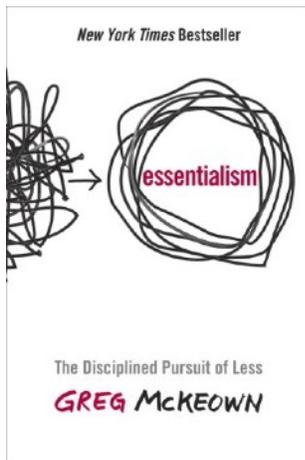


# Essentialism

*"If you take one thing away from this book, I hope you will remember this: whatever decision or challenge or crossroads you face in your life, simply ask yourself, "What is essential?" Eliminate everything else." - Greg McKeown*

## Key Takeaways:

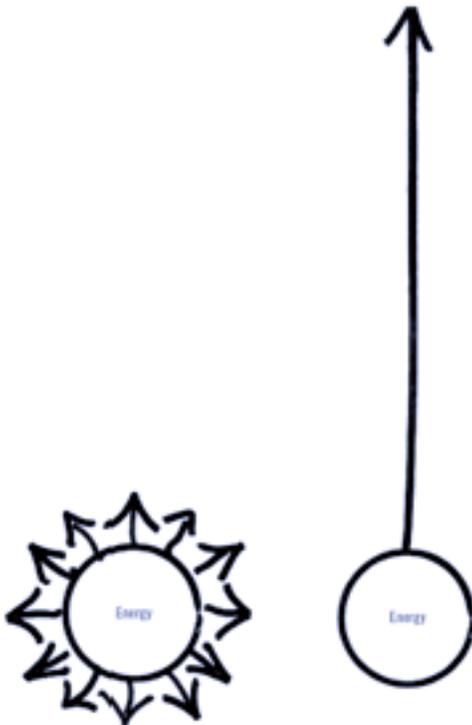
1. Answer the one question that answers 1,000 questions.
2. Create 2 lists:
  1. What's Important Now?
  2. Get the future out of my brain list.Prioritize both lists.
3. If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will.
4. Saying "yes" to one thing means saying "no" to something else.
5. If it isn't a definite "YES" it should be a "no".
6. Don't get decision fatigue. Create routine to eliminate nonessential decisions.
7. Add 50% margin in your schedule.
8. Clarify your purpose. Use it like a filter to eliminate nonessentials.
9. Ask: "HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN WE'RE DONE?"
10. 20 percent of our efforts produce 80 percent of results. Focus on the 20%.
11. You can either make a millimeter of progress in a million directions or much progress in a few. Focus on the vital few.
12. Eliminate things that slow you down the most. (Create a "Stop doing" list.)
13. Don't let your tombstone read, "He checked e-mail."



## Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

By Greg McKeown

Our life can either look like the diagram on the left, or the one on the right. We can be going in 1,000 directions or in a few, but we can't do both. For most people, their life is more like the diagram on the left. The shocking part is, the sum of the left lines is the same as the right line. It doesn't take more energy or time to go far in one direction, it takes clarity of focus. This book helps you find that clarity.



**The Essentialist**

Always ask: “Is this the very most important thing I should be doing with my time and resources right now?”

“Instead of making just a millimeter of progress in a million directions he began to generate tremendous momentum towards accomplishing the things that were truly vital.”

“the basic value proposition of Essentialism: *only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter.*”

““Am I investing in the right activities?” There are far more activities and opportunities in the world than we have time and resources to invest in. And although many of them may be good, or even very good, the fact is that most are trivial and few are vital.”

“In many cases we can learn to *make one-time decisions that make a thousand future decisions so we don’t exhaust ourselves asking the same questions again and again.* The way of the Essentialist means living by design, not by default. Instead of making choices reactively, the Essentialist deliberately distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many, eliminates the nonessentials, and then removes obstacles so the essential things have clear, smooth passage. In other words, Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.”

“If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.”

## Part I: Essence: What is the core mind-set of an Essentialist?

### **CHOOSE: The Invincible Power of Choice ~ “I choose to”**

“We can choose how to spend our energy and time.”

