



## Think Like a Freak

*Steven D. Levitt , Stephen J. Dubner*

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The New York Times bestselling Freakonomics changed the way we see the world, exposing the hidden side of just about everything. Then came SuperFreakonomics, a documentary film, an award-winning podcast, and more.

Now, with Think Like a Freak, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner have written their most revolutionary book yet. With their trademark blend of captivating storytelling and unconventional analysis, they take us inside their thought process and teach us all to think a bit more productively, more creatively, more rationally—to think, that is, like a Freak.

Levitt and Dubner offer a blueprint for an entirely new way to solve problems, whether your interest lies in minor lifehacks or major global reforms. As always, no topic is off-limits. They range from business to philanthropy to sports to politics, all with the goal of retraining your brain. Along the way, you'll learn the secrets of a Japanese hot-dog-eating champion, the reason an Australian doctor swallowed a batch of dangerous bacteria, and why Nigerian e-mail scammers make a point of saying they're from Nigeria.

Some of the steps toward thinking like a Freak:

First, put away your moral compass—because it's hard to see a problem clearly if you've already decided what to do about it.

Learn to say "I don't know"—for until you can admit what you don't yet know, it's virtually impossible to learn what you need to.

Think like a child—because you'll come up with better ideas and ask better questions.

Take a master class in incentives—because for better or worse, incentives rule our world.

Learn to persuade people who don't want to be persuaded—because being right is rarely enough to carry the day.

Learn to appreciate the upside of quitting—because you can't solve tomorrow's problem if you aren't willing to abandon today's dud.

Levitt and Dubner plainly see the world like no one else. Now you can too. Never before have such iconoclastic thinkers been so revealing—and so much fun to read.

## Think Like a Freak Details

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Author : Steven D. Levitt , Stephen J. Dubner

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## From Reader Review Think Like a Freak for online ebook

### Kressel Housman says

I'm a big Freakonomics fan. I've read the two previous books, seen the movie, and I regularly listen to the podcasts. So for a fan like me, this book was slightly disappointing because I'd heard most of the material before on the podcasts. Still, since I love the lessons so much, I didn't mind a review. I especially liked the lesson of embracing failure instead of fearing it. Temporarily putting away your moral compass before analyzing problems was a good one, too. As the authors say, you can't solve a problem if you've already decided what to do about it.

Thanks to Freakonomics, the subject of economics is more human to me, and I've gone on to read more books on the subject, most of them more academic in style. Because of that, the light-hearted style that appealed to me so much with the first books seems a little *too* light to me now. But ultimately, I love what these authors have to say, so I'll read/listen to/watch anything they come out with, and I'm always looking forward to more.

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### Jane Stewart says

I prefer the audiobooks over the physical books. They're great for listening while doing other things.

This is the third book in the Freakonomics series. You don't need to read them in order. I've enjoyed all three. They talk about a variety of subjects.

One subject was intriguing and not answered. A multinational retail company bought tv ads 3 times a year. They had their highest sales at those three times. The authors asked the question did the ads cause the sales? Or did the sales cause the ads? The company took out ads on the three biggest sale days: Black Friday, Christmas, and Father's Day. The same company paid for advertising inserts in newspapers year round. The authors suggested the company run an experiment to see if those ads paid off - by doing no ads in selected areas for a few months and then comparing sales data. The marketing guys refused to experiment. They said they'd get fired if they stopped advertising. But they admitted that one summer an intern forgot to place the ads in the Pittsburgh area and there was no decrease in sales during that time. And still, the marketing guys refused to experiment. I'm having trouble with that. I don't think I'd want to invest money in that company.

The authors looked at religious communities in Germany - or somewhere near there. They found Protestants made more money than Catholics - even though they all started with the same wages per hour. The reasons were: Protestants worked more hours per week, Protestants were more likely to be self employed, and more Protestant women worked than Catholic women.

Want to keep restrooms cleaner? Paint a fly in the urinal - male desire to target practice.

At the end of the audiobook, there are several episodes from Freakonomics Radio. They are available as podcasts from iTunes and the Freakonomics web site. They were good.

### AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR:

Co-author Stephen Dubner was excellent as a narrator. Good production equipment - I didn't hear his breaths - yay.

DATA:

Unabridged audiobook length: 7 hrs and 5 mins. Swearing language: none. Sexual content: none. Book copyright: 2014. Genre: nonfiction, economics.

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## Oleksandr Golovaty says

The book is full of a wealth of interesting stories with non-standard approaches to problem solving. Incredibly interesting stories.

