1-Page Book Summary of David and Goliath

In the Biblical story of David and Goliath, a small shepherd boy conquers a giant by slingling a rock at his exposed forehead. We tend to think of David's victory as a miracle, proof that sometimes, if he's lucky, the weak can beat the strong.
But what if underdog victories have less to do with luck and more to do with the very circumstances we view as disadvantages? In *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that what we assume are disadvantages might actually be advantages, and vice versa.

**Lacking skills can be an advantage.**

- You can't use skills you don't have. If you lack the skills others think are necessary for the game, and you still want to play the game, you can't play like everyone else.
- Lacking certain skills forces you to get creative. You have to come up with new approaches to winning. Meanwhile, your skilled opponents have no reason to get creative (and discover more effective strategies) because the conventional way works for them. Your opponents don't expect your novel approach. This gives you the edge.
- For example, David wasn't skilled with a sword and shield, so he couldn't battle Goliath the traditional way (the way Goliath was expecting). David had to get creative, using his skill as a slinger to knock Goliath to the ground. Because Goliath wasn't expecting this tactic, he left himself vulnerable to it.

**Having less than your opponent can be an advantage.**

- **Having too much limits you.**
  - We tend to believe that if something is good, more of it is better.
  - But studies suggest that while qualities such as strength, size, and wealth positively impact our lives in moderation, you reach a point at which all those seemingly-great resources become disadvantages.
  - For example, Goliath was covered in armor and loaded with weapons. In a battle, weapons and armor are good things to have. But Goliath's overabundance of weapons weighed him down. What was an advantage in a limited amount became a disadvantage in a large amount.
  - Likewise, having too much wealth could make parenting more difficult, when it becomes harder to pass down your hard-earned values to your comfortable kids.

- **Having nothing frees you.**
  - Occasionally, you have to break the rules to win the game. When you have money, a nice house, a foreign car, and clout in your community, you risk it all when you buck convention. Your desire to hold onto everything you have forces you to play by certain rules, and this constrains you.
  - On the other hand, if you have nothing to lose, you'll try anything. Like David challenging Goliath with a rock and a sling, you'll take the unconventional approach that's so crazy (and perhaps morally questionable) it just might work.

**Being a big fish in a little pond can be an advantage.**

- When choosing a college, most would agree you should go to the most prestigious one that will accept you. This would make you a little fish in a big pond, but who cares?
- You should care. The theory of relative deprivation says that we judge our abilities based on the abilities of those around us.
  - If you attend Harvard and struggle in a chemistry class, you may feel that you're just not cut out for a career in science.
  - In reality, your skills in chemistry may be better than 99% of people in the world studying chemistry. But you don't compare yourself to everyone in the world; you only compare yourself to fellow Harvard students.
  - When comparing yourself to your peers at a prestigious school, you lose confidence in your abilities. You may switch to a humanities major, depriving the world of a great scientist.
  - Your confidence in your skills may be a better predictor of career success than the prestige of the school you attend. Being a big fish in a little pond can give you this confidence.

**Having a disability can be an advantage.**

- We generally consider having a disability a disadvantage. However, disabilities force some people to make up for them by developing extraordinary abilities in other areas.
- For people who can compensate, their disability becomes a gift—without it, they never would have needed to work so hard to develop other skills.
- For example, students with dyslexia struggle to read. Because they can't depend on reading to learn, they often compensate by developing superior listening and observation skills instead.

**Living through a traumatic event can be an advantage.**
Social scientists break people who have survived a traumatic event into two groups: near misses and remote misses.

Remote misses are people who are slightly removed from the trauma. For these people, the death of a parent or an exploding wartime bomb strengthens them. Trauma actually leaves them better off than they were before.

*Because the worst has already happened,...*

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Here’s a preview of the rest of Shortform’s David and Goliath summary:

**David and Goliath Summary Introduction: The Story of David and Goliath**

For thousands of years, the Biblical story of David and Goliath has given hope to underdogs inspired by David's miraculous victory against the giant Goliath, with only a rock, sling, and stick at his disposal. The odds were against David...or were they?

