

How to Read A Book

By: Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren

“I’ve been reading since early childhood and am indeed doing it right now; why was this book written, let alone why should I read it?” I’m sure the title engenders this question and if you heed the negative answer, you will find yourself all the poorer for it. Within its 419 pages later translated into five languages, Mortimer and Charles in 1940 set out to (even then) tackle the problem of ever-increasing literacy but decreasing understanding. Starting with the Activity and Art of reading, the two men work through how to be a demanding reader, the levels of reading, how to read different types of books (science, history, philosophy, etc.), how reading grows the mind, and offer a recommended reading list. Overall, *How to Read a Book* lays bare the simple (though not easy) steps one must take to pass from merely reading, to understanding, to mastering a work and the untold rewards such a journey offers.

The “Activity and Art” of reading is best summed up in the difference between knowing *that* and knowing *how*. We often fool ourselves in thinking that we are well-read, that we are unable to understand good books, or that they are not worth the trouble. These are all excuses and can be easily overcome. Adler rightfully points out that:

People go to sleep over good books not because they are unwilling to make the effort, but because they do not know how to make it. Good books are over your head; they would not be good for you if they were not. And books that are over your head weary you unless you can reach up to them and pull yourself up to their level. It is not the stretching that tires you, but the frustration of stretching unsuccessfully because you lack the skill to stretch effectively. To keep on reading actively, you must have not only the will to do so, but also the skill – the art that enables you to elevate yourself by mastering what at first sight seems to be beyond you.

To become well-read, in every sense of the word, one must know how to use whatever skill one possesses with discrimination – by reading every book according to its merits. Skill and mastery are constant refrains in HTRAB and for good reason; reading, like skiing, when done well by an expert is graceful and harmonious yet when done by a beginner is awkward, frustrating, and slow. Mortimer and Charles lay out the path to take to become that master that we all wish to be.

Being a demanding reader is something that is done both of the book and the reader himself. Utilizing the levels of reading are for naught if the wrong books are read; this isn’t to say that particular books are wrong in general or specifics (though some come very close) but that there is a goal to reading. Is it simply for distraction and enjoyment? Then read on without worry. If reading is to grow in mind and spirit, then you must stay awake and put forth the effort to be an active, demanding reader. Good books, fiction or nonfiction, deserve demanding reading and to use them as a sedative or to let your mind wander during the hours you planned to devote to reading for profit clearly defeats your own ends. A demanding reader *asks questions* when he reads. What is the book about as a whole (Inspectional)? What is being said in detail and how (Analytical)? Is the book true, in whole or part (Analytical)? What of it (Syntopical)? These four questions sum up the obligations of the reader and a demanding reader makes a *habit* of asking them as he reads.

Demanding readers make books their own both intellectually by utilizing the levels of reading but most importantly physically by intelligently and fruitfully marking it. After utilizing the examples below, writing in the front endpapers as a record of your thinking to outline the book as an integrated structure with a basic outline and order of parts will be a measure of your understanding of a work; expressing your intellectual ownership of a book far more than a fancy bookplate ever could.

- Underlining major points
- Vertical lines in the margins to emphasize statements
- Stars to emphasize the ten or so most important statements

- Numbers in the margin to indicate the sequence of points of argument development
- Numbers of other pages in the margin to indicate where similar, contrasting, or contradicting points are made
- Circling key words/phrases
- Writing in the margin/top/bottom of the page to record questions or answers a passage raises, reducing complexity, etc.

Back to the example of skiing, learning how to ski is one of the most humiliating things an adult person can do. While a man has been walking his entire life, put a set of skis on their feet and suddenly he slips, falls down, has trouble getting up, gets his skis crossed, tumbles again, and generally looks – and feels – like a fool. Instructors, those paragons of skiing, make everything look easy and remind the man to do all manner of disparate things all at once: bend your knees. Look down the hill. Keep your weight on the downhill ski. Keep your back straight yet lean forward. Endless admonitions...how can you remember all these things, let alone do them at once and ski? The key is to forget the separate acts in order to perform all of them well to gracefully speed down the mountain. But in order to forget them as separate acts, you have to learn them first as separate acts. It is the same with reading. You've been reading a long time and starting to learn all over again can be humiliating but like skiing, after you have practiced the parts separately, you can not only do each with greater facility and less attention but can also gradually put them together into a smoothly running whole.

The levels of reading are simple yet build upon each other: Elementary, Inspectional, Analytical and Syntopical. While each level and sub-levels have pages dedicated to each, they break down generally as follows:

1. Elementary Reading: Being able to literally/grammatically understand what is written on the page which, after passing through four stages ("reading readiness," simple reading, vocabulary building through contextual clues, and refinement of the previous stages) is reached by a man's early teens though if ideally built upon for the rest of his life.
2. Inspectional Reading: Broken down into two types (Skimming/Pre-Reading and Superficial Reading), inspectional reading allows you to discover if the book is *worth* reading further. This allows for a systematic understanding of what the book is about in a few minutes (no more than an hour) by:
 - Looking at the Title Page and (if applicable) its Preface
 - Study the Table of Contents
 - Check the Index
 - Read the Publisher's blurb
 - Look at the chapters that seem pivotal to the argument
 - Turn the pages, dipping in here-and-there, no more than a paragraph or several pages in sequence

Superficial reading is how best to tackle a difficult book; the first time you read it, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away. Consulting footnotes, the dictionary, or outside sources prematurely actually impedes our reading instead of helping it. Think back to reading a Shakespearean play like *Hamlet* in school. It was force read scene by scene, line by line and analyzed to death, everyone forgetting what had happened in the last Act, let alone the beginning of the play. Reading quickly through the first time sets one up for success in going back to better tease out meaning.

