

How to Read a Book

Mortimer J. Adler & Charles Van Doren

**THE CLASSIC GUIDE
TO INTELLIGENT READING**

COMPLETELY REVISED AND
UPDATED FOR THE 1970's



How to Read a Book, originally published in 1940, has become that rare phenomenon a *living* classic. Widely adopted throughout the country at both the high school and college levels over the past three decades, it has also proved to be the best and most successful guide to reading comprehension for the general reader. Now it has been completely rewritten and updated for the 1970's.

This is what a few of the critics had to say about the original edition:

It makes no empty promises, but it shows concretely how the serious work of proper reading may be accomplished and how much it may yield in the way of instruction and delight. From *How to Read a Book* I have actually learned how to read a book.

—Clifton Fadiman, *The New Yorker*

Written with such verve and vigor as to fill the reviewer's mind with the vain desire to quote and quote again . . . a serious and valuable invitation to an enrichment of personal life.

—*The New York Times*

Packed full of high matters which no one solicitous for the future of American culture can afford to overlook. —Jacques Barzun, *Saturday Review*

In view of this sort of praise and the immense and continuing success of the book in every sort of edition and many languages, why attempt to recast and rewrite it for the present generation of readers? The answers lie both in the changes that have taken place in our society and in the subject itself. There are new insights into the problems of learning how to read with proficiency and comprehension that could not

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(Continued from front flap)

be treated—certainly not adequately—thirty years ago; there are fresh things to be said today about the need for acquiring higher levels of skill in the art of reading; and these matters are so wide-reaching and new that no casual revision could accomplish the authors' aims. So *How to Read a Book* has been rewritten very thoroughly, as can be quickly verified by a comparison of the present Table of Contents with that of the original version. Of the four parts, only Part Two, expounding the rules of Analytical Reading, closely parallels the content of the first book, and even that has been largely recast.

In this new edition, Mortimer J. Adler, sole author of the original work, has enlisted the collaboration of Charles Van Doren. Dr. Adler began his professional career as an instructor at his Alma Mater, Columbia, and later moved to the University of Chicago, where for many years he was Professor of Philosophy of Law. He has been the Director of The Institute for Philosophical Research since 1952. The author of many books, he has since 1945 been a guiding spirit in the Great Books of the Western World program.

Charles Van Doren has been Dr. Adler's associate at The Institute for Philosophical Research for many years and has worked with him on other books, notably the twenty-volume *Annals of America*, published by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., in 1969. Together they have conducted Great Books discussion groups and moderated seminars in Chicago, San Francisco, and Aspen, in the course of which they gained much of the inspiration that resulted in the rewriting of *How to Read a Book*.

CONTENTS

Preface

Part One

THE DIMENSIONS OF READING

1. The Activity and Art of Reading
2. The Levels of Reading
3. The First Level of Reading: Elementary Reading
4. The Second Level of Reading: Inspectional Reading
5. How to Be a Demanding Reader

Part Two

THE THIRD LEVEL OF READING: ANALYTICAL READING

6. Pigeonholing a Book
7. X-Raying a Book
8. Coming to Terms With an Author
9. Determining an Author's Message
10. Criticizing a Book Fairly
11. Agreeing or Disagreeing With an Author
12. Aids to Reading

Part Three

APPROACHES TO DIFFERENT KINDS OF READING MATTER

13. How to Read Practical Books
14. How to Read Imaginative Literature
15. Suggestions for Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems
16. How to Read History
17. How to Read Science and Mathematics
18. How to Read Philosophy
19. How to Read Social Science

Part Four

THE ULTIMATE GOALS OF READING

20. The Fourth Level of Reading: Syntopical Reading
21. Reading and the Growth of the Mind

Appendix A. A Recommended Reading List

Appendix B. Exercises and Tests at the Four Levels of Reading

Index



HOW TO READ A BOOK

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

BY

MORTIMER J. ADLER

AND

CHARLES VAN DOREN

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CONTENTS

Preface ix

PART ONE

THE DIMENSIONS OF READING

1. The Activity and Art of Reading 3
Active Reading 4 • *The Goals of Reading: Reading for Information and Reading for Understanding* 7 • *Reading as Learning: The Difference Between Learning by Instruction and Learning by Discovery* 11 • *Present and Absent Teachers* 14
2. The Levels of Reading 16
3. The First Level of Reading: Elementary Reading 21
Stages of Learning to Read 24 • *Stages and Levels* 26 • *Higher Levels of Reading and Higher Education* 28 • *Reading and the Democratic Ideal of Education* 29
4. The Second Level of Reading: Inspectional Reading 31
Inspectional Reading I: Systematic Skimming or Pre-reading 32 • *Inspectional Reading II: Superficial Reading* 36 • *On Reading Speeds* 38 • *Fixations and Regressions* 40 • *The Problem of Comprehension* 41 • *Summary of Inspectional Reading* 43

