

BY JEFFREY L. GRINDE JR.

Too Many Books, Too Little Time

Three books every young attorney should read
(and quick lessons for those who want summaries).

I WRITE THIS ENTERING INTO MY LAST FEW WEEKS AS A FIRST-YEAR ASSOCIATE. There have been many ups, many downs, and a lot of in-betweens. Our roles as junior associates are numerous, but we are not learning from scratch. Plenty of others came before us—some as lawyers, some in other fields. Thankfully, a few have put pen to paper and shared insights they learned along their endeavors. As a young lawyer, I have been trying to find various ways to learn from other people's successes and failures, and one of the best ways of doing so is through reading what is already out there.

A large part of what lawyers are paid to do is to read, write, and think. When we get home, it can be difficult to find the time—much less the desire—for more reading, writing, and thinking. But this is worth doing. What follows is a summary of three books I highly recommend every junior associate read. None focuses on the law. Rather, they focus on writing, thinking, and living well. What follows is not meant to encapsulate everything you need to know about each book. Rather, the goal is to provide digestible lessons you can think deeply about and incorporate into your life as an attorney.

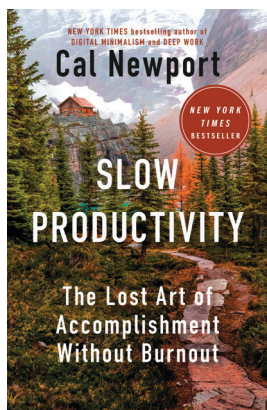
ISBA RESOURCES >>

- Benjamin R. Lawson, *Avoiding Hustle Culture in the Practice of Law*, General Practice, Solo & Small Firm (Sept. 2022), law.isba.org/3Gp7jPG.
- Kayla M. Hickey, *Top Five Ways To Improve Productivity in the New Year*, YLDNews (Feb. 2022), law.isba.org/3EEmrpb.
- ISBA, Pointers From Practice HQ, Wellness/Work-Life Balance, isba.org/practicehq/worklifebalance.



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Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout

By Cal Newport
Portfolio, Penguin Random House (Mar. 2025)
256 pages, \$30

“[S]trive to reduce your obligations to the point where you can easily imagine accomplishing them with time to spare. Leverage this reduced load to more fully embrace and advance the small number of projects that matter most.”

I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH CAL

NEWPORT’S work when I was an undergraduate student. His blog, Study Hacks (calnewport.com/blog), provides invaluable advice and recommendations to college students and made me a better student while reducing stress. His background is a testament to what an ambitious person can accomplish with enough forethought and planning. While a doctoral candidate at MIT, he wrote three books about student success that collectively sold more than 500,000 copies.¹ He has written more than 20 New Yorker articles in the past five years, writes a weekly well-read blog, and publishes highly cited academic papers.² He practices what he preaches.

While I recommend young lawyers read some of his earlier work, particularly “So Good They Can’t Ignore You,” “Deep Work,” and “A World Without Email,” my focus here is how to accomplish a significant amount of high-quality work without losing steam. Newport defines slow productivity as “a philosophy of organizing knowledge work efforts in a sustainable and meaningful manner” based on three principles: 1) doing fewer things; 2) working at a natural pace; and 3) obsessing over quality.³

The book explores how to use these three principles to build a successful professional life at a sustainable pace. Newport challenges readers to: ... rescue knowledge work from its increasingly untenable freneticism and rebuild it into something sustainable and humane, enabling you to create things you’re proud of without requiring you to grind yourself down along the way.⁴

Newport contends that much of knowledge work today has been transformed from doing the work we are paid to do to planning and talking about doing it.⁵ This is partly because knowledge workers have no agreed-upon definition of what “productivity” even means.⁶ Newport points out how unusual it is that an economic sector as large as knowledge work lacks useful, standard definitions of productivity.⁷

Without a standard definition of productivity, a simple alternative has emerged: “... using visible activity as a crude proxy for actual productivity. If you can see me in the office ... or ... see my email replies and chat messages arriving regularly—then at the very least, you know I’m doing something.”⁸ Newport defines this phenomenon as pseudo-productivity: relying on visible activity to demonstrate actual productive effort.⁹ He then lays the groundwork for arguing how and why his three principles can be used to alleviate the problem of pseudo-productivity.

