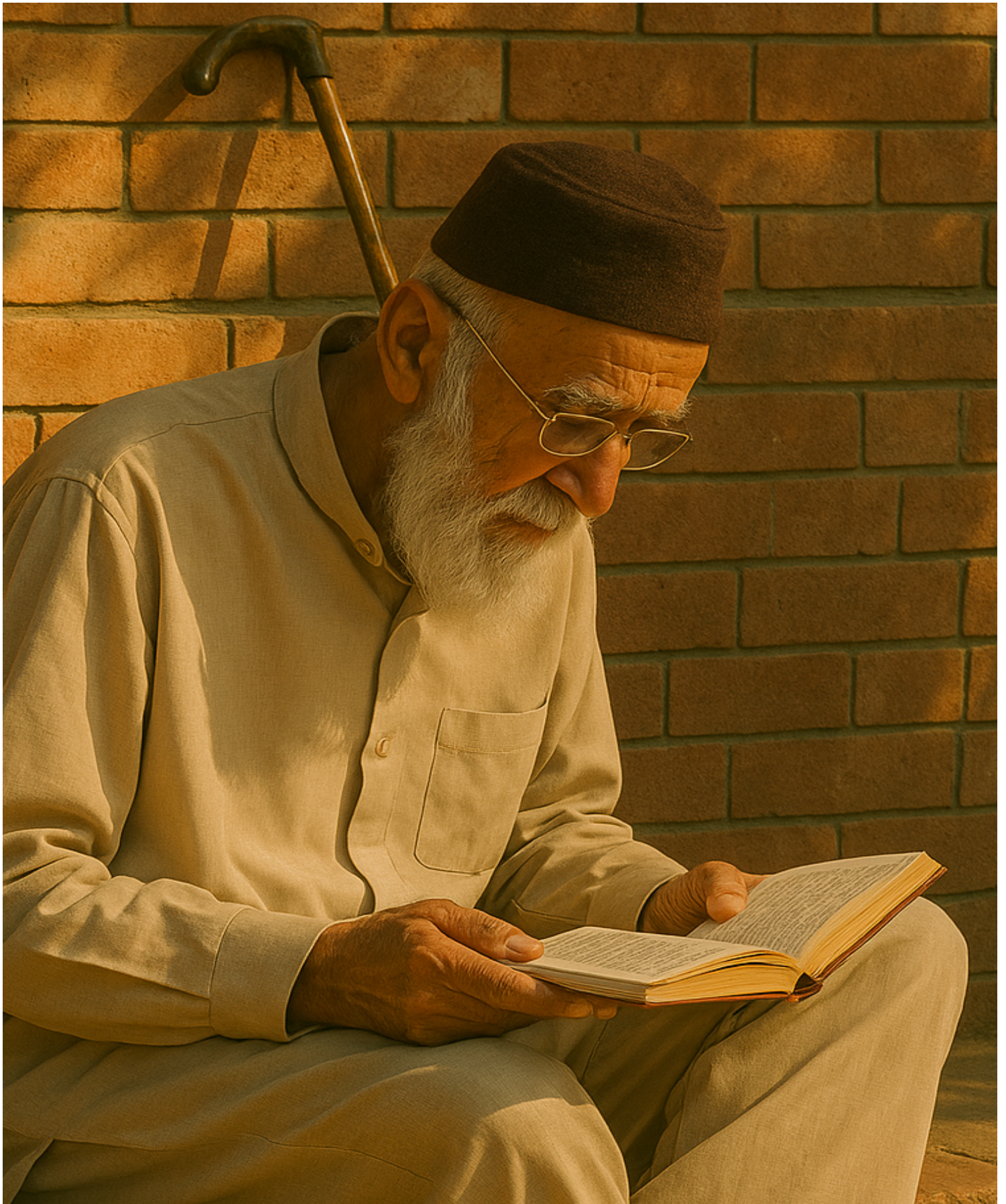


The Importance of Reading

A Perspective for the Young Muslim Mind



Introduction

The ability to read and engage with knowledge is one of the most distinctive features of human intelligence. Throughout history, reading has always played a crucial role in the intellectual, moral, and cultural development of societies, long before the rise of mass media. This is especially relevant for young Muslims today who are growing up in an age marked by information overload, cultural confusion, and shrinking attention spans. In such an environment, reading is no longer just a means of acquiring facts, but it develops the intellectual resilience necessary to navigate competing worldviews while maintaining a clear sense of identity.

It is no coincidence that the very first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through Angel Jibreel was "Read!"¹. This divine command laid the foundation for a civilization anchored in knowledge. Yet, today, that message feels more urgent than ever. The modern world abounds with content but often lacks depth and meaning. Social media, short-form videos, and algorithm-driven content have fundamentally altered how we process information, making it increasingly difficult to cultivate thoughtful, sustained reading habits. This cognitive shift has led to what many now refer to as "brain rot": a gradual erosion of concentration ability, depth of thought, and intellectual sharpness.

