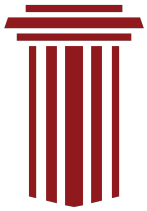
Agora Bookshelf

Keep reading



WELCOME

Hi Friends,

We all agree on one thing: reading is boring. Reading unnecessary books can be both boring and wasteful.

As a project aimed at making knowledge and writing more accessible, we curated this reading list of the best texts and literature (at least we think so) for some of the common subjects.

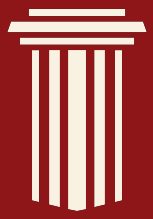
The types of books you will find in this file are as follows: encyclopedias, original (primary source) works, controversial works, texturous and atypical pieces, and mini-essays.

We didn't want to flood the file with too many books. We approached students and teachers in each major and asked for their suggestions. We filtered the suggestions and curated a final list. We made sure that we were choosing the best books. The books that provoke. The books that push you out of your sheep-like ignorance. The books that have proven their timeless significance over the past years. And we purposefully organized the list by common subjects. You may explore the areas that appeal to you.

However, if you find any book to be unworthy of the list, or if you think we could've added any other book to the list instead of the ones present, don't hesitate to reach out to us at husan@agorawriting.com. We are open to feedback and inquiries.

We also express our utmost gratitude to people whose suggestions made up the list. Without them, this list wouldn't be possible.

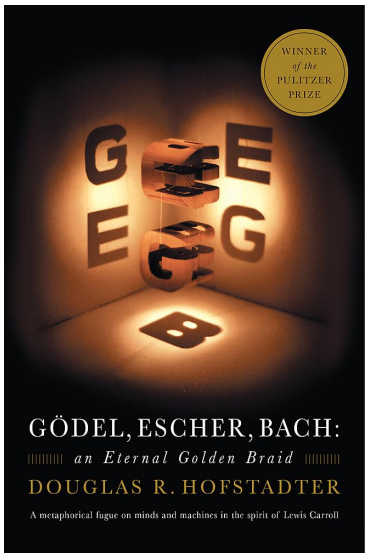
We hope you fall in love with these books as much as we did.



MUST-READS

GÖDEL, ESCHER, BACH

Douglas Hofstadter

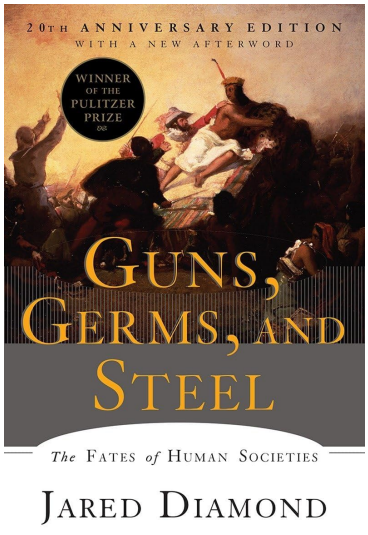


Mathematics, AI, Consciousness

Three guys walk into consciousness: a logician, an artist, and a composer. This book is what happens when someone tries to explain intelligence through Bach fugues, Escher drawings, and mathematical paradoxes. Dense, brilliant, and occasionally maddening.

GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL

Jared Diamond

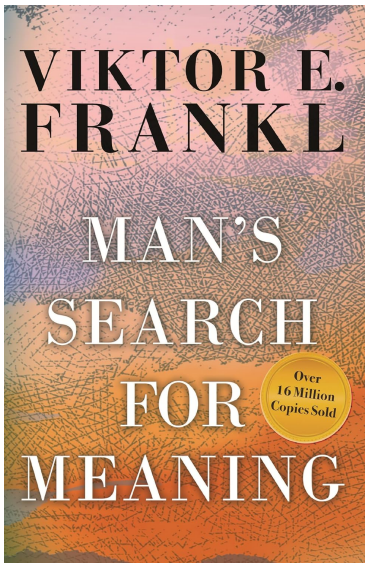


History, Anthropology

Why did Europeans conquer the Americas and not the other way around? Jared says it is because of the geography, not genetics. Wheat beats corn, horses beat llamas, and Eurasia's east-west axis meant faster idea-sharing than Africa's north-south layout.

MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

Viktor Frankl

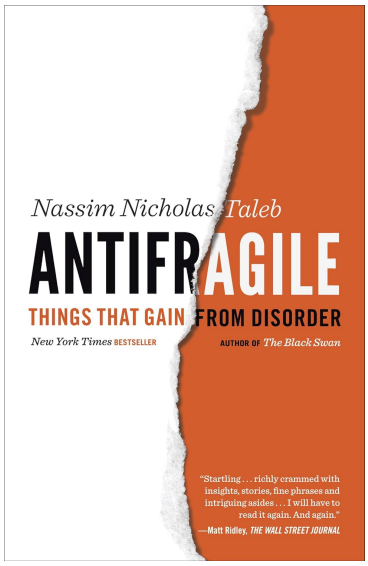


Meaning, Life, Philosophy

Frankl survived Nazi concentration camps and argues the key was having a reason to live. He builds a therapy approach around this - that people need meaning more than comfort or control. Half memoir showing how this worked for him, half theory about what drives humans fundamentally.

ANTIFRAGILE

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

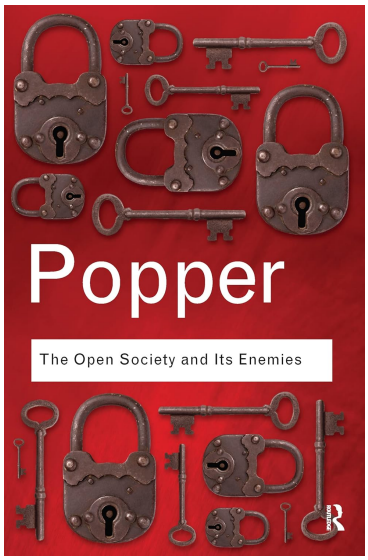


Philosophy, Economics, Risk

Some things break under stress, some things resist stress, and some things get stronger from stress. Taleb is annoyingly accurate, outspoken about the bullshit, and is going to change how you think about risk, uncertainty, and why your gym membership matters.

THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES

Karl Popper

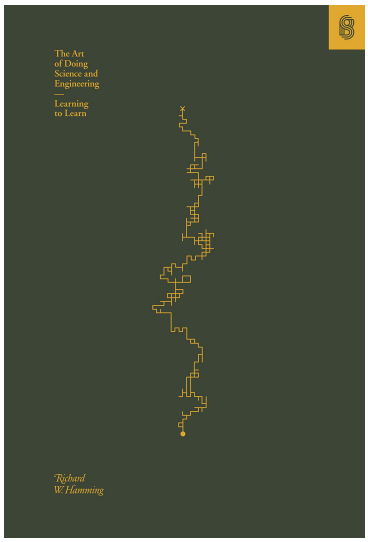


Philosophy, Political Theory

Popper wrote this during World War II attacking Plato, Hegel, and Marx as philosophical roots of totalitarianism. His argument: closed societies claim to know ultimate truth and enforce it; open societies accept uncertainty and allow criticism. Dense, combative, and foundational to liberal political philosophy.

THE ART OF DOING SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING

Richard W. Hamming

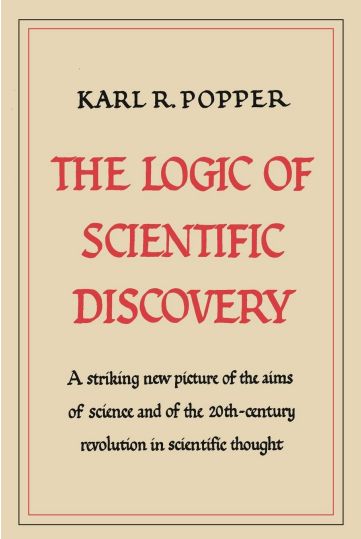


Science, Engineering

Why do some scientists make lasting contributions while others don't? Hamming spent decades at Bell Labs trying to formulate an answer. He concluded that the raw intelligence wasn't enough to make lasting contributions. One needed the ability to choose important problems, to work on them obsessively, and communicating clearly. Practical wisdom from someone who actually did great work.

THE LOGIC OF SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

Karl Popper



Philosophy of Science

Science doesn't prove theories true; it tries to prove them false. Popper argues that falsifiability separates science from pseudoscience. You can't verify a theory with a million confirming observations, but one counterexample destroys it. Revolutionary for philosophy of science, still controversial.

1984

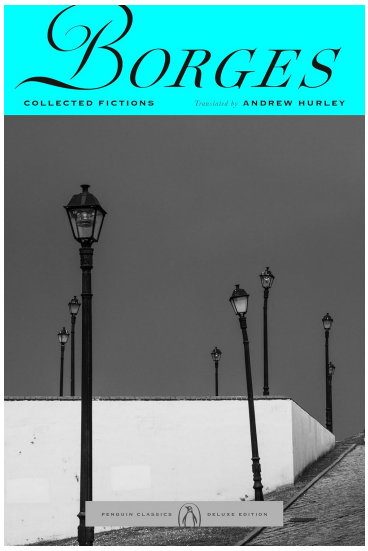
Eric Arthur Blair

Fiction, Political Philosophy

Totalitarian future where the Party controls reality itself. War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and "two plus two" equals "five" if the Party says so. Orwell wrote it in way back in 1948, but he nailed creating the framework for understanding authoritarian language manipulation.

FICTIONS

Jorge Luis Borges

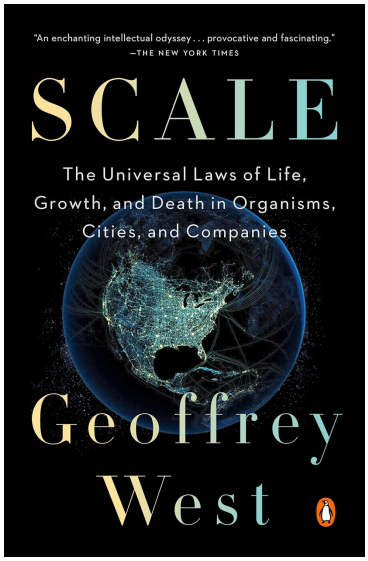


Fiction, Philosophy

Short philosophical thought experiments given in the story format. Libraries containing every possible book, labyrinths that are the universe, a lottery that determines all life outcomes. The title may say "fiction." But it is not really a fiction. Borges is writing metaphysics disguised as fiction. Each story touches on questions about infinity, identity, and knowledge.

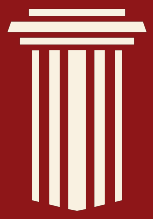
SCALE

Geoffrey West



Science, Systems Thinking

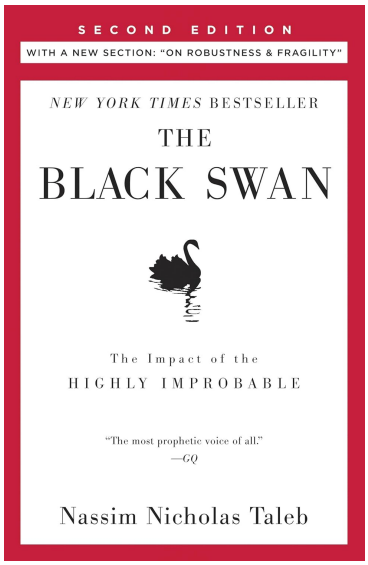
Cities, companies, and organisms follow mathematical laws. Double a city's size, productivity increases 15% but infrastructure needs only grow 85%. Double an organism's size, metabolism slows proportionally. West found universal scaling laws that explain growth, innovation, and why companies die but cities don't. A must-read if you want to scale (scale really anything).



MATHEMATICS

THE BLACK SWAN

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

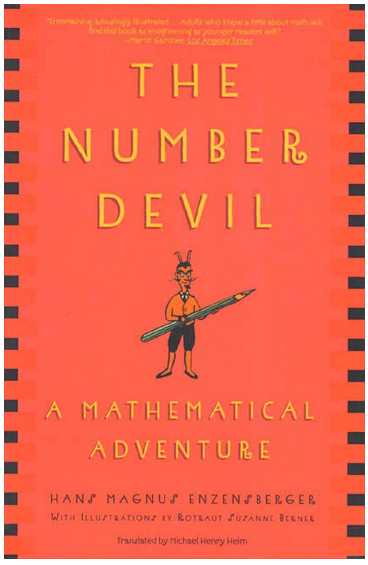


Philosophy, Risk, Statistics

Normal distributions are lies we tell ourselves. The world runs on rare, unpredictable events: 9/11, market crashes, the career breaks. Taleb is convinced that most experts are frauds who mistake the map for the territory, and he'll insult everyone while proving it.