“When we surrender our ability to choose, something or someone else will step in to choose for us.”

Many “people don’t believe they have a choice in what opportunity, assignment, or challenge to take on. They believe they “*have to* do it all.””

### **DISCERN: The Unimportance of Practically Everything ~ “Only a few things really matter”**

“20 percent of our efforts produce 80 percent of results.”

““the Law of the Vital Few.” .... you could massively improve the quality of a product by resolving a tiny fraction of the problems”

Learn to discern the “trivial many” from the “vital few”.

“Sometimes what you don’t do is just as important as what you do.”

“Even the many good opportunities we pursue are often far less valuable than the few truly great ones. Once we understand this, we start scanning our

environment for those vital few and eagerly eliminate the trivial many. Only then can we say no to good opportunities and say yes to truly great ones.”

“An Essentialist...discerns more so he can do less.”

“Many capable people are kept from getting to the next level of contribution because they can’t let go of the belief that everything is important.”

**TRADE-OFF: Which Problem Do I Want? ~ “I can do anything but not everything”**

“We can’t have it all or do it all. If we could, there would be no reason to evaluate or eliminate options. Once we accept the reality of trade-offs we stop asking, “How can I make it all work?” and start asking the more honest question “Which problem do I want to solve?”

“Instead of asking, “What do I have to give up?” ... ask, “What do I want to go big on?””

**Part II: Explore: How can we discern the trivial many from the vital few?**

“Ask three questions: “What do I feel deeply inspired by?” and “What am I particularly talented at?” and “What meets a significant need in the world?””

“To discern what is truly essential we need space to think, time to look and listen, permission to play, wisdom to sleep, and the discipline to apply highly selective criteria to the choices we make.”

“If you believe being overly busy and overextended is evidence of productivity, then you probably believe that creating space to explore, think, and reflect should be kept to a minimum. Yet these very activities are the antidote to the nonessential busyness that infects so many of us. Rather than trivial diversions, they are critical to distinguishing what is actually a trivial diversion from what is truly essential.”

**ESCAPE: The Perks of Being Unavailable**

“WITHOUT GREAT SOLITUDE NO SERIOUS WORK IS POSSIBLE. — Pablo Picasso”

*Space to Design:* “In order to have focus we need to escape to focus.”

*Space to Concentrate:* ““Can you remember what it was like to be bored? It doesn’t happen anymore.” ... Today, everyone waiting around in an airport or a waiting room is glued to their technology tools of choice. Of course, nobody likes to be bored. But by abolishing any chance of being bored we have also lost the time we used to have to think and process.”

*Space to Read:* “Whether you can invest two hours a day, two weeks a year, or even just five minutes every morning, it is important to make space to escape in your busy life.”

**LOOK: See What Really Matters**

“WHERE IS THE KNOWLEDGE WE HAVE LOST IN INFORMATION? — T. S. Eliot”

### **PLAY: Embrace the Wisdom of Your Inner Child**

“Play broadens the range of options available to us. It helps us to see possibilities we otherwise wouldn’t have seen and make connections we would otherwise not have made. It opens our minds and broadens our perspective. It helps us challenge old assumptions and makes us more receptive to untested ideas...play is an antidote to stress, and this is key because stress, in addition to being an enemy of productivity, can actually shut down the creative, inquisitive, exploratory parts of our brain.”

“Play doesn’t just help us to explore what is essential. It is essential in and of itself.”

“What did you do as a child that excited you? How can you re-create that today?”

### **SLEEP: Protect the Asset**

“EACH NIGHT, WHEN I GO TO SLEEP, I DIE. AND THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN I WAKE UP, I AM REBORN.” —Mahatma Gandhi

“Sleep will enhance your ability to explore, make connections, and do less but better throughout your waking hours.”

### **SELECT: The Power of Extreme Criteria**

“If the answer isn’t a definite yes then it should be a no.”

