

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 and especially graduate school, you have likely become a proficient reader, although not everyone enjoys reading or does it efficiently. For many of us, this period 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 classic 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?

BASIC NOTE-TAKING METHODS

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.

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. You must know **what kind of book** you are reading, and you should know this as early in the process as possible, preferably before you begin to read. Also: Classify the book according to kind and subject matter. *Theoretical or practical? If theoretical, is it scientific or philosophical or historical?*

Rule 2. State the **unity of the whole book** in a single sentence, or at most a few sentences (a short paragraph). Also: State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity. *What is the book's theme or main point?*

Rule 3. Set forth the **major parts** of the book, and show how these are organized into a whole, by being ordered to one another and to the united of the whole. Also: 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. Find out what the author's **problems** were. Also: define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve. *Discern what questions the author was trying to answer.*

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

Rule 5. Find the important words and through them **come to terms** with the author. Also: Come to terms with the author by interpreting his 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. Keep vocabulary and terminology separate.*

Rule 6. Mark the most important sentences in a book and discover the propositions they contain. Also: 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 written in certain sentence forms (e.g., if this, then that, etc.).*

Rule 7. Locate or construct the basic arguments in the book by finding them in the connection of sentences. Or, restated: Find if you can the paragraphs in a book that state its important arguments; but if the arguments are not thus expressed, your task is to construct them, by taking a sentence from this paragraph, and one from that, until you have gathered together the sequence of sentences that state the propositions that compose the argument. Also: 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 wants you to accept their conclusions. Be able to distinguish between inductive (i.e., particular facts leading to a conclusion) and deductive (i.e., an accumulation of generalizations that add up to another one) argumentation. 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. Find out what the author's solutions are. Also: Determine which of his problems the author as solved, and which he has not; and as to the latter, decide which the author knew 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. You must be able to say, with reasonable certainty, "I understand," before you can say any one of the following things: "I agree," or "I disagree," or "I suspend judgment." Also: 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.") *These are the only responses you can have and it is imperative that you understand before you judge.*

Rule 10. When you disagree, do so reasonably, and not disputatiously or contentiously. Also: Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously. *Look for resolution to disagreements, not arguing for arguments' sake.*

Rule 11. Respect the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by giving reasons for any critical judgment you make. Also: 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 wherein 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 wherein the author is misinformed. *The author argues things that are incorrect, and you must show the truth or the greater probability.*

Rule 14. Show wherein 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; although you may suspend judgement with the final point.

APPROACHES TO DIFFERENT KINDS OF READING MATTER

How to Read History (viz. narrative history)

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.

Two main points:

If you can, read more than one history of an event or period that interests you. 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.

Questions to ask a history book (adapted):

1. Know precisely what the historian sets out to do (and not do). An author cannot be blamed for not doing what he 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. Answering significance is quite important because history affects peoples' actions. "History suggests the possible, for it describes things that have already been done." Practical and political action explains the significance of one's reading of history.

THE FOURTH STAGE OF READING: SYNTOPICAL READING (i.e., reading across books)

We often need to read many books on a topic to fully understand it. This is especially true for advanced research. These steps should help.

Stage I. Inspectional Reading for the Fourth Stage (i.e., Syntopical)

- *Create a tentative bibliography of your subject by recourse to library catalogues, advisors, and bibliographies in books.*
- *Inspect all books on the tentative bibliography to ascertain which are germane to your subject, and also to acquire a clearer idea of the subject.* This helps you identify which books on the list will be productive to read analytically and that narrows down the bibliography.
 - Only after narrowing, after inspectional reading, do you move on to analytical reading.

Stage II. Five Steps in Syntopical Reading

1. **Find Relevant Passages.** *Inspect the books already identified as relevant to your subject in Stage I in order to find the most relevant passages.* Since, in syntopical reading, you and your interests are most important, you are searching for things that help you. Inspect the works again to find passages most germane to your needs. Do not attempt to do this stage during the inspectional reading above. You are not meant in syntopical reading to develop an overall understanding of the book but to find out how it is useful to you, because the author's purpose may be quite different from yours.
2. **Bring the Authors to Terms.** *Bring authors to terms by constructing a neutral terminology of the subject that all, or the great majority, of the authors can be interpreted as employing, whether they actually employ the words or not.* Again, since this is your question, not the author's, you must establish your own terms and bring the books to bear on them. In a sense, you make the authors use your language, not you using theirs. This is essentially translating their language into yours.

3. **Get the Questions Clear.** *Establish a set of neutral propositions for all of the authors by framing a set of questions to which all or most of the authors can be interpreted as giving answers, whether they actually treat the questions explicitly or not. Often such question begin with questions about the existence or character of an issue (idea or phenomenon), followed by questions related to how it is known or manifested, and ending with questions about consequences of it all.*
4. **Define the Issues.** *Define the issues, both major and minor ones, by ranging the opposing answers of authors to the various questions on one side of an issue or another. You should remember that an issue does not always exist explicitly between or among authors, but that it sometimes has to be constructed by interpretation of the authors' views on matters that may not have been their primary concern. When authors understand a question but answer it in contrary ways, it means there are differences in conceptions of the issue or of the subject. The syntopical reader will then sort through the controversy.*
5. **Analyze the Discussion.** *Analyze the discussion by ordering the questions and issues in such a way as to throw maximum light on the subject. More general issues should precede less general ones, and relations among issues should be clearly indicated. Doing this clears away the issue, allowing a new thinker to wander in and add to it.*

Syntopical reading especially requires as much objectivity as can be mustered, seeing all sides in the controversy and taking none of them. Constantly refer back to and cite texts to keep you grounded in the work, not in opinions.