THE NUMBER DEVIL

Hans Magnus Enzensberger

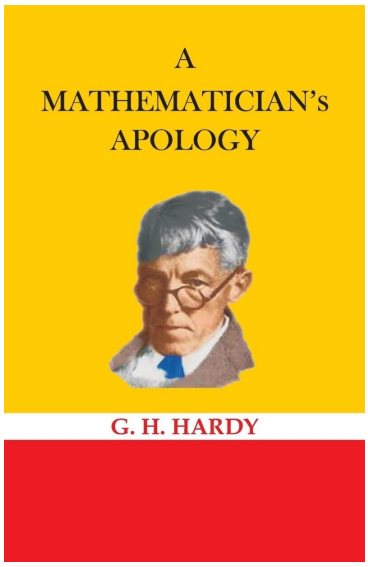


Mathematics, Children's Literature

A kid who hates math meets a "devil" in his dreams who teaches him real mathematics. Not school arithmetic based on rote learning, but patterns, prime numbers, and mathematical reasoning through playful problems. Makes abstract concepts concrete without dumbing them down.

A MATHEMATICIAN'S APOLOGY

G.H. Hardy

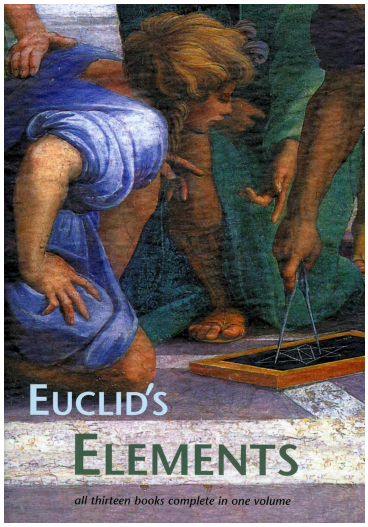


Mathematics, Philosophy

Hardy defends pure mathematics as art, not utility. He's proud his work has no practical application—beauty's the point. Written by a brilliant mathematician confronting his declining powers, it's melancholic and defiant in equal measure.

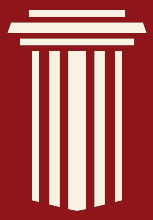
ELEMENTS

Euclid



Geometry, Logic

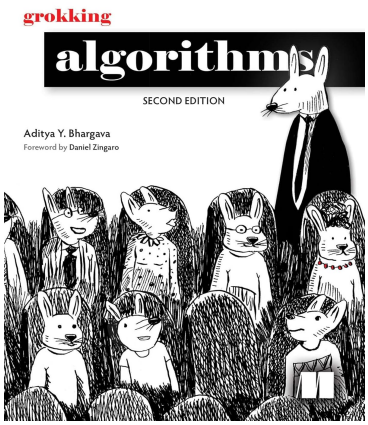
The most influential textbook ever written, used for 2,000 years. Geometry built from five axioms through pure deductive reasoning. It's not just math—it's the template for how to think with ruthless logical precision.



COMPUTER SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

GROKKING ALGORITHMS

Aditya Y Bhargava



Computer Science, Algorithms

The bible of algorithms. Bhargava's work is an illustrated, beginner-friendly introduction to core algorithms and data structures, using simple Python examples and visuals to teach searching, sorting, graphs, trees, greedy methods, dynamic programming, and more, with a strong focus on intuition over heavy math.

THE LAST QUESTION

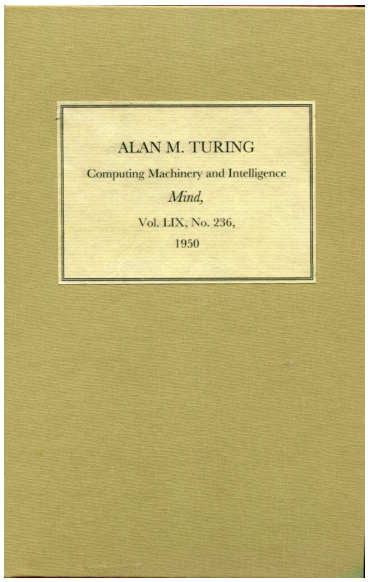
Isaac Asimov

Science Fiction, Cosmology, Philosophy of Technology

Humans keep asking increasingly advanced AIs whether entropy can be reversed and the universe saved from heat death. Each era brings new technology but the same answer—until the final question is asked when all humans are gone. Asimov's most famous short story about computation, consciousness, and cosmic timescales.

COMPUTING MACHINERY AND INTELLIGENCE

Alan Turing

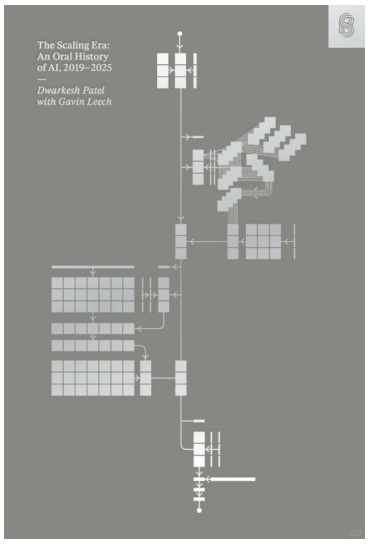


AI, Philosophy, Computer Science

Turing asks "Can machines think?" then immediately declares the question meaningless. His imitation game (the Turing Test) reframes the whole debate. Written in 1950, still shapes every AI conversation we're having today.

SCALING ERA: THE ORAL HISTORY OF AI

Dwarkesh Patel

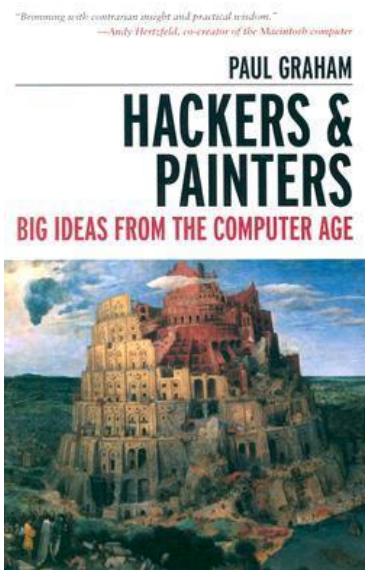


Scaling AI, Interviews, AI Bubble

Interview compilation with AI lab founders and researchers (Amodei, Hassabis, Sutskever, Yudkowsky, Zuckerberg) about how LLMs were built and where AI is heading. Useful for understanding the technical and philosophical debates among people actually building the systems. Published 2024, so captures the post-ChatGPT moment.

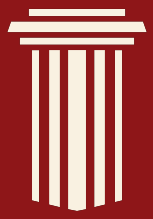
HACKERS AND PAINTERS

Paul Graham



Technology, Philosophy, Startups

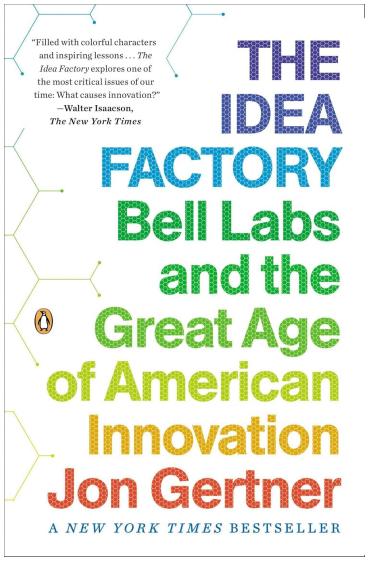
A collection of Paul Graham's essays on hackers as creative builders, exploring programming, startups, wealth creation, and heretical ideas about technology's role in reshaping modern life, written in an accessible, thought-provoking style that blends computer science, business, and philosophy



ENGINEERING

THE IDEA FACTORY: BELL LABS AND THE GREAT AGE OF AMERICAN INNOVATION

Jon Gertner

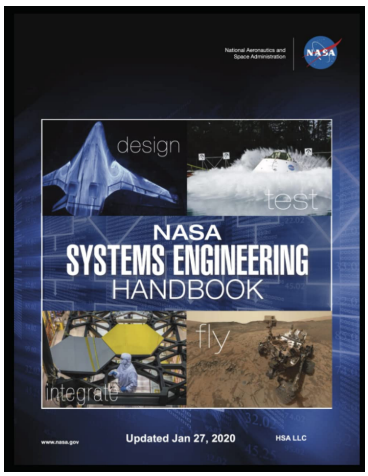


Innovation, Technology, Engineering

A narrative history of Bell Labs, the legendary ATT research center that birthed the transistor, information theory, lasers, and more, showing how its scientists and engineers worked, collaborated, and were managed to create many of the core technologies of the information age.

NASA'S SYSTEMS ENGINEERING

NASA

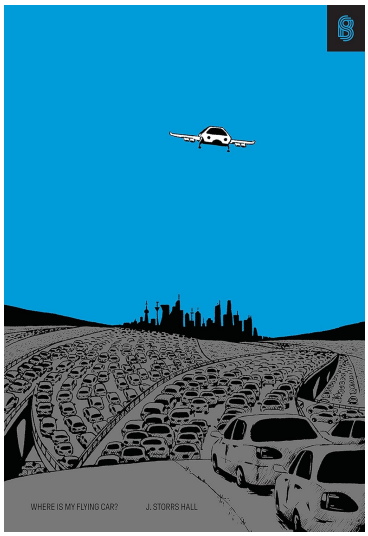


Systems Engineering, Space Systems, Aerospace Engineering

NASA's official manual for managing complex engineering projects. Covers requirements, design integration, verification, and risk management processes. Bureaucratic and process-heavy - useful for practitioners coordinating large technical teams, not for learning fundamental engineering principles or inspiration.

WHERE IS MY FLYING CAR?

J. Storrs Hall

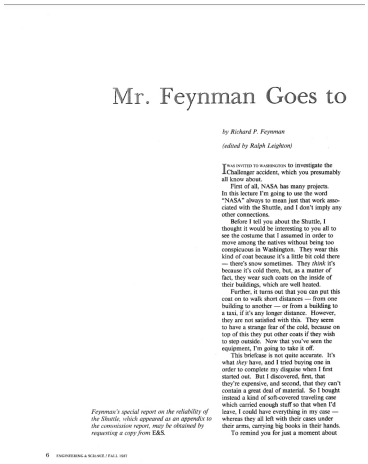


Innovation, Scientific Progress, Futurism

Hall argues technological progress peaked around 1970 and then stalled - we got computers but missed energy breakthroughs, nanotech, and physical world innovations like flying cars. He blames excessive regulation, risk-aversion, and abandonment of nuclear power. Uses engineering analysis to show what was technically feasible but didn't happen. Libertarian-leaning but makes concrete technical arguments about why certain technologies failed to materialize despite theoretical viability.

FEYNMAN'S CHALLENGER REPORT APPENDIX

Richard Feynman


Mr. Feynman Goes to

by Richard P. Feynman

(edited by Ralph Leighton)

I WAS INVITED TO WASHINGTON to investigate the Challenger accident, which you presumably all know about.

First of all, NASA has many projects. In this lecture I'm going to use the word "NASA" always to mean just that work associated with the Shuttle, and I don't imply any other connections.

Before I tell you about the Shuttle, I thought it would be interesting to you all to see the costume that I assumed in order to move among the natives without being too conspicuous in Washington. They wear this kind of coat because it's a little bit cold there — there's snow sometimes. They *think* it's because it's cold there, but, as a matter of fact, they wear such coats on the inside of their buildings, which are well heated.

Further, it turns out that you can put this coat on to walk short distances — from one building to another — or from a building to a taxi, if it's any longer distance. However, they are not satisfied with this. They seem to have a strange fear of the cold, because on top of this they put other coats if they wish to step outside. Now that you've seen the equipment, I'm going to take it off.

This briefcase is not quite accurate. It's what they have, and I tried buying one in order to complete my disguise when I first started out. But I discovered, first, that they're expensive, and second, that they can't contain a great deal of material. So I bought instead a kind of soft-covered traveling case which carried enough stuff so that when I'd leave, I could have everything in my case — whereas they all left with their cases under their arms, carrying big books in their hands.