5.	How to Be a Demanding Reader	45
	<i>The Essence of Active Reading: The Four Basic Questions a Reader Asks</i> 46 • <i>How to Make a Book Your Own</i> 48 • <i>The Three Kinds of Note-making</i> 51 • <i>Forming the Habit of Reading</i> 52 • <i>From Many Rules to One Habit</i> 54	
PART TWO		
THE THIRD LEVEL OF READING: ANALYTICAL READING		
6.	Pigeonholing a Book	59
	<i>The Importance of Classifying Books</i> 60 • <i>What You Can Learn from the Title of a Book</i> 61 • <i>Practical vs. Theoretical Books</i> 65 • <i>Kinds of Theoretical Books</i> 70	
7.	X-raying a Book	75
	<i>Of Plots and Plans: Stating the Unity of a Book</i> 78 • <i>Mastering the Multiplicity: The Art of Outlining a Book</i> 83 • <i>The Reciprocal Arts of Reading and Writing</i> 90 • <i>Discovering the Author's Intentions</i> 92 • <i>The First Stage of Analytical Reading</i> 94	
8.	Coming to Terms with an Author	96
	<i>Words vs. Terms</i> 96 • <i>Finding the Key Words</i> 100 • <i>Technical Words and Special Vocabularies</i> 103 • <i>Finding the Meanings</i> 106	
9.	Determining an Author's Message	114
	<i>Sentences vs. Propositions</i> 117 • <i>Finding the Key Sentences</i> 121 • <i>Finding the Propositions</i> 124 • <i>Finding the Arguments</i> 128 • <i>Finding the Solutions</i> 135 • <i>The Second Stage of Analytical Reading</i> 136	
10.	Criticizing a Book Fairly	137
	<i>Teachability as a Virtue</i> 139 • <i>The Role of Rhetoric</i> 140 • <i>The Importance of Suspending Judgment</i> 142 • <i>The Importance of Avoiding Contentiousness</i> 145 • <i>On the Resolution of Disagreements</i> 147	

-
11. Agreeing or Disagreeing with an Author 152
Prejudice and Judgment 154 • *Judging the Author's Soundness* 156 • *Judging the Author's Completeness* 160 • *The Third Stage of Analytical Reading* 163
12. Aids to Reading 168
The Role of Relevant Experience 169 • *Other Books as Extrinsic Aids to Reading* 172 • *How to Use Commentaries and Abstracts* 174 • *How to Use Reference Books* 176 • *How to Use a Dictionary* 178 • *How to Use an Encyclopedia* 182

PART THREE

APPROACHES TO DIFFERENT KINDS
OF READING MATTER

13. How to Read Practical Books 191
The Two Kinds of Practical Books 193 • *The Role of Persuasion* 197 • *What Does Agreement Entail in the Case of a Practical Book?* 199
14. How to Read Imaginative Literature 203
How Not to Read Imaginative Literature 204 • *General Rules for Reading Imaginative Literature* 208
15. Suggestions for Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems 215
How to Read Stories 217 • *A Note About Epics* 222 • *How to Read Plays* 223 • *A Note About Tragedy* 226 • *How to Read Lyric Poetry* 227
16. How to Read History 234
The Elusiveness of Historical Facts 235 • *Theories of History* 237 • *The Universal in History* 239 • *Questions to Ask of a Historical Book* 241 • *How to Read Biography and Autobiography* 244 • *How to Read About Current Events* 248 • *A Note on Digests* 252
17. How to Read Science and Mathematics 255
Understanding the Scientific Enterprise 256 • *Suggestions for Reading Classical Scientific Books* 258 • *Fac-*

ing the Problem of Mathematics 260 • *Handling the Mathematics in Scientific Books* 264 • *A Note on Popular Science* 267

18. How to Read Philosophy 270
The Questions Philosophers Ask 271 • *Modern Philosophy and the Great Tradition* 276 • *On Philosophical Method* 277 • *On Philosophical Styles* 280 • *Hints for Reading Philosophy* 285 • *On Making Up Your Own Mind* 290 • *A Note on Theology* 291 • *How to Read "Canonical" Books* 293
19. How to Read Social Science 296
What Is Social Science? 297 • *The Apparent Ease of Reading Social Science* 299 • *Difficulties of Reading Social Science* 301 • *Reading Social Science Literature* 304

