



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower enjoyed all types of literature. This photo was taken in his office at NATO headquarters with his copy of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story collection, *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard*. (U.S. Army photo)

## From Reader to Leader

*By Kimball Johnson*

"Reading makes a full man, conversation a ready man, and writing an exact man."

—Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)<sup>1</sup>

**F**rom the earliest days of our nation, our leaders have been constant readers and superb writers. Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and his personal library became the basis for the Library of Congress. President Abraham Lincoln walked miles to borrow a book and personally wrote his speeches, along with the Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation. Gen.

George S. Patton's determination on the battlefield is well known, but not many know that he was also a determined reader, marking and commenting in the margins of his books. When he died, his books went to the library at the U.S. Military Academy. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe during World War II, was also a committed reader. He studied Greek classics, Civil War history, and

enjoyed the fiction of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories.<sup>2</sup>

Since noncommissioned officers are being required to develop their professional writing skills as they progress through the ranks, it is important to learn how reading improves not only writing skills but also leadership skills.

**Related:** [Professional Writing Through the Ranks](#)

## Read for Pleasure

Reading is fundamental, but not everyone enjoys reading. The most effective way to overcome a reluctance to read is finding a book that interests you. It can be fiction or non-fiction, the latest horror novel or an old classic. It does not matter; just make sure it appeals to you.

Reading lists can also help you in your search. Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Mark A. Milley, created a 45 book reading list that includes military fiction, history, and leadership training topics. The list includes a synopsis of each book to help you decide if it is of interest to you.

Book reviews are another way to find an enjoyable read. Experienced readers always have an opinion, and they like to give their reasons. Reviews are easily found online and freely offered at bookstores and libraries. You may even want to ask fellow Soldiers for their suggestions.

**Related:** [Military Review Book Reviews](#)

Joining a reading group can be another way to find a great book. Sergeant Major of the Army Daniel A. Dailey has an online [book club](#) where he regularly chooses a book, provides a discussion guide, and offers a forum for discussion.

After you choose a book, the most important thing to consider is finding the time to read it. This usually involves picking a place where you like to read and then setting a time to do it. Doing this will encourage you to establish a reading routine.

## Reading and Your Brain

Even if you feel you are a poor reader, studies have shown that consistent reading habits increase reading skills over a period of six months by [improving the connections](#) between areas of the brain that process what we read.<sup>3</sup>

[Studies](#) within the last ten years also show that the brain is the ultimate virtual reality machine when it comes to reading, responding to narrative storytelling as if the reader were involved, and participating in real life.<sup>4</sup> This means that what you read has the potential to affect you as if you had actually participated in the book's events.

For example, when reading the words "lavender," "cinnamon," or "soap," the olfactory center of the brain reacts as if smelling those scents, or when action takes place in

the narrative, such as in the sentence, "He kicked him," the motor center of the brain will respond as if you were kicking someone. The overall effects of these "actions" can linger in the brain for [about 5 days](#).<sup>5</sup>

Another [study](#) found that parts of the brain continue to grow and mature until the age of 40. Of primary importance among these areas is the prefrontal cortex, which handles the higher brain functions such as planning, decision-making and social behavior.<sup>6</sup> This area is also the location for feelings of empathy.

The development of empathy, or the ability to guess what other people are thinking, feeling, and ways they might react, is probably the most important reason for NCOs to evaluate their reading habits. Empathic leaders are better able to understand their Soldiers', as well as their enemies', motivations and tend to make leadership decisions that are realistic and humane. Studies show these feelings [can be developed](#) by reading fiction and narrative non-fiction, explaining why people get "involved" when reading a novel.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, reading is the quickest way to [lower stress levels](#); faster than listening to music or playing a video game and even better than taking a walk. It only takes six minutes of reading to slow down the heart rate and relax muscular tension by 68 percent.<sup>8</sup>

## Read to Learn

Pleasurable reading has its benefits, but NCOs also need to read in order to learn. It takes effort to stretch their minds and vocabularies towards understanding something unfamiliar.

In his article, "How to Digest Books Above Your "Level" and Increase Your Intelligence," Ryan Holiday, a best-selling author, suggests a number of ways to tailor reading habits for better understanding and retention.<sup>9</sup>

Most important, he says, is finding the book's overall message before you start reading. That way, readers can look for ways to apply the book's principals to real life situations rather than waste time figuring out what the author is trying to say.

To accomplish this, he advises to read always the book flap's summary as well as the author's introduction and any prefaces. He also suggests referring to book reviews for an overview of what other people think of the book.