Analytical Reading: The lion's share of HTRAB is dedicated to analytical reading and for good reason; it is the level that allows the reader to move from simple ingestion to understanding of a work. Asking a living teacher might give you an answer but when you ask a book a question, you must answer it yourself. Enlightenment is achieved only when, in addition to knowing what an author says, you know what he means and why he says it. Analytical reading's eight rules help you answer that question yourself:

- Classify the book according to kind and subject matter

- State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity (a single or few sentences)
- Enumerate its major parts in their order/relation and outline these parts as you have outlined the whole
- Define the problem(s) the author is trying to solve
- Come to terms with the author by interpreting his key words
- Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences
- Know the author's arguments by finding them in (or constructing them from) sequences of sentences
- Determine which of his problems the author has solved and which he has not; to the latter, decide if the author knew he had failed to solve them

3. Syntopical Reading: This type of reading is the pinnacle yet the most difficult and fruitful. Syntopical brings the previous four levels of reading together in an examination of *multiple* books in order to serve you and your concerns on a specific topic. This point concerning your concerns somewhat contradicts points in analytical reading but in level four, you are likely making connections that may be very far from the author's own purpose in writing. YOU are the master of the situation. Two stages with seven rules govern this level:

- Surveying the Field
 - Create a tentative bibliography of your subject
 - Inspect (Inspectional Reading) *all* of the books to ascertain which are germane and to better grasp the subject
- Examining the Field
 - Finding the relevant passages in each work
 - Bringing the authors to terms by constructing neutral terminology of the subject for all authors
 - Getting the questions clear by establishing neutral propositions in a common frame
 - Defining the major/minor issues by ranging opposing answers from authors to various questions
 - Analyzing the discussion by arranging questions and issues in a way to shed maximum light

Different types of books, while utilizing the same general levels of reading, nonetheless require different questions to be asked or considered. A practical book, for example, can never solve the practical problems with which it is concerned; theoretical books do this. Everything turns on the ends or goals; if you think that the goals of the *Communist Manifesto* are preposterously false, you have no practical interest in even the soundest means to reach ends you disapprove of or do not care about. In Imaginative literature, beauty is harder to analyze than truth but there are definitely ways *not* to read imaginative literature. Don't try to resist the effect that it's trying to create; don't look for terms, propositions, and arguments; and don't criticize fiction by the same standards of truth and consistency as you would a practical book. This, of course, does not mean that imaginary works are above criticism but clarifying it according to its kind and grasping the unity of the work (the plot) allows us to consider chiefly its *beauty* in how it gives us pleasure. Stories, plays, and poems fall in this type of analysis as well.

History, Science, Philosophy, and Social Science are yet other types of works that deserve separate degrees of analysis. To history and the "What of it?" question, it is possible that no kind of literature has a greater effect on the actions of men than it. Read more than one history of an event or period that interests you as well as read history not only to learn what really happened at a particular time and place in the past, but also to lead the way men act in all times and places, especially now. Science, on the other hand, is (or should be) steeped in scientific objectivity which is not the *absence* of initial bias but the frank *confession* of it. Philosophy has some of the opposite problems of science and mathematics in that special research or experiments cannot be accomplished to find the answer to first-order questions. Ultimately, the most distinctive mark of a philosophical work is that it makes you answer questions for yourself. Finally, while social science might be the easiest possible material to read, the fact that so much of it seems familiar to us (jargon, metaphors, etc.) make it difficult to read. Social science is generally literature rather than a single book, as unlike the other forms of writing, in social science we generally have our eye on an *issue* rather than a *particular* author or book (race relations, governmental policy, etc.). Because of this, the social sciences lend itself most to Syntopical reading.

Reading grows the mind, but only, if like gardening, the right seeds are put in the right soil. As mentioned previously, if you are reading in order to become a better reader, you cannot read just any book or article. It is of crucial importance for you to not only be *able* to read but to also *identify* those works that make the kinds of demands on you that improvement in reading ability requires. Powerlifters get stronger with ever heavier weights as it tears the muscle to build even more in its place. The books you read challenge your mind (especially through analytical reading) by making demands on you by seeming to be outside your capacity. But there are rewards. The best of books rewards you in two ways: First, through the improvement in your skill when you tackle a good, difficult work. Second, and in the long-run most importantly, it can teach you about the world and yourself. About life. Not just knowledgeable but wiser.

What books, then, will make these demands on a man? While the book offers an excellent listing, we need to remember the great majority of the many million books, blog articles, newspapers, and 4chan threads...99% of them will not make these demands. Amusement and information, yes, but not learning anything of importance. Less than one out of every hundred books is one from which you can truly learn but when you return to it, it seems that there is less there than before; this is because you yourself have grown in the meantime with a fuller mind and greater understanding. There are few, those rare books of the highest class, that are inexhaustible; when you return to it, it seems to have grown with you. There are maybe less than a hundred of books like this but for each reader there is less than that due to tastes and interests. We are surrounded by props that fool us into thinking our minds are active (TV, internet, social media, etc.) but like drugs, we grow used to them and require ever more and more until they have no effect. Reading the right books well unlocks the near-unlimited growth of the mind and the list of books HTRAB provides is an excellent starting point to build a foundation of drugless mental acuity.

In closing, Mortimer Adler and Charles Doren's *How to Read a Book* exhaustively yet convincingly and honestly work through the worthwhile struggle of learning to read worthwhile books in a worthwhile way. Through the activity and art of reading, we learn how to be a discerning reader and then how to progress through the four levels of reading to grow the mind with a carefully-curated list of books that grow with us in our ever-expanding reading skills.