In *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that we misunderstand underdog victories. We think of David's small size, shortage of weapons, and lack of battle experience as disadvantages, when these were actually crucial to his success. Gladwell shows us that our various disadvantages--from loss and grief to discrimination and disability--may be advantages in disguise.

Two key ideas run through this tale and throughout the book:

1. **Difficulty can be desirable**
   - When you face seemingly insurmountable difficulties and beat the odds, you cultivate the qualities we most value in society.
   - We tend to think of all challenges and deficiencies as disadvantages, but **what we assume are disadvantages are often advantages**. There are some traits you only develop through adversity, such as unshakable self-confidence and emotional endurance.

2. **We misunderstand underdog stories**
   - We think that power = physical strength, size, weaponry, or wealth.
   - In reality, **what we assume are advantages are often disadvantages**. Heavy armor may appear to protect you when it actually weighs you down. Likewise, having too much wealth and exerting too much power can hold you back.

**The Story of David and Goliath**

To understand the book's premise, we need to review the basics of its foundational tale from the Bible:

In the Valley of Elah, the Philistines want to capture the land ruled by the Israelites. The Philistines send their strongest man, the six-foot-nine Goliath, to do battle for them. The only Israelite to volunteer to confront Goliath is a shepherd boy, David. Saul, king of Israel and Judah, offers David a sword and shield, but David refuses them and runs, unprotected, toward Goliath. He slings a rock at Goliath's exposed forehead before Goliath can react, and as Goliath lies on the ground,...
David and Goliath Summary Chapter 1: The Advantages of Lacking Skill

If you feel like the underdog, it may be because you lack skills that most people consider necessary to win in your field. You likely think of your shortcomings as obvious disadvantages. But, contrary to common sense, what if you could use your inadequacies to your advantage?

Chapters 1-3 have to do with the various advantages of “disadvantages.” In this chapter, we’ll talk about the advantage of lacking skill.

The Advantages of Having No Skill

If you're really terrible at a game, you can't follow conventional wisdom and win—you just don't have the skills. Being unskilled (but still in the game) forces you to come up with new approaches to winning. Your skilled opponents (who aren't as desperate as you are) have no reason to come up with novel strategies because the conventional ones work well for them. Consequently, your opponents are not prepared for your new approach. Taking them by surprise gives you an edge.

Two stories, one historical and one recent, illustrate situations in which a group's lack of skill obliged them to implement strategies that were far more effective than the traditional ones.

Example #1: Lawrence of Arabia

At the end of the First World War, Lawrence of Arabia led the Arabs 6,000 miles through the desert, into battle against the highly trained Turkish army occupying Arabia. Lawrence commanded a small, untrained band of Arab nomads, many of whom had never held a gun. The troops only numbered a few hundred, but they beat the Turks’ army easily, only losing two men.

Why Did Lawrence of Arabia's Underdog Tactics Work?

- They were unexpected: The Turks were prepared to defend themselves against an attack from British ships at the Gulf of Aqaba. They left themselves vulnerable to an attack from the desert, never imagining that any troop would be crazy enough to cross it, especially in the summer.
- They took advantage of the opponent's weaknesses: Like Goliath with his burdensome weapons and armor, the Turks’ extensive material resources weighed them down and rendered them immobile, trapped...

Shortform Exercise: Turn Lack of Skills into a Strength

Reflect on your perceived weaknesses to find their hidden advantages.

Think of a personal or career challenge that felt insurmountable because you felt like you were lacking skills. What was the challenge?
Most of us tend to believe that when something is good (like strength, money, or small class sizes), more of it is better. But Goliath’s abundance of size, strength, and weaponry didn’t protect him from David’s rock—it made him more vulnerable. There is a point at which the accumulation of resources ceases to be an advantage and another point at which those resources become a distinct disadvantage. The visual representation of this theory is the inverted-U curve.

**The Inverted U-Curve**

When you graph the relationship between, say, parenting success and money, or class size and student achievement (two examples we’ll explore more below), the shape is an upside-down U.

![Inverted U-Curve Diagram](image)

For instance, if we wanted to graph the relationship between money and happiness, we could chart wealth on the X-axis and happiness on the Y-axis. Picture the beginning of the inverted-U at the bottom left-hand corner, where the X- and Y-axes meet, at $0 and 0 on the happiness scale. (It’s difficult to be happy when you don’t have money and are just trying to survive.)

