Understanding Atomic Habits: Ideas, Evidence, and Limits

Name Date Class

Reading

1 When James Clear's *Atomic Habits* appeared in 2018, its central promise was easy to like: small changes, repeated consistently, add up to large results. Its opening story concerns British Cycling, whose coach Dave Brailsford looked for **marginal** gains everywhere. Clear's central image is arithmetic. If you improved by 1 percent every day, you would be about 37 times better after a year, and if you declined by 1 percent, you would end up almost at zero. On any single day the difference is **negligible**, but gains **compound** like interest. The catch is that results lag behind effort. Clear compares progress to an ice cube that shows no change from 25 to 31 degrees Fahrenheit and then melts at 32. People who quit on a **plateau**, he says, do not realize that their progress is **latent**: present but not yet visible.

2 The second claim is that systems matter more than goals. Winners and losers often share the same goals, Clear argues; the difference is the daily process. He illustrates small shifts with a flight from Los Angeles: a pilot who changed the heading by about 3.5 degrees would land in Washington instead of New York. A small change in daily habits alters your **trajectory** in the same way, even if the first miles look identical. The **premise** underneath is that your current habits predict your future better than your ambitions do.

3 Clear argues that the deepest layer of change is identity: every action is a vote for the person you want to become. Small repeated actions gradually **bolster** the new self-image, which he considers more practical than an **aspirational** statement such as "I want to be healthy." Psychologists have tested a related idea. In 2011, Christopher Bryan and colleagues at Stanford reported that asking people to think of themselves as voters, rather than as people who vote, raised turnout in two US elections. Larger field experiments in 2016 and 2020 found no effect from the same wording. Were the effect as large as the first study suggested, those experiments would probably have detected it.

4 Clear describes every habit as a four-step loop: a cue triggers a craving, the craving prompts a response, and the response delivers a reward. Repeated often enough, the loop runs with little conscious thought, a state psychologists call **automaticity**. The loop also explains why bad habits become **entrenched**: their rewards arrive immediately, while their costs come later. From it he builds four laws of behavior change. A good habit should be obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying, and each law is reversed for a bad habit.

5 Environment is the second big lever. Clear describes a Boston hospital cafeteria where researchers put bottled water in refrigerators that had held only soda. Over three months, water sales rose by about 26 percent and soda sales fell by about 11 percent. A space can be **conducive** to good choices or bad ones, and a little **friction** can matter more than willpower. The evidence deserves care, though. The study, led by Anne Thorndike at Massachusetts General Hospital, compared sales before and after in one cafeteria that had already added traffic-light labels. A follow-up found that "red" drinks fell from 26 to 17 percent of beverage sales over two years, but a before-and-after comparison cannot rule out other causes.

6 Some of the book's tools rest on **robust** evidence. A 2006 meta-analysis by Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran combined 94 tests and found that specific if-then plans had a medium-to-large effect on reaching goals. In a 2002 experiment at the University of Bath, 91 percent of exercisers who wrote down when and where they would exercise reported doing so the next week, against 35 and 38 percent in two other groups. The 37-times figure, by contrast, is arithmetic, not a measurement. The idea that habits take 21 days appears to come from a 1960 book by a plastic surgeon, Maxwell Maltz. A 2010 study at University College London tracked 96 volunteers for 12 weeks. Among the 39 whose data fitted its model well, the median time to reach automaticity was 66 days, with estimates from 18 to 254 days.

7 Many of the book's most memorable stories are **anecdotal**: they show that a method worked for someone, not that it works for most people. Bradley Wiggins, the 2012 Tour de France winner, once called marginal gains "a load of rubbish," and a 2018 UK parliamentary committee criticized Team Sky's use of a permitted drug before that race, a finding the team disputed. A success story rarely has a single cause. A deeper objection is philosophical: Oliver Burkeman's 2021 book *Four Thousand Weeks* argues that constant self-optimization can become a trap. A proposed preregistered repeat of the 66-day study would recruit about 800 people at four sites, but this lesson found no published results.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**marginal**	_____	**A**	too small to be worth considering
2	**negligible**	_____	**B**	difficulty that slows an action down
3	**compound**	_____	**C**	strong and reliable when tested
4	**plateau**	_____	**D**	make something stronger or more secure
5	**latent**	_____	**E**	expressing hopes, not present reality
6	**trajectory**	_____	**F**	based on stories, not research
7	**premise**	_____	**G**	present but not yet visible
8	**aspirational**	_____	**H**	grow as gains build on earlier gains
9	**bolster**	_____	**I**	an idea that an argument is based on
10	**automaticity**	_____	**J**	firmly fixed and hard to change
11	**entrenched**	_____	**K**	making a result more likely
12	**conducive**	_____	**L**	a period with little or no progress
13	**friction**	_____	**M**	the path something follows over time
14	**robust**	_____	**N**	very small in amount or importance
15	**anecdotal**	_____	**O**	acting without conscious thought

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

anecdotal	**aspirational**	**automaticity**	**bolster**	**conducive**	**entrenched**	**friction**	**latent**	**marginal**
negligible	**plateau**	**premise**	**robust**	**trajectory**				

1 The new timetable made only a _____ difference to waiting times.

2 On any single day, a one percent improvement is _____ .

3 After months of progress, her weight loss reached a _____ .

4 The course revealed a _____ talent for languages that she had never noticed.

5 Moving abroad changed the _____ of her career.

6 The _____ of the plan is that customers prefer low prices.

7 “I want to be healthy” is an _____ statement, not a plan.