In response to this decline, various initiatives have emerged to revive reading culture, from aesthetic online communities like BookTok and Bookstagram² to public efforts such as open-access book-sharing cabinets and clever "Don't judge a book by its cover" campaigns. Yet, despite these well-intentioned efforts, reading today is often reduced to mere entertainment, turning books into essentially just Netflix shows in different packaging. Such programs may increase reading quantity, but do little to improve reading quality – and they rarely address why we read in the first place, let alone how we should evaluate content.

And yet, this distinction is vital because for a young, impressionable mind, what one reads – or fails to read – shapes one's worldview, moral compass, and ways of thinking. As a matter of fact, books are not neutral; they always carry assumptions, values, and ideas that gradually mold how we see ourselves and the world around us. When we recognize this power of the written word, we understand why reading with discernment and purpose becomes key.

Within this challenge, however, lies a tremendous opportunity. By reclaiming purposeful reading, young Muslims can develop a clarity of mind and spiritual depth that sets them apart in an increasingly distracted world, reconnecting them with their rich scholarly tradition.

Against this backdrop, this whitepaper explores several critical questions:

- How does the Islamic tradition view reading, and why does Allah ﷻ refer to the revelation as a “book”?
- What unique benefits does deep, intentional reading offer that digital consumption can never replace?
- How can we overcome the specific challenges facing young Muslims in developing meaningful reading habits?

In a time when superficial content dominates attention and passive consumption replaces contemplation, returning to meaningful reading is not just desirable, but it is necessary. This whitepaper aims to reignite a love for reading among young Muslims and demonstrate that books are not merely a pastime but a source of intellectual and spiritual steadfastness.

Important Disclaimer

While this whitepaper aims to encourage a reading habit in general, it is important to emphasize that not all reading is equally beneficial or meaningful. Contemporary reading trends, as previously noted in the introduction, often not only revolve around sheer entertainment but frequently glamorize values and lifestyles that stand in stark contrast to Islamic ethics and principles. Reading then risks becoming a form of escapism, a way to avoid serious questions about life, faith, morality, and meaning.

Although leisure reading certainly has its place, what we read and why we read matters deeply. It is for this reason that Islam recognizes a clear distinction between beneficial knowledge ('ilm nafi') and useless or harmful knowledge³. The Prophet ﷺ himself would seek refuge from knowledge that does not benefit, saying: "O Allah, I seek refuge with You from knowledge that does not benefit, from a heart that does not humble itself, from a soul that is never satisfied, and from a supplication that is not heard."⁴

Given the vast number of books available and the limited time each person has, it becomes crucial to select reading material with utmost intention and care. A meaningful reading habit is not measured by how many books one reads but by choosing the right ones. Quality reading nourishes both the mind and soul, and especially brings one closer to Allah ﷻ – which, in itself, should be the ultimate purpose of every action. Conversely, material that promotes falsehood, immorality, or causes ideological confusion ultimately leads one astray.

The Islamic Perspective on Reading

Islam places a distinctive emphasis on reading as a spiritually significant practice, not merely a means to an end, which is to acquire knowledge. The relationship between reading and faith reveals the unique position that texts and engagement with them hold in Islamic thought.

Islam Began With "Read"

From the very beginning, Islam linked faith with learning. The first word revealed to the Prophet ﷺ was not about prayer, fasting, or charity – it was: "Read"⁵. The final revelation to humanity could have begun with any other instruction, yet it began with an invitation to read, highlighting the centrality of this particular act in a believer's journey.

Even the very name "Qur'an" reinforces this point. It stems from the Arabic root qara'a (قرأ), which encompasses both reading and recitation. In classical Arabic, these activities actually merge; reading transcends silent consumption to become vocal, reflective, and interactive engagement.

This distinction goes even further, for it illuminates how knowledge itself is meant to be approached. The Qur'an reached us through oral transmission, careful preservation, and mindful articulation, establishing a model where engaging with texts demands attentiveness, contemplation, and subsequent action.

Within this framework, reading functions as a form of active remembrance, where the Muslim does not simply absorb information but gives voice to knowledge, internalizes it, and allows it to perfect their conduct and character. This approach is powerfully illustrated in the Qur'an:

“The ‘true’ believers are only those whose hearts tremble at the remembrance of Allah, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, and who put their trust in their Lord. ‘They are’ those who establish prayer and donate from what We have provided for them. It is they who are the true believers. They will have elevated ranks, forgiveness, and an honourable provision from their Lord.”⁶ These verses clearly show how one should engage with true knowledge: it should be heard, internalized, and made visible in one's actions.

Revelation in the Form of Books

The Qur'an consistently refers to itself as a kitab (book), emphasizing its nature as a text:

"It is Allah who has sent down the best message - a Book of perfect consistency and repeated lessons—which causes the skin and hearts of those who fear their Lord to tremble, then their skin and hearts soften at the mention of Allah's mercy."⁷

This self-reference as a book further underscores the primacy of the written word. Notably, Allah ﷻ refers to all of His previous revelations as "books", revealing a profound theological point: if Allah ﷻ chose the written word as His primary medium for guidance, then thoughtful engagement with texts becomes a pathway to understanding truth in a more comprehensive way. Our responsibility in approaching divine revelation thus establishes a model for engaging with all beneficial knowledge.

