



A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain

John J. Ratey

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John Ratey, bestselling author and clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, here lucidly explains the human brain's workings, and paves the way for a better understanding of how the brain affects who we are. Ratey provides insight into the basic structure and chemistry of the brain, and demonstrates how its systems shape our perceptions, emotions, and behavior. By giving us a greater understanding of how the brain responds to the guidance of its user, he provides us with knowledge that can enable us to improve our lives.

In **A User's Guide to the Brain**, Ratey clearly and succinctly surveys what scientists now know about the brain and how we use it. He looks at the brain as a malleable organ capable of improvement and change, like any muscle, and examines the way specific motor functions might be applied to overcome neural disorders ranging from everyday shyness to autism. Drawing on examples from his practice and from everyday life, Ratey illustrates that the most important lesson we can learn about our brains is how to use them to their maximum potential.

A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain Details

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Ehsan Doostmohammadi says

Mikee says

"The idle mind is the devil's plaything"

Heather Wright says

This was a fascinating read. I learned so much about how the brain works, how easy it is to train (when you know what you're doing), and how one small thing in one small piece of it can affect everything else and have huge consequences. I highly recommend this to anyone who has a brain of their own and most especially anyone who is or knows someone who is ADHD, has dealt with any mental illness, or in any way falls on the spectrum of "different" based on their mental capacities or tendencies. It's written in a very easy to understand way that lets a lay person (even a not terribly science inclined one) easily understand all the concepts being discussed. You'll be amazed by your own potential by the time you get to the end of this book.

Allison says

The idea for this book was excellent: take all of the intricate, ground-breaking information in neuroscience and psychology, simplify it as much as possible to educate every-day readers, and add a "how to" component to show the information's practicality, importance, and usefulness. Coming from an author and clinician as well established as John Ratey (he works at Harvard), I expected nothing less than an intelligent, compelling book.

A User's Guide reads like a condensed version of my freshman year coursework in Brain & Cognitive Sciences. Ratey provides explanations of each basic neuroscience concept (e.g. synapses, "use it or lose it," plasticity, etc.) as he goes through his material, all of which are essential to understanding and being convinced of his argument that we can change the neuroanatomy and therefore functionality of our own brains. However, Ratey may as well have physically taken his book and bashed his readers over the head with it repeatedly, because that is what he does with every point he makes. Instead of providing one paragraph of neuroscience explanation and then a follow-up paragraph or two about how this anatomy or functionality works in practical terms and/or how it can be manipulated by a "user," he spends pages going over and over each concept in every synonymous way he can conceive. By the end of the first chapter, I was less convinced of his argument that people can change their own brains by "thinking right" and more

convinced that he was trying to create a memorization aid for neuroscience students.

Ultimately, I got so fed up with the repetition that I quit the book. (A reader can only skip so many paragraphs, after all, before deciding to "skip" the remainder of the book.) I am sure there are other books out there on this same topic that are more entertaining and less tiresome. Ratey seems like he knows his stuff, and--as I am already familiar with the material--he seems to explain it well. However, as good as his explanations might be, there IS something to be said for too much of a good thing. And *A User's Guide* was definitely too much.

Francesco says

Dr John J Ratey's book clarified so many of my beliefs about learning, socializing, and regulating emotions. With his thorough explanation of the brain biology, he explained how each function of the biology of the brain influences our outward expressions of our personality. Ultimately, once we learn about our learning abilities or disabilities, he explains that we can choose to self-regulate in order to manage our goals and life expectations. The common thread throughout the book is that if you are interested in self-improvement and see yourself as having greater gifts, then you must search for the answers from qualified healthcare professionals, due diligence of research, and do not get discouraged. Dr John J Ratey expresses that there have been many famous people whom have overcome their biological neuropsychology through perseverance. A wealth of insight and research that inspires one to share his knowledge.

Amela Sandra says

One of the best and first psychology books I've ever read.

This book has transformed my life.

It has inspired me to immerse myself in the world of the human mind.

I absolutely LOVE this book!

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in psychology.

Tom S says

As someone with no prior background or experience in neuroscience or psychology I found this book a fascinating insight into the complexities of the brain.

The author initially sets out his goal of providing an accessible read to all by eschewing complex medical terms for easy to understand concepts through metaphors. These certainly provide a fantastic level of accessibility but at the expense of a certain level of repetition.

I think the intended target of this book is freshman undertaking studies in neuroscience, demonstrated by the significant amount of references to studies, papers and research.

This book provided me with enough information to grasp a solid understanding of the fundamentals of

neuroscience whilst giving me ideas of where I can direct my efforts for further reading and study on related topics, some of which I intend to explore further.

For me, this book loses one star due to being overly dry in parts and having a significant lack of flow or rhythm; I would attribute this equally between the subject matter and the linguistic capabilities of the author who was acutely focused on a highly factual narrative.

Lauren says

I picked up A User's Guide to the Brain from a library booksale. As someone with brain problems of some variety, I've developed a strong interest in finding out how brains actually work.

Ratey does a good job of balancing actual science with writing that is easily understandable. I appreciated his non-judgemental and hopeful tone, and I found some of his insights really useful, especially regarding the importance of motor centres in the brain and the connection between movement and thinking, the role of emotions in decision making, and the plasticity of the brain. I finished this book feeling like I understood more about myself, others, and will be able to use some of these insights to fine-tune routines in my life to help out my brain.

