

Adler, Mortimer J. and Van Doren, Charles. How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading, rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1972)

Part 1: The Dimensions of Reading

Chapter 1- The Activity and Art of Reading

- A. Two types of reading:
 - 1. For information (more data: the 'what')
 - 2. For understanding (more discernment: the 'why')
- B. Two types of learning:
 - 1. By instruction (more passive: to know what)
 - 2. By discovery (more active: to know why)
- C. Goal of this book:
 - 1. Learning to learn by discovery, for understanding
 - 2. Learning how to learn from "one who is absent" (author)
 - 3. Learning "how to make books teach us well"

Chapter 2- The Levels of Reading

- A. Elementary: "What does the sentence/book say?"
- B. Inspectional: "What is the book about? What kind of book is it?"
- C. Analytical: "What does the book mean?"
- D. Syntopical: "How does it compare with other books?"

Chapter 3- Elementary Reading

- A. Four basic stages
 - 1. 'reading readiness' (early physical development)
 - 2. simple reading (small vocabulary; simple skills)
 - 3. expanded reading (large vocabulary; diverse subjects; enjoyment)
 - 4. refined reading (understand concepts; compare different views)
- B. Need for remedial instruction in elementary reading
 - 1. at the high school level
 - 2. at the college level

Chapter 4- Inspectional Reading

- A. Systematic skimming or pre-reading
 - 1. Look at the title page and preface: try to pigeonhole type of book
 - 2. Study table of contents: look for structure/road map for trip
 - 3. Check index: estimate range of terms and topics; look up some passages that seem crucial
 - 4. Check the dust jacket: read the publisher's blurb
 - 5. Look for chapters which seem most pivotal: read opening and/or closing passages/pages carefully
 - 6. Thumb through entire book, reading a few paragraphs and/or pages here and there, esp. at the end, looking for the main argument(s)
- B. Superficial reading

1. Read through *"without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away"*
 2. *"Go right on [until] you come to things you do understand. Concentrate on these. Keep on in this way."* (e.g. "reading Shakespeare"! :)
- C. On reading speeds
1. Learn to read at different speeds
 - a. "many books are hardly worth even skimming;"
 - b. "some should be read quickly;"
 - c. "a few should be read... quite slow...allow[ing] for complete comprehension"
 2. Even difficult books have some material which can be read quickly
- D. Fixations and regressions:
1. The mind can grasp a sentence or even a paragraph at a glance
 2. For faster reading try sweeping your thumb and first two fingers like a "pointer" across the line forcing your eyes to keep up
- E. Problem of comprehension
1. Speed isn't enough; speed alone doesn't bring comprehension
 2. This book seeks to improve comprehension
- F. Summary of inspectional reading
1. "Race through even the hardest book" the first time through.
 2. "You will then be prepared to read it well the second time."

Chapter 5- **How to be a Demanding Reader**

A. Four basic questions a reader asks:

THE FOUR STAGES OF ANALYTICAL READING:

1. "What is the book about as a whole?" (Subject/Classification)
2. "What is being said in detail, and how?" (Terms/Interpretation)
3. "Is the book true, in whole or part?" (Truth/Evaluation)
4. "What of it?" (Significance/Response)

B. How to make a book your own:

1. Underlining key sentences
2. Vertical lines to mark key sections
3. Marginal doodads like asterisks and stars
4. Numbers of other pages in the margin
5. Circling key words or phrases
6. Writing in margins, or top and bottom

C. Three kinds of note-making

1. Structural- about the content of the subject
2. Conceptual- about the truth and significance
3. Dialectical- about the shape of the argument in the larger discussion of other people's ideas

Part 2: The Third Level of Reading: Analytical Reading

THE FIRST STAGE OF ANALYTICAL READING

Chapter 6- **Pigeonholing a Book**

RULE 1. CLASSIFY THE BOOK: "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."

Chapter 7- **X-Raying a Book**

RULE 2. RE-STATE THE POINT OF THE BOOK IN YOUR OWN WORDS:

"STATE THE UNITY OF THE WHOLE BOOK IN A SINGLE SENTENCE, OR AT MOST A FEW SENTENCES."

"Every book has a skeleton hidden between its covers.

Your job as an analytical reader is to find it."

RULE 3. OUTLINE THE BOOK: "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 UNITY OF THE WHOLE."

The art of outlining a book: "A piece of writing should have unity, clarity, and coherence... we must find it."

RULE 4. DETERMINE THE AUTHOR'S GOAL: "FIND OUT WHAT THE AUTHOR'S PROBLEMS WERE." [WHAT QUESTION IS HE TRYING TO ANSWER?]

THE SECOND STAGE OF ANALYTICAL READING

Chapter 8- **Coming to Terms with an Author**

RULE 5. INTERPRET KEY WORDS: "FIND THE IMPORTANT WORDS AND THROUGH THEM COME TO TERMS WITH THE AUTHOR."

1. Find the key words (words which are emphasized, repeated, defined, and/or italicized; 'fighting' words)
2. Find the meanings of those words from the context, like "putting a jigsaw puzzle together"

Chapter 9- **Determining an Author's Message**

RULE 6. GRASP THE MAIN PROPOSITIONS: "MARK THE MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCES IN A BOOK AND DISCOVER THE PROPOSITIONS THEY CONTAIN."

Propositions are the *author's judgments* about what is true or false. They are also the *author's answers* to questions, his or her *major affirmations and denials*.

These are *the heart of his/her communication*. They are *the most important things the author has to say*. Unless these propositions are supported by reasons, they are nothing but expressions of personal opinion.

RULE 7. FIND THE MAIN ARGUMENTS: "LOCATE OR CONSTRUCT THE BASIC ARGUMENTS IN A BOOK BY FINDING THEM IN THE CONNECTION OF SENTENCES."