Reading with Purpose and Humility

The Qur'an not only emphasizes reading but also provides guidance on how to approach it. The opening verses of Surah Al-'Alaq outline two foundational principles:

1. Purposeful Reading

"Read in the name of your Lord who created"⁸

The command to read is immediately specified and put into context – it should be done "in the name of your Lord." This establishes that reading carries intention and purpose, contrasting with the mindless scrolling or even superficial reading prevalent today.⁹ Whether engaging with religious, scientific, historical, or literary material, the Muslim reader ideally approaches texts with an awareness of higher purpose, seeking understanding that benefits both personal growth and the common good.

2. Reading with Humility

"Read, and your Lord is the Most Generous - Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know"¹⁰

These verses remind us that knowledge ultimately comes from Allah ﷻ. As one learns more, one should cultivate greater gratitude but especially humility, not pride or self-importance. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, the measure of scholarship is not knowledge gathered but ethical conduct and character refinement.

Knowledge finally comes with a certain responsibility. What we learn should not only be stored but also put into practice. The well-known saying "Knowledge is power" therefore has a much deeper meaning in the Islamic context: While true knowledge does free the mind, it also simultaneously obligates us to use this knowledge for the common good – not for self-elevation or to demonstrate superiority. The Prophet ﷺ expressed this concisely: "The Qur'an is a proof on your behalf or against you."¹¹ This powerful statement clarifies that knowledge, once acquired, never remains neutral – it either calls us to act upon it, or it testifies against us when we ignore it. This insight underscores why the conscious selection of what we read is so crucial, as we emphasized in our disclaimer at the beginning of this whitepaper.

The Legacy of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization

This approach to knowledge shaped one of history's richest intellectual traditions. Unlike kings who passed down gold and wealth, the Prophet ﷺ left behind something far more valuable: "The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets. The Prophets did not leave behind dinars or dirhams, but rather they left behind knowledge."¹²

From the early generations onward, scholars recorded, analyzed, and transmitted knowledge across fields: jurisprudence, theology, science, philosophy, literature, and beyond. Cities like Baghdad, Cordoba, Fez, Cairo, and Kairouan became global centers of learning, where study circles (ḥalaqāt) and the practice of samā' (listening to texts read aloud) became a communal form of knowledge transmission.

The profound value of knowledge was exemplified even in moments of conflict. After the Battle of Badr, the Prophet ﷺ offered prisoners of war a unique path to freedom: those who could teach reading and writing to Muslim children would be released.¹³

These historical examples illustrate how education and knowledge exchange in Islam possess not only intellectual but also spiritual and communal dimensions. They offer young Muslims today valuable guidance in an age of information overload.

The Islamic Etiquette of Reading



Classical Islamic scholarship developed sophisticated traditions around reading:

- **Deep Engagement:** Traditional scholarly methods emphasized reading important texts multiple times - first to grasp general meaning, then for detailed analysis, and finally to extract lasting benefit and practical wisdom. This layered approach ensured comprehensive understanding rather than merely superficial knowledge.
- **Integrated Approach:** In the Islamic scholarly tradition, reading was never an isolated activity but part of an integrated learning process that included writing summaries, memorizing key passages or even entire books, discussing insights with others, and teaching what one had learned.¹⁴
- **Books as Companions:** Throughout Islamic intellectual history, scholars maintained deep, enduring relationships with books, viewing them not as mere repositories of information but as faithful companions on the journey of knowledge - sources of guidance, comfort, and enduring wisdom.

The Benefits of Reading

In today's digital landscape we live in, knowledge appears to be readily accessible through podcasts, videos, and bite-sized content. Yet these formats often provide information without depth or context, similar to nutritional supplements that can never truly replace a complete meal. Reading, by contrast, offers comprehensive intellectual and spiritual nourishment that transforms not just what we know but how we think and who we become.

1. Intellectual Growth

Critical Thinking and Structured Reasoning

No scholar, scientist, or thinker has ever achieved mastery without intensive engagement with written works. While digital media often presents only simplified versions of complex ideas, reading enables profound interaction with complete lines of argumentation in their proper context. Readers gain insight into the structure of arguments: they recognize how premises lead to conclusions, how evidence supports claims, and how counterarguments are thoughtfully addressed.

This form of critical reading sharpens analytical thinking across various fields of knowledge. A person engaging with demanding texts – whether in Islamic jurisprudence, literature, or natural sciences – not only acquires information but inevitably develops a methodical approach that transfers to other areas of life.

Practiced readers recognize logical gaps, distinguish between strong and weak arguments, and identify underlying assumptions of a position. These skills prove invaluable when navigating contemporary issues and current debates, where overly simplified analyses all too often set the tone.

Language and Communication Mastery

Reading naturally expands our vocabulary in meaningful contexts, rather than through dull memorization. As we experience how authors accurately distinguish between similar concepts, such as the difference between contentment and happiness, we too develop more precise expression skills.

For Muslims, this linguistic precision gains special significance when dealing with multifaceted Islamic concepts. Terms like *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *ihsan* (excellence), and *adab* (refined character) require a nuanced understanding that only emerges through systematic engagement with their various contexts of application. Regular reading imparts the necessary linguistic competencies to properly grasp these meaningful distinctions.