My dissatisfactions with the book are mainly these: after a throwaway comment that no one is born gay, Ratey never speaks of homosexuality again. This book was written in 2002, but it's still annoying, especially to myself as a lesbian. And a quick google search does show there has been evidence for homosexuality showing up in different ways in the brain.

Ratey also doesn't mention the impacts of gender socialization on the brain at all. Basically, if you read this book you also definitely need to read Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference!

Stacie says

"A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain" by John J. Ratey, "lucidly explains the human brain's workings, and paves the way for a better understanding of how the brain affects who we are. Ratey provides insight into the basic structure and chemistry of the brain, and demonstrates how its systems shape our perceptions, emotions, and behavior. By giving us a greater understanding of how the brain responds to the guidance of its user, he provides us with knowledge that can enable us to improve our lives." I loved this book, probably because I'm very interested in psychology and I love learning about the human brain. It was easy to understand what I was reading, and I loved how the author used real life examples and then describe what was going on and how they figured out what the problem was. I would recommend this to anyone who wants to learn more about the way we think and how we can improve our lives by having this knowledge and understanding.

Mohsen Rajabi says

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Matthew says

Honestly, most people would expect this to "just be another boring science book" but I in fact quite enjoyed it. Not only does it give factual info in a fun way but it also includes actual stories about what the chapters are about, not just cold hard facts. would I recommend this book to others? Definitely! Its a great book and interesting to boot.

Amari says

Very engaging at times, though I felt it dragged a bit in the middle.

Well-written, but still falls easily within the category of shoulda-had-me-proofread-it.

Much fascinating information. Easy to appreciate, this relatively non-technical yet non-dumbed-down little introduction to the physiology of our noggins and, of course, selves.

Several tidbits that will stay with me:

If you've just learned some new vocabulary words or are trying to integrate information, you have to get some REM sleep in order to truly learn the new material.

Language development can be conceived as a simple result of humans' unique ability to create and understand symbols.

Ratey writes beautifully about infants' innate ability to understand beings as discrete entities with different information and the ability to deliberately share it.

I like Ratey's positive spin, which persists throughout, on our potential to rewire our brains and change ourselves throughout life. I believe him, somehow, probably as much because he writes as though convinced as for the facts he uses to support this argument.

I like the way this book has taught me to think more analytically about why I react to certain events as I do (why did I scream when I saw a mouse? why exactly do I have trouble with word recall when I am suffering from insomnia? how does my left-handedness define me?)

Laura says

A very well structured and precise introduction to Neuroscience/Neuropsychology.

I have been reading similar books, this one in particular was recommended from my Neuropsychology's professor, and though I didn't learn anything new, I quite enjoyed the way it was structured, every chapter covers a cognitive process or a psychological topic like development.

Therefore, if you are struggling with neuroscience or want to learn about it in a cool and easy way, this is a very good option, it covers a lot of topics (most of them are cognitive) and gives a good insight about the brain without going too deep about it. It's great for psychology students.

Lisa Duffy-Korpics says

An amazing book that explains all the aspects of the brain in an intelligent, yet accessible way that is easily understood by the regular person. No need to have a Neuroscience degree to grasp this book - however it never talks down to the reader. Written by John J. Ratey, M.D., a clinical professor of Psychiatry at Harvard

Medical School, this book touches on memory, language, movement, emotion and social ability and how our brain is "plastic" or changeable throughout our lives. A study involving a group of Nuns who lived on average, to be 100 years old and over, showed how this group had a much lower rate of Alzheimer's Disease and/or dementia associated with again, then the general population. The major difference? - learning. Constant learning throughout your life. Not only can an old dog learn new tricks - those new tricks can be the key to longer, more productive lives and a healthier brain. While practice may make perfect, it's new tasks that require us to master skills that we've never used before, that keep a brain growing and making new neural connections.

A fascinating read - I highly recommend it.

Sarah Milne says

This is the single best "pop-neuro" book I have read. It is a fascinating look at the four theaters of the brain that ultimately makes the point that biology is at the root of mental disorders, and while that does not excuse behavior, it is extremely liberating. A couple quotes:

"Despite all this activity going on in the brain, the treatment of mental disorders—extreme and mild—has centered upon the lone issue of "affect": a person's emotional state. Since the earliest days of psychiatry, every diagnostician has inevitably asked some version of the question "How do you feel?" Feelings are what hurt the patient, and the therapist is drawn to them, wanting to fix the hurt. But feelings are not the cause of the problems but the result, the outcome of an enormous amount of brain activity, including perception, attention, consciousness, and the brain functions." (336-337)

"Problems in the fourth theater are the ones most readily apparent to ourselves and others, so not only are they the ones most likely to motivate people to seek treatment, they are often the sole focus of investigation and treatment. Many clinicians never even look at or through the other theaters of the brain. Personality is not a cause of problems; it is rather the expression of good and bad influences from the earlier theaters." (346)

"When assessing a human being, almost everything merits examination." (354)

"It will be the clinician's duty in the new century to help and to teach patients to explore whatever modifications of neurochemical, behavioral, psychological, and environmental factors might compensate for an illness." (354)

"Discovering creativity in one's self can be a highly effective component of treatment. By thinking solely in terms of pathology, as if our Hippocratic duty required only that we restore the patient to some former, imagined state of perfect health, we fail to notice traits that provide not only a path to recovery but a means to progress beyond it. The brain's processes can be utterly transformed by self-discovery and the right pursuits in life." (354-355)