Newport begins by discussing what it means to do fewer things. He wants us to “strive to reduce your obligations to the point where you can easily imagine accomplishing them with time to spare. Leverage this reduced load to more fully embrace and advance the small number of projects that matter most.”¹⁰ To do so, he proposes that we apply limits at different scales of work at the same time, from overarching missions to ongoing projects to daily goals.¹¹

A mission is “any ongoing goal or service that directs your professional life.”¹² His challenge is to limit yourself to three missions. For some young attorneys, this might mean defining their overarching missions as, “do the work that I am assigned well and stay sane in the process.” Another might say, “learn how to be a good associate and lawyer, and lay the groundwork for building business farther down the road.” What they should not say is, “learn how to be a world-class negotiator, trial lawyer, rainmaker, conference presenter, and on-air personality.” (My missions are to learn how to be an effective associate, meet other lawyers at all levels to learn from their experiences, and become more involved in outside organizations. Much like spending time with nonlaw students proved to be a refreshing experience in law school, spending time with nonlawyers helps remind me that there is a wider world beyond the realm of statutes and courts.)

Newport recommends several strategies for tackling projects at a natural pace. Newport defines projects as work-related initiatives that cannot be completed in a single session.¹³ Junior associates are well familiar with projects like drafting motions, researching caselaw, and abstracting depositions. Newport proposes an idea that I have tried to implement:

When considering a new project, you estimate how much time it will require and then *go find that time and schedule it on your calendar*. If you’re unable to find enough blank spaces in your schedule in the near future to easily fit the work, then you don’t

1. Curriculum Vitae, CALNEWPORT.COM, available at [law.isba.org/42oohGu](https://www.isba.org/42oohGu) (last visited Apr. 23, 2025).

2. *Id.*

3. CAL NEWPORT, SLOW PRODUCTIVITY: THE LOST ART OF ACCOMPLISHMENT WITHOUT BURNOUT 8 (2024).

4. *Id.* at 9.

5. *Id.* at 15.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* at 16.

8. *Id.* at 20–21.

9. *Id.* at 22.

10. *Id.* at 53.

11. *Id.* at 69.

12. *Id.* at 70.

13. *Id.* at 72.

have enough time for it. The power of this approach is that you're dealing with the reality of your time, not a gut feeling about how busy you are at the moment.¹⁴

Of course, this assumes we know how long something will take. Oftentimes, we don't. Additionally, this does not account for the unexpected nature of some of our work. As a litigator, I don't get as many surprises as my transactional friends. But taking a few moments to plan out how to allocate your hours frees up mental space to focus on the work at hand.

Newport also recommends replacing asynchronous communication with real-time conversations during office hours and "docket-clearing" meetings.¹⁵ With the proliferation of email, Teams, and Slack messages:

Office collaboration was transformed into an ongoing, haphazard bazaar of asynchronous, back-and-forth messaging—a colleague asks you to handle something, you reply to clarify what he means, you then write another colleague to gather the needed information, but based on her response, you realize you don't fully understand the task, so you send a new message to the original requester, and so on. Multiply these drawn-out interactions by dozens of concurrent open loops, and

soon you're spending most of your time managing conversations, not executing individual tasks.¹⁶

Newport likes using docket-clearing meetings to reduce asynchronous communication:

During these sessions, your team churns through any pending tasks that require collaboration or clarification. The group moves through the tasks one at a time, figuring out for each what exactly needs to be done, who is working on it, and what information they need from others.¹⁷

He proposes sharing a document formatted as a list that everyone can add to before the next meeting.¹⁸ A partner at my firm has been phenomenal about implementing these meetings. Rather than shooting 10, 20, or 50 emails back and forth, the team saves its questions and takes care of them all at once. This saves everyone time, energy, and money.