Beyond vocabulary even, reading also demonstrates effective communication patterns. We internalize how authors skillfully explain complex ideas, build convincing arguments, and express subtle thoughts. These patterns gradually influence our ability to communicate with clarity, depth, and persuasiveness.

2. Spiritual and Moral Development

Reading cultivates a sense of simplicity and mindful living. Those who engage deeply with books often gain distance from the noise of material excess, finding fulfillment in intellectual depth rather than constant consumption and the passive stream of external stimulation. This aligns with the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ example, who perfectly embodied moderation and focus on what truly matters.

A reading-centered lifestyle naturally strengthens discipline in a world of constant distraction. It teaches prioritizing essentials, practicing self-restraint, and valuing routines that encourage mindfulness and inner reflection. Rather than fueling desire for external things, reading directs our attention to lasting, inner values – a core aspect of Islamic spirituality.

Reading is a path of continuous self-improvement, where knowledge becomes more than just personal learning. With each page, we invest in something far greater than ourselves: a form of charity that persists beyond our own lifetime.¹⁵ The knowledge we acquire and share continues to benefit others long after we are gone, making reading a spiritual investment with eternal significance, insha'Allah.

3. Social and Cultural Awareness

Emotional Intelligence and Human Understanding

Reading broadens our horizon and develops empathy. Through exposure to diverse characters, perspectives, and situations, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of human experiences.

The life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (sira), with its detailed accounts of just leadership and wise decisions, provides Muslims with an excellent model to follow. Similarly, the Qur'an contains stories of other prophets, offering valuable lessons and wisdoms for life.

Regular engagement with such rich narratives strengthens our judgment as well as our own willingness to purification of character, which is essential for both personal relationships and broader societal interactions.

Protection Against Misinformation and Intellectual Freedom

In a world saturated with opinions, headlines, and competing ideologies, reading becomes an intellectual anchor. It connects us to broader historical and philosophical frameworks, protecting us from the manipulation prevalent in modern media today.

Engaging with significant works from the past provides clarity against contemporary misconceptions. Just as a traveler who has visited many places can better recognize limited viewpoints, a reader who has journeyed through different historical periods develops the ability to critically evaluate trends of their own time. This historical perspective helps identify which contemporary issues are truly novel and which are merely old challenges in different guises. This is particularly valuable in our information-overloaded age.

4. Expanded Perspective and Worldview

We are all naturally limited by our own experiences: our time, place, and circumstances. No one can personally witness every historical event or visit every part of the world. Books, however, open doors to knowledge beyond our personal boundaries. Through them, we engage with scholars of the past, travel with historians, and gain wisdom from those who came before.

This encounter with different ways of thinking fosters intellectual maturity and open-mindedness. It enables us to understand the context in which ideas developed and to view today's questions through a broader perspective.

Reading bridges generations and allows immersion in various intellectual and spiritual traditions, whose timeless insights continue to resonate through the written word.

Challenges Facing the Youth

Young Muslims today face significant obstacles to developing sustainable reading habits that reflect broader cultural, technological, and psychological shifts beyond individual challenges. Having addressed some of these issues before, this section now examines them in greater detail to understand the forces that hinder deep engagement with books.

1. Cultural and Social Challenges

Contemporary culture has relegated reading from a central intellectual activity to a specialized academic or even superficially commercial pursuit. This marginalization manifests in several ways:

- **Means over meaning:** Reading is often viewed merely as a tool for academic or professional advancement rather than recognized as essential for personal development and growth.
- **Work vs. leisure perception:** Social attitudes treat reading as "work" while digital consumption is seen as the natural leisure activity, gradually eroding motivation as young people increasingly associate books with obligation.
- **Entertainment as social glue:** In today's society, shared media consumption serves as the primary foundation for social bonding. People connect when they enjoy the same series, music, or films. When books are read at all, they are often chosen and discussed primarily for their entertainment value. More demanding, less "enjoyable" literature – especially works that raise deeper questions about life – rarely finds appreciation in social settings.

- Commodification of knowledge: Books become status symbols on shelves or social media backdrops - perhaps due to their attractive covers that are massively showcased in online communities. This leads to reading being measured more by quantity than depth, while literature is evaluated primarily on its appearance and entertainment value rather than its transformative potential.
- Social pressure: On the other hand, those who prioritize reading over social activities may quickly be labeled "radical." Especially during formative years when a sense of belonging represents a central psychological need, this may create a difficult choice between social conformity and intellectual flourishing.

These cultural factors not only diminish the perceived value of reading but simultaneously increase its social cost, making it increasingly difficult for young Muslims to maintain reading as a central life practice, let alone establish it in the first place.

2. Psychological and Practical Challenges

The internal obstacles to reading often prove as challenging as the external ones:

- Retention and application: Many readers become discouraged when they struggle to recall information weeks later or cannot apply theoretical knowledge practically. This creates a sense that their efforts were completely wasted.
- Cycle of enthusiasm and abandonment: Reading habits typically follow a pattern of initial enthusiasm followed by gradual decline, a phenomenon already described by the Prophet (ﷺ = Peace be upon him).¹⁶ This natural cycle becomes problematic when readers select overly challenging texts, set unrealistic goals, or misinterpret motivation dips as permanent failure.

