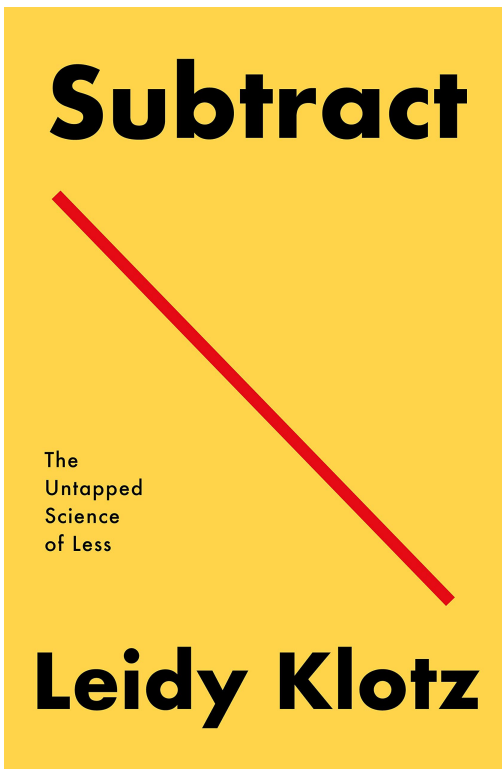


Subtract

The Untapped Science of Less

Reading and Discussion Guide

Blending behavioral science and design, Leidy Klotz's *Subtract* offers a scientific appreciation of why we underuse subtraction—and how to access its untapped potential.



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About the Book

We pile on “to-dos” but don’t consider “stop-doings.” We create incentives for good behavior, but don’t get rid of obstacles to it. We collect new-and-improved ideas, but don’t prune the outdated ones. Every day, across challenges big and small, we neglect a basic way to make things better: we don’t subtract.

Leidy Klotz’s pioneering research shows why. Whether we’re building Lego models or cities, grilled cheese sandwiches or strategic plans, our minds tend to add before taking away. Even when we do think of it, subtraction can be harder to pull off because an array of biological, cultural, and economic forces push us towards more. But we have a choice—our blind spot need not go on taking its toll on our cities, our institutions, and our minds. By diagnosing our neglect of subtraction, we can treat it.

Subtract will change how you change your world. In these pages you’ll meet subtracting exemplars: design geniuses, Nobel prize winners, rock stars, and everyday heroes, who have subtracted to dismantle racism, advance knowledge, heal the planet, and even tell better jokes. These and more guiding lights show how we can revolutionize not just our day-to-day lives, but our collective legacy. A paradigm shift of a book, *Subtract* shows us how to find more of the options we’ve been missing—and empowers us to pursue them.

About the Author

Leidy Klotz studies the science of design, which, he reminds us, is something we all do every day. His research has appeared in both *Nature* and *Science*, and he is a frequent guest on interview programs including *Hidden Brain*, *Freakonomics*, *NPR*, and *The Atlantic*. His writing has appeared in outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *Fast Company*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Scientific American*. He has given more than 100 invited talks at leading universities, think-tanks, and companies.

A professor at the University of Virginia, Leidy has taught thousands of students, including 21 Ph.D. advisees, whose designing and teaching shapes the world. Leidy's scholarship benefits from diversity and inclusion as more than three quarters of his advisees are from groups underrepresented in their respective fields.

Before becoming a professor, Leidy designed schools in New Jersey and before that he played professional soccer.

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1. How is subtraction different from doing less? Have you ever resisted subtraction to demonstrate competence? How could you benefit from using subtraction at work, in your relationships, or in your community?
2. Why did Sue Bierman initially fail to remove the Embarcadero freeway from San Francisco's waterfront? How did her efforts contribute to the eventual removal of the freeway?
3. How did Leo Robinson's refusal to unload South African cargo trigger a series of anti-apartheid actions? Have you ever participated in a smaller act of resistance that contributed to a later change? What are some current movements for divestment that could lead to transformational social change?
4. How was the "tragedy of the commons" constructed from harmful and incorrect assumptions? How did Elinor Ostrom successfully challenge these assumptions? How can subtracting old ideas lead to monumental paradigm shifts? What are some current social ideas that would benefit from subtraction?
5. Consider some of the subtractions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. How did these subtractions lead to short-term gains? What long-term gains are possible?