The 90 Percent Rule: “can apply to just about every decision or dilemma. As you evaluate an option, think about the single most important criterion for that decision, and then simply give the option a score between 0 and 100. If you rate it any lower than 90 percent, then automatically change the rating to 0 and simply reject it. This way you avoid getting caught up in indecision, or worse, getting stuck with the 60s or 70s.”

When hiring ask:      “Will this person be an absolutely natural fit?”  
                                  “Would he or she love working here?”  
                                  “Would we love having him or her work with us?”

“If we search for “a good career opportunity,” our brain will serve up scores of pages to explore and work through. Instead, why not conduct an advanced search and ask three questions: “What am I deeply passionate about?” and “What taps my talent?” and “What meets a significant need in the world?” ...We aren’t looking for a plethora of good things to do. We are looking for the one where we can make our absolutely highest point of contribution.”

## **Part III: Eliminate: How can we cut out the trivial many?**

“Peter Drucker said, “People are effective because they say ‘no,’ because they say, ‘this isn’t for me.’”

“It’s not enough to simply determine which activities and efforts don’t make the best possible contribution; you still have to actively eliminate those that do not.”

“The killer question when deciding what activities to eliminate is: “If I didn’t have this opportunity, what would I be willing to do to acquire it?”

“Anytime you fail to say “no” to a nonessential, you are really saying yes by default.”

### **CLARIFY: One Decision That Makes a Thousand**

“When there is a serious lack of clarity about what the team stands for and what their goals and roles are, people experience confusion, stress, and frustration. When there is a high level of clarity, on the other hand, people thrive. When there is a lack of clarity, people waste time and energy on the trivial many.”

“Two common patterns... emerge when teams lack clarity of purpose.

PATTERN 1: PLAYING POLITICS...the team becomes overly focused on winning the attention of the manager.

PATTERN 2: IT’S ALL GOOD (WHICH IS BAD)...teams without purpose become leaderless. With no clear direction, people pursue the things that advance their own short-term interests, with little awareness of how their activities contribute to (or in some cases, derail) the long-term mission of the team as a whole.”

“When teams are really clear about their purpose and their individual roles, on the other hand, it is amazing what happens to team dynamics. Formal momentum accelerates, adding up to a higher cumulative contribution of the team as a whole.”

“An essential intent is one decision that settles one thousand later decisions. It’s like deciding you’re going to become a doctor instead of a lawyer. One strategic choice eliminates a universe of other options and maps a course for the next five, ten, or even twenty years of your life. Once the big decision is made, all subsequent decisions come into better focus.”

Ask: “If we could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be?”

Ask: “HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN WE’RE DONE?”

### **DARE: The Power of a Graceful “No”**

“Have you ever felt a tension between what you felt was right and what someone was pressuring you to do? Have you ever felt the conflict between your internal conviction and an external action? Have you ever said yes when you meant no simply to avoid conflict or friction?”

“Why is it so hard in the moment to dare to choose what is essential over what is nonessential? One simple answer is we are unclear about what is essential.”

“A...reason why it is hard to choose what is essential in the moment is as simple as an innate fear of social awkwardness...We feel guilty. We don’t want to let someone down. We are worried about damaging the relationship. But these emotions muddle our clarity. They distract us from the reality of the fact that

either we can say no and regret it for a few minutes, or we can say yes and regret it for days, weeks, months, or even years.”

“How do we learn to say no gracefully?”

- “SEPARATE THE DECISION FROM THE RELATIONSHIP”
- “SAYING “NO” GRACEFULLY DOESN’T HAVE TO MEAN USING THE WORD NO”
- “FOCUS ON THE TRADE-OFF”
- “REMIND YOURSELF THAT EVERYONE IS SELLING SOMETHING”
- “MAKE YOUR PEACE WITH THE FACT THAT SAYING “NO” OFTEN REQUIRES TRADING POPULARITY FOR RESPECT”
- “REMEMBER THAT A CLEAR “NO” CAN BE MORE GRACEFUL THAN A VAGUE OR NONCOMMITTAL “YES””

“The “No” Repertoire”:

1. “The awkward pause.”
2. “The soft “no” (or the “no but”).”
3. “Let me check my calendar and get back to you.” (Gives time to reflect)
4. “Use e-mail bouncebacks.”
5. “Say, “Yes. What should I deprioritize?””
6. “Say it with humor.”
7. “Use the words “You are welcome to X. I am willing to Y.””
8. “I can’t do it, but X might be interested.”