- Content selection difficulties: Without guidance, young readers struggle to discern meaningful texts from the abundance of options. They risk unintentionally consuming harmful content that contradicts Islamic principles, or developing poor reading and thinking habits through "intellectual junk food" - such as seemingly "helpful" self-help and psychology books that often promote un-Islamic concepts. Similarly, excessive escapist reading can lead to disconnection from reality rather than deepening their connection to the world, and subtly shape their identity according to over-romanticized, often un-Islamic lifestyles and values.

These psychological challenges can be discouraging on their own. As we will see in the next section, the characteristics of the digital world intensify these problems by offering quick distraction at every reading obstacle. This leads to a destructive cycle: less frequent reading weakens reading abilities, making future reading attempts more laborious and less rewarding – further reducing motivation.

3. The Digital Challenge

The digital environment presents uniquely powerful obstacles to reading:

- Neurological rewiring: Digital media alter the neural connections in the brain by promoting constant multitasking, dopamine release, and fragmented attention. While earlier generations only had to contend with simple distractions, today's society faces technologies deliberately designed by psychologists to capture our attention.
- False equivalence: Many young people already consider it "reading" when they consume summaries or videos, without recognizing the qualitative difference from direct text study. This misconception is reinforced by an efficiency culture that prioritizes quick fact acquisition and formal qualifications over thorough understanding.

- Digital reading limitations: Even when reading digitally, hyperlinks make concentration difficult, screen-based reading favors superficial skimming over intensive processing, and the multifunctionality of devices tempts constant task-switching. Each interruption reduces the mental energy needed for understanding content.

Studies show that reading time continuously decreases while smartphone usage increases¹⁷, demonstrating that digital technologies impair the cognitive processes required for reading. This transforms reading from a natural human activity into a challenge requiring extraordinary effort to assert itself against technologies specifically designed to direct attention elsewhere.

4. The Intellectual and Spiritual Crisis

For the Muslim youth in particular, declining reading habits create unique intellectual and spiritual challenges:

- Lack of reading proficiency: Despite the technical ability to read, many lack the necessary endurance and concentration to comprehend complex texts. Today's widespread difficulty in focusing on a single line of thought for extended periods particularly impairs understanding of demanding Islamic texts. Where previous generations developed the patience to recognize nuances and make connections, many young Muslims today tend toward fragmented perception that hinders deeper understanding.¹⁸
- Methodological gaps: Traditional Islamic learning involved structured progression, guided instruction, and integrated memorization with deep reflection. Without these methodological tools, many young Muslims approach texts without the proper prerequisites to extract their full benefit.

- Identity crises: When prevailing narratives question Islamic values, young Muslims without deep knowledge of texts and traditions struggle to distinguish authentic teachings from dilutions. They feel insecure when facing criticism and have difficulty navigating complex questions at the intersection of various cultural influences.

Each of these four challenges ultimately points to two fundamental needs:

Habit formation – Developing consistent reading habits requires deliberate measures in an increasingly distracting environment.

Purpose cultivation – Without clear direction and compelling motivation, readers remain vulnerable when initial enthusiasm naturally wanes.

The decline in reading habits among youth isn't merely personal failure but the predictable result of a systematic undermining of both ability and motivation for deep reading. Understanding these challenges reveals the path forward: targeted strategies aligned with Islamic principles and practices that help young Muslims rebuild meaningful relationships with texts.

Practical Steps to Cultivate a Reading Habit

Developing a sustainable reading habit requires practical strategies, consistent effort, and a clear understanding of how to overcome common obstacles. This section provides concrete guidance for young Muslims seeking to establish reading as a lifelong practice.

1. Begin with Intention and Start Small

The foundation of a sustainable reading habit lies in the right intention (niyyah). The Prophet ﷺ said: "Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended."¹⁹

When you view reading as a form of worship and as a response to Allah's command "Read!", each page becomes an opportunity for reward. This spiritual dimension gives the practice - virtually any practice - a much deeper significance, as it is not merely oriented toward the dunya but ultimately connected to Allah ﷻ and the Hereafter. In this sense, "sustainability" takes on an entirely different meaning.

Practical tip: Set modest goals initially – 10-15 minutes of daily reading is a good start. As the Prophet ﷺ taught: "The most beloved deeds to Allah are those that are consistent, even if they are small".²⁰ Choose easily accessible books before venturing into more challenging material. Focus more on regularity than on the quantity read.

A common mistake is beginning too ambitiously and then giving up entirely. Reading a few pages daily is far more valuable than devouring an entire book in one sitting and then not reading anything for weeks.

At the same time, be sure to challenge yourself intellectually. If you set your standards too low – such as reading only social media posts or a few sentences per day – you might develop a routine, but you'll hardly promote your intellectual growth.

Find the middle path: Start small, gradually increase both volume and complexity, and build a habit that is both consistent and challenging.