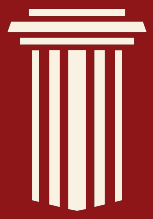
To remind you for just a moment about

Feynman's special report on the reliability of the Shuttle, which appeared as an appendix to the commission report, may be obtained by requesting a copy from E&S.

6 ENGINEERING & SCIENCE / FALL 1987

Engineering Ethics, Scientific Integrity, Institutional Dysfunction

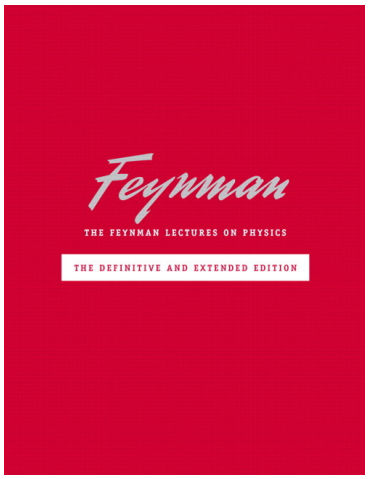
Feynman's dissenting appendix to official Challenger investigation. Demonstrates how NASA management ignored engineers' warnings about O-ring failures in cold temperatures. Uses simple ice water experiment to expose gap between engineering reality and bureaucratic wishful thinking. Devastating clarity in few pages.



PHYSICS

THE FEYNMAN LECTURES ON PHYSICS

Public

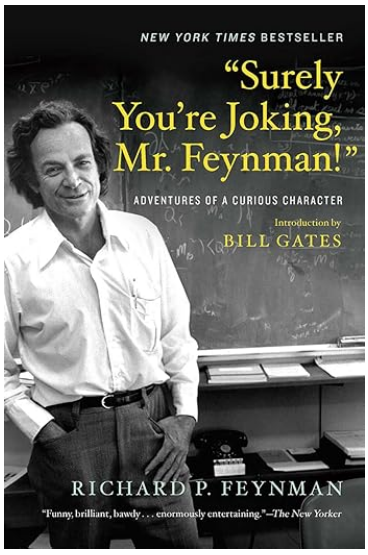


Electromagnetism, Theoretical Physics

An advanced undergraduate text from Feynman's legendary lecture series, this volume explains electromagnetism and the behavior of matter with rigorous physics, rich mathematical detail, and intuitive physical insights, aimed at students who want both conceptual clarity and problem-solving depth.

SURELY YOURE JOKING, MR. FEYNMAN!

Richard Feynman



Popular Science, Memoir

A witty and autobiographical collection of Richard Feynman's stories, from Los Alamos and safe-hacking into travel and pranks, showing how his curiosity, skepticism, and playfulness shaped both his physics and his life

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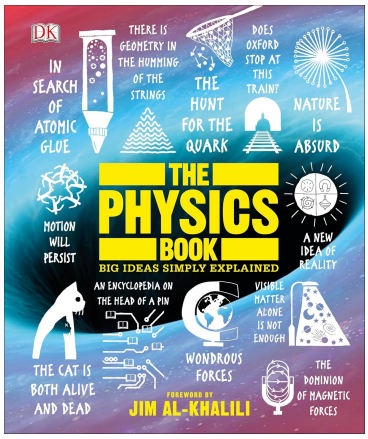
THE PHYSICS BOOK: BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED

DK

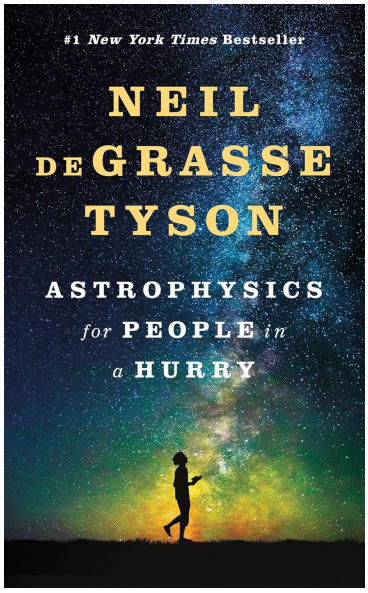


Physics Fundamentals, Conceptual Overview

Visual encyclopedia covering core physics concepts from mechanics to quantum theory. Uses diagrams, infographics, and plain language explanations rather than heavy math. Good for broad conceptual understanding and quick reference. Sacrifices depth for accessibility - introductory overview, not rigorous treatment for serious study.

ASTROPHYSICS FOR PEOPLE IN A HURRY

Neil deGrasse Tyson



Astrophysics, Cosmology

Covers universe origins, dark matter, black holes, and cosmic evolution in brief chapters. Tyson writes for non-specialists but doesn't avoid the actual physics—you'll understand why we think dark energy exists and what cosmic microwave background radiation tells us. Trade-off: breadth over depth, which is the explicit point

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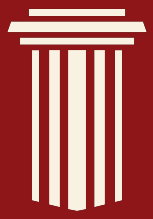
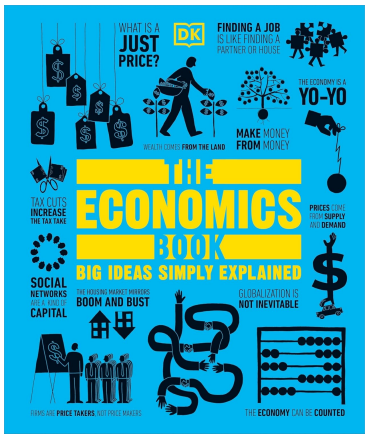


ECONOMICS

THE ECONOMICS BOOK: BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED

DK Big Ideas

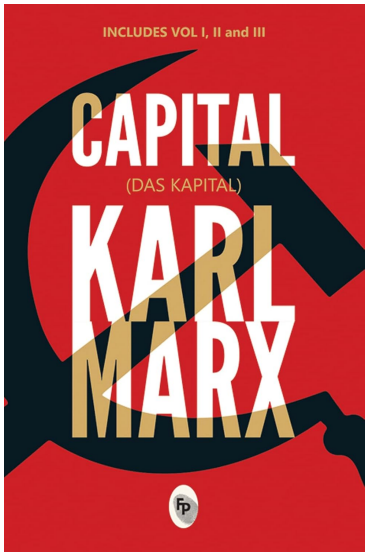


Economics Fundamentals, Conceptual Overview

Visual guide covering major economic theories, thinkers, and concepts from ancient commerce to modern markets. DK's illustrated format breaks down complex ideas (supply/demand, capitalism, Keynesianism, behavioral economics) into accessible explanations with timelines, diagrams, and historical context for general readers.