As wealth increases, the arch moves diagonally up to the right. (An increase in money means an increase in happiness.)

But, at some point (studies say at a family income of around $75,000), an increase in money stops making you happier—you have enough to meet your basic needs and buy yourself and your family a few luxuries. The diagonal ascent of the graph starts to level off, forming the top of the upside-down U—income increases, but happiness levels stay the same.

We tend to think the relationship between wealth and happiness ends here: at some point, how much money you have ceases to matter. But this is our error—we forget that we live in a “U-shaped world.”

**Is there a point at which more money triggers a decrease in happiness, completing the upside-down-U shape?** Many social scientists claim that, yes, you can have too much of a good thing, as we’ll explore further in the example of money’s effect on parenting, below.

The...

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**Shortform Exercise: Find Your Advantage in Moderation**

Reflect on the ways your desire for more is holding you back, and how moderation can help you move forward.

Think about something that you love (maybe a food or an activity) or something that you think of as unquestionably positive (perhaps a quality like patience or forgiveness). Can you imagine a point at which there’s too much of it? What would be the result?
David and Goliath Summary Chapter 3: The Advantages of Being a Big Fish in a Little Pond

Would you rather be a “Little Fish in a Big Pond” or a “Big Fish in a Little Pond” of your own choosing?

When applying to college, we want to attend the most prestigious university possible (and, therefore, be Little Fish in a Big Pond). Most would agree, when given a choice between two universities, you should choose the “best” one—the one with the most resources, the most accomplished faculty, the smartest students, and the prestige. But what if attending a “better” school could be a disadvantage?

The Theory of Relative Deprivation

The theory of relative deprivation says we compare ourselves to the people around us. Our feelings of happiness or deprivation, success or failure, are not absolute, but rather relative to how happy and successful our neighbors are.

For example, countries in which citizens consider themselves the happiest (Switzerland, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Canada) have a higher suicide rate than countries in which citizens consider themselves generally unhappy or neutral. If you’re depressed in a place where everyone around you seems happy, you feel worse. However, if you’re depressed in a place where everyone around you also seems a little depressed, you feel normal and things aren’t so bad.

In education, we call this the “Big Fish-Little Pond Effect.” When assessing their own academic abilities, students don’t compare themselves to every other student in the world. They compare themselves to the students in their class. The more elite the school, the more negatively students perceive their own academic abilities.

For example, students who would be at the top of the class at School B (and would feel pretty good about themselves and their skills) might be in the middle or bottom of the class at the more prestigious School A (and feel bad because they compare themselves to students more skilled than they are).

Why does how we view our abilities matter?

Our perceptions have real-world consequences. Let’s take a look at the drop-out rates at Hartwick College and Harvard to see the “Big...”

Shortform Exercise: View Your Skills Objectively

Use this exercise to become more aware of how your environment—and the people in it—may be influencing your confidence and keeping you from your goal.

Have you ever felt like a Big Fish in a Little Pond? When?

David and Goliath Summary Chapter 4: Desirable Difficulty #1 - Disability

Part One (Chapters 1-3) discusses how what we perceive to be advantages are often disadvantages, or at least more of a mixed bag than we realize. In Part Two (Chapters 4-6), we see how so-called disadvantages can actually be strong advantages.

Desirable Difficulties

In Part Two we learn about three “desirable difficulties”: disability, tragedy, and having nothing. What makes these, or any difficulties, desirable?
Not all difficulties are desirable—the students in the bottom third of an elite college do not benefit from feeling demoralized and discouraged from pursuing their dreams.

On the other hand, not all difficulties (what we perceive as disadvantages) should be avoided. For instance, making a task more difficult can actually increase your chances of success on it.

An experiment involving the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) demonstrates the advantages of a desirable difficulty. The CRT is the shortest intelligence test in the world at three questions long. At Princeton, researchers first gave the test to students in clear, standard font and print size. Students scored an average of 1.9 correct answers out of three. The second time researchers gave the CRT to Princeton students, they printed the test in hard-to-read font that was 10% gray. The average score increased from 1.9 correct answers to 2.45.