“We need to learn the slow ‘yes’ and the quick ‘no.’ ”

### **UNCOMMIT: Win Big by Cutting Your Losses**

“HALF OF THE TROUBLES OF THIS LIFE CAN BE TRACED TO SAYING YES TOO QUICKLY AND NOT SAYING NO SOON ENOUGH. —Josh Billings”

Ask: “If I weren’t already invested in this project, how much would I invest in it now?”

Think: “What else could I do with this time or money if I pulled the plug now?”

“Avoiding Commitment Traps”:

- “BEWARE OF THE ENDOWMENT EFFECT”
- “PRETEND YOU DON’T OWN IT YET”
- “GET OVER THE FEAR OF WASTE”
- “INSTEAD, ADMIT FAILURE TO BEGIN SUCCESS”
- “STOP TRYING TO FORCE A FIT”
- “GET A NEUTRAL SECOND OPINION”
- “BE AWARE OF THE STATUS QUO BIAS”
- “APPLY ZERO-BASED BUDGETING”
- “STOP MAKING CASUAL COMMITMENTS”
- “FROM NOW ON, PAUSE BEFORE YOU SPEAK”
- “GET OVER THE FEAR OF MISSING OUT”
- “TO FIGHT THIS FEAR, RUN A REVERSE PILOT”

### **EDIT: The Invisible Art**

“I SAW THE ANGEL IN THE MARBLE AND CARVED UNTIL I SET HIM FREE. — Michelangelo”

Essentialists:

- “Thinks that making things better means subtracting something.”
- “Eliminates the distracting words, images, and details.”

### **LIMIT: The Freedom of Setting Boundaries**

Essentialists...see boundaries as empowering. They recognize that boundaries protect their time from being hijacked and often free them from the burden of having to say no to things that further others’ objectives instead of their own.

#### **“DON’T ROB PEOPLE OF THEIR PROBLEMS**

I am not saying we should never help people. We should serve, and love, and make a difference in the lives of others, of course. But when people make their problem our problem, we aren’t helping them; we’re enabling them. Once we take their problem for them, all we’re doing is taking away their ability to solve it.

The author Henry Cloud tells a story about just this kind of situation in his book *Boundaries*. Once, the parents of a twenty-five-year-old man came to see him. They wanted him to “fix” their son. He asked them why they had come without their son, and they said, “Well, he doesn’t think he has a problem.” After listening to their story Henry concluded, to their surprise: “I think your son is right. He doesn’t have a problem.... You do.... You pay, you fret, you worry, you plan, you exert energy to keep him going. He doesn’t have a problem because you have taken it from him.””

#### **“BOUNDARIES ARE A SOURCE OF LIBERATION**

..when we don’t set clear boundaries in our lives we can end up imprisoned by the limits others have set for us. When we have clear boundaries...we are free to select from...the whole range of options—that we have deliberately chosen to explore.”

#### **“FIND YOUR DEALBREAKERS**

Another quick test for finding your dealbreakers is to write down any time you feel violated or put upon by someone’s request. It doesn’t have to be in some extreme way for you to notice it. Even a small “pinch” (to use a description I think is helpful for describing a minor violation of your boundaries) that makes you feel even a twinge of resentment—whether it’s an unwanted invitation, an unsolicited “opportunity,” or a request for a small favor—is a clue for discovering your own hidden boundaries.”

## **Part IV: Execute: How can we make doing the vital few things almost effortless?**

“once you’ve figured out which activities and efforts to keep in your life, you have to have a system for executing them. You can’t wait until that closet is bursting at the seams and then take superhuman efforts to purge it. You have to have a system in place so that keeping it neat becomes routine and effortless.”