8 The good exam results helped to _____ her confidence.

9 With practice, common words are recognized with _____ .

10 _____ attitudes toward overtime were slow to change.

11 A quiet library is _____ to serious study.

12 Removing _____ from the checkout process makes customers buy more.

13 The finding proved _____ when other teams repeated the study.

14 The evidence for the app is _____ , since it comes from a few users.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What is the arithmetic behind Clear's image of small improvements, and what does the ice cube example add to it?

2 According to the reading, what does Clear mean by saying that systems matter more than goals?

3 What does the writer say about the flight example and about the premise underneath it?

4 How does the reading connect Clear's idea of identity with the 2011 study by Bryan and colleagues, and what happened when larger experiments tried to repeat it?

5 Explain the four-step habit loop and why, according to the reading, it helps to explain entrenched bad habits.

6 What did the Boston cafeteria study find, and why does the writer say its conclusions must be treated with care?

7 Which pieces of evidence does the reading describe as robust, and which does it describe as less firm? Give the reasons.

8 What does the reading say about the origin of the 21-day idea and about the 2010 University College London study, and why should the 66-day figure be handled carefully?

9 The writer ends with a story about a cycling team, an objection from Oliver Burkeman, and a proposed repeat of a study. What does each add to the writer's overall judgment of the book?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The 66-day figure has been confirmed by a large repeat of the University College London study."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that the book's advice is useless."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer include the sentence "A success story rarely has a single cause"? Is its purpose to reject the book, to warn readers about how success stories are used, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** The reading says that improving by 1 percent every day would make you about 37 times better after a year.

2 **T / F** According to the reading, the ice cube in Clear's example melts at 25 degrees Fahrenheit.

3 **T / F** Clear argues that winners and losers often share the same goals.

4 **T / F** The reading says that Clear thinks goals matter more than systems.

5 **T / F** Larger field experiments in 2016 and 2020 found no effect from the "voter" wording.

6 **T / F** The 2011 study by Bryan and colleagues found that identity wording lowered turnout.

7 **T / F** Clear describes a habit as a loop with three steps.

8 **T / F** The cafeteria study compared sales before and after in a single cafeteria.

9 **T / F** The idea that habits take 21 days appears to come from a 1960 book.

10 **T / F** The reading says the team accepted the 2018 parliamentary committee's finding about a permitted drug.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1. Which of your current habits would you most like to change? Which of Clear's four laws would help most?
2. Think of a goal you set but did not reach. What was missing from your system, not your goal?
3. Finish this sentence in a way that feels true: I am the kind of person who... Which small daily actions count as votes for that identity?
4. Have you ever quit something while stuck on a plateau? Looking back, do you think your progress was latent, or was quitting the right decision?
5. Look at the place where you usually study or work. Is it conducive to the habits you want, or does it make bad habits easier?
6. Choose a habit you want to build and shrink it to a version that takes two minutes. Does it feel too small to matter?
7. Do habit trackers and streaks motivate you, or do they make you feel guilty when you miss a day?
8. The reading says the 37-times figure is arithmetic, not a measurement. Does knowing that make the advice less convincing?
9. The 2011 voting study could not be repeated in larger experiments. How should a reader treat an appealing psychological finding that later fails to replicate?
10. Many of the book's stories are anecdotal. How much should we trust advice that rests mostly on success stories?
11. Can changing your environment work for people who do not control their schedules, such as shift workers or students who live with family?
12. Is there a risk that tracking and optimizing your habits makes life feel like a project to be managed? Give reasons.
13. Habits differ across cultures and communities. Which habits in your country are shaped mainly by the environment, and which by identity or group belonging?
14. Do you think Clear and Burkeman disagree more about what to do, or about why to do it?

Language Focus: Conditionals: Real, Hypothetical, and Inverted

Conditional sentences describe results that depend on a condition. Hypothetical conditionals use if + past simple, followed by would + base verb. In formal writing, an inverted form can replace if: Were + subject, or Had + subject + past participle.

In the reading:

- "**If you improved** by 1 percent every day, **you would be** about 37 times better after a year..."
- "...and **if you declined** by 1 percent, **you would end up** almost at zero."
- "...a pilot who changed the heading by about 3.5 degrees **would land** in Washington instead of New York."

Practice: Rewrite as an inverted conditional, without if: *"If the team had measured behavior directly, the results would be easier to trust."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/atomic-habits

Notes