With sincere intention:



- Each page becomes an opportunity for reward
- Reading becomes a means of drawing closer to Allah
- Knowledge becomes a form of worship

2. Develop a Strategic Reading System

Rather than approaching reading haphazardly, create a deliberate system for yourself that includes:

- Structured reading plan: Set achievable goals with realistic timeframes for yourself. Balance diverse subjects (Islamic texts, history, literature) and progressively increase difficulty as your skills develop.
- Energy-matched selection: Pair books with your mental energy levels: Read challenging texts when you're alert (morning or after rest), intermediate material during moderate energy periods (afternoon), and lighter beneficial reading when you're tired (before bed). This strategic approach ensures reading remains enjoyable for you rather than becoming a burden.

- Continuity technique: Prevent gaps between books by immediately starting a new book after finishing the previous one, even if just for a few pages. This maintains your momentum and prevents the inertia that often leads to abandoning the habit entirely.

3. Integrate Reading Into Daily Life

As the saying goes: “You don’t HAVE time, you MAKE time” – especially for what truly matters. In reality, most of us already have enough time for reading but often spend it on less meaningful activities. Instead of desperately trying to find extra time, we should focus on transforming valuable moments in our day to prioritize reading.

- Reclaim existing moments: Reach for a book instead of your phone after Fajr prayer, read before sleep instead of "zombie scrolling," during commutes, while using public transportation, while waiting for appointments, or during solo meals.
- Create a reading-friendly environment: Establish a home library (even just a small shelf) that reminds you of your dedication to seeking knowledge, provides you ready access to books, and can even become a legacy for your family and friends.
- Increase flexibility: Learn to read in different environments and situations rather than requiring specific conditions. Just as the Qur'an praises those who remember Allah "while standing, sitting, and lying on their sides"²¹, practice reading in various settings, postures, and time windows to seize every opportunity.

4. Build a Supportive Knowledge Community

Reading need not be solitary. The Prophet ﷺ taught: "A person is upon the religion of his close friend, so let one of you look at whom he befriends."²² This wisdom applies to intellectual pursuits as well.

- Join or create reading circles: Group study has been central to Islamic scholarship for centuries. Modern reading circles foster accountability, deepen text understanding through different perspectives, and strengthen community through shared engagement.
- Cultivate knowledge-oriented relationships: Follow scholars and other passionate readers on social media instead of entertainment accounts, attend Islamic lectures, discuss books with like-minded individuals, and build yourself an environment in which the pursuit of knowledge is valued.
- Establish regular knowledge exchanges: Create opportunities to discuss your current reading with friends or family, even informally. When you plan time for "book conversations" during meals or gatherings, even social meetings become opportunities for intellectual growth, and deep conversations become the norm in your environment.

5. Develop Effective Learning Techniques

Reading is most valuable when we understand, retain, and apply what we read. With the right methods, you can deepen your reading experience and make it more sustainable.

- **Realistic expectations:** Understand that forgetting is not only normal but human. In fact, the Arabic word for human — "insān إنسان" — shares a root with forgetting ("nasiya نَسِيَ"). Therefore, don't aim for perfect recall, but focus on building a solid foundation of knowledge.
- **Active engagement:** Improve your retention by reading multiple sources on the same topic, creating personal notes and summaries (whether through annotations in the book itself or in a separate reading journal or "book journal," which are now widely available), and explaining what you've learned to others. The latter is particularly effective because to convey an idea, you must structure your knowledge clearly, which strengthens your memory. Even when details fade later, this mental framework helps you retrieve important information when needed.
- **Balanced approach to technology:** Use digital tools as supplements to intensive reading, not as substitutes. For example, audiobooks and podcasts can make use of time that would otherwise be wasted. Preparatory research (e.g. author interviews) is also helpful – but don't rely exclusively on summaries.

6. Focus on Growth, Not Comparison

Many readers become discouraged when comparing their pace or volume to others, leading either to resignation ("I'll never read that much!") or superficial reading where books are roughly skimmed.

Remember that reading is a journey of personal development, not a competition. What matters is not the number of books you've read, but the depth of your engagement and application of what you've learned. Instead of asking, "How many books have I read this year?" ask, "Am I living a life connected to knowledge and reflection?"

This principle is reflected in the methodology of the Sahabah. They didn't accumulate knowledge for its own sake, but rather learned, internalized, and implemented before moving on to new material.²³

This reminds us that knowledge alone is not the goal – what matters is acting upon it and returning to our Creator whilst on this path, insha'Allah. Allah ﷻ cares more about your effort than about actually achieving a specific goal.

So always ask yourself: **Am I applying what I read in my life, or am I merely collecting one piece of information after another, for which I will later be held accountable for not applying?**

Recommended Reading List

Before Anything Else: The Quran — The Supreme Paradigm Shift

Before recommending specific books, we must first emphasize the Quran's unique and incomparable status. It is not merely one book among many, but the ultimate source of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. Unlike human-authored works, the Quran offers a profound paradigm shift, unveiling dimensions of existence otherwise hidden: the world of the unseen, the Hereafter, the meaning of life, and all aspects of human existence.

One of its names is Al-Furqan ("The Criterion"), as it provides clear standards by which to distinguish truth from falsehood, good from evil – especially in moral matters, where subjective opinions often differ. The Quranic stories of the prophets also contain timeless lessons on patience, perseverance, and trust in Allah ﷻ, from which we can draw abundant inspiration.

