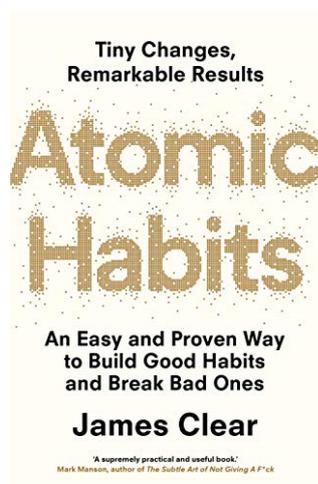


Atomic Habits



This book is based on the premise that real change occurs as a result of the compounding effect of hundreds of small decisions. Minuscule changes are easier to make and sustain and therefore are more likely to result in long-term, and even institutional, change.

A 1% change isn't particularly noticeable or sometimes it is not even noticeable, but it can be very meaningful in the long term. It's like compounding interest.

I've summarised some of the key ideas presented in the book from the perspective of helping improve students' literacy skills.[divider]

Forget about goals, focus on systems instead:

- The goal might be to learn to read or spell, but to achieve this goal you need to have the correct system in place.
- An effective system requires a repeated behaviour (i.e., a habit).
- It is the regular habit or practice that results in the goal being achieved.

Identity and habits are interlinked:

- It is easier to change and maintain habits if they are in alignment with your identity.
- In terms of literacy, this means you need to think of yourself as being a reader or a writer.
- Then ask yourself, "What would a reader or a writer do?" For example, a reader might read every night before turning out the light or always have a book available to read when waiting. If you are unsure, ask other people about the books their reading and when they read.
- This will guide your behaviour.
- Every action/behaviour that aligns with being a reader or writer (even something small like always carrying a book) reinforces your identity as a reader or writer – the ultimate form of intrinsic motivation.
- As part of identify development focus on attributes that are flexible over a range of activities. For example, I am the type of person who is resilient and keeps trying even when it is difficult **OR** I'm the type of person who likes a challenge and learning.
- As a parent look for instances when your child exhibits behaviours associated with this identity. "Wow, I was amazed at how long you practised hitting the ball even when you kept missing – you are so resilient."

The habit loop – four laws of behaviour change:

- Make it obvious.
- Make it attractive.
- Make it easy.
- Make it satisfying

Make it obvious:

- Link your new habit (reading) to an existing habit (e.g., waking up, taking a shower, brushing your teeth, eating afternoon snack, etc.).
- Make a specific plan indicating what you will do (behaviour), when you will do it (time) and where you will do it (location).
- Link the new habit to an existing habit.
- Example 1: I will learn spelling rules for 10 minutes after I have had my afternoon snack at the kitchen table.
- Example 2: I will read for 15 minutes after I have brushed my teeth and got into bed.
- Habit stack: As soon as I get up and make my bed, I will put the book I'm reading on my pillow. This means the book will be there as a reminder when you go to bed at night.
- Design the environment for success. For example, store books in a location where they are readily accessible and visible. Allocate a specific space for studying and have all the required supplies readily available (two pencils, eraser, markers, paper, etc.).
- If a particular space has been previously associated with negative behaviours, start afresh at a new location. For example, if you have previously done homework at the kitchen bench, change to desk in the study. If possible have a designated study space that is only used for study.
- Eliminate 'bad cues' by reducing exposure. For example, if your child comes home and turns on the television, unplug the television after every use and/or put the remote in a different location so your child has to ask for it. If technology, like smart phones is an issue, Invest in a filtering/control device such as Family Zone (<https://www.familyzone.com/au/families>) or use the parental controls for Apple devices (<https://support.apple.com/en-au/HT208982>).