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## Jen Lawrence says

I loved this book. No, scratch that. I LOVED this book. Authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner explore how the iconoclastic approach to data revealed in Freakonomics can improve the way we think. As they write, “This book steps out of the shadows and tries to offer some advice that may occasionally be useful, whether you are interested in minor lifehacks or major global reforms.” I have to admit that I became biased in favour of this book when I saw the early reference to Philip Tetlock, who I have loved ever since his piece, Why Foxes Are Better Forecasters Than Hedgehogs (with apologies to the Publisher of this fine newspaper, of course...) But I will try to write an open-minded review.

Before researching this book, the authors naturally saw the world through the rational lenses of economics and statistics and were curious to find out why so many decisions seem illogical. The books starts by reviewing the thinking process of a soccer player who is about to make a critical penalty kick in the championship game of the World Cup. The authors turn to the data about penalty kicks to see where the player should direct the ball to maximize his chance of success. They then look at where he is most likely to aim the ball. “While a penalty kick aimed at the centre of the goal is significantly more likely to succeed, only 17% of kicks are aimed there. Why so few?”

The authors realize that the decision cannot be made based on statistics alone as the rational side of the brain is forced to contend with the emotional side. This is not, of course, new information. Back in about 370 BC, Plato was writing about the tug between the intellect and the heart. More recently, Jonathan Haidt wrote about the struggle between the rider (the rational brain) and the elephant (the emotional brain) in The Happiness Hypothesis. What makes Think Like a Freak so good is that the authors breathe life into this oft-explored slice of neuroscience through the art of storytelling, like the example about the soccer game. True, kicking a ball dead centre towards the goalie is statistically more likely to result in a goal. But if the goalie does manage to stop the ball kicked right to him, the kicker looks like a bit of an idiot (“Why’d you kick it righ’ to ‘im?” the hooligans in the stands will shout.) As the authors write, “Aiming towards the centre has a better chance of success, but aiming towards the corner is less risky to his own reputation.” And, as they go

on to describe, humans (and, in our experience, animals) are rather more interested in “protecting our own reputation rather than promoting the collective good” in spite of claiming otherwise. Therefore, most goalies take the riskier corner kick that is less likely to be successful but has the tried-my-very-best optics for the crowd.

In order to think like a Freak, the authors say that we need to be aware of, and overcome, some of the general biases that mess with our ability to think well. None of these ideas are original (I discuss a number of these issues in my soon-to-be-released book, *Engage the Fox*) but the authors’ gift resides in their ability to tell a memorable story. Instead of boring the reader silly with talk of confirmation biases and herd mentality and the gap between revealed and declared preferences, they walk us through memorable examples such as how the Smile Train charity raises funds by not asking for money, why Zappos offers new employees \$2000 to quit, and why rocker David Lee Roth insists on a candy bowl containing no brown M&Ms.

This book will appeal to the business reader (our favourite line is “just because you are at the office is no reason to stop thinking”) and any reader interested in improving the way they think. Levitt and Dubner are not afraid to make bold suggestions such as why one should regularly say “I don’t know” and the benefits of being a quitter. They describe why it’s good to act like a kid as “there is no correlation between appearing to be serious and actually being good at what you do. In fact, an argument can be made that the opposite is true.” Phew! That observation alone is worth the price of the book. The authors find wisdom in the most interesting places, such as studying why kids are better at seeing through magic tricks than adults: “by seeing things from a literally new angle, you can sometimes gain an edge in solving a problem.”

One of the most powerful sections in the book covers the art of persuading someone to change his or her mind. The authors are not optimistic: “As hard as it is to think creatively about problems and come up with solutions...it is even harder to persuade people who do not wish to be persuaded.” They dissect a \$1 billion anti-drug campaign that not only did not turn people off drugs, but possibly made drug use appear more appealing. They then outline the most useful strategies for getting others to change their opinions (hint: don’t start campaigning with the so-called smartest guys in the room, but not for the reason you think.) In keeping with their Freak perspective, they show how pointing out the flaws in your own arguments is one of the most effective ways to convince people you are right.

Not surprisingly, the authors find that the most effective way to change someone’s mind is to tell them a compelling story. And this is, of course, the heart of the book’s success. All three of the books in the *Freakonomics* series sing because memorable stories illustrate potent theories. At the end of this book, the authors, firmly embracing the idea that it’s OK to quit, threaten that this is their last book in this series. I hope that this is not, in fact, the case. The authors succeed in bringing thinking to life which, as a fox-like thinker, is something I take quite seriously. Hopefully the early success of this book will convince the authors to do more work in the field.

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## Jill says

Levitt and Dubner’s earlier two books, *Freakonomics* and *Superfreakonomics* were smashing successes because they came up with innovative insights to make sense of phenomena that were rather mysterious, such as an explanation for the drop in the crime rate over the last decade.