DAS KAPITAL

Karl Marx

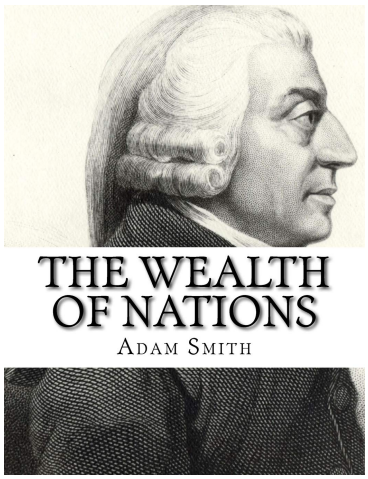


Capitalism, Surplus Value, Marx

Marx analyzes how capitalism generates profit through labor exploitation—workers create value but receive only part of it as wages, with the surplus extracted by capital owners. Volume 1 is 1,000+ pages of economic theory, historical examples, and polemics. The prose is dense (19th-century German philosophical style) but the core argument about surplus value and capital accumulation remains influential across economics, sociology, and political theory.

WEALTH OF NATIONS

Adam Smith

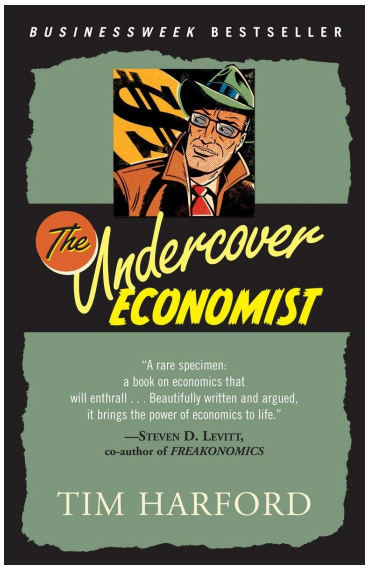


Free Markets, Capitalism, Economic Theory

Smith's foundational economics text explains how free markets create wealth through specialization and competition, introduces the "invisible hand" concept, and identifies when government intervention is necessary—covering trade, wages, taxes, and economic development.

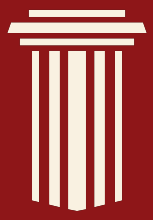
THE UNDERCOVER ECONOMIST

Tim Harford



Behavorial Economics, Popular Economics

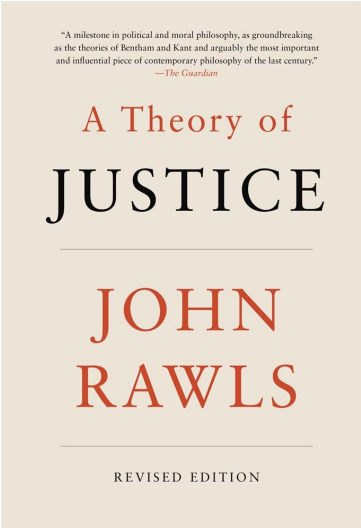
Applies microeconomic principles to everyday situations. Explains supply/demand, pricing, externalities through coffee shops, traffic, retail. Clear examples but sometimes oversimplifies market complexities. Good intuition-building for basic economics.



POLITICAL SCIENCE & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE THEORY OF JUSTICE

John Rawls

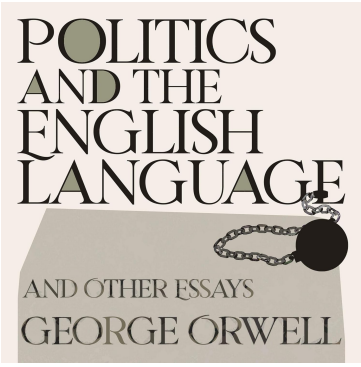


Justice, Moral Philosophy, Political Philosophy

Brought political philosophy back to life in 1971. The big idea is the veil of ignorance: imagine designing a society without knowing if you'd be rich or poor, healthy or sick, talented or not. What rules would you pick? Rawls argues you'd choose fairness because you might end up anywhere. His principles try to balance liberty with helping the worst off. Over 500 pages but he builds the argument step by step, so it's actually readable for philosophy.

POLITICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE

George Orwell

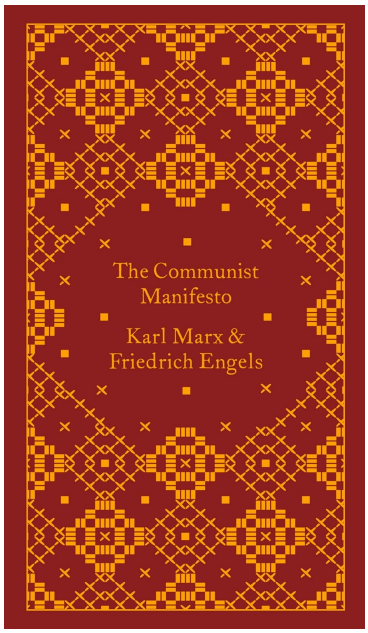


Language, Thinking, Politics

Essay arguing that sloppy language enables sloppy thinking, and politicians exploit this deliberately. Shows how vague abstractions, passive voice, and dying metaphors hide meaning and make lies sound respectable. His examples: "pacification" for bombing villages, bureaucratic phrases that say nothing. Gives six rules for clear writing (never use a metaphor you're used to seeing, cut words when possible, use active voice). Only 13 pages but cuts through bullshit directly. Written in 1946 but every example still applies to corporate speak and political rhetoric today.

