



The University of St. Thomas

Odyssey Program

Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*

Chapter 1: The Activity and Art of Reading

1. The author sets out on the first page of his book what the book is *for*. “This is a book for readers and for those who wish to become readers. Particularly, it for readers of books.” You are now entering into a university education, and a university education will involve reading a lot of *books*. That is one of the reasons we are having you read this book. So, in a sense, the author is describing *you*. “Even more particularly,” though, says the author, his book is for those whose main purpose in reading books is what?

* to gain increased understanding

2. “There is some feeling nowadays,” says Adler – and please note that by “nowadays,” he means *1940*, when the book was originally written, which was *before* the U.S. entered World War II and *long before* most of your parents were born; but back then, a long, long time ago, in ages past, people somehow got this idea into their heads – “that reading is not as necessary as it once was.” Wow! They thought that *way back then* -- in 1940? Yes, they did. Why? Well, as Adler points out, because it was thought that, “Radio and especially television have taken over many of the functions once served by print.” Did they? If you were growing up in 1940's America and had thought to yourself: “Golly, I don’t need to learn to read; the new technologies of radio and television will replace the need to read by the time I get out of school,” would you have been right? Would you have found yourself well prepared for the last half of the Twentieth Century (sometimes called the beginning of the “Information Age”)?

3. As preparation for reading this book and this chapter, please read the article in your reader entitled “Literary Reading in Dramatic Decline According to National Endowment for the Arts Survey.” It is short and informative. What, according to the National Endowment for the Arts Survey, are some of the consequences of the low levels of reading in American society?

* Reading also affects lifestyle, the study shows. Literary readers are much more likely to be involved in cultural, sports and volunteer activities than are non-readers. For example, literary readers are nearly three times as likely to attend a performing arts event, almost four times as likely to visit an art museum, more than two-and-a-half times as likely to do volunteer or charity work, and over one-and-a-half times as likely to attend or participate in sports activities. People who read more books tend to have the highest level of participation in other activities.

The most important factor in literacy reading rates is education, the report shows. Only 14 percent of adults with a grade school education read literature in 2002. By contrast, more than five times as many respondents with a graduate school education - 74 percent - read literary works.

*Family income also affects the literary reading rate, though not as strongly as education. About one-third of the lowest income group - those with a family income under \$10,000 - read literature during the survey year, compared with 61 percent of the highest income group - those with family income of \$75,000 or more.

* The survey also studied the correlation between literary reading and other activities. For instance, literature readers watched an average of 2.7 hours of television each day, while people who do not read literary works watched an average of 3.1 hours daily. Adults who did not watch TV in a typical day are 48 percent more likely to be frequent readers - consuming from 12 to 49 books each year - than are those who watched one to three hours daily.

4. People have said for years (indeed, since at least 1940) that the previous “literary culture” is being replaced by a

“visual culture” of images, such as those found on YouTube and, to a certain extent, on MySpace. In your reader, you will also find an article by painter Makoto Fujimura (Refractions 26: The Epistle of Van Gogh) who was on the advisory board of the NEA when they made their report on the decline in reading in America. “As an artist,” said Fujimura in an interview, “I am concerned that the declining attention span that has resulted from less reading has also affected the way people view and appreciate art. That is to say, they no longer have the concentration and the attention to view art with any appreciation.” Here is a brief excerpt from Fujimura’s article:

“The recent report on NEA's study on reading in America, "To Read or not to Read," depicts a dramatic erosion of America's reading habits. Not only does the report give us hard data on the steep decline of reading at all levels and age groups (except the pre-teen years ... call it the "Harry Potter effect,") but it substantiates an alarming trend of communal disