

20 Amazing and Essential Non-fiction Books to Enrich Your Library

written by [Leo Babauta](#)

I'm an avid reader of fiction and just love a novel that transports me, that is so gripping that I can't put it down. But I also enjoy a good non-fiction book, from self-help stuff to philosophy to biographies to just about anything that makes me think.

After the warm reception of my post on novels ([50 Amazing and Essential Novels to Enrich Your Library](#)), a number of people asked for a list of non-fiction as well. Well, here it is!

I was hesitant to do this as there are so many classic non-fiction texts, from the Greeks to philosophers through the ages to biographies of amazing people to first-hand accounts of surviving wars and much more. It's overwhelming, and it would be hard to be comprehensive. But then I decided not to be comprehensive. Instead, I wanted to find 20 books that convey some of the philosophy of Zen Habits in different ways, books that influenced this site and that I think will enrich your library and your life if you haven't read them yet.

So this list is far, far from being authoritative or comprehensive. It leaves off just about every classic work — histories, philosophy works, scientific classics, and so on. It doesn't have the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, anything by Descartes or Nietzsche or Kant, accounts by Anne Frank or slaves, or anything else on the [100 Best Non-fiction Books](#) list. Not that those books don't hold great value — they do — but they've been done elsewhere.

This list is just a few of my favorites. I hope you enjoy them, find inspiration from them, and share some of your favorites in the comments below!

1. **Your Money or Your Life**, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robins. No book on money is more important. If you haven't read this book yet, you must. It's simply life transforming, and takes the way most people look at money and turns it on its head. My philosophy about money stems from this book.
2. **Slowing Down to the Speed of Life**, by Richard Carlson and Joseph Bailey. I only discovered this book recently but it is simply transformational. At its core, it is about learning to live and think in the moment, which is far from new — Buddhism has had this for 2,500 years. But this book explores the idea from a psychological point of view, showing us how our thoughts are what create our emotions, how we can become calm in the middle of chaos, how we can minimize stress, become better parents, improve our relationships, and much more. I've been trying this myself recently and it works wonders.

3. **Simplify Your Life**, by Elaine St. James. This is one of the books that most influenced the simple philosophy behind this site. I began simplifying my life when I first read this book a decade ago, and though I've had some ups and downs, I credit my love for simplifying to Elaine St. James. It's an easy read and there are some great tips in there.
4. **The Art of Happiness**, by the Dalai Lama. I love the Dalai Lama mostly because he always seems so happy and compassionate. I don't know if the actual person is like that, but his writings on compassion and happiness are simple yet insightful, and even if there's nothing overly profound, I found them to be great reminders about why living a more compassionate life can have incredible meaning for ourselves and those around us.
5. **Getting Things Done**, by David Allen. The quintessential productivity book, it's a must-read for anyone looking to get more organized and efficient. This was my starting point, and while I've modified my system, GTD taught me some really important skills: emptying my inbox, getting everything on paper and out of my head, creating a system to keep everything in, and so forth.
6. **The 4-Hour Workweek**, by Timothy Ferriss. This book inspired legions of us to simplify and focus on that which has the most impact on our lives and our businesses. The concepts can be applied to any life — whether you're a CEO, office worker, stay-at-home parent, blogger, you name it. You might not actually get to a 4-hour workweek, but you'll learn to look at your work in new ways and do it in smarter ways.
7. **The War of Art**, by Steven Pressfield. For anyone who writes or creates, the battle to actually get the creating done is well known. We struggle sometimes, often daily, to focus on our work, to actually do the writing or creating, to avoid the great abyss of procrastination and distraction. This book shows you how to overcome this struggle by working like a professional. Great stuff.
8. **Don't Sweat the Small Stuff**, by Richard Carlson. Carlson is the co-author of the above-mentioned "Slowing Down to the Speed of Life", but he's more famous for this book (actually a series of books that started with this book). The book's title becomes more meaningful when you hear the subtitle: "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff — and it's all small stuff". This book teaches you to keep things in perspective and in doing so, stop stressing out about things. It teaches you to appreciate the things — and especially people — around you. Really an excellent book.
9. **Running to Win**, by George Sheehan. Sheehan was a running philosopher. I thought this book was going to be about competitive running, and in some ways it is, but really it's about a philosophy of life, of living life to its fullest in every way. Sheehan's essays are beautiful and inspiring. He's written a bunch of excellent books, but this one was written after he learned he had a terminal disease.

