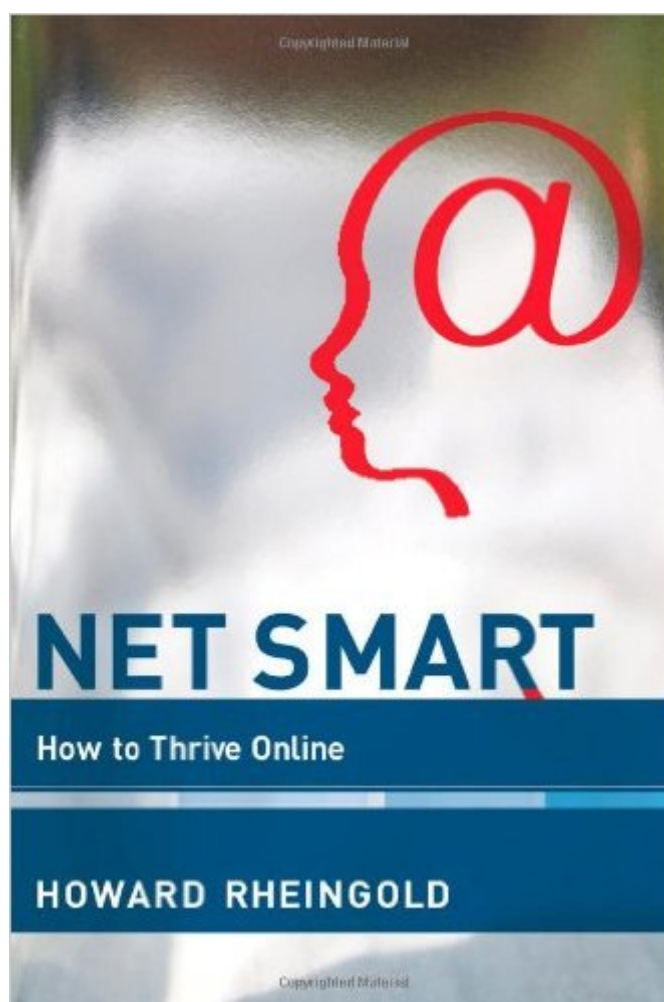


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# Net Smart: How To Thrive Online



## Synopsis

Like it or not, knowing how to make use of online tools without being overloaded with too much information is an essential ingredient to personal success in the twenty-first century. But how can we use digital media so that they make us empowered participants rather than passive receivers, grounded, well-rounded people rather than multitasking basket cases? In *Net Smart*, cyberculture expert Howard Rheingold shows us how to use social media intelligently, humanely, and, above all, mindfully. Mindful use of digital media means thinking about what we are doing, cultivating an ongoing inner inquiry into how we want to spend our time. Rheingold outlines five fundamental digital literacies, online skills that will help us do this: attention, participation, collaboration, critical consumption of information (or "crap detection"), and network smarts. He explains how attention works, and how we can use our attention to focus on the tiny relevant portion of the incoming tsunami of information. He describes the quality of participation that empowers the best of the bloggers, netizens, tweeters, and other online community participants; he examines how successful online collaborative enterprises contribute new knowledge to the world in new ways; and he teaches us a lesson on networks and network building. Rheingold points out that there is a bigger social issue at work in digital literacy, one that goes beyond personal empowerment. If we combine our individual efforts wisely, it could produce a more thoughtful society: countless small acts like publishing a Web page or sharing a link could add up to a public good that enriches everybody.

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## Customer Reviews

In *Net Smart*, Howard Rheingold details how the digital world is reshaping our minds, our culture, and itself, faster than any but the very young and the very dedicated can keep up with. However, as he shows with examples from his college teaching, the very young lack the perspective to do much more than ride the wave they are part of, even though they provide its power. They cannot clearly evaluate its history, present impact, or possible futures. But he showed me how this no-longer-young person can play a worthwhile part in all that, improve my own mind, and have more fun at the same time. I thought I was fairly net-savvy from decades of playing and working with computers and being online. But I was surprised by how much I learned from Rheingold, who has been seriously involved at the frontiers of the net and its communities for all the years that I have just dabbled as a user (which should maybe have an "I" in front of it). *Net Smart* rearranged a lot of what I sort-of-knew into a more coherent picture that also included a great deal that I didn't know. It is a book that will show you how to interact with the net more productively, and also how to use both your online and offline time in positive-sum games that benefit others as well as yourself. Despite the electronic title, there is a significant amount of just plain self-help here that I found very worthwhile in its own right. As Rheingold says, "Learning the latest knowledge about the brain's capacity to rewire itself - known as "neuroplasticity" - can increase your power to actually direct your brain's self-rewiring function rather than just being affected by it". *Net Smart* will help if you have children and want to participate in their world and help shape it (or them!) for the better.

It's a pleasure to follow Howard Rheingold on this provocative journey into how best to make sense of the near-now through developing some new and distinct basic competencies. In a way the book is Howard's travelogue through his own cognitive atlas as he sagely builds a set of models for how to now only survive, but thrive in the face of ever-accelerating demands on attention and in the sheer volume of information encountered daily. As Rheingold skillfully builds his case for acquiring a new set of tools with which to deal with information, he also introduces us to a plethora of experts across a broad swath of disciplines: IT, engineering, learning, cognitive science, and neuroscience to flesh out the concepts he's inventing to help himself make better sense of the world. At the same time, the book provides detailed step-by-step examples of how to implement the dashboard, Radars, agents, and sensors that Howard has arrayed to bring coherence and amenity to his own info-space. At the book's heart is a key notion of Infotention—a neologism Rheingold coined, and which really sits at the middle of a radical proposition. Developing the cognitive capacity to effectively adopt a "mind-machine combination of brainpowered attention skills and computer-powered information filters" is a deceptively simple proposition with deep implications.

Very little in most people's education provides them with the ability to effectively develop the mindset of focus and awareness that Infotention calls for. Rheingold also brings a deep understanding of the underpinnings of the social platforms that have exploded on to the scene.

Media literacy involves grappling with the ways a new medium not only changes but also reinforces our uses and understandings of the current ones. For example, the onset of digital media extended the reach of literacy by reinforcing the use of writing and print media. No one medium or technology stands alone. They must be considered in concert. Moreover, to be literate in the all-at-once world of digital media is to understand its systemic nature, the inherent interrelationship and interconnectedness of all technology and media. As Walter Ong put it, "Today, it appears, we live in a culture or in cultures very much drawn to openness and in particular to open-system models for conceptual representations. This openness can be connected with our new kind of orality, the secondary orality of our electronic age..." "Secondary orality" reminds one of the original names of certain technologies (e.g., "horseless carriage," "cordless phone," "wireless" technology, etc.), as if the real name for the thing is yet to come along. These changes deserve an updated and much more nuanced consideration given how far they've proliferated since Ong's time. 'Net Smart: How to Thrive Online' collects Howard Rheingold's thoughts about using, learning, and teaching via networks from the decades since Ong and McLuhan theorized technology's epochal shift. Rheingold's account is as personal as it is pragmatic. He was at Xerox PARC when Bob Taylor, Douglas Englebart, and Alan Kay were inventing the medium (see his 1985 book, '

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