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Gareth Stedman Jones

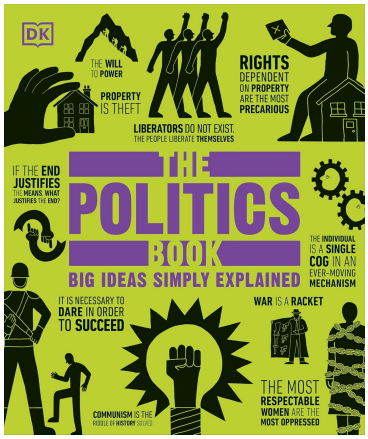


Socialism, Political Economy, Communism

Workers make everything, own nothing. Bosses own everything, make nothing. All history is conflict between those who have and those who don't. Capitalism eats itself eventually. Workers need to take over, eliminate private ownership of factories/land, run things collectively instead.

THE POLITICS BOOK: BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED

DK

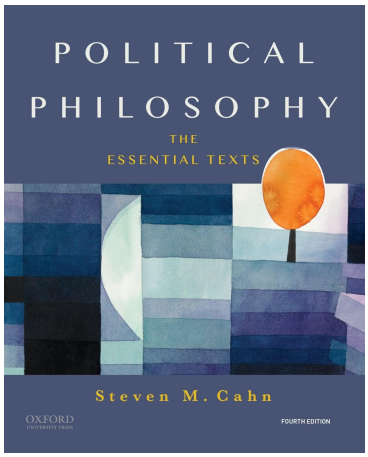


DK, Political Overview, Politics

Illustrated overview hitting major political thinkers from Plato to modern theorists, organized by concept (democracy, justice, liberty, power). Good for quick context on schools of thought (liberalism, conservatism, socialism, anarchism) but loses nuance in compression. Works as a reference map, not deep analysis.

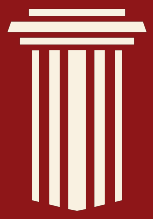
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: THE EXISTENTIAL TEXTS

Steven M. Cahn



Political Thoughts, Foundational Texts

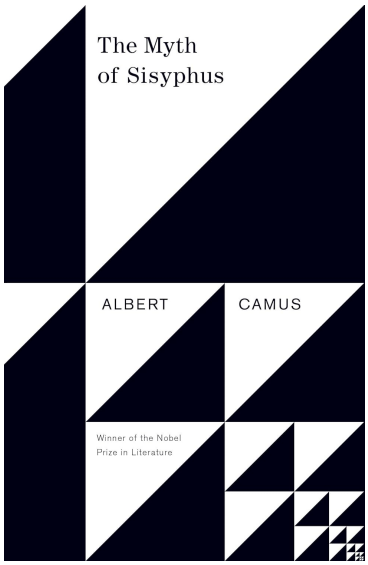
This book contains most of the important thinkers in the sphere of political thought. Not all the thinkers might be relevant to the subject you are covering, but the works of Machiavelli and Plato are seminal.



PHILOSOPHY

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

Albert Camus

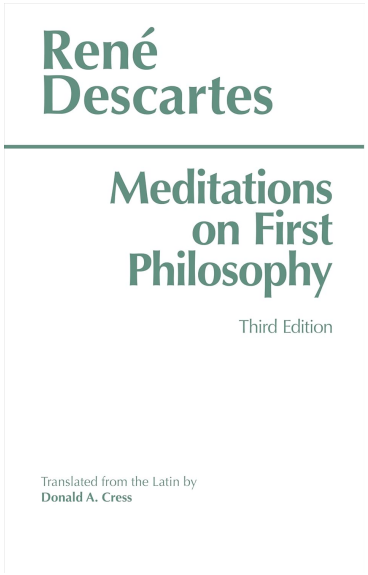


Absurdism, Meaning

Starts with the question: if life has no inherent meaning, why not just kill yourself? Camus says that's the fundamental philosophical problem. His answer uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus rolling a boulder uphill forever. Instead of seeing this as torture, imagine Sisyphus finds meaning in the act itself, the struggle. Camus says everyone is pushing the boulder up in someway. Only 120 pages, written clearly. The suicide essay at the start lays out the problem without sugarcoating it.

MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY

Rene Descartes

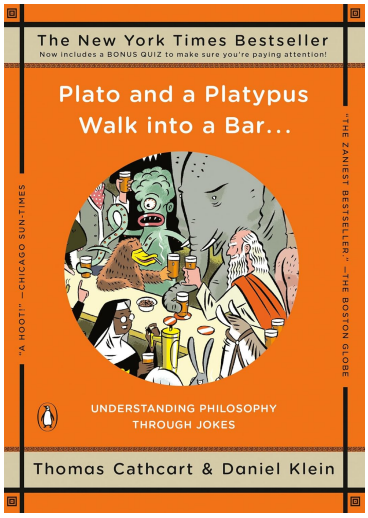


Philosophy, Metaphysics, Epistemology

Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy is a short book that questions everything, proves "I think, therefore I am," argues that God exists, and claims mind and body are distinct.

PLATO AND A PLATYPUS WALK INTO A BAR: UNDERSTANDING PHILOSOPHY THROUGH JOKES

Thomas Cathcart

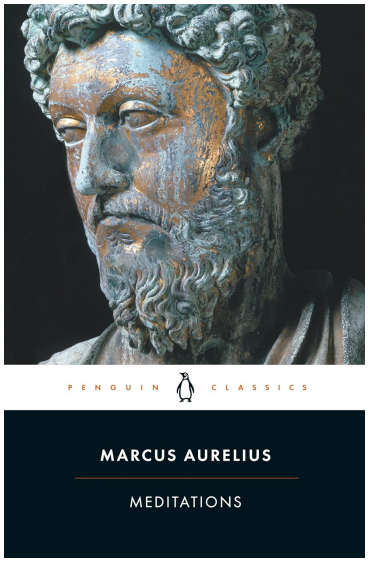


Philosophy, Humor

Uses jokes to illustrate philosophical concepts: existentialist humor for existentialism, logical paradoxes for formal logic. The format works because jokes and philosophy both rely on subverting expectations. Lighter than a textbook but actually teaches the ideas rather than just name-dropping philosophers.

