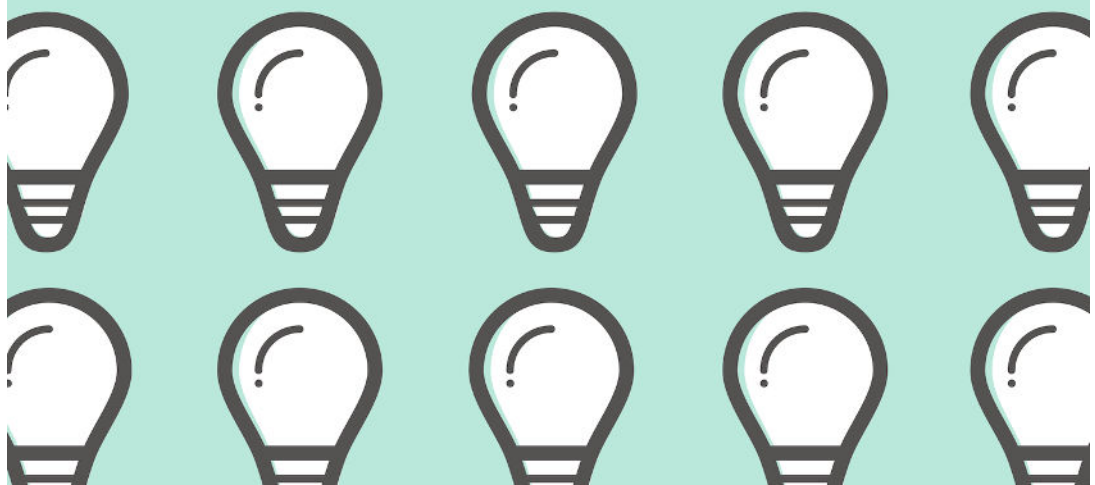


HOW TO GET AHEAD
& STAY AHEAD

READ STRATEGICALLY

By Cory J. Miller



HOW TO READ
STRATEGICALLY

CORY J. MILLER

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INTRODUCTION

I had an inglorious beginning in the business world.

In 2006 I was sitting in an office in suburban Oklahoma City. This office had a borrowed, once forgotten desk and two doors on either end. I say office, but it was kind of a pass-through room that became my office.

Here I was: a glorified copy machine operator.

Prior to that, I had undertaken the scary task of managing a part-time person, James. We ... he, was awesome. He was essentially a grad assistant working on his masters and he basically trained and tutored me — a peer who had the title — for that job and told me how to master the basics.

However, by 2008, with luck, opportunity, and a ton of hard work, I started iThemes, a company that initially provided commercial templates (“themes”) for WordPress. Over the next 10 years I held on for one heck of a ride.

Today iThemes has around 20 team members in 7 states across 4 countries. They are a truly remarkable team of passionate, commit-

ted, and talented people. They work together to do great things for our community and to go far together. We've had some great products installed on millions of sites. And, as a result of all of our hard work, in January 2018 we were acquired by Liquid Web, a premier hosting company.

In that decade together, what I'm most proud of is that we've made people's lives awesome.

* * *

So how did I overcome my beginnings to run a successful business of my own?

Here today I'll share one of my most powerful secret weapons with you. It's been one of the essential components of all my success. I couldn't have spent the last decade starting and growing a multi-million dollar company with thousands of customers and popular software products without it.

This secret is not just for entrepreneurs and leaders (although I feel it's an essential skill for them as well), but also for aspiring, emerging, or rookie leaders, managers, and professionals who have ambitions and dreams for something bigger and better.

It's for anyone who wants to get an edge, to get ahead and stay ahead, to be looking around corners, to level up their game, to mind the gaps between where they are now and where they want to go.

And I believe it's one of the most important investments you can make in your own life and career.

My secret weapon of success?

I read.

I read voraciously.

All the time.

BUT I'm not talking about the ordinary run of the mill reading that's typically unfocused and passive. I'm talking about a new

method of reading, on a whole different level, one with laser precision focus and supreme efficiency of purpose. I'm talking about MY process of reading: **Reading Strategically.**

It's not just about reading. It's not just about reading more books. It's about reading better. And this is how I do it.