The Quran also refers to itself as Ash-Shifa ("The Healing"), a personal prescription from the best of doctors, with each surah serving a specific remedy. While other books may indeed enrich the mind, the Quran, in addition, purifies the heart, soul, and body. It offers solace in difficult times, guidance amid chaos, and a source of inner peace.

For all these reasons, no library is truly complete – and no person is truly well-read – without a place for the Quran.

Some Essential works for understanding the Quran:

- The Clear Quran by Dr. Mustafa Khattab (Translation)
- An Eternal Challenge by Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah Darraz
- Tafsir As Sa'di by Sheikh Abdul Rahman As Sa'di (begin with Juz' Amma and familiar surahs)

Building a Balanced Knowledge Framework

Just as the Quran addresses every dimension of human existence – spiritual, intellectual, social, and practical – so too does Islam encompass all aspects of life. Allah ﷻ says in the Qur'an: "Whenever they bring you an argument, We come to you with the right refutation and the best explanation"²⁴

This verse demonstrates that there is no question in life for which Islam does not provide a deeper and more comprehensive answer. A thoughtful reading program that aligns with this principle should therefore include the following areas:

1. Prophetic Tradition (Sunnah)

The Hadith contains not only the explanation but also the practical implementation of Quranic guidance.²⁵ They hold the same level of strength of authority as the Qur'anic text and are considered part of the revelation.²⁶ It is advisable to begin with manageable Hadith collections before delving into more comprehensive works.

Some recommendations:

- The Forty Hadith of Imam Nawawi (and its various explanations)
- Riyadh al-Salihin (Gardens of the Righteous)
- The Methodology from the Prophetic Heritage by Sheikh Ahmad Alsayed²⁷

2. Core Religious Sciences

A sound Islamic worldview requires understanding the basic principles of various Islamic sciences.

Some recommendations:

- Because You Are Allah by Sheikh Ali Jaber Al Fayfi (Aqeedah)
- The Sealed Nectar by Safiur Rahman Mubarakpuri (Sirah of the Prophet ﷺ)
- Umdatul Fiqh by Ibn Qudamah Al Maqdisi (Fiqh)

3. Historical Knowledge

Historical narratives make up a significant portion of the Quran, underscoring the importance of learning from the past. The study of history not only helps in understanding past lessons but also fosters the ability to approach current and future challenges wisely.

Some recommendations:

- Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Kathir
- The Simplified Encyclopedia of Islamic History by Dr. Raghib Al Sirjani
- Unveiling Tyranny: The Genocide In Gaza & False Zionist Narratives On Palestine by Sapience Institute

4. Engaging with Contemporary Issues

Muslims should seek to understand modern challenges while remaining anchored in Islamic principles. Delving into topics such as philosophy, society, politics, and modern-day challenges is essential to expanding one's understanding and preserving one's faith in a changing world.

Some recommendations:

- The Divine Reality: God, Islam and the Mirage of Atheism by Hamza Andreas Tzortzis
- Fifth-Wave Feminism by Mohammed Hijab
- Islam & Nihilism: My Poison & My Cure by Yusuf Ponders

Guiding Principles for Book Selection



Two principles should guide your choice of books:

1. Content alignment: Reading material should not contradict fundamental Islamic values.²⁸
2. Balance: Entertainment reading should not overshadow more essential knowledge.

Conclusion


While we have outlined practical ways to develop a reading habit in this whitepaper, ultimately it's about something far deeper than that: understanding reading as a central part of our Islamic identity. For Muslims, reading is not just an optional leisure activity, but a spiritual necessity that began with the divine command to "Read!"

In our digital day and age, following this command becomes a quiet resistance against the prevailing culture of superficiality. When we consciously choose depth over triviality, context over simplification, and active thinking over passive consumption, we embody a fundamental Islamic principle: the cultivation of the mind and the nourishment of the soul are inseparably intertwined – two sides of the same spiritual journey.

The Prophet ﷺ emphasized the importance of this journey, stating: "Whoever takes a path to seek knowledge, Allah makes the path to Paradise easy for him."²⁹ This lifelong pursuit, undertaken with the right intention, not only strengthens our faith but also deepens our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Therefore, consider this whitepaper not merely as a source of information, but as an invitation – an invitation to reassess your time and attention, and to prioritize reading in a way that shapes your entire worldview. To support you on this path, One Ummah Forum regularly publishes whitepapers like this one, accompanying you in building a meaningful reading habit.

In fact, you have already taken the first step by reading this far. You have demonstrated that capacity for focused attention which is becoming increasingly rare in a distraction-filled world. The further journey begins with a conscious decision and a single book. Will this moment be now? The answer determines not only what you read – it influences who you become.