Arguments are statements which offer the grounds or reasons for the author's judgments and conclusions.

How to find the key sentences and propositions:

1. Look for signs: underlining; italics; location
2. Look where you seem "to be perplexed"
3. Look for statements containing key terms
4. Look for a sequence in the argument(s)
5. Separate complicated sentences into more than one proposition
6. See if you can state the author's argument in your own words
7. See if you can give your own example to make the same point

RULE 8. DETERMINE THE AUTHOR'S SUCCESS/FAILURE: "FIND OUT WHAT THE AUTHOR'S SOLUTIONS ARE."

THE THIRD STAGE OF ANALYTICAL READING

Chapter 10- **Criticizing a Book Fairly**

RULE 9. COMPLETE YOUR READING FIRST: "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.'"

1. Recognize your "responsibility of taking a position" in response to the propositions you have now read. "Reading a book is a kind of conversation... The author has had his say, and then it is the reader's turn."

2. Recognize the "role of rhetoric" in this process, i.e. the attempt in all communication "to convince or persuade." This attempt is "the ultimate end in view... rhetorical skill is knowing how to react to anyone who tries to convince or persuade us."

RULE 10. CONTROL YOURSELF: "WHEN YOU DISAGREE, DO SO REASONABLY, AND NOT DISPUTATIVELY OR CONTENTIOUSLY."

RULE 11. PRESENT GOOD REASONS: "RESPECT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND MERE PERSONAL OPINION, BY GIVING REASONS FOR ANY CRITICAL JUDGMENT YOU MAKE."

Chapter 11- **Agreeing or Disagreeing with an Author**

A. Three ideal conditions for a well-conducted disagreement:

1. Acknowledge your emotions
2. Make your own assumptions explicit
3. Make an attempt at impartiality

B. Four practical ways to criticize a book negatively

1. "You are uninformed"
2. "You are misinformed"
3. "You are illogical"
4. "Your analysis is incomplete"

Chapter 12- **Aids to Reading**

A. The Importance of Context

1. Intrinsic reading- the context within the book itself
2. Extrinsic reading- the context of sources outside the book

B. Using other books as Extrinsic Aids

1. The 'Great Books' - a "prolonged conversation" in Western civilization which "provide[s] an even larger context that helps you to interpret the book you are reading."

2. Commentaries- should be "used wisely, which is to say sparingly," since they "are not always right" and "may not be exhaustive." So: "you should not read a commentary by someone else until *after* you have read the book."
3. Reference Books- cannot help until you first have some idea of what you need to know and where to find it
4. Dictionaries- "are about words":
 - a. as "physical things" with uniform spelling;
 - b. as "parts of speech" with grammatical roles;
 - c. as "signs" with many meanings, some "totally unrelated"
 - d. as "conventions" with "a history, a cultural career" of "transformations"
5. Encyclopedias- "are about facts":
 - a. as ideally "true propositions" and "reflections of reality"
 - b. but "to some extent conventional... and culturally determined"
 - c. requiring the user "to ask the proper questions"
 - d. containing "striking omissions," e.g. "no arguments"

Part 3: Approaches to Different Kinds of Reading Matter

Chapter 13- How to Read Practical Books- "What are the author's objectives & means?"

Chapter 14- How to Read Imaginative Lit.- "Don't criticize until you fully appreciate..."

Chapter 15- Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems- "Read quickly...suspend disbelief"

Chapter 16- How to Read History- Ask author's purpose/audience/knowledge, etc.

Chapter 17- Science and Mathematics- Recognize math as a language to be learned

Chapter 18- How to Read Philosophy- Identify question(s) and historical context

Chapter 19- How to Read Social Science- Identify point of view & mix of fact/fiction; read *syntopically* (i.e. in relation to other books on the same subject)

Part 4: The Ultimate Goals of Reading

Chapter 20- The Fourth Level of Reading: Syntopical Reading

A. The Five Steps in Syntopical Reading

1. Find the relevant passages
2. Establish a common terminology
3. Clarify the questions
4. Define the issues
5. Analyze the discussion: Look for the truth:
 - a. "in the *order discussion itself*,"
 - b. and in "*the conflict of opposing answers*"
(weigh the evidence; seek to be objective)

B. How to use the Syntopicon

1. Greek = "collection of topics;" 2 volume index to the 60 volumes entitled Great Books of the Western World published by Encyclopedia Britannica
2. Lists 103 "Great Ideas" (e.g. "Democracy, God, Happiness"), each with a basic definition, introductory essay, an outline of related topics, and lists of references, cross-references, and additional readings

Chapter 21- Reading and the Growth of the Mind

- A. "Active reading" = "asking questions" and looking for answers
- B. "What good books do for us" = "stretch our mind;" "improve our reading skill;" "teach us about the world and ourselves"
- C. Difference between "good" (few thousand) and "great" books (less than 100)
 - 1. Good books need have no more than one meaning and one reading
 - 2. Great books have many meanings and need to be read over and over again
- D. The test of a great book
 - 1. "Marooned on a desert island": Which ten books would you select?
 - 2. "The book seems to grow with you;" "You see new things" every time you re-read it; The book is able to "lift you" over and over again.
 - 3. *"You should seek out the few books that can have this value for you."*

Appendix A. A Recommended Reading List
(137 authors, from Homer to Solzhenitsyn)

- Appendix B. Exercises and Tests at the Four Levels of Reading
- A. Exercises & Tests at the First Level: Elementary Reading
 - B. Exercises & Tests at the Second Level: Inspectional Reading
 - C. Exercises & Tests at the Third Level: Analytical Reading
 - D. Exercises & Tests at the Fourth Level: Syntopical Reading