10. **Upgrade Your Life**, by Gina Trapani. This is Lifehacker in book form — all the tips and tricks that will help you turn technology from something that distracts and overwhelms you into something that makes you more productive and effective.
11. **The Essential Gandhi**, by Louis Fischer. Whether you're a fan of Gandhi or not, his writings are inspiring and his words have had deep and widespread impact. I am a subscriber to his writings on non-violence and civil disobedience and truth. I'm inspired every time I pick up this book.
12. **Manufacturing Consent**, by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. If you haven't read or heard anything by Chomsky, this book could be eye-opening. It was for me when I read it more than a decade ago, and it taught me a lot about political systems and the media, and from this I've become more critical of the information I consume (and perhaps a little more cynical about politics as well). Anyway, I highly recommend this or other Chomsky works if you'd like to get a completely different perspective on things, from one of the most famous dissidents of our times.
13. **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People**, by Stephen Covey. Indispensable reading for anyone who wants to learn to focus on the important things and become more effective in work and in life. The 7 Habits include being proactive, beginning with the end in mind, putting first things first, thinking win/win, seeking first to understand, synergizing, and sharpening the saw. His 8th habit boils down to "Find your voice and inspire others to find theirs."
14. **Tao Te Ching**, by Lao Tzu. This fundamental Taoist classic is an excellent read for something that's 1,500 years old (or thereabouts). It'll teach you the basics of Eastern philosophy and a thing or two about life itself.
15. **Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance**, Robert Pirsig. A modern classic, Pirsig travels the countryside with his son and friends, and explores the competing principles of a Zen-like world view with those of logic and reason. While Pirsig might seem to represent logic and reason for some of the book, it later becomes apparent that he believes the two should be merged. He writes that despite the book's title, "it should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice. It's not very factual on motorcycles, either."
16. **The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari**, by Robin Sharma. The book is a fable, and it's one that will certainly make you give some thought to your life, your goals, your dreams and how your daily habits help you reach those dreams. While I don't think you can actually implement everything discussed in the book (it would be too overwhelming), Sharma explores a lot of interesting ideas, and I'm sure anyone will find some that are worth trying. [Read my review.](#)

17. **The Elements of Style, by Strunk and White.** An absolutely indispensable resource for anyone who writes in the English language. Seriously. This isn't only for writers — it's for bloggers, people who write reports, people who write emails and write things online. In short, for just about everyone. I read this when I first became a journalist 18 years ago, and I've read it every year since. It'll teach you to be more concise, to avoid common mistakes, and to generally be clearer and more powerful with your words.
18. **Fever Pitch, by Nick Hornby.** This book is a bit different from the others on this list, but I loved it so much I thought I'd share it here. It's an autobiographical look at the author's obsession with soccer (or football to most of the world) through his lifetime. This series of essays (each focused on a different match) is an absorbing read and incredibly interesting.
19. **A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn.** The book that changed history for many people who had previously only studied the usual textbooks. Zinn tells the story of the United States from an entirely different perspective — the powerless, instead of the rich and powerful. It's the story of the blacks, the women, the Chinese who built the railroads, the poor, the workers, those oppressed by force and power, the voiceless, and many other minorities. An eye-opener.
20. **The Power of Less, by Leo Babauta.** OK, it's cheesy and self-promotional to put your own book on a list you created. I know. But I couldn't help it — sometimes you have to be self-promotional ... and plus, I really think you'll find value in this book. Teaches you to focus on the essentials in order to simplify your life and become more effective in your work. Also see: the [Power of Less video](#), the free [Thriving on Less ebook](#), [audio tips podcasts](#), and [The Power of Less New Year's Challenge!](#)

Bonus update — I forgot a few that I really want to add to this list. So here are a few more books:

- **Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life, and True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart, by Thich Nhat Hanh.** As someone in the comments pointed out, I quote Nhat Hanh all the time. His writings are very very simple, and yet there is a profoundness in them that is apparent after you've read a chapter or two.
- **In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed, by Carl Honore.** Discusses the growing slow movement — slow food, slow travel, slow living — and how it counters our current culture of speed.
- **The Tao of Pooh, by Benjamin Hoff.** A great introduction to Taoism using one of the best-known characters in Western literature.

So there are hundreds and thousands of great non-fiction books that I've left off this list, mostly because I don't have the time to compile a bigger list, and also largely because there are so many I haven't read personally.