Next, look up all the words and concepts you do not understand, and always read the notes. This may take time, but your vocabulary will expand and your ability to understand the concepts presented will increase dramatically. This seems like common sense, but it is surprising how often people skip this step. Wikipedia and online dictionaries make it easy to learn about and understand basic, well-known ideas and words. The notes, in particular, explain difficult concepts and lead you to other helpful resources.

An added benefit of this "extra" reading will be how often this new knowledge overlaps into other areas of

learning you come across in the future. It will diversify your vocabulary and expose you to new concepts you may want to learn more about later.

You should also mark up your books for easy reference. Then, after completing the book, copy the marked passages out by hand for memorization and further study. The act of physically writing these important passages will strengthen memory retention.<sup>10</sup> It will be like reading the book a second time and will reinforce the principles you found most important.

Finally, when you finish reading the book, select at least one book from the bibliography. This will allow you to find supporting ideas or competing theories and deepen your understanding of the topic.

## Read to Write

*"If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that."*

—Stephen King<sup>11</sup>

The best way to improve your writing skills is to write about what you have just read. Write about any new ideas or questions that you may have after reading non-fiction books and articles. Explain why certain characters in novels interested you, or bothered you. More importantly, analyze how the author wrote the book and whether it was effective. You might try to write a paragraph or two mimicking the author's style or pursue your own research into a concept that you feel the author did not explain well enough.

This practice will influence your writing skills. First, your memory will improve, as you recall scenes or concepts and how the author wrote them. You will reinforce your knowledge of grammar, experience different writing styles and be able to practice them. Through self-analysis, you will see a transformation of ideas into clear and concise sentences and develop your written and verbal communication skills.

As you continue to practice, you may find yourself searching for different reasons to write. These reasons could include writing to examine various ways of solving a problem, keeping a journal, telling a story, or sharing your knowledge with peers. As you write, you will begin to develop your own voice and you will find there is more to writing than meeting requirements for reports and evaluations.

## Conclusion

"Reading is a kind of simulation, one that runs not on computers but on minds: a simulation of selves in their interactions with others in the social world," said Keith Oatley, professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto. "[It is] based in experience, and involving being able to think of possible futures."<sup>12</sup>

The act of reading exposes NCOs to new thoughts, provides knowledge and enjoyment, encourages thought, and contributes to effective writing. It also improves the NCOs ability to communicate with authority and clarity. Like any other skill, to become effective NCOs must practice their writing skills. ■

---

## Notes

1. Johnson, Samuel, "The Role of the Scholar," in *Consolation in the Face of Death: Penguin Great Ideas #67*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 80.

2. According to his memoirs and Kenneth S. Davis's *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Soldier of Democracy*, Eisenhower's reading list, while stationed in Panama, included books by Churchill, Tacitus, Plato, Von Clausewitz, and Nietzsche, along with 2 classic Civil War memoirs by Grant and Sheridan between 1922-24. A book of short stories entitled, *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, was also part of his reading list at the time.

3. Shilo Raube, "Carnegie Mellon Scientists Discover First Evidence of Brain Rewiring in Children," cmu.edu, December 9, 2009,

4. [https://www.cmu.edu/news/archive/2009/December/dec9\\_brainrewiringevidence.shtml](https://www.cmu.edu/news/archive/2009/December/dec9_brainrewiringevidence.shtml).

5. Annie Murphy Paul, "Your Brain on Fiction," nytimes.com, March 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html>.

6. Carol Clark-Emory, "Does reading actually change the brain?", futurity.org, December 23, 2013, <http://www.futurity.org/reading-novels-leaves-shadow-activity-brain/>.

7. Lin Edwards, "Brain is Not Fully Mature Until 30s and 40s," medicalexpress.com, December 22, 2010, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-12-brain-fully-mature-30s-40s.html>.

8. Gregory S. Berns, Kristina Blaine, Michael J Prietula, and Brandon E. Pye, "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain," nih.gov, December 1, 2013, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3868356/>.

9. "Reading 'can help reduce stress,'" telegraph.co.uk, March 30, 2009, accessed January 23, 2018, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/5070874/Reading-can-help-reduce-stress.html>.

10. Ryan Holiday, "How to Digest Books Above Your 'Level' and Increase Your Intelligence," medium.com, January 17, 2008, <https://medium.com/personal-growth/how-to-digest-books-above-your-level-and-increase-your-intelligence-a11bd134da13>.

11. Alice Calch, "How Writing Influences the Brain," *finerminds.com*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.finerminds.com/mind-power/how-writing-influences-brain>.

12. Stephen King, *On Writing*, (New York: Scribner, 2010).  
13. Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, (Oxford: Wiley, 2011), xii.

---



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