Hoping to find similar out-of-the-box proposals, I was eager to try their third book, *Think Like A Freak*.

This book contains a few surprises, but overall it seems like a slap-dash production intended to cash in on the success of their previous enterprises. As such, it is somewhat duller reading. There are a few interesting

analyses, like about the rationale for the popular email extortion scam based in Nigeria, or how a love of "fun" might be harnessed to encourage people to save more money.

For the most part, however, the chapters read like filler material. They include platitudinous management suggestions that make common sense but not compelling reading, such as in the chapter on "How to Persuade People Who Don't Want to Be Persuaded," and "revelations" about phenomena ranging from the etiology of ulcers to the causes of obesity that made the rounds of popular magazines years ago.

Using the examples of King Solomon and rock singer David Lee Roth to provide examples of game theory may have been cute, but it felt like the authors were reaching for the lowest common denominator. In fact, it seemed more like a chapter on the *meta* subject of How to Expand Your Potential Reading Audience.

The last chapter of the book discusses when it is advisable to quit whatever is it you have been doing for too long. Maybe the authors should take their own advice and call it a day.

**Evaluation:** This book is mildly entertaining, but not up the standards set in the first two. Gone are the "economics" of the earlier books; more challenging content has been replaced with bromidic bullet points and stories I read a long time ago in doctor's waiting room periodicals.

**Rating:** 2.5/5

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## Sam Quixote says

If I changed the title to "Think Outside the Box" you'd probably have a good idea of what to expect from this book - and you'd be right!

Granted I've not read Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt's other "Freak" books, Freakonomics and SuperFreakonomics, but I suspect they're just more of what's contained in Think Like a Freak. Hey, if it ain't broke, right?

Think Like a Freak essentially has one very broad thesis: to approach any difficult situation/problem from an unexpected angle to solve it/excel at it. It's not a new idea. The writers relate stories to illustrate this, which I'm sure more than a few people have already heard. How David Lee Roth, the lead singer of Van Halen, ensured the venues they played at adhered to their lengthy stage setup by putting a clause in their rider for no brown M&M's - if there were none when they got there it meant the promoter had read everything carefully; if there were it meant the crew needed to do a thorough check of the equipment to make sure nobody would be hurt at the show.

Or the little Japanese fella who became a Coney Island hot dog eating champion by taking apart the hot dog - separating the bun, dunking it in a glass of water, breaking up the hot dog, and eating everything this way. Before that everyone used to eat them whole, limiting the amount they could competitively eat; now everyone does it the new way.

It goes on like this with case after case being brought up of old thinking being usurped by those who came to a situation differently and changed everything. Not that I'm against this attitude in any way but it means Think Like a Freak is quite a shallow read. It has one unremarkable mantra repetitively underlined throughout. Trotting out case studies to prove the benefits of thinking like a freak or outside the box, or whatever, doesn't make this any more valid or compelling.

Sure, there are nuances throughout. They encourage people to think like a child, think about smaller portions of a problem rather than the problem as a whole in order to progress to a solution, saying “I don’t know” is often more useful an answer than saying either yes or no, know when to quit, humans enjoy stories and use them to understand problems so do that whenever trying to explain things (which they apply in this book). But it feels so unsubstantial and obvious - really nothing here stands out as unique or brilliant to recommend readers to pick it up.

Maybe Dubner/Levitt were trying to parlay their Freakonomics brand into a kind of self-help methodology but it doesn’t work. Think Like a Freak has a few interesting stories but it’s all in service to a completely uninspired and smug thesis that felt like a lazy product than a book they cared about writing.

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## Mara says

This book won't be *2.5/5 stars* for everyone. If, like myself, you enjoyed Steven and Stephen's earlier volumes, *Freakonomics* and *Superfreakonomics*, then congratulations! — you've found a subject area that interests you (albeit a sometimes nebulous one that can show up under the guise of a variety of disciplines). If, for some reason, you *only* feel comfortable learning about the ways in which data and patterns can reveal the inner workings of our world with these two *Freakonomists*, then this book is for you.

However, I'm an ever-curious being with little patience; and, thus, haven't been sitting around just waiting for the Steven/Stephens to give me the go ahead. I thought of giving a list of recommended reading here, but one of the cool things about Freakonomics is that its principles can be applied to almost anything — for me this has included books on the philosophical nature of humanity as well as ones that helped me figure out how to run a G-D factor analysis to draft my fantasy football team (spoiler alert: it wasn't that helpful for football purposes, but learning how to use *R* opened a whole new world of statistical computing fun for me).