PART ONE

WHY YOU SHOULD READ STRATEGICALLY

Reading Strategically is a completely different way to approach reading and has been the catalyst for success and happiness in every area of my life. Period. Along with the help of many others, I have achieved everything I have to date in my career and business, book by book, consistently — almost religiously — through every challenge, problem, and situation I've encountered.

Simply put, Reading Strategically has changed my life.

It has made me money, helped me become more influential and impactful, more confident, more creative, gotten me out of tight spots, pushed me to think bigger, better, and bolder ... and, yes, become a better husband, father, leader, friend and human.

Books are magic.

For \$20 or less, paid one-time, I get invaluable help from experts. I get their best work and ideas vetted, edited, and curated to communicate succinctly in one package of distilled wisdom, and all on my timeline, when I need it.

I get instant access to the best mentors and experts who I can

consult for almost any challenge or need 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. No wrangling schedules or pay again and again for a session. My library is my personal Board of Directors, my Counsel of Elders, my School of Tutors and Teachers.

Now, you might be thinking, “Sure, books are indeed magic, but who has the time to read, let alone to read them cover to cover?” Not me, that’s for sure. I read for the cheat codes!

ONE

I READ FOR THE CHEAT CODES!

Cheat codes? Yes, the cheat codes. Those little bits of information that apply to your specific quest. Still unsure about the concept of cheat codes? A more glamorous description of Reading Strategically would be: **Reading with precision for ideas and inspiration.**

They're the treasures, the knowledge, contained within the books I seek out and read that answer my question, fill my need, and help me move to the next level.

Here are the key ideas and inspiration I'm looking for from the books I choose:

- Stories and Case Studies
- Quotes
- Mindsets
- Courage and Confidence
- Strength and Resilience
- Creativity
- Attitudes

- Perspectives
- Formulas
- Frameworks
- Models
- Templates
- Methods
- Processes
- Approaches

All of these are the treasures I've found within books that I seek to use in my daily life, information that helps me achieve my goals.

PART TWO

THE 6 KEYS TO READING
STRATEGICALLY

Now that you know **WHAT** you're looking for, we can move into **HOW** to find it. What follows are the essential keys and tips I cultivated to accomplish Reading Strategically.

TWO

HAVE THE RIGHT READING TOOL

To find treasure, you need the right equipment and Reading Strategically is no different. In order to take advantage of the speed and convenience that Reading Strategically offers, you've gotta have the right reading tool. And the best tool for finding and reading books ever invented (so far) is an e-reader. Of all the options, I prefer the **Amazon Kindle**.

You may be thinking, "But I love the feel of print." Yeah, me too. But physical books aren't always efficient (one of the core elements of Reading Strategically is efficiency) and a big part of efficiency is access.

Years ago, I made the transition to fully embrace e-books and haven't looked back. Not only am I able to take my 800+ library with me everywhere I go (generally reading on my iPhone), but the software tools are vastly superior to, and more efficient than, thumbing through a book to find or recall something. All that said, for the best books I still at times buy the physical copy, what author Seth Godin calls the "souvenir" edition, to put on my office shelf. Sometimes you

just can't beat a copy you can see and touch and flip through, especially if you intend to return to it again and again.

But, back to e-readers. I want to share an important distinction about what the Amazon Kindle really is. It's not just the devices. It's so much more.

The Kindle is **a reading platform.**

Specifically, the Kindle is THE best tool I've found for Reading Strategically that is currently on the market. And for our purposes, I'm talking about the free Kindle reading apps for iPhone and Android ... and additionally the often unknown, underused, Amazon Cloud Reader for your desktop or laptop. Not only does it allow you to access your own library, but you can also download samples of books to test drive them before buying.

ACTION ITEM: Install the Kindle app on your phone today!

BENEFIT: Take your library everywhere you go!

Another feature it has that I value is One-Click buying. If you don't already have this set up, enable One-Click buying on your Amazon account. That streamlines the entire process by allowing you to make a purchase and instantly start reading on your Kindle apps.

THREE

KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

Once you have the right tool for the job, now you can put it to work. Assuming you know where to start that is. To understand that, we need to dive into how to identify and choose the right books to read strategically. This might seem overwhelming, what with all the books out there, but it's really just about approaching it with the right mindset and being clear about what you're looking for or want to accomplish.

Simply put, you have to approach it like an explorer. You are looking for treasure after all.

To start, you have to determine what you're looking for. Specifically, being clear on the issue, challenge, gap, situation, problem you're looking for help on OR looking to solve. That's what makes Reading Strategically different from just reading. You're reading with a purpose, a goal, to be or do something more than you currently are.

There's a simple formula and mindset to think about when looking for books to Read Strategically. It's called: **If This, Then That.**

You likely already have something on your mind, some gaps in your knowledge or capability, some edge you want to get or a struggle you're dealing with or working through. That's the **If This** part.

My If This can typically be categorized by.

- Gaps
- Challenges
- Problems
- Situations

The **Then That** part is what you're looking for in a book. That book will, hopefully, help you with the ideas and inspiration to solve, fill in, or answer your **If This** with action. You're searching for the help, solutions, and answers — the cheat codes — in whatever book you found.

But searching becomes groping blindly in the dark unless you've determined the **If This** part. Without a clear direction, you'll stray into buying and reading a book that might not meet your need at the moment. The best books — the right books — make clear and compelling arguments. They arm you with perspectives, ideas, language and, yes, even confidence for what you're trying to do or become.

I'll give you an example.

In 2008, our first year of business, our team grew to four people. Prior to that, as I previously mentioned, I had only managed a part-time person for a limited season of time. And essentially that part-time person could have done my job and trained me!

So in the first year, I was faced with the prospect of becoming a manager fast. I lacked knowledge and experience, which meant I also lacked the confidence needed to be a good manager of others. I needed some help, guidance, and direction, and in a very short

amount of time. Oh, and I also didn't have the money or contacts to hire a coach or trainer.

That was the If This part.

What did I do? I went exploring ... searching for a book or books to help me level up, catch up, and be "good enough" to manage our team. Ultimately, I needed to buy some time to learn and improve.

What I found has been invaluable. The book, **12: The Elements of Great Managers**, provided me with some of the critical answers and help that I still use to this day. That one book helped shaped how we led and managed our team for years.

Here's just one example of how that book profoundly shaped the way I led and how we formed our culture and values around it.

The 10th element in the book is "A best friend at work." As I read this chapter, it deeply resonated with me personally. I reflected on my past work experiences and if I had had a best friend at work. If so, how had it enriched my work and commitment and passion for that job.

And, yeah, in several cases, I could recall, fondly, some names of people who were definitely my best friend at work. Not just the names, but also how that friendship enriched the time for me and made my work better.

It led me to ask myself, "Could we create an environment with consistent practices that encouraged our team to be friends? To enjoy each other's company and make the work so much richer and better?"

The answer is nuanced and we implemented some practical steps like inviting everyone to voluntary monthly nighttime get-togethers, but the concept and idea was Let's try to encourage an environment where we can spend quality time with our coworkers and enhance the opportunities for personal connection and belonging ... off the clock, so to speak.

To my delight, most of our team regularly showed up for these hangouts and in fact looked forward to them as one of the highlights of their month. It was just a relaxed, non-work focused time to talk

about TV shows or other personal interests or, yeah, sometimes complain about customers.

Without having a defined need, a solid If This, I wouldn't have been able to find the book that had the answers (the Then That) my team needed, uncover them in a timely manner, and be ready to implement them and improve everyone's work experience.

FOUR

DISCOVERING THE RIGHT BOOKS TO READ

Now that you know what need or goal you want to fulfill, it's time to determine where to begin your search. The answer's out there somewhere, someone else has had the same problem or question, but just where DO you look to find it? Fortunately, you have a multitude of resources available to you.