### **BUFFER: The Unfair Advantage**

GIVE ME SIX HOURS TO CHOP DOWN A TREE AND I WILL SPEND THE FIRST FOUR SHARPENING THE AXE. —Attributed to Abraham Lincoln

“The only thing we can expect (with any great certainty) is the unexpected. Therefore, we can either wait for the moment and react to it or we can prepare. We can create a buffer.”

“I like to allow a luxurious amount of time just in case things come up.”

#### “USE EXTREME PREPARATION

The importance of extreme preparedness holds true for us in business...some companies have thrived under extreme and difficult circumstances while others have not. In filtering out 7 companies from 20,400, the authors found that the ones that executed most successfully did not have any better ability to predict the future than their less successful counterparts. Instead, they were the ones who acknowledged they could not predict the unexpected and therefore prepared better.”

#### “ADD 50 PERCENT TO YOUR TIME ESTIMATE

If you’ve estimated it will take ten minutes...leave the house fifteen minutes before practice begins. Not only does this relieve the stress we feel about being late (imagine how much less stressful sitting in traffic would feel if we weren’t running late), but if we do find that the task was faster and easier to execute than we expected...the extra found time feels like a bonus.”

### **SUBTRACT: Bring Forth More by Removing Obstacles**

“TO ATTAIN KNOWLEDGE ADD THINGS EVERY DAY. TO ATTAIN WISDOM SUBTRACT THINGS EVERY DAY. —Lao-tzu”

"doing less, but better.”

“Essentialists don’t default to Band-Aid solutions. Instead of looking for the most obvious or immediate obstacles, they look for the ones slowing down progress. They ask, “What is getting in the way of achieving what is essential?” While the Nonessentialist is busy applying more and more pressure and piling on more and more solutions, the Essentialist simply makes a one-time investment in removing obstacles. This approach goes beyond just solving problems; it’s a method of reducing your efforts to maximize your results.”

“Instead of focusing on the efforts and resources we need to add, the Essentialist focuses on the constraints or obstacles we need to remove. But how?”

1. “BE CLEAR ABOUT THE ESSENTIAL INTENT: Ask yourself, “How will we know when we are done?””
2. “IDENTIFY THE “SLOWEST HIKER: Ask yourself, “What are all the obstacles standing between me and getting this done?” and “What is keeping me from completing this?” Make a list of these obstacles. They might include: not having the information you need, your energy level, your desire for perfection. Prioritize the list using the question, “What is the obstacle that, if removed, would make the majority of other obstacles disappear?””

3. “REMOVE THE OBSTACLE Let’s say your “slowest hiker” turns out to be your desire to make the report perfect. There may be dozens of ideas you have to make the report better, but in this case your essential intent is to send off the draft. So to remove the obstacle you need to replace the idea “This has to be perfect or else” with “Done is better than perfect.””

### **PROGRESS: The Power of Small Wins**

“Instead of starting big and then flaring out with nothing to show for it other than time and energy wasted, to really get essential things done we need to start small and build momentum. Then we can use that momentum to work toward the next win, and the next one and so on until we have a significant breakthrough”

“the best place to look is for small changes we could make in the things we do often. There is power in steadiness and repetition.”

“FOCUS ON MINIMAL VIABLE PROGRESS”

“Done is better than perfect.”

“We can ask ourselves, “What is the smallest amount of progress that will be useful and valuable to the essential task we are trying to get done?””

“DO THE MINIMAL VIABLE PREPARATION”

“Take a goal or deadline you have coming up and ask yourself, “What is the minimal amount I could do right now to prepare?””

### **FLOW: The Genius of Routine**

“Without routine, the pull of nonessential distractions will overpower us. But if we create a routine that enshrines the essentials, we will begin to execute them on autopilot. Instead of our consciously pursuing the essential, it will happen without our having to think about it. We won’t have to expend precious energy every day prioritizing everything. We must simply expend a small amount of initial energy to create the routine, and then all that is left to do is follow it.”

“Instead of spending our limited supply of discipline on making the same decisions again and again, embedding our decisions into our routine allows us to channel that discipline toward some other essential activity.”