**"To attain knowledge add things every day.
To attain wisdom subtract things every day." — Lao Tzu**

6. What happens when the mesolimbocortical pathway in the brain is activated? What are some types of acquisition that feel stimulating or satisfying to you? Would you benefit from subtracting any of these patterns of acquisition? How does synaptic pruning protect us? How might you consciously emulate this pruning?
7. How does our view of "the field" have roots in cultural evolution? How can changing our view reveal a subtraction as a new path? How can you practice seeing a field that extends beyond physical objects?
8. Why are public spaces like Collyer Park in New York City and public squares in Savannah, Georgia important? How do these physical spaces illustrate the transformational potential of subtraction? Are there unused spaces in your community that could be transformed into cultural bright spots?

"A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." — Herbert Simon

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9. How did Maya Lin use subtraction in her design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? What are the culturally significant aspects of monumental architecture? How can removing monuments benefit a community's culture?
10. How was consumption framed as both a moral objective and economic necessity following World War II? Why are metrics like gross domestic product (GDP) commonly used to frame progress? How can we avoid conflating progress with growth?
11. How is time famine harmful? How has your professional sector or field of interest benefited from stop-doings? What time-saving measures and stop-doings could increase satisfaction in your life?

"Omit needless words." — Strunk and White

12. How did architect Kate Orff use subtraction in Lexington, Kentucky? How did the verbs "reveal, clean, carve" impact the community's response to her design? How can positive language prevent triggering loss aversion? How could you use this tactic in your life?
13. How can subtraction help us understand complex systems and create social change? Why is this important when thinking about racial injustice, poverty, and equity? How can subtraction transform social systems?
14. How did Costa Rica integrate subtraction into their model for becoming a carbon-neutral nation? How could this model be replicated in other environments? Why is it important to boldly envision the future we want? Consider your own vision for a brighter future—what would you include and what would you subtract?
15. Why is it often helpful to distill complex scenarios to their most essential ideas? How does subtracting information help our mental processing? Consider a complex scenario in your life—at work, home, or in your community. How could a lesslist help you to improve a system, process, or decision?

About this Guide's Author

Rachael Zafer is a writer, educator, and social change consultant and provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. Rachael is the author of guides for over thirty texts, available for free download and use at www.rachaelzafer.com.

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When we understand our adding instincts and seek alternatives, subtraction can improve our lives, our institutions, and our planet.

Invert:

Try less before more

Subtract unnecessary detail before you act. Take a cue from the life-saving ER triage process.

Put subtraction first. Play a round of Jenga. Simplify a recipe. Send less email.

Convey that less is not a loss. Use Kate Orff's "clean, carve, reveal" approach. Choose a unit of transformation.

Expand:

Think add *and* subtract

Revel in the noticeable less. Take a virtual tour of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Go sit in a nearby public square or pocket park.

Zoom out to see the field. Find and eliminate the tension. It's often the best way to transform systems.

Celebrate multitudes. Tap into your inner editor. If you get stuck, hire one.

Distill:

Focus on the people

Embrace complexity while striving for the essence. Clarify what sparks joy.

Resist more-ality. Try stop-doings. Spend money to save time.

Subtract information and accumulate wisdom. Get rid of the mental chartjunk. Appreciate your brain's synaptic pruning.

Persist:

Keep subtracting

Make less undeniable. Create your version of Springsteen's "Darkness on the Edge of Town." Carry on until you change the system—think Costa Rica's plan for carbon neutrality.

Leave a legacy of less. Clear the clutter to entrust options for the future.

Reuse your subtractions. Everyone loves a donut hole.