PART FOUR
 THE ULTIMATE GOALS
 OF READING

20. The Fourth Level of Reading: Syntopical Reading 309
The Role of Inspection in Syntopical Reading 313 • *The Five Steps in Syntopical Reading* 316 • *The Need for Objectivity* 323 • *An Example of an Exercise in Syntopical Reading: The Idea of Progress* 325 • *The Syntopicon and How to Use It* 329 • *On the Principles That Underlie Syntopical Reading* 333 • *Summary of Syntopical Reading* 335
21. Reading and the Growth of the Mind 337
What Good Books Can Do for Us 338 • *The Pyramid of Books* 341 • *The Life and Growth of the Mind* 344
- Appendix A. A Recommended Reading List 347
- Appendix B. Exercises and Tests at the Four Levels of Reading 363
- Index 421

PREFACE

How to Read a Book was first published in the early months of 1940. To my surprise and, I confess, to my delight, it immediately became a best seller and remained at the top of the nationwide best-seller list for more than a year. Since 1940, it has continued to be widely circulated in numerous printings, both hardcover and paperback, and it has been translated into other languages—French, Swedish, German, Spanish, and Italian. Why, then, attempt to recast and rewrite the book for the present generation of readers?

The reasons for doing so lie in changes that have taken place both in our society in the last thirty years and in the subject itself. Today many more of the young men and women who complete high school enter and complete four years of college; a much larger proportion of the population has become literate in spite of or even because of the popularity of radio and television. There has been a shift of interest from the reading of fiction to the reading of nonfiction. The educators of the country have acknowledged that teaching the young to read, in the most elementary sense of that word, is our paramount educational problem. A recent Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, designating the seventies as the Decade of Reading, has dedicated federal funds in support of a wide variety of efforts to improve

proficiency in this basic skill, and many of those efforts have scored some success at the level at which children are initiated into the art of reading. In addition, adults in large numbers have been captivated by the glittering promises made by speed-reading courses—promises to increase their comprehension of what they read as well as their speed in reading it.

However, certain things have not changed in the last thirty years. One constant is that, to achieve all the purposes of reading, the desideratum must be the ability to read different things at different—appropriate—speeds, not everything at the greatest possible speed. As Pascal observed three hundred years ago, “When we read too fast or too slowly, we understand nothing.” Since speed-reading has become a national fad, this new edition of *How to Read a Book* deals with the problem and proposes variable-speed-reading as the solution, the aim being to read better, always better, but sometimes slower, sometimes faster.

Another thing that has not changed, unfortunately, is the failure to carry instruction in reading beyond the elementary level. Most of our educational ingenuity, money, and effort is spent on reading instruction in the first six grades. Beyond that, little formal training is provided to carry students to higher and quite distinct levels of skill. That was true in 1939 when Professor James Mursell of Columbia University’s Teachers College wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The Failure of the Schools.” What he said then, in two paragraphs that I am now going to quote, is still true.

Do pupils in school learn to read their mother tongue effectively? Yes and no. Up to the fifth and sixth grade, reading, on the whole, is effectively taught and well learned. To that level we find a steady and general improvement, but beyond it the curves flatten out to a dead level. This is not because a person arrives at his natural limit of efficiency when he reaches the sixth grade, for it has been shown again and again that with special tuition much older children, and also adults, can make enormous improvement. Nor does it mean that most sixth-graders read well enough for all

practical purposes. A great many pupils do poorly in high school because of sheer ineptitude in getting meaning from the printed page. They can improve; they need to improve; but they don't.

The average high-school graduate has done a great deal of reading, and if he goes on to college he will do a great deal more; but he is likely to be a poor and incompetent reader. (Note that this holds true of the average student, not the person who is a subject for special remedial treatment.) He can follow a simple piece of fiction and enjoy it. But put him up against a closely written exposition, a carefully and economically stated argument, or a passage requiring critical consideration, and he is at a loss. It has been shown, for instance, that the average high-school student is amazingly inept at indicating the central thought of a passage, or the levels of emphasis and subordination in an argument or exposition. To all intents and purposes he remains a sixth-grade reader till well along in college.

If there was a need for *How to Read a Book* thirty years ago, as the reception of the first edition of the book would certainly seem to indicate, the need is much greater today. But responding to that greater need is not the only, nor, for that matter, the main motive in rewriting the book. New insights into the problems of learning how to read; a much more comprehensive and better-ordered analysis of the complex art of reading; the flexible application of the basic rules to different types of reading, in fact to every variety of reading matter; the discovery and formulation of new rules of reading; and the conception of a pyramid of books to read, broad at the bottom and tapering at the top—all these things, not treated adequately or not treated at all in the book that I wrote thirty years ago, called for exposition and demanded the thorough rewriting that has now been done and is here being published.