“There is another cognitive advantage to routine as well. Once the mental work shifts to the basal ganglia, mental space is freed up to concentrate on something new.

This allows us to autopilot the execution of one essential activity while simultaneously actively engaging in another, without sacrificing our level of focus or contribution. “In fact, the brain starts working less and less,”... “The brain can almost completely shut down.... And this is a real advantage, because it means you have all of this mental activity you can devote to something else.””

### **FOCUS: What’s Important Now?**

“Nonessentialists tend to be so preoccupied with past successes and failures, as well as future challenges and opportunities, that they miss the present moment. They become distracted. Unfocused. They aren’t really there.”

“What we can’t do is concentrate on two things at the same time. When I talk about being present, I’m not talking about doing only one thing at a time. I’m talking about being focused on one thing at a time. Multitasking itself is not the enemy of Essentialism; pretending we can “multifocus” is.”

How to be fully present?

Make 2 lists:

1. “FIGURE OUT WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW” (right now list)
2. “GET THE FUTURE OUT OF YOUR HEAD” (future plans list)
3. “PRIORITIZE” (both lists)

### **BE: The Essentialist Life**

“BEWARE THE BARRENNESS OF A BUSY LIFE. —Socrates”

“When we look back on our careers and our lives, would we rather see a long laundry list of “accomplishments” that don’t really matter or just a few major accomplishments that have real meaning and significance? I still fight the urge to impulsively check my phone; on my worst days I have wondered if my tombstone will read, “He checked e-mail.””

“Here are some of the ways the disciplined pursuit of less can change your life for the better.

**MORE CLARITY:**

As you continue to clear out the closet of your life, you will experience a reordering of what really matters. Life will become less about efficiently crossing off what was on your to-do list or rushing through everything on your schedule and more about changing what you put on there in the first place. Every day it becomes more clear than the day before how the essential things are so much more important than the next most important thing in line. As a result, the execution of those essentials becomes more and more effortless.

**MORE CONTROL:**

You will gain confidence in your ability to pause, push back, or not rush in. You will feel less and less a function of other people’s to-do lists and agendas. Remember that if you don’t prioritize your life someone else will. But if you are determined to prioritize your own life you can. The power is yours. It is within you.

**MORE JOY IN THE JOURNEY:**

With the focus on what is truly important right now comes the ability to live life more fully, in the moment. For me, a key benefit of being more present in the moment has been making joyful memories that would otherwise not exist. I smile more. I value simplicity. I am more joyful. As the Dalai Lama, another true

Essentialist, has said: “If one’s life is simple, contentment has to come. Simplicity is extremely important for happiness.””

“Will you choose to live a life of purpose and meaning, or will you look back on your one single life with twinges of regret? If you take one thing away from this book, I hope you will remember this: **whatever decision or challenge or crossroads you face in your life, simply ask yourself, “What is essential?” Eliminate everything else.**”

## **Appendix: Leadership Essentials**

“LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner sees “fewer things done better” as the most powerful mechanism for leadership....he said no to really good opportunities in order to pursue only the very best ones.”

“The results of this research were startling: when there was a high level of clarity of purpose, the teams and the people on it overwhelmingly thrived. When there was a serious lack of clarity about what the team stood for and what their goals and roles were, people experienced confusion, stress, frustration, and ultimately failure....“**Clarity equals success.**””

“when teams lack clarity of purpose, it becomes difficult if not impossible to discern which of these myriad opportunities are truly vital. The unintended consequence is that Nonessentialist managers try to have their teams pursue too many things—and try to do too many things themselves as well—and the team plateaus in its progress.”

“one wrong hire is far costlier than being one person short. And the cost of hiring too many wrong people (and one wrong hire often leads to multiple wrong hires because the wrong person will tend to attract more wrong people) is what Guy Kawasaki called a “Bozo explosion”—a term he uses to describe what happens when a formerly great team or company descends into mediocrity.”

Without clarity of purpose, Nonessentialist leaders straddle their strategy: they try to pursue too many objectives and do too many things. As a result their teams get spread in a million directions and make little progress on any.