For one, if I'm lucky, another author has acknowledged a book that will help. Some of the best books I've found are mentioned within other really incredible books, in the footnotes or otherwise referenced or quoted in the text. So, pay attention! Don't miss out on this opportunity as you read.

Think about it: When an author quotes another book and author, and does so several times, I know I'm onto something and quickly look it up on Amazon, putting the book in my WishList or downloading the sample on my Kindle so I can return to it later.

When I don't have a good lead on a book for my need, another option is to go to Google and enter the phrase of the issue/situation/challenge/gap I'm seeking help for and see what turns up. That

search and scan typically unearths some leads for potentially useful books.

If you still need help, I created ReadStrategically.com to aid in discovering better books to read, all based on what I'm sharing here. I find books in all kinds of places from going straight to Amazon and searching topics, to recommendations from friends I trust, my "Good Reads" list of people on Twitter, and of course blogs, magazine, websites, and podcasts I follow.

FIVE

CHOOSE THE RIGHT BOOK TO READ

So, here you are. Deep in the hunt for the answer that meets your need. You now have some ideas for WHERE to look for books, so let's talk specifically about HOW to pick the right books to read. There are some gritty elements to determining if you've found the right book to purchase before you actually take the time to read it.

First, when I find a book possibility, I go to the book's sales page on Amazon.com. Once there, I look at the Title and Subtitle and ask:

Does this speak to me? Does it resonate with what I'm looking for?

If it does, I'll glance at the Reviews under the Title, noting how many reviews and the average review score of the book. Most good books I find and purchase typically average around 30-40 reviews (although I've found gems that had 5-10 reviews). Think of reviews and the amount of reviews as a type of social filtering. When others share their experience with the book you're considering, there's value in seeing what they have to say.

Once I've looked those over and like what I see, I go straight to the Table of Contents. This part is essential. The Table of Contents

is the quick map to the treasure buried within the book. It often tells me instantly if the book is worth my time and helps me find what I'm searching for. While I agree that you should never judge a book by its cover, to effectively Read Strategically, you should **ALWAYS judge a book by its Table of Contents.**

If done well, the Table of Contents shows me exactly where the gold is in the book. But if it's fluffy and abstract, or the author's trying to be cute, I usually get frustrated. What I was hoping would help, ends up taking more work to discern if it meets my goal and removes the efficiency from the process.

The job of the Table of Contents is important. It directs me EXACTLY where I want to go. After all, it is my map. So, the most important thing I do on the book's sales page is click on the "Look Inside" book cover and go straight to the Table of Contents.

Sadly, Amazon's system isn't perfect. Because the company makes its sales volume primarily through fiction sales, too often nonfiction books don't get the love and care they deserve. Unfortunately, some Kindle books still don't have their Table of Contents properly setup in the apps, which is frustrating and a waste of time.

But all hope is not lost! If I can't get to the Table of Contents in the Kindle version (which is sometimes the case), I'll click over to the Print version and look at the sales page for the physical book. This is often the better way to investigate the Table of Contents before deciding to purchase. And for some books, in the Print version preview, you can actually click and read several chapters of the book. However in the Kindle preview version, it's usually just the Table of Contents and Introduction.

So, just what am I looking for in the Table of Contents? I look to see what chapters are of particular interest to me and try to read segments from those. If I still need convincing, I move on to the Introduction or Preface.

Second only to the Table of Contents, the Introduction is a more verbose map of the book (or should be if the book is written well).

The Introduction is essentially the overview of the book, where the author unpacks each section and what is covered in those sections. There's so much information to be gained in a most efficient manner. As I read, I'm able to make mental notes of how the book is laid out and the overview of the argument the author is seeking to make.

This phase is all about deciding if the book is right for me and my situation. By taking the time to preview the Table of Contents and Introduction and as many chapters as I can, I get a solid idea of whether this book will meet my needs. It's the critical make or break point when choosing a book I want to Read Strategically.