Yes, CRT scores increased when researchers made the test more difficult. How can this be?

1. When a task is more obviously difficult and frustrating, you slow down.
2. You think more deeply about the task and devote more of your mental resources on it. In essence, you think harder.

Desirable Difficulty #1: Disability or Deficiency

When we are deficient in a skill area that most people depend on for success, we will only succeed if we find a way to compensate for our deficiency. We may compensate so well that our skills are more impressive than if we didn't have the disability in the first place.

Capitalization Learning versus Compensation Learning

Most of our learning can be roughly divided into two...

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Shortform Exercise: Compensate for Skills You Lack
There are some difficult situations, like having a learning disability, that you can’t change. But that doesn’t mean they have to hold you back. Reflect on how you have compensated in the past, and how you can compensate in the future, for deficiencies.

Think about a skill that didn’t come easily when you were a kid. What was it? How did you compensate for your deficiency in it?

David and Goliath Summary Chapter 5: Desirable Difficulty #2 - Trauma

The second “desirable difficulty” is trauma.

Courage is not innate; it is something you have to earn. You earn it by surviving something you didn't think you could survive, or confronting a fear and realizing it's not as scary as you expected.

Because it can result in courage, trauma actually leaves some people better off than they were before. How does this work?

- If the worst has already happened, you're freed of fear to some extent. Nothing will ever be as frightening as the realization of your worst fear (an event you somehow survived).
- Overcoming fear leads to a confidence you couldn't have earned without it. You endure the seemingly unendurable, and then you know you can live through it. It gives you a sense of your own invincibility and power.

Trauma Strengthens Some People and Weakens Others

We tend to believe that trauma affects everyone the same way, and that this effect is universally negative. There are actually 3 general effects of trauma:

- Direct hits: These are people who don't survive the traumatic event.
  - For example, the casualties of the Blitz, Germany's bombing campaign of Britain during the Second World War, were direct hits.

- Near misses: These are people who are close to the traumatic event, perhaps even witnessing it, but survive. Trauma weakens them.
  - During the Blitz, these were the people who were wounded or saw the carnage. These survivors remained preoccupied with the horror of the Blitz long after it was over.

- Remote misses: These people are slightly more removed from the traumatic event. They experience it, but not quite as acutely as those in the "near miss" group. Trauma strengthens them--they benefit from the elation and relief of being spared.
  - These were the Londoners who heard the sirens and the bombs exploding, and witnessed the ruins in their neighborhood. Most of the Londoners who lived through the Blitz were in this group.
  - The Germans thought that by bombing London, they would destroy the courage of the Brits. In fact, the Germans...

Shortform Exercise: Acknowledge the Upside of Your Fear

As a society, we think of fear as something to be avoided. Use this exercise to reflect on how fear (and, crucially, confronting your fear) has impacted you, both negatively and positively.

Think of a time when you were afraid of something and you confronted that fear. (The fear could be big or small.)
David and Goliath Summary Chapter 6: Desirable Difficulty #3 - Having Nothing

In a fair world, everyone could follow the conventional rules of the game and win. In the world we have, perpetual underdogs occasionally need to break the rules to succeed. To do so, they need to be “disagreeable” in the sense that they can’t care what others think.

If you have an abundance of wealth, status, and material goods, you risk all of it when you play by your own rules rather than society’s. You’re constrained. You have everything to lose.

But if you have very little and you’ve been neglected (or worse) by society, you don’t have anything to lose by bucking tradition and going your own way. This gives you freedom that those with more to lose don’t have.

Example: The American Civil Rights Movement

When the conventional way doesn’t work, try something unconventional. For instance, the leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement had to play by their own rules because society’s didn’t work for them.

Martin Luther King, Jr., and many Civil Rights activists, came from a community that had been enslaved and oppressed for hundreds of years. Being an underdog community for centuries was a clear disadvantage to its members. But it also taught them how to operate as underdogs and win. African Americans were not respected by the societies they sought to transform. They couldn’t lose a respect they never had. This made them freer in their strategies than their opponents.

Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement like Wyatt Walker, the executive director of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, took inspiration from the “trickster” tales passed down through generations. The Brer Rabbit stories, a subgenre of the trickster tale, depict an underdog (Brer Rabbit) using his wits to outsmart characters who are bigger and stronger than he is. Walker’s strategy for fighting racism in Birmingham is a powerful real-world example of the use of trickster techniques to outsmart Goliath.

Walker devised a plan for Birmingham called Project C ("C" for confrontation). The last stage was a series of marches devised, in part, to fill up the...

David and Goliath Summary Chapter 7: The Limits of Power - The Principle of Legitimacy

Part Three shifts the focus away from the Davids of the world and toward the Goliaths. We’ll discuss two aspects of Goliath's...
power that actually make him less powerful: the limits of authority and the negative effects of the overuse of power.

What Goliaths, people with overt power, tend to misunderstand about power is that it has limitations. The traditional hallmarks of power—massive weapons, years of experience, society's blessing—can only take you so far. The degree to which you are powerful depends, in part, on how much power your “subjects” are willing to give you.

The Principle of Legitimacy

An authority figure's power over the rest of us is especially limited if we don't perceive him and his power as being "legitimate." An authority's legitimacy is based on three things:

1. We, the subjects, need to have a voice. And we need to believe that those in power care about what we have to say.
2. We need to feel that the law we're being asked to abide by is predictable.
3. We need to feel that the law and the people enforcing it are fair.

If you're the one with the power, why does it matter what people think of you?

People become defiant, rather than submissive, when they don't view the authority as legitimate. Authorities may make the rules, but they have trouble enforcing them without legitimacy. In fact, if you aren't "legitimate" and you exert your power, you may get the opposite of your intended effect.

A Negative Example: Northern Ireland and the Troubles

In the late 1960s, antagonism between Northern Ireland's Catholic minority and Protestant majority came to a head. The UK government called in the British (mostly Protestant) Army to keep the peace.

Ian Freeland was the general in charge in Northern Ireland. He believed in ruling by force. He intended to meet any resistance with immediate and brutal punishment and didn't care what anyone, particularly Catholics, thought about it.

Aiming to scare the rioters on both sides, Freeland threatened to shoot anyone caught throwing gasoline bombs. This backfired....

Shortform Exercise: Use Your Power Legitimately

When Goliaths use their power illegitimately, both Goliath and David suffer. Think about the power dynamics in situations in which you’ve been David and situations in which you've been Goliath.

Have you ever had a teacher, supervisor, or boss whom you didn’t respect (perceive as legitimate)? How did you react when he or she gave you direction or feedback? What could have the teacher, supervisor, or boss done to make you more willing to cooperate or give your best effort?

David and Goliath Summary Chapter 8: The Limits of Power - The Inverted U

As we learned in Chapter 2, we live in a "U-shaped world," so we know by now that more power does not necessarily equal more compliance from those over whom we exert it. As Goliaths, using our power helps us. However, overusing (or abusing) our power gets us in trouble. To use our power effectively, we need to use it moderately. We also need to compensate for power's limitations with forgiveness.

Looking at the relationship between crime and punishment, Chapter 8 demonstrates how forgiveness might be a more...
appropriate response to a situation than exerting your power.

In particular, we'll look at how the Inverted U applies to crime and punishment. As a society, we operate on the assumption that the tougher we are on crime, the less crime there will be. This is true up to a certain point, at which an increased severity of punishment ceases to matter. As we move further toward the right side of the inverted U, it's possible that cracking down on crime actually starts to make the crime situation worse.

The Three Strikes Law

Let's take a look at an example. California implemented the Three Strikes Law to decrease crime in California. Under the 1994 law, if you're convicted of a second serious offense, you serve double the time. If you commit a third offense, serious or minor, you serve a mandatory sentence of at least 25 years.

Californian Mike Reynolds lobbied for the law when a crystal-meth addict brazenly shot his 18-year-old daughter in the head outside a diner. Reynolds promised his daughter that he would work to prevent the same thing from happening to anyone else. He also wanted justice.

Did the law have its intended effect?

