

How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading (1940, revised 1972)
by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren

By the time you have reached college, you have likely become a proficient reader, although not everyone enjoys reading or does it efficiently. For many of us, college will mark the time when we read the most. A lot of our success is riding on reading well. In the middle of the last century, Mortimer J. Adler with some later help from Charles Van Doren, came up with a class guide to help people read intelligently. The guide works well, if you follow their suggestions and rules. I encourage anyone who aspires to “intelligent reading” to pick up their book and digest it. I have sketched out some of the basics derived from their book, hoping you might gain some of their insights so you can practice their method and improve your reading skills.¹ As with most guidebooks, this one is full of rules; and as with most rules, these will serve you well if you follow them consistently.

PREFATORY WORK AND WORDS

Systematic Skimming, or Pre-reading

1. Look at the title page and, if the book has one, at its preface. Categorize the book as best you can. Identify author’s angle.
2. Study the table of contents.
3. Check the index. Scan for topics and key terms. Go and read some passages.
4. Read the publisher’s blurb.
5. Look at the chapters that seem to be pivotal to its argument. Read opening and closing pages.
6. Turn the pages, dipping in here and there, reading a paragraph or two, sometimes several pages in sequences, never more than that.

Note on Superficial Reading

In tackling a difficult book for the first time, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away. (There will be time to re-read and the second time through will be easier. Trying to puzzle things through when you don’t know the whole book’s shape is premature and will hurt the process.)

BASIC QUESTIONS

Four Basic Questions a Reader Asks

1. What is the book about as a whole?
2. What is being said in detail, and how?
3. Is the book true, in whole or part?
4. What of it?

¹ In the cases of the rules, I have mostly copied Adler and Van Doren’s language precisely, adding only explanations if they seemed necessary.

BASIC NOTE-TAKING METHODS

Make the Book Your Own

1. Underline: major points, statements
2. Vertical lines at the margins: for emphasis
3. Star, asterisk, or other doodad at the margin: used sparingly for best dozen statements; fold corner of these pages
4. Numbers in the margin: to note sequence of author's argument
5. Numbers of other pages in the margin: to mark cross references
6. Circling of key words or phrase: same as #1
7. Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page: for questions and answers; also use endpapers

ANALYTICAL READING

The First Stage of Analytical Reading, or Rules for Finding What a Book Is About

Rule 1. Classify the book according to kind and subject matter as early in the process as possible, preferably before you begin to read.

Rule 2. State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity (single sentence or short paragraph)

Rule 3. Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and outline these parts as you have outlined the whole. *A good book is like a house, with separate spaces but with integrity in the structure.*

Rule 4. Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve or the questions the author is trying to answer.

The Second Stage of Analytical Reading, or Rules for Finding What a Book Says (Interpreting Its Contents)

Rule 5. Come to terms with the author by interpreting the author's key words. *The important words are used precisely but typically give the reader pause or confusion. Discern how the author uses them, recognizing that one word can have many meanings and one idea can be expressed by many words. To discover the author's meaning, use the meanings of the words around it.*

Rule 6. Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences. *Propositions are arguments, answers to questions, claims being made, and they are often written in certain sentence forms (e.g., if this, then that, etc.).*

Rule 7. Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences. *In following this rule, pay attention to these three things: Look for reasons*

the authors want you to accept their conclusions. Note the author's assumptions—those self-evident claims the author depends on. Spend time on the sentences that puzzle you, not interest you. This is where you will learn. You must be able to restate the author's propositions in your own words; if you cannot, then you do not understand the book's claims. Another way to test your knowledge is to provide an example of the principles being described.

Rule 8. Determine which of the problems the author has solved, and which s/he has not; and as to the latter, decide which the author knew s/he had failed to solve.

The Third Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Criticizing a Book as a Communication of Knowledge

A. General Maxims of Intellectual Etiquette

Rule 9. Do not begin criticism until you have completed your outline and your interpretation of the book (Do not say you agree, disagree, or suspend judgment, until you can say "I understand.")

Rule 10. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously. *Look for resolution to disagreements, not arguing for arguments' sake.*

Rule 11. Demonstrate that you recognize the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any critical judgment you make. *Knowledge can be defended with evidence; opinion is unsupported judgments, which should help resolve the disagreements referenced in Rule 10.*

B. Special Criteria for Points of Criticism

Rule 12. Show where the author is uninformed. *The author does not have all the relevant knowledge; you must show the relevance and how it makes a difference to the author's conclusions.*

Rule 13. Show where the author is misinformed. *The author argues things that are incorrect, and you must show the truth or the greater probability.*

Rule 14. Show where the author is illogical. *Author concludes something that doesn't follow the reasons provided or may not draw the conclusion the evidence points to.*

Rule 15. Show wherein the author's analysis or account is incomplete. *The author hasn't solved all the problems presented or hasn't used evidence well or hasn't followed through on implications, but in stating this, you will need to explain how the inadequacy is relevant. (This criticism, however, typically means there is agreement in part.)*

The first three are criteria for disagreement, and if you cannot state those, you must agree; however, you may suspend judgement with the final point.

APPROACHES TO DIFFERENT KINDS OF READING MATTER

How to Read History (viz. narrative history)

Notes on the Four Questions adapted for a history book:

1. Know precisely what the historian sets out to do (and not do). *Authors cannot be blamed for not doing what they did not try to do.*
2. Which way does the historian intend to tell the story? *This allows readers to understand what is most fundamental to the historian.*
3. In criticizing whether the book is true, historians can be charged with misinterpreting the evidence and lacking a sense of realistic truth or with misusing evidence.
4. "History suggests the possible, for it describes things that have already been done." So, establishing significance is quite important because history affects peoples' actions.

General Observations about History

Two main points:

1. If you can, read more than one history of an event or period that interests you.
2. Read a history not only to learn what really happened at a particular time and place in the past, but also to learn the way men act in all times and places, especially now

Facts are elusive, and the sure ones rarely tell much.

Historians are bound to accuracy but necessarily have to create things. These derive from the author's sense of pattern or theory of history. Readers must recognize the ways historians assign causes or motivations (e.g., Providence, class struggle, etc.). Each narrative is told from a specific point of view, so you must recognize it and read more than one account.

Author argues that historian's real achievement is beyond telling what happened. Instead, historians help us understand the present—and the future since the future is partially determined by the present.