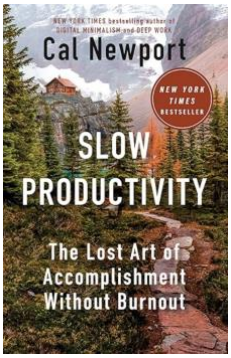
'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

*Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.*



October 2025

Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout

By Cal Newport

Book Summary

Generated by Chat GPT; edited by Ashley Campana

Introduction: The Problem with Productivity

- **Context:** 2020 brought scrutiny of knowledge work as remote work, and revealed how much time is spent signaling work instead of doing it. "Great Resignation" and "Quiet Quitting" exposed the limits of hustle culture.
- **Pseudo-Productivity:** Activity ≠ accomplishment. Technology stacks tasks; constant communication blocks deep work. Busyness as a proxy for productivity.
- **Slow Productivity:** Inspired by the "slow food" movement (McDonald's in Rome → Italian backlash), Newport calls for sustainable, meaningful, human-scaled work.

Part One: Do Fewer Things

Proposition: Limit the Big

Focus deeply on a few major missions instead of scattering across too many.

Practices:

a. Calendar block to see if new work realistically fits.

b. Structure workload with margins for the unexpected.

c. Work on one project all day instead of 4 projects over 4 days.

Proposition: Contain the Small

Small tasks accumulate until coordination costs erode productivity until you reach the overhead tax tipping point.

Practices:

a. Outsource, delegate, or automate routine work. Pay to outsource work that doesn't need your expertise.

b. Batch communications (make others give complete requests to reduce back-and-forth) or synchronize with live, succinct communications versus back-and-forth messages.

c. Avoid "task engines" with endless little moving parts.

Proposition: Pull Instead of Push

In knowledge work, demand is effectively infinite — if you let others "push" tasks onto you (via email, meeting invites, chat pings), you'll drown.

Practices:

a. Use a holding list for future projects and work on no more than 3 active projects at once.

b. Intake process = acknowledgment, requirements, and completion estimate.

c. Weekly "list cleaning" to reassess.

Part Two: Work at a Natural Pace

There will always be more work—make work part of a life well lived, not an obstacle to it. Working with unceasing intensity is unsustainable.

Proposition: Take Longer

Big ideas need maturity and refinement (e.g., Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* took 7 years).

Practices:

a. Use 5-year plans to guide progress—it's short enough to require incremental process while leaving breathing room.

b. Double timelines for cognitive work—humans underestimate effort.

c. Simplify the day reducing tasks/appointments by 25–50% or caping meetings at half the workday.

d. Forgive yourself: don't overcorrect on procrastination with frantic catch-up.

Proposition: Embrace Seasonality

Human work has always had rhythms; knowledge workers can, too. Reduce the expectation of being constantly accessible over email and chat.

Practices:

a. Schedule "slow seasons" (summer, holidays) and don't volunteer for extra work during those times.

b. Shorten the work year (e.g., 10 months with breaks between projects). Do you put a greater value on income or quality of life?

c. Use "small seasonality": no-meeting Mondays, occasional weekdays off.

d. Work in cycles: 6–8 week pushes → 2 week cooldown.

Proposition: Work Poetically

Environment and ritual shape sustainability and creativity.

Practices:

a. Match workspace to task.

b. Choose "strange over stylish" — new spaces trigger new thinking.

c. Use striking rituals (walks, tools, environments) to mark transitions.

Part Three: Obsess Over Quality

Quality is the glue that holds Slow Productivity together. Fewer, better outputs create lasting impact and compound influence over time. To work slowly is not to work less—it's to produce work that matters, built on craft, care, and deep focus.

Practices:

a. Clarify Your Core: Identify the two most important goals or activities in your professional life and focus relentlessly on those.
b. Trade Complexity for Clarity: Decide what *not* to do. Simplify systems, commitments, and projects.
c. Guard Deep Work: Create protected focus blocks (e.g., 3 hours with no messages, meetings, or calls).
d. Simplify for Impact: Reduce volume; choose quality over busyness. Consider adjusting your model—charge more, work less, or consciously pause the "rat race."

Proposition: Improve Your Taste

We can often *recognize* excellence before we can *produce* it. Raising our standards pulls our skills upward and fuels mastery.

Practices:

a. Study Excellence: Regularly expose yourself to quality work—books, films, art, craftsmanship.
b. Curate Insights: Keep a notebook of "inklings"—observations, ideas, inspiration.
c. Find Your Circle: Gather with others who share your professional ambitions and taste.
d. Invest in Tools: Use quality tools that elevate both mindset and output.
e. Let Taste Be Your Compass: Let your evolving sense of quality guide judgment and improvement.

Proposition: Bet on Yourself

Choosing quality over volume is a long game. Betting on yourself means trusting that excellence, not speed, will yield freedom.

Practices:

a. Create Productive Pressure: Make public commitments or set external deadlines to stay accountable.
b. Use Constraints as Catalysts: Reducing hours or taking bold steps (like leaving a job or contract) can focus energy and sharpen intent.
c. Seek Backing or Investment: If possible, attract partners or investors to fund quality tools—and let that accountability motivate you.
d. Reinvest in Freedom: Use success not to expand workload, but to buy back time and autonomy.