Apparently. From 1994, when the referendum was signed into law, to 1998:

- The homicide rate dropped by 41.4%
- Convictions of rape dropped by 10.9%
- Robbery dropped by 38.7%
- Assault dropped by 22.1%

So it was an unequivocal success? Not exactly. California's crime rates began to decrease before the enforcement of the Three Strikes Law. At the same time, they were decreasing across the...

Shortform Exercise: Combine Appropriate Consequences with Forgiveness

Harsher punishments don't always lead to better results. When you're in a Goliath position, find ways to make the punishment fit the crime, and pair the punishment with a healthy dose of forgiveness.

Think of a time when you handed a punishment that was too harsh. What was the situation? How did you handle it?

David and Goliath Summary Chapter 9: Summing Up the Limits of Power

Chapter 9 tells the story of the Vichy town of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon that openly defied the German Occupation government in France. The narrative ties together themes from throughout the book, including the principle of legitimacy, the advantages of disagreeableness, and the idea that courage can grow out of tragedy. It's also the ultimate underdog story: A small town dares to challenge the Goliath of Naziism—and wins.

André Trocmé and the Resistance in Vichy

After France fell to Germany in 1940, the French government at Vichy revoked anti-semitism laws, revoked Jews' rights, took away
their jobs, and sent them to internment camps. The government also implemented a range of smaller changes impacting non-Jews: for instance, all school children had to participate in a full fascist salute of the French flag and teachers had to sign a loyalty oath to the state.

The residents of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon refused to comply with any of these new orders.

For centuries, Le Chambon had been a haven for various refugee and outcast groups, primary among them the Huguenots. The local pastor was André Trocmé, a pacifist, and he preached resistance of any government request that was contrary to the orders of the Gospel.

Hearing that Le Chambon was a tolerant and accepting community, Jewish refugees started coming in huge numbers.

When a Vichy government official visited the town, expecting the usual banquet, march, and formal reception, the residents treated him coldly. A group of students read a letter, crafted with the help of Trocmé, that informed the official, “We have Jews. You’re not getting them.”

Trocmé’s Advantages, Borne from Disadvantages

What gave Trocmé and his community this astounding courage? What were Trocmé’s advantages?

1. Tragedy: Trocmé’s Protestant ancestors had faced persecution for centuries. The Huguenot sect had been banned in France. In attempts to make practitioners return to Catholicism, French kings had imprisoned and massacred...

READ FULL SUMMARY OF DAVID AND GOLIATH

David and Goliath Summary Afterword: Konrad Kellen

Gladwell's Afterword addresses one of the biggest questions posed by the book: If Davids beat Goliaths all the time, why hasn't that changed the way we view “David and Goliath” situations?

- It’s counter-intuitive. The assumption that the bigger, stronger, wealthier, more weaponized side has to win is instinctive and goes against conventional wisdom. It's hard to wrap your head around the idea that the victory of a small, weaponless shepherd boy over an experienced, armored giant is not only possible but probable.

- It’s easiest to measure advantage by what we can see: the number of soldiers, the amount of money, the available weapons and material resources. It's harder to look below the surface to evaluate the less tangible or clear-cut advantages of disagreeability, deficiency, and trauma. Furthermore, disagreeability, deficiency, and trauma are painful. We're wired to link pain with disadvantage, so we don't as readily see pain's advantages.

The Afterword looks at how these play out in the opposing views of two political scientists analyzing the Vietnam War. Leon Gouré was certain the U.S. military (Goliath) would be victorious over the Viet Cong (David); Konrad Kellen was certain the U.S. military would never suppress the Viet Cong. Kellen was right, but by the time the American government realized it, more than a million soldiers and civilians were dead and America was in turmoil.

In the 1950s, communists, backed by the Chinese, controlled North Vietnam, and a pro-Western government ran South Vietnam. The U.S. decided to send troops to help the South defend itself against communism and its North Vietnamese agents, the Viet Cong.

The plan, called Operation Rolling Thunder, was to bomb Viet Cong-controlled areas until the North gave in. The U.S. government was confident—as they saw it, they had all the advantages, the “three M’s: men, money, and matériel,” as one general put it.

The Morale Project

There was really only one problem: The U.S. didn't know anything about its enemy, the Viet Cong.

Leon Gouré worked for the RAND...