attributes to Bertrand Russell:

“The chains of habit are too light to be felt until they're too heavy to be broken”

3. Identity change first, the rest will follow

The ultimate form of intrinsic motivation is when a habit becomes a part of your identity. It's one thing to say I'm the type of person who wants this. It's something very different to say I'm the type of person who is this. — James Clear

If you want to create real change, focus first on *who* you want to become instead of things like *what* you want to do and *how* you want to accomplish it.

James Clear gives the example of two different approaches of people who are trying to quit smoking when they are offered a cigarette. One says, “No thanks, I’m trying to quit.” And the other says, “No thanks, I don’t smoke.” The second person is making a small but fundamental distinction with their response. It’s not about *what* they are or aren’t trying to do, it’s about *who* they are.

Instead of wanting to write a book, figure out how to be the kind of person who writes books. What kind of qualities and habits do you think they have? Or a physically fit person, what would a healthy person do? Each time you perform a habit, good or bad, you are essentially casting a vote according to Clear, “Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become.”

Start at the identity level first and then build out from there. The *how* and the *what* components will naturally follow once you figure out the *who* part.

“Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become.”

4. “The aggregation of marginal gains”

Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement. The same way that money multiplies through compound interest, the effects of your habits multiply as you repeat them. They seem to make little difference on any given day and yet the impact they deliver over the months and years can be enormous”— James Clear

In Chapter 1, Clear tells the famous story of the British Cycling team and their coach, Dave Brailsford and his Marginal Gains philosophy that posited if the team could get 1% better at all the little things that go into riding a bike, they would see significant gains in performance when they added it all together.

On paper, this appeared to work. After “nearly one-hundred years of mediocrity,” the British Cycling team was suddenly dominating the Tour de France and the Olympics. Of course, in recent years this story has received some criticism with regards to how much it actually helped the team, but I think the overarching principle is a sound one.

Little things add up to big things. Tiny actions, multiplied by millions can produce massive results. This concept is not unlike compound interest which Einstein is purported to have called the “eighth wonder of the world.” There’s a good reason business luminaries from Warren Buffett to Mark Cuban extoll the virtues of compound interest. It works in powerful, life-changing ways.

As Naval Ravikant said:

“All the returns in life, whether in wealth, relationships, or knowledge, come from compound interest.”

5. Winners and Losers* have the same goals

And if successful and unsuccessful people share the same goals, then the goal cannot be what differentiates the winners from the losers. — James Clear

Having goals is not enough. If it was, we'd all be winners. But we know that's not the case. We all set goals for ourselves. How many of us actually see them through? Whether we succeed or fail depends on the quality of the system we develop to help us make progress once we've chosen a direction.

As James Clear writes in the book, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You rise to the level of your system."

I've set countless goals for myself over the years and I've failed to reach most of them. I've set some of the biggest, most grandiose goals for myself one could imagine on certain occasions but that never seems to move the needle.

If and when I achieve goals, it's not because I set them, it's because I set up the proper system to achieve them. If you want to see results, i.e. achieve your goals, you should worry far more about your system than anything else.

**refers specifically to outcomes, as in a sporting match, and is in no way a comment on anyone's worthiness as a human being.*

"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You rise to the level of your system."

I could probably write two or three more lengthy posts just like this one with all the helpful insights I gained from [this book](#) but I'm going to stop here.

Yes, it does go into the science and psychology behind habit formation in much more detail, but I wanted to pick out some of the larger, overarching ideas that I found really accessible and practical.

I'd strongly encourage you to pick up a copy and read the rest for yourself. If you're struggling with your habits, this is very much a book for you. I think it's a book that can in fact change your life.

****This post contains affiliate links. This means, if you click on the link and buy the book, I get a small commission on the sale. I hope you think I've provided you some value here and that this is a square deal for both of us.****

Sign up for [my newsletter](#) to get more TomThoughts straight to your inbox...and a free book!

Sign up for TomThoughts

By Tom Thoughts

Monthly Medium highlights, distilled and poured straight from the source [Take a look](#).

Get this newsletter

Emails will be sent to andres.salgado17@gmail.com.

[Not you?](#)

[Books](#) [Reading](#) [Self Improvement](#) [Habits](#) [Productivity](#)