If you still need more than the Table of Contents and Introduction have provided, one other place to glean information is the Endorsements. I'll skim the Endorsements, sometimes to see if I recognize names, but more so for the titles of people who have endorsed the book.

I'm not so much interested in what they have to say about the book (after all, they were chosen because they're flattering, right?), but more so in who the author has asked to put THEIR name on the book. There's a big difference between having their mom endorse the book and a Ph.D. expert on the subject or well-known author who writes in the same category. We'll talk more about healthy skepticism in Reading Strategically later on, but I do approach the Endorsements with a skeptical eye.

Finally, if I need a push over the top, or have been frustrated by the Preview information, I'll go to the Customer Reviews. I'll read the top, or comment voted most helpful, first. Often I'm looking for the information I would have found in the missing Table of Contents or the book's organization here. A good review tells me the If This, Then That formula and shares outcomes, changes, and the help the book gave them.

I'll also skim the 1-Star Reviews. Please know, I'm not a fan of trolls. And there are plenty of trolls in all kinds of reviews. But not all people who leave 1-Star Reviews are trolls. Sometimes 1-Star

Reviews are a result of misinformed expectations about what the book was intended to do. But sometimes, if you're lucky, they highlight legitimate problems with the book.

If I end up here, I just want to see if there is a theme that can expose the book's flaws. Occasionally, you'll find a title and content mismatch. Maybe there's too much fluff, not enough examples, or more of the "same old stuff." Those kinds of reviews are flags to me, but I weigh them with everything else I've learned about the book and how well it matches my situation or need.

Once I've been sufficiently convinced that this book may hold the answer that I need, it's time to buy it. If not, I continue my hunt. If I find a great book I'm eager to read, but it doesn't fit the season or moment of need I'm in, I'll either buy it and tuck into my library, OR add it to my Amazon WishList for later.

SIX
SCAN TO DISSECT BOOKS

Finally it's time to dig for that treasure that's going to change your life. You've picked up a new tool, decided on your goal, and found a book that shows promise. However, you might also be thinking, "I've read books before. What makes Reading Strategically unique?"

We don't read the book cover to cover.

Wait, what! Conventional wisdom suggests that to properly read a book we have to read from the copyright notices to the appendix and every sentence and paragraph in between.

But that's how you read fiction.

When you're looking for cheat codes, which is the basis of Reading Strategically, reading a book from cover to cover is a misuse and waste of your finite and valuable time. You won't get maximum results by insisting on that. Frankly, it's the wrong mindset and approach to reading this type of nonfiction book.

People so often ask me, and yes, rhetorically, "How do you read so many books?" Well, this is my answer: **I don't read books; I use books.**

For my purposes here, I don't read them like a novel. I search them to find and extract what I need. I don't insist on checking some box and playing some ego game that says, "Look at me, I read every single page of that book! Aren't I awesome?!"

Read books with precision, with your end goal in mind, not to win Trivial Pursuit. The idea here is focused learning and application versus amassing a library of information in your brain that allows you to be a walking version of Wikipedia.

However, don't be alarmed. I'm not saying that context is irrelevant. Some books require more reading so you grasp more context or you can miss the point altogether. But for nonfiction, if a book is written, edited, and organized well, each chapter can be (and should be!) a self-standing piece of content.

Unless the argument the author is making is more complex and interconnected, context isn't always necessary. But it's usually obvious when it is. Sometimes, I'll go straight to a chapter and realize I need to take a step backward. I move to the previous chapter before going forward and it all falls into place. It's just usually clear that I've missed something.

But overall, we're reading with precision.

We're on a focused mission to find just the information we need that holds the answers, help, solutions, ideas, and inspiration to whatever we're working through. We've determined the location to dig for our treasure and like before when we were deciding on where to look, we consult our map: **The Table of Contents and Introduction.**

Once the book is in my library, I go straight to the Table of Contents and start clicking on chapters that resonate with me, that seem like they'll hold the information I'm looking for. If after a couple of paragraphs in a chapter I feel off track, I'll click back to the Table of Contents and try another one. A couple of click-throughs like this

and I've got a feel for how I'll attack the book and how I want to dissect it.