The year after *How to Read a Book* was published, a parody of it appeared under the title *How to Read Two Books*; and Professor I. A. Richards wrote a serious treatise entitled *How to Read a Page*. I mention both these sequels in order to

point out that the problems of reading suggested by both of these titles, the jocular as well as the serious one, are fully treated in this rewriting, especially the problem of how to read a number of related books in relation to one another and read them in such a way that the complementary and conflicting things they have to say about a common subject are clearly grasped.

Among the reasons for rewriting *How to Read a Book*, I have stressed the things to be said about the art of reading and the points to be made about the need for acquiring higher levels of skill in this art, which were not touched on or developed in the original version of the book. Anyone who wishes to discover how much has been added can do so quickly by comparing the present Table of Contents with that of the original version. Of the four parts, only Part Two, expounding the rules of Analytical Reading, closely parallels the content of the original, and even that has been largely recast. The introduction in Part One of the distinction of four levels of reading—elementary, inspectional, analytical, and syntopical—is the basic and controlling change in the book's organization and content. The exposition in Part Three of the different ways to approach different kinds of reading materials—practical and theoretical books, imaginative literature (lyric poetry, epics, novels, plays), history, science and mathematics, social science, and philosophy, as well as reference books, current journalism, and even advertising—is the most extensive addition that has been made. Finally, the discussion of Syntopical Reading in Part Four is wholly new.

In the work of updating, recasting, and rewriting this book, I have been joined by Charles Van Doren, who for many years now has been my associate at the Institute for Philosophical Research. We have worked together on other books, notably the twenty-volume *Annals of America*, published by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., in 1969. What is, perhaps, more relevant to the present cooperative venture in which we have been engaged as co-authors is that during the

last eight years Charles Van Doren and I have worked closely together in conducting discussion groups on great books and in moderating executive seminars in Chicago, San Francisco, and Aspen. In the course of these experiences, we acquired many of the new insights that have gone into the rewriting of this book.

I am grateful to Mr. Van Doren for the contribution he has made to our joint effort; and he and I together wish to express our deepest gratitude for all the constructive criticism, guidance, and help that we have received from our friend Arthur L. H. Rubin, who persuaded us to introduce many of the important changes that distinguish this book from its predecessor and make it, we hope, a better and more useful book.

MORTIMER J. ADLER

Boca Grande
March 26, 1972

HOW TO READ A BOOK

PART ONE

The Dimensions of Reading

THE ACTIVITY AND ART OF READING

This is a book for readers and for those who wish to become readers. Particularly, it is for readers of books. Even more particularly, it is for those whose main purpose in reading books is to gain increased understanding.

By “readers” we mean people who are still accustomed, as almost every literate and intelligent person used to be, to gain a large share of their information about and their understanding of the world from the written word. Not all of it, of course; even in the days before radio and television, a certain amount of information and understanding was acquired through spoken words and through observation. But for intelligent and curious people that was never enough. They knew that they had to read too, and they did read.

There is some feeling nowadays that reading is not as necessary as it once was. Radio and especially television have taken over many of the functions once served by print, just as photography has taken over functions once served by painting and other graphic arts. Admittedly, television serves some of these functions extremely well; the visual communication of news events, for example, has enormous impact. The ability of radio to give us information while we are engaged in doing other things—for instance, driving a car—is remarkable, and a great saving of time. But it may be seriously questioned

whether the advent of modern communications media has much enhanced our understanding of the world in which we live.

Perhaps we know more about the world than we used to, and insofar as knowledge is prerequisite to understanding, that is all to the good. But knowledge is not as much a prerequisite to understanding as is commonly supposed. We do not have to *know* everything about something in order to *understand* it; too many facts are often as much of an obstacle to understanding as too few. There is a sense in which we moderns are inundated with facts to the detriment of understanding.

One of the reasons for this situation is that the very media we have mentioned are so designed as to make thinking seem unnecessary (though this is only an appearance). The packaging of intellectual positions and views is one of the most active enterprises of some of the best minds of our day. The viewer of television, the listener to radio, the reader of magazines, is presented with a whole complex of elements—all the way from ingenious rhetoric to carefully selected data and statistics—to make it easy for him to “make up his own mind” with the minimum of difficulty and effort. But the packaging is often done so effectively that the viewer, listener, or reader does not make up his own mind at all. Instead, he inserts a packaged opinion into his mind, somewhat like inserting a cassette into a cassette player. He then pushes a button and “plays back” the opinion whenever it seems appropriate to do so. He has performed acceptably without having had to think.

Active Reading

As we said at the beginning, we will be principally concerned in these pages with the development of skill in reading books; but the rules of reading that, if followed and practiced, develop such skill can be applied also to printed material in

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