Building an antilibrary: the power of unread books

Anne-Laure Le Cunff • Reading time: 6 minutes

Tsundoku (積ん読) is a beautiful Japanese word describing the habit of acquiring books but letting them pile up without reading them. I used to feel guilty about this tendency, and would strive to only buy new books once I had finished the ones I owned. However, the concept of the antilibrary has completely changed my mindset when it comes to unread books. Unread books can be as powerful as the ones we have read, if we choose to consider them in the right light.

The vastness of the unknown

What is an antilibrary? To put it simply, an antilibrary is a private collection of unread books. The concept was first mentioned by Lebanese-American scholar and author Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his book The Black Swan, where he describes the unique relationship Italian writer Umberto Eco had with books:

The writer Umberto Eco belongs to that small class of scholars who are encyclopedic, insightful, and nondull. He is the owner of a large personal library (containing thirty thousand books), and separates visitors into two categories: those who react with "Wow! Signore professore dottore Eco, what a library you have! How many of these books have you read?"* and the others—a very small minority—who get the point that a private library is not an ego-boosting appendage but a research tool. Read books are far less

valuable than unread ones. The library should contain as much of what you do not know as your financial means, mortgage rates, and the currently tight real-estate market allows you to put there. You will accumulate more knowledge and more books as you grow older, and the growing number of unread books on the shelves will look at you menacingly. Indeed, the more you know, the larger the rows of unread books. Let us call this collection of unread books an antilibrary.

For Umberto Eco, a private library is a research tool. The goal of an antilibrary is not to collect books you have read so you can proudly display them on your shelf; instead, it is to curate a highly personal collection of resources around themes you are curious about. Instead of a celebration of everything you know, an antilibrary is an ode to everything you want to explore.

The vastness of the unknown can feel terrifying, which is why many people feel uncomfortable with the idea of accumulating books they haven't read. But embracing the unknown is what drives discovery. As Scottish scientist James Clerk Maxwell once said: "Thoroughly conscious ignorance is the prelude to every real advance in science." An antilibrary is a reminder of everything we don't know.

By expanding our awareness of unknown unknowns, an antilibrary may even be an antidote to the Dunning–Kruger effect, where we tend to overestimate the extent of our knowledge. Whether in a private or a public library, being surrounded by books we haven't read yet—in the case of Umberto Eco, too many books to read in a lifetime—is a humbling experience.

As Nassim Nicholas Taleb puts it: "We tend to treat our knowledge as personal property to be protected and defended. It is an ornament that allows us to rise in the pecking order. So this tendency to offend Eco's library sensibility by focusing on the known is a human bias that extends to our mental operations. People don't walk around with anti-résumés telling you what they have not studied or experienced (it's the job of their competitors to do that), but it would be nice if they did. Just as we need to stand library logic on its head, we will work on standing knowledge itself on its head."

How to maintain an antilibrary

The antilibrary is a counterintuitive idea which goes against many of our deeply held beliefs. As such, it may be hard to know where to start. How many books should it contain? What proportion of read versus unread books? Won't it create anxiety? As often, there is no clear-cut answer to these questions, but some strategies may be helpful.

- **Make notes of all relevant references.** When an author mentions another book, check the exact reference and make a note of it. By doing so, you will have a list of all the relevant sources for a book when you are done reading it. Then, research this constellation of books. It is unlikely all the sources on the list will seem interesting to you. Sometimes, only a short passage of the source was relevant to the book you just read. But other times, you will discover a book that genuinely piques your curiosity. Add this book to your antilibrary.
- **Ask fellow readers for recommendations.** If you read a book that you particularly enjoyed and would like to learn more about the topic, simply ask people if they know of any similar books. If you don't have many readers in your circles, you can use Goodreads or Amazon to find similar books. Read

the reviews to decide whether they would be a good addition to your antilibrary.

- **Allow for serendipity.** I have read quite a few interesting books that I randomly bought in a bookstore because the cover looked nice and the title was intriguing. While looking for sources and similar books are both effective ways to build an antilibrary, make sure you leave space for chance discoveries.

- **Do not expect the proportion of unread books to decrease.** While there is no perfect proportion, the more you read, the more you will expand your perimeter of knowledge, and the more unread books will be added to your antilibrary. It is not a bad thing, it means you are progressively turning unknown unknowns into known unknowns.

- **Improve your relationship with knowledge.** At first, building an antilibrary can feel strange and even a bit anxiety-inducing. So many books—am I ever going to be able to read them all? Isn't that a waste of money? Remember that knowledge is a process, not a possession. In addition, building an antilibrary is an investment in yourself which should stay within your means. Even if you only have 3-5 books you haven't read on your shelf, this is already a great step in expanding your intellectual horizon.

Whatever its size—from a couple of books to thousands of them—an antilibrary creates a humble relationship with knowledge. It reminds us that our knowledge is finite and imperfect. Far from being negative, this awareness can drive our curiosity and encourage us to question our assumptions. In a world where nuanced thinking is needed more than ever, an antilibrary is a much needed tool for thought.

* To that question, Umberto Eco's tongue-in-cheek answer was: "No, these are the ones I have to read by the end of the month. I keep the others in my office."

Join 40,000 mindful makers!

You've reached the end of the article. If you learned a thing or two, you can get a fresh one in your inbox every week. Maker Mind is a weekly newsletter with science-based insights on creativity, mindful productivity, better thinking and lifelong learning.

Email Address	SUBSCRIBE

As a knowledge worker, your brain is your most important tool. Work smarter and happier by joining a community of fellow curious minds who want to achieve their goals without sacrificing their mental health. You'll also receive a guide with 30 mental models to make the most of your mind!

One email a week, no spam, ever. See our Privacy policy.

Resources

Featured Tools

Community

Library

Workshops

Consulting

FAQ

Press

Contact

Categories

⚡ Mindful Productivity

✨ Better Thinking

🌱 Continuous Learning

💙 Healthy Mind

🏞️ Meaningful Living

🎨 Purposeful Creativity

🛠️ Tools for Thought

🧠 Wonderful Brain

Don't work more. Work mindfully.

Ness Labs provides content, coaching, courses and community to help makers put their minds at work. Apply evidence-based strategies to your daily life, discover the latest in neuroscience research, and connect with fellow curious minds.

| Your email address | SUBSCRIBE |