



How to Read a Book | *Mortimer J. Adler & Charles Van Doren*

You have a mind. Now let us suppose that you also have a book that you want to read. The book consists of language written by someone for the sake of communicating. Your success in reading it is determined by the extent to which you receive everything the writer intended to communicate.

Mortimer J. Adler was an American author, educator, and philosopher who championed the repopularization of the Great Books and Great Ideas curriculum of study. A prolific scholar, he was the author or editor of more than fifty books, including editions of the Encyclopedia Britannica. It's very fitting then, that one of his best-known works is How to Read a Book.

The art of reading is the process whereby a mind, with nothing to operate on but the symbols of the readable matter, and with no help from the outside, elevates itself by the power of its own operations.

The goal a reader seeks – be it entertainment, information, or understanding – determines the way he reads. The effectiveness with which he reads is determined by the amount of effort and skill he puts into his reading.

The Levels of Reading

There are four levels of reading – so called because they are cumulative in that each level includes all the others, and you can't progress to a higher level without mastering the levels that come before. The four levels are:

- Elementary
- Inspectional
- Analytical
- Syntopical

1

Elementary Reading – What does the book say?

In mastering this level, one learns the rudiments of the art of reading, receives basic training in reading, and acquires reading skills. Our first encounter at reading is at this level; sadly, many people never progress beyond this level.

At this level of reading, the question asked of the reader is “What does the sentence say?” While that could be conceived as a complex question, in this setting take it at its simplest sense.

The attainment of the skills of elementary reading occurred some time ago for almost everyone reading this summary. Nevertheless, we continue to experience the problems of this level of reading, no matter how capable we may be as readers.



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Many readers continue to have various kinds of difficulties reading at this level. Most of the difficulties are mechanical, and can be traced back to early instruction in reading. Overcoming these difficulties usually allows us to read faster.

There are four basic stages of Elementary Reading:

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| 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) |

2 Inspectional Reading – What is the book about?

The focus of reading at this level is to get the most out of a book with in a given amount of time. When reading at this level, your aim is to examine the surface of the book, to learn everything that the surface alone can teach you – which is often a good deal.

Techniques for Inspectional Reading of a book include:

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

3 Analytical Reading – What does the book mean?

The third level of reading, analytical reading, is both a more complex and a more systematic activity than either of the previous two levels of reading. Analytical reading is thorough reading, complete reading, or good reading – the best you can do. The analytical reader must ask many organized questions of what he is reading.

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Analytical reading is hardly ever necessary if your goal in reading is simply information or entertainment. Analytical reading is preeminently for the sake of understanding. Moving your mind from a condition of understanding less to a condition of understanding more with the aid of a book is almost impossible unless you have at least some skill in analytical reading.

Techniques for Analytical Reading include:

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
7. Structural notes - about the content of the subject
8. Conceptual notes - about the truth and significance
9. Dialectical notes - about the shape of the argument in the larger discussion of other people's ideas

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4

Syntopical Reading – How does this book compare with other books?

The fourth and highest level of reading is the most complex and systematic type of reading. It makes very heavy demands on the reader, even if the materials themselves are relatively easy and unsophisticated.

Another name for this level of reading may be called comparative reading. The reader is reading many books, not just one, and places them in relation to one another and to a subject about which they all revolve. Mere comparison of texts is not enough: syntopical reading involves more. With the help of the books being read, the syntopical reader is able to construct an analysis of the subject that may not be in any of the books. Syntopical reading is the most active and effortful kind of reading.

Techniques in Syntopical Reading include:

1. Find the relevant passages
2. Establish a common terminology
3. Clarify the questions
4. Define the issues
5. Analyze the discussion and look for the truth

Syntopical reading is the most active and effortful kind of reading.

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Reading and the Growth of the Mind

Active reading is the asking of questions and looking for answers. Good books stretch our minds, improve our reading skills, and teach us about the world and ourselves. Good books make demands on us.

But there is a world beyond good books – that of great books. Good books need have no more than one meaning and one reading. Great books, on the other hand, have many meanings and need to be read over and over again.

The test of a great book:

1. If you were marooned on a desert island, which ten books would you select?
2. Does the book seem to grow with you?
3. Do you see new things every time you re-read it?
4. Is the book is able to lift you over and over again?

Seek out the few books that have these values for you.

Reading well, which means reading actively, is not only good in itself, nor is it merely a means to advancement in our work or career. Reading keeps our minds alive and growing.

Recommended Resources

1. Take a look at “Reading 101” by Auxano Vision Room Curator Bob Adams [here](#).
2. Do you know how to get the most out of reading? Read some helpful hints by Auxano Vision Room Curator Bob Adams [here](#).
3. Clarity Evangelist Will Mancini challenges you to answer a simple question before you read any book [here](#).