The third principle, obsessing over quality, requires improving your taste, which is tough to define but critical for achieving quality work. "It can be daunting to directly study great work in your profession, as you already know too much about it," Newport writes. "Confronting the gap between what the masters produce and

your current capabilities is disheartening."¹⁹ The solution is to study an unrelated field so that "the pressure is reduced, and you can approach the topic with a more playful openness."²⁰

I chose to study the very basics of photography. I cannot write like U.S. Supreme Court Justices Kagan and Gorsuch, nor take photos like Ansel Adams. But exploring and experimenting in the realm of photography feels different and less burdensome than mastering the law. I have come to appreciate Newport's insight that developing your taste in one field primes your brain to do the same in others. If you have been contemplating some sort of creative endeavor outside of law, whether that be acting, watching or making films, painting, or drawing, consider getting started and seeing how developing your taste in that new pursuit enriches other areas of your life.

14. *Id.* at 74.

15. *Id.* at 86.

16. *Id.* at 87–88.

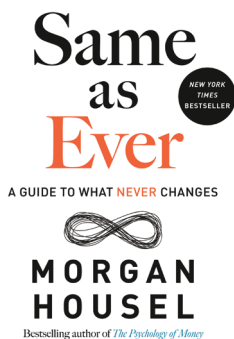
17. *Id.* at 89.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* at 188.

20. *Id.*

"Timeless lessons about money, life, storytelling, ambition, and satisfaction.
A library's worth of wisdom." —DEREK THOMPSON, *The Atlantic*



Same as Ever: A Guide to What Never Changes

By Morgan Housel
Portfolio, Penguin Random House (Nov. 2023)
240 pages, \$30

MORGAN HOUSEL IS ONE OF THE PREEMINENT FINANCE WRITERS OF OUR ERA.

While I also highly recommend his "Psychology of Money," the focus of "Same as Ever" is different from most of his other books. Rather than contemplating what sorts of things are going to change in the near and distant future, and how to predict that better than anyone else, Housel takes the opposite approach: "This is a book of short stories about what never changes in a changing world."²¹

Housel presents 23 lessons relayed in approachable, memorable stories. Of my two favorites, the first is "Too Much, Too Soon, Too Fast: A Good Idea on Steroids Quickly Becomes a Terrible Idea."²² Housel claims that whenever people discover something valuable, they tend to ask, "Great, but can I have it all faster? Can we push it twice as hard? Can we make it twice the size? Can we squeeze some more juice out of it? It's a natural question, and understandable."²³ But Housel suggests everything has an ideal size and growth rate.²⁴ Pushing beyond them is when things fall apart.

Housel uses tree saplings as a helpful example. They spend decades slowly growing under the shade of their mother's canopy. If one is planted in the open, it grows too quickly. "Fast growth leads to soft, airy wood that never had time to

"This is a book of short stories about what never changes in a changing world."

21. MORGAN HOUSEL, *SAME AS EVER: A GUIDE TO WHAT NEVER CHANGES 2* (2023).

22. *Id.* at 88.

23. *Id.* (internal quotations omitted).