Make it attractive:

- The more attractive the activity, the more likely it is to become habit forming.
- The anticipation of a reward (not the fulfilment of it) is more likely to lead to a feeling of desire and a craving to take action.
- Pair an action that you want to do with an action you need to do and include this in your habit stack.
- Example: After I eat my snack, I will spend 10 minutes learning my spelling rules. After I have spent 10 minutes learning my spelling rules, I will spend 10 minutes on Minecraft.
- Proximity has a powerful effect on behaviour as we pick up the habits of people around us. If you want your children to read then you need to regularly model reading, talk about books and how much you enjoy reading, and read to your child.
- Habits are about associations. Link the habit to positive associations. For example, cuddle your child as she/he reads, give your child a hug before you start homework.
- Change your vocabulary. Instead of saying, "You have to do your homework now", say 'Let's learn something new now.' This word shift transitions your child from perceiving the activity as a burden to one of opportunity.
- Take it a step further and create a motivational ritual. For example, before you do homework with your child, play a song you both enjoy and dance around the room together **or** have your child hug your pet dog **or** have a game of Orbit tennis or do something else your child enjoys (keep it short and sweet).

Make it easy:

- If you want to master a habit the key is to start with repetition not perfection. Initially, the homework routine might just be setting aside 30 minutes (or less) each day at the same time after the same cues or it might be reading for 10 minutes in bed each night. The key initially is to establish the habit even if the homework is not being completed or not much reading is occurring.
- Every action requires a certain amount of energy. The more energy required, the less likely the action will occur.
- You can think of a new habit as an obstacle to achieving what you really want. Learning how to spell individual words is an obstacle to writing coherently.
- The aim is to reduce friction and use less effort. You can do this by optimising your environment as discussed above and priming the environment (e.g., having all the pens, paper and books you will need – plus spares). At the same time you need to increase the friction associated with bad habits (e.g., put electronic devices out of sight).
- For particularly resistant children, start very small and make the habit as easy as possible. The starting point might be for the first week, the child sits down at the study desk and opens the book (following all the cue and motivational rituals discussed above). The aim is to have your child master the art of ‘starting’.
- With your child map out a progression from very easy to desirable – (1) sit down and open book, (2) complete one activity (or work for 5 minutes), (3) complete ½ the activities (or work for 15 minutes, (4) complete all the activities (or work for ½ hour)....
- As each task is mastered, move to the next level. It is important that that you stick to the agreed task. If the task is sitting down and opening the book, once this has been done, the child should be able to go.
- If you sit down at a study desk and open your book on 5 consecutive days you are building an identity of being the type of person who studies or likes learning.

Make it satisfying:

- We are more likely to repeat a behaviour when the experience is satisfying. However, it needs to be immediate satisfaction.
- The problem is that many of the choices we make today will not have an immediate benefit. Learning the skills associated with reading or spelling does not immediately result in the gratification associated with being a competent reader or a writer, rather it feels like a sacrifice.
- Choose a reward associated with the identity you are trying to develop. For example, when the child has completed the required activity, you read to them.
- Keep a visual progress tracker. Count how many activities need to be completed over a week (perhaps it is 5 activities each day which makes 25 activities over the week). Place 25 paper clips in a jar. Have another empty jar labelled ‘completed’. Each time an activity is finished, the child moves a paper clip into the ‘completed’ jar. Record how many paper clips are in the completed jar at the end of each week and try to improve.
- Set up a challenge of ‘not breaking the chain’. Use a month to a page type calendar. Every time the ‘homework’ is completed, place a tick on the day. The aim is to tick each day (it is important that your child does the ticking) during the month, even if the homework isn’t done completely or particularly well – something is better than nothing. Keep the calendar on the fridge or in a very visible location.
- There will be good days and bad days. Don’t let the bad days derail the habit. Just re-start the next day. Missing one day occasionally is not the problem. Missing twice or regularly not doing the homework is the beginning of a new (negative) habit!

- Set up an accountability contract between your child and a person with whom they have a good relationship (perhaps a grandparent). Each day the grandparent phones your child at a designated time to find out how they went with their homework. If your child does a particularly good job, they might make the phone call!

Final comment:

Changing behaviour is a continuous process. There is no finish line. There is no permanent solution. Every time you reach a 'bottle neck' you need to stop, reassess and modify your system. Small habits don't add up – they compound!

Reference

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: An easy and proven way to build good habits and break bad ones*. Penguin Random House: London, UK.