Another great place to dig for answers is the book's Popular Highlights in Kindle. Popular Highlights are the result of crowdsourcing at its best and finest. This shows how many people have highlighted a section and what bubbled up as key resonating facets of the book. Popular Highlights are like following a trail of people who have gone ahead of you and pointed out all the good stuff in the book.

Now, I don't rely totally on Popular Highlights, but it's a great way to see what has surfaced as the material in the book — what resonates with others — and I love it. It gives me even more direction in reading the book precisely and strategically.

Once I've reviewed the Popular Highlights, which will likely only take a few minutes, I pick my first chapter to dig into and Read Strategically.

SEVEN

ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS READ FOR
ACTION

We've reached the spot where it's time to put this philosophy to work. Remember: Reading Strategically is ALL about transferring what you read into action and application.

Once you get to the actual reading of the book, it's time to put what you've unearthed to work for you. You wouldn't gather your tools, traipse through the jungle, dig deep in the heat and the bugs just to haul up the chest, take a look inside, and bury it back in the ground. Well, I know I wouldn't.

Instead, you want to take the ideas and inspiration you've unearthed and use them as a foundation for growth and change in your life. **If you miss the application part of reading, you've missed the entire approach to Reading Strategically.**

If you're not reading to find information you can test, apply, experiment and act on, you're doing another kind of reading. Maybe it's reading to catalog information, reading as entertainment or to recharge, or reading to become the next champion on Jeopardy. Those are all good and appropriate forms of reading, but not what

I'm advocating here. Simply reading to have read — and thinking somehow just by reading a book you'll start to magically produce growth and results in your life — is wishful thinking.

Again ... don't read books, *use* books. Read to get results. Read to make small experiments in your life that test how the information you found functions and uncovers what results you get.

My goal, our goal, is to do or be something more than I am today. That means application, testing, and experimenting with what I find. Acting on the ideas and inspiration — the cheat codes — to see how they work in my life and what better results I can get from them. And the best way to choose what information to do this with while reading is to consistently ask: **How can I use this tomorrow?**

While anchored firmly in the challenge, situation, or problem, you're looking to glean ideas and inspiration for action and application. You're translating what you've read into action plans. You're reading for forward momentum, something you can implement, not to stay in place.

That way after you've read a book and cultivated the ideas into action you can say, "After I read X [Book], I did Y [Action] and got Z [Results]."

In every situation, I'm reading with awareness of the issues, challenges, or gaps (my If This) I currently have and looking for creative ideas and inspiration to make changes and action (my Then That). Thus, as I'm reading, I'll highlight key concepts, ideas, quotes that I can turn into action and application.

(Side note: the Highlighting and Notes features are another fantastic reason why I recommend using the Kindle as a reading platform and why it is installed on all my devices.)

I also have my digital journal handy to record those ideas and inspirations I don't want to forget. (Because it's already on my devices, I use DayOne on my iPhone and Mac.) If I don't do this, I know I likely won't retain all the ideas I've unearthed from my reading. Particularly since I'm often reading at night and want to capture

and remember the ideas I've gotten, this added tool helps me save them for later when I can implement them.

Another way I take action is to fire off an email to a team member for follow-up. Other times, particularly if I'm reading on my computer via Amazon's CloudReader, I jot down ideas into a mind map (I use MindNode on Mac) which I can apply to the gap, challenge, issue, or topic I'm working on. ALL for the purpose of implementation. To capture what I've learned, the inspiration I've gleaned, and to put into action at the next possible opportunity I have.

CONCLUSION

OK, so there it is: my secret formula and mindset for success by Reading Strategically.

By implementing these six simple steps, you can approach books with a new perspective. No longer does the length matter. By digging in with purpose and precision, you can uncover just what you need with a minimum of expended resources.

I hope it's been helpful to you.

I'd love to hear your feedback as always. You can email me at cory@corymiller.com. And remember to sign up for the ReadStrategically.com email.

NOW ...

Go read your way to success, just like me!