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Footnotes

1. Surah Al-'Alaq, 96:1.
2. BookTok and Bookstagram are social media subcommunities dedicated to literature and reading on TikTok and Instagram respectively. On these platforms, users share book recommendations, reviews, reactions, and discussions through short videos on TikTok and visually appealing images on Instagram. Prior to these, online book discussions primarily flourished on platforms such as Tumblr, YouTube (especially "BookTube"), and the literary forum Goodreads. While Bookstagram later became a dominant space for book discussions on social media, BookTok has now largely replaced it in popularity and influence, reflecting broader shifts in social media usage patterns. These online communities have significantly influenced the publishing industry, with BookTok in particular reviving interest in previously published works through viral content. A survey of 16-25 year-olds (<https://www.publishers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/BookTok-for-WEBSITE.pdf>) revealed that over half developed a passion for reading through BookTok, and two-thirds were inspired to explore books they would not have otherwise considered. The influence of these communities has grown to the point where major literary events like the Frankfurt Book Fair now feature BookTok awards, demonstrating the considerable impact of social media on contemporary reading culture.
3. We plan to publish a future whitepaper on the topic of "What is beneficial knowledge in Islam", where we'll explore the limits of leisure reading and how to avoid falling into haram, insha'Allah.
4. Sahih Muslim 2722.
5. Surah Al-'Alaq, 96:1.
6. Surah Al-Anfal, 8:2-4
7. Surah Az-Zumar, 39:23.
8. Surah Al-'Alaq, 96:1.
9. It is worth reiterating that entertaining literature does have its place, and we will explore this topic in more detail in a forthcoming whitepaper. However, within the scope of this discussion, we aim to highlight a growing imbalance in contemporary reading habits that warrants critical reflection.
10. Surah Al-'Alaq, 96:3-5.
11. Sahih Muslim 223.

12. Sunan Abi Dawud 3641.
13. See Musnad Ahmad, narrated by Ibn Abbas, verified by Shu'ayb Al-Arnaut. Also mentioned in the Sunan of Al-Bayhaqi. Ibn al-Qayyim confirms this practice of release through knowledge exchange in "Zad al-Ma'ad". In fact, Zaid ibn Thabit was among those who learned reading and writing through this exchange.
14. This integrated approach to reading created what we might call a "textual ecosystem" where written works were not merely consumed but engaged with through multiple modalities. The tradition of *ijāzah* (formal authorization to transmit or convey a text) ensured the conveying of knowledge through authentic chains of narration and a shared understanding of the text.
15. As the Prophet ﷺ said: "When a person dies, their deeds end except for three: continuous charity, knowledge that benefits others, or a righteous child who prays for them" (Sahih Muslim, Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 38). The criteria for this 'beneficial knowledge' will be discussed in the aforementioned upcoming whitepaper.
16. As the Prophet ﷺ stated in a hadith: "Every deed has a period of enthusiasm, and every period of enthusiasm is followed by a slackening off. If a person's enthusiasm is for my Sunnah, then he has succeeded, but whoever chooses something else when he slackens off is doomed." (Ibn Hibban 1/187; classified as sahih by Al-Albani in Sahih al-Targhib, 56)
17. Numerous studies have examined the cognitive impact of smartphone usage, with findings indicating that increased digital engagement may disrupt the sustained attention and deep processing required for reading. For example:

Loh, K. K., & Kanai, R. (2016). How has the Internet reshaped human cognition?. *The Neuroscientist*, 22(5), 506-520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073858415595005>

Wilmer, H. H., Sherman, L. E., & Chein, J. M. (2017). Smartphones and cognition: A review of research exploring the links between mobile technology habits and cognitive functioning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 605. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00605>

Hadar, A., Eliraz, D., Lazarovits, A., Alyagon, U., & Zangen, A. (2015). Using longitudinal exposure to causally link smartphone usage to changes in behavior, cognition and right prefrontal neural activity. *Brain Stimulation: Basic, Translational, and Clinical Research in Neuromodulation*, 8(2), 318. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brs.2015.01.032>

Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2018). Trends in U.S. adolescents' media use, 1976–2016: The rise of digital media, the decline of TV, and the (near) demise of print. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8(4), 329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000203>

18. This phenomenon is also reflected in social media, where young people are eager to receive quick and simplistic black-and-white answers. Their attitude towards knowledge has thus been significantly influenced.
19. Narrated by 'Umar bin Al-Khattab in Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 1, Hadith 1.
20. Sahih al-Bukhari 6464.
21. Surah Al-i-Imran, 3:191.
22. Tirmidhi 2378.
23. As narrated in a Narration, Ibn Mas'ud, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "If a man from us learnt ten verses, he would not go beyond them until he knew their meanings and how to act on them." (At-Tabari)
24. Surah Al-Furqan, 25:33.
25. A'isha (may Allah be pleased with her) said about the Prophet: „The character of the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) was the Qur'an.“ (Sahih Muslim 746)
26. The Prophet (ﷺ) said: Let me not find one of you reclining on his couch when he hears something regarding me which I have commanded or forbidden and saying: We do not know. What we found in Allah's Book (only) we have followed. (Sunan Abi Dawud 4605, Grade: Sahih by Al-Albani)
27. One Ummah Forum is working on a written explanation of this work in the English language, insha'Allah.
28. An exception applies to scholars and experts of the Ummah, who may engage with contradictory works for the purpose of refutation and scholarly critique.
29. Jami` at-Tirmidhi 2646.

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