24. *Id.*

densify. And soft, airy wood is a breeding ground for fungus and disease.”²⁵

Likewise, young lawyers pressured to do too much too quickly in their career may develop specific skills quicker, but those skills can be disconnected from strategy and wisdom. Or it might not make sense for a client to pay a large firm to take on a matter when a boutique firm can get the job done more effectively and inexpensively. Conversely, massive transaction should not be handled by a three-person firm. Everything has an ideal size and an ideal growth rate. Push past those limits at your own peril. As Housel states, “Most great things in life—from love to careers to investing—gain their value from two things: patience and

scarcity. Patience to let something grow, and scarcity to admire what it grows into.”²⁶

My second favorite chapter is “Elation and Despair: Progress Requires Optimism and Pessimism To Coexist.”²⁷ As lawyers, we’re often thought to be professional pessimists. That may well be true. But we need to be optimists, too. “The trick in any field—from finance to careers to relationships,” Housel writes, “is being able to survive the short-term problems so you can stick around long enough to enjoy the long-term growth.”²⁸

Housel relays how Bill Gates insisted on having enough cash in the bank to keep Microsoft alive for 12 months with no revenue coming in.²⁹ In any business, that

sort of conservatism is almost unheard of. But Housel observes “[w]hat Gates seems to get is that you can only be an optimist in the long run if you’re pessimistic enough to survive the short run.”³⁰

Any firm—especially those just starting out—should heed this lesson. The point is not to have a year’s worth of cash. Instead, remember that laws change, clients change, and attorneys change. Those short-term changes are trivial for firms that have sufficient reserves to endure a loss of revenue but disastrous for those that don’t. The name of the game is survival.

25. *Id.* at 93.

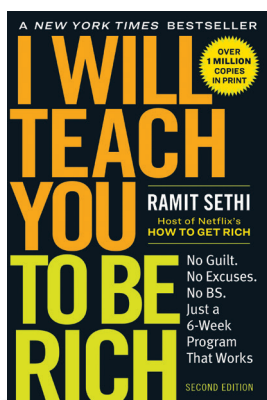
26. *Id.* at 95.

27. *Id.* at 127.

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.* at 126.

30. *Id.*



I Will Teach You To Be Rich

By Ramit Sethi
Workman Publishing
Company, Hachette Book
Group (Mar. 2023)
352 pages, \$16.99

“I WILL TEACH YOU TO BE RICH” IS SURELY AN ATTENTION grabber, but his understanding of what makes a rich life is worth exploring. When Sethi claims that he wants you to be “rich,” he means a rich life. To live a rich life, he advocates spending “extravagantly on the things you love and [cutting] costs mercilessly on the things you don’t.”³¹

Bookshelves, he notes, are filled with covers offering new ways to budget, save, cut costs, and invest. “Everybody talks about how to save money, but nobody teaches you how to spend it,” Sethi notes.³² To fix this problem, Sethi proposes a simple set of spending categories: fixed costs (50 to 60 percent); investments (retirement); savings goals (5 to 10 percent); and guilt-free spending (20 to 35 percent). From there, Sethi pushes you to be specific about how to use your guilt-free spending.³³

When people are asked, “Why do you want more?” common answers are “freedom” or “security.”³⁴ Those are fine, but Sethi challenges you to go deeper. “The problem is that high-level, vague visions never motivate us as much as we’d hope. True motivation is often real, concrete—on the street.”³⁵

I have concluded that what I most care about is spending money traveling and experiencing new places with the people I love and supporting organizations whose missions I believe in, like my alma mater Ripon College and Chicago Debates (chicagodebates.org). I don’t care about cars, Michelin-starred restaurants, and designer

“Everybody talks about how to save money, but nobody teaches you how to spend it.”

shoes. But some people do. Sethi’s point is that money is a tool at our disposal. Like any tool, money should be used to maximize your return on investment in terms of the happiness derived from spending it. It is a simple idea. But implementing it in my own life has been eye-opening.

I sincerely hope that you can take something away from these summaries and are inclined to check the books out yourself. I have not yet found a book club in Chicago that gathers to discuss books like these, so if you, too, are interested in such books and would like to regularly meet and discuss them, don’t hesitate to reach out to me. **[E]**

31. RAMIT SETHI, *I WILL TEACH YOU TO BE RICH* 27 (2d ed. 2019).

32. *Id.* at 147.

33. *Id.* at 279–80.

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*