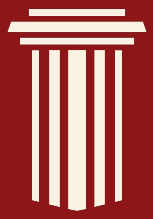
MEDITATIONS

Marcus Aurelius



Philosophy, Stoicism, Roman Empire

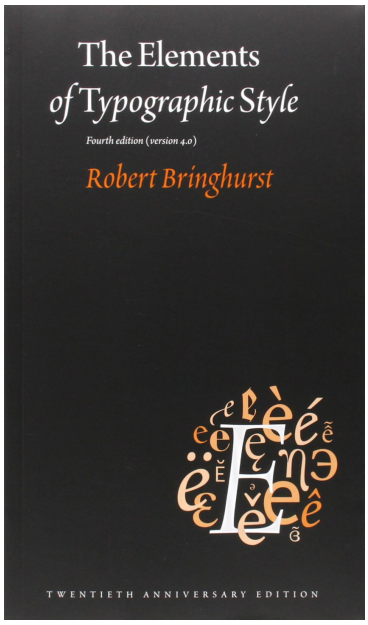
Marcus Aurelius's Meditations is a Roman emperor's private notebook of Stoic reminders on how to stay disciplined, calm, and decent in a chaotic world, focused on controlling your mind, accepting fate, and doing your duty.



ART & DESIGN

THE ELEMENTS OF TYPOGRAPHIC STYLE

Robert Bringhurst



Typography, Book Design

Treats typography seriously as both an art and a technical skill. Covers spacing, visual hierarchy, and choosing the right typeface with real depth about why these choices matter. The core idea is that good typography serves the content without calling attention to itself. Gets into practical details like when to use different types of dashes, how to adjust spacing between letters, and why one typeface works better than another for specific purposes

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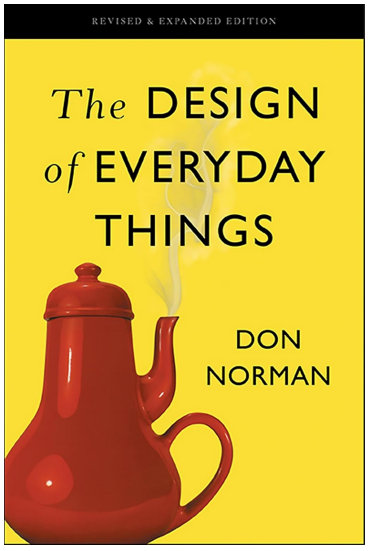
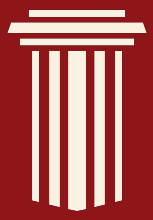
THE DESIGN OF EVERYDAY THINGS

Dan Norman



Design Philosophy, Zen Aesthetics, Apple

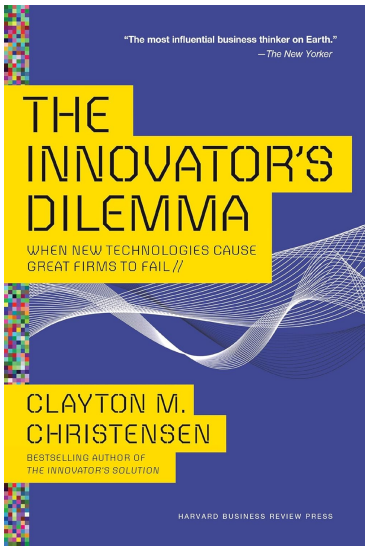
Explains how good design makes things obvious to use. His main point is that when people struggle with a product, it's the designer's fault, not theirs. He uses door handles as examples (called "Norman doors") where you can't tell if you should push or pull. The book shows how to design things so people naturally understand what to do and don't make mistakes. Jobs hired Norman at Apple, and this thinking is behind their "it just works" approach. The book captures what Jobs learned in his calligraphy class at Reed College.



BUSINESS & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

THE INNOVATOR'S DILEMMA

Clayton Christensen

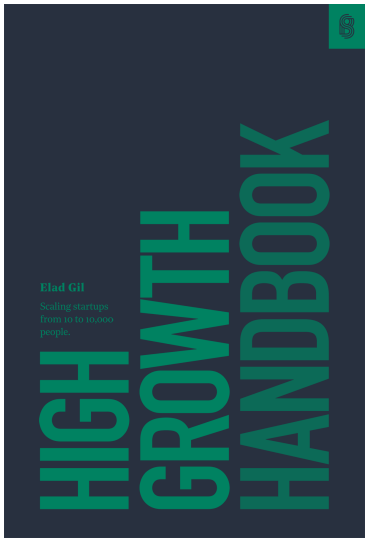


Business, Technology, Strategy

Good companies fail because they do everything right. They listen to customers, invest in better products, and then get blindsided by cheap, crappy alternatives that improve faster. Christensen explains why Kodak invented digital cameras and still went bankrupt.

HIGH GROWTH HANDBOOK

Elad Gil



Startups, Business, Scaling

Every high-growth company eventually needs to tackle thet same set of challenges around organizational structure, late-stage funding and secondary stock sales, culture, internationalization, hiring executive for roles the founders don't understand, buying other companies, and more. This is the handbook for navigating those challenges.

THE BIG SCORE: THE BILLION DOLLAR STORY OF SILICON VALLEY

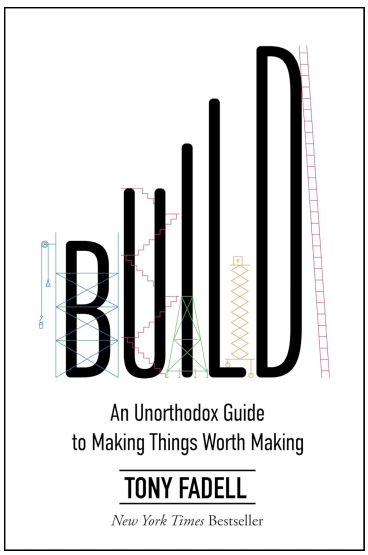
Michael S. Malone

Silicon Valley, Innovation, Startups

A narrative history of Silicon Valley's rise, following the entrepreneurs, engineers, investors, and companies that turned a quiet California region into the world's leading hub for high-tech startups, venture capital, and billion-dollar innovations across computing, semiconductors, and the modern tech industry.

BUILD: AN UNORTHODOX GUIDE TO MAKING THINGS WORTH MAKING

Tony Fadell



Startups, Business, Innovation

"Build" is a straight-talking handbook where Tony Fadell condenses his experience building the iPod, iPhone, and Nest into short, practical chapters on how to build products, lead teams, and navigate startup and corporate careers.