So go forth and "*Think Like a Freak*," but, honestly, you might not need to read this book in order to do that.

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## Paul says

Freakonomics and the follow up book, SuperFreakonomics were two of those books that changed the way people looked at the world and the things that happened in it. In this third volume, Levitt and Dubner are aiming to teach you the way of thinking outside the box as they do.

With chapters as diverse as The Three Hardest Words in the English Language, How to Think Like a Child and Like Giving Candy to a Baby, they bring more stories and anecdotes that demonstrate just how lateral thinking can bring a fresh perspective on a problem, and that sometimes the uncomplicated answer is the correct one.

Whilst this is a great read, Dubner writes some very readable text, it feels like a thin veneer rather than having the depth that the earlier books had. Interesting though, and may be the place to start if you have never read anything by these authors before.

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## Ryan Dejonghe says

This book does nothing to cure my sickness: footnote-itis. Behind the two-hundred pages of text are another couple of hundred benign-sounding “underlying research citations and other background information”, which the authors encourage me to use. Thanks Mr. Levitt. Thanks Mr. Dubner. I needed an extra day to write this review because I spent most of one night watching lectures from Yale Professor Dan Kahn talking about the Cultural Cognition Project. Only one-hundred-ninety-nine more footnotes to go.

According to the authors, “the first two books were rarely prescriptive”. They told stories with data. This book couples that with useful takeaways for everyday life. Again, not helping my sickness, authors. This interesting analysis tells me “just because you’re at the office is no reason to stop thinking”. This book teaches me how to redefine the problem by: thinking small, not big; not being afraid of the obvious; and, having fun. I had a lot of fun with this book.

This book starts out by telling me that the highest percentage of winning goals are right down the middle, that stuffing someone else’s poop up my butt can cure me, and that a bank can make me rich by playing lottery with my money. Something like that. Oh, and keep worrying, because the winner of the 2005 Nobel Prize proves it’s bacterial, not worry that causes ulcers.

The whole idea here is to re-think the obvious perception. Much of what we’ve learned in DRIVE, OUTLIERS, ESSENTIALISM, and especially THINKING, FAST AND SLOW is replicated here in the authors’ unique and witty voice. They take what other people may overlook and spin it around, just like their previous works, if not better. So pour yourself that \$1.65 bottle of wine (because it tastes the same as a \$150 bottle), sit back, and enjoy this awesome book.

Anything that sparks my brain into extra gear is a winner, even if my footnote-itis remains uncured.

Thanks to William Morrow and HarperCollins for sending me this book to review.

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## Yousif Al Zeera says

Levitt and Dubner continue to dazzle readers, freaks and soon-to-be-freaks with their fascinating way of combining data and narration to present interesting (and very much informative) stories on various fields.

In this book, the “theoretical” ratio slightly increased than the previous two books as the intention is lay down the foundations of “how to think like a freak”, basically how to rely more on “data” and less on “anecdote”. It is still full of splendid stories.

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## Brian Clegg says

I loved Freakonomics and its sequel, so was expecting more of the same here, but Think Like a Freak is a very different book and suffers by comparison.

The thing that absolutely blew everyone away with the earlier books was the absolute string of superb eye-opening stories, taking a sideways look at a problem using statistics and psychology (it wasn't really economics, but it worked as a title). Perhaps the definitive example was the idea that crime rates had fallen as a result of increased availability of abortions some years earlier. In this book, though, the Freakonomics authors set out to teach us their methodology and, by comparison it's a bit dull.

What we get is often little more than a collection of management consultancy platitudes like 'thinking small is powerful' and 'it's good to quit', because in the end the special thing about the Freakonomics approach was not the basic tools, which are two a penny, but the way the authors employed them. Occasionally we do get a great little story – I particularly love the exploration of how to do better in football penalty shootouts – but there just aren't enough of them, specifically not enough really surprising, 'Wow!' stories like the ones that fill the previous books. The authors really should have taken their own advice when they say the most powerful form of persuasion they know is to use stories. We need more great stories, guys!

I would also pick up on another point they made. When talking about the benefits of quitting (where appropriate) they say 'Should we take our own advice and think about quitting? After three Freakonomics books, can we possibly have more to say – and will anyone care?' The answer is yes, and no. 'Yes', quit doing this kind of book – but 'no' don't give up and write us another Freakonomics if you can, as we will be ready to lap up more of those mind-bending ideas.

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## **Riku Sayuj says**

### **Not Very Freaky**

A very ordinary effort. Levitt & Dubner tells us the recipe to "Think Like a Freak". Most of the ingredients are quite ordinary and almost all are trodden territory. A wholly unnecessary book.

1. That all the Big Problems of the world are too tough to solve for ordinary people like us and that we should nibble at the edges.
  - A bit about game theory and about how most problems arise due to private vs public conflicts and how we need learn to realign incentives to solve small problems. Keep nudging the incentives and solving small incentive-problems. The very soul of Freakonomics.
2. That we should learn - to say "I don't know" more often, especially the experts. A few stories thrown in about how stupid people who try to predict the future are.
  - Also, don't bring your moral compass into your predictions/decisions. And always look for feedback if you want to keep improving.
3. That we have to learn - to ask the Right Question. Reframe the question to get ahead.
  - Endlessly experiment to get the right feedback on the reframed problem. The 'abortion & crime' story is repeated. AGAIN!
4. That we should - Think like a Child: Have fun. Don't ignore the obvious. Think small.
5. That we should obsess over - Incentives, Again: Understand contexts; Reframe contexts. Use appropriate incentives. NEVER mix your incentives!
6. That we can win arguments: How to win an Argument: Don't pretend your argument is perfect. Acknowledge their viewpoint and... meh.
7. That we might want to think of - When to Quit: Avoid the sunk cost fallacy. BTW, this chapter is for us

too — We (Levitt & Dubner) just might quit writing this stuff!

In short, nothing really exciting, nothing novel. Nothing that fires the imagination. I am not at all freaked out by the ideas & stories presented here. They can still spin a good yarn, but that gets old fast without the essential ingredient - radical ideas.

If indeed the freakish duo decides to call it quits, it would be a pity that this was added to their otherwise magnificent legacy.

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### **TS Chan says**

An entertaining read - or listen to be exact. Nothing stupendously ground-breaking to be honest but it's stuff that one doesn't really think about being too caught up in the rat race and what might be construed as conventional thinking. What I really like are the real world examples, while it might not be exactly relevant for my field of work in the financial sector, are more accessible and easy to connect to.

The audiobook has added material which is a compilation of a few Freakonomic radio/podcasts which I am still going through. Pretty interesting stuff as well. Might it prompt me to subscribe to their podcasts? We'll just have to see. :)

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### **Bo says**

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### **Elizabeta says**

Bunch of really interesting stories. Just think outside of the box!

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### **Maria says**

Pretty great for non-podcast listeners, but as someone who loves the Freakonomics podcast, most of this material has already been featured on there, and some of it in greater detail.

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### **Zachary Schwartz says**

Fun fun fun fun fun! This was my favorite of the franchise. Like its predecessors, it is filled with amusing stories which usually highlight some economic or behavioral principle (such as sunk cost, cobra effect, etc...). Unlike its predecessors, this book has an underlying structure of a "how to" book. I feel that this gives the book a more coherent flow. The writing is accessible to anyone, lighthearted in tone, entertaining, and it moves very fast. If you listen to the podcast, many of the stories will already be familiar to you. This didn't

bother me at all as I enjoyed reading them now more than listening to them the first time. I try to reserve 5-star ratings for books that either make me see the world differently, provide a deep emotionally experience, or make me laugh really hard. Because this book did neither, I give it a 4+, but I highly recommend it to everyone. Did you ever wonder why Nigerian email scammers ALWAYS advertise that they are from Nigeria? Read the book to find out...

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### **Pouting Always says**

I feel that a lot of self-help or businesses type books now all follow the same formula and in the end talk about the same few ideas again and again. Like there really isn't a need for a whole book on some of these ideas like thinking outside the box or being comfortable making mistakes. I really only get something out of reading them if I'm feeling lost unsure about what I'm doing because they kind of help me ground myself or become motivated again. Otherwise though it feels like a waste of time like how many anecdotes do I need to read about creative thinking honestly.

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### **Arminius says**

Think like a Freak is a book that teaches people to think like kids. That means to not be afraid to not know an answer and investigate your interests without regard to what others may think. It also states to break large problems down and solve the small ones associated with them. The authors use various experiments to prove their points.

They made a website that asks people to flip a coin on whether or not to make a major decision then report how happy they were at a future date. Their conclusions came to the fact that there is an upside to quitting something.

They advise getting into other people's minds and figure out what really matters to them to get them to do what you want. Watch what they do rather than what they say is how they offer to accomplish this.

Also included in the book were other people's stories where they thought like freaks and became very successful.

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### **Lena says**

This book is similar in format to their previous works - present a supposedly unconventional idea and support it with some entertaining storytelling. It's a very fast, mildly interesting read. Unfortunately, I had the feeling that I'd heard almost all of these stories elsewhere, so the book feels more like it's filling out a book contract than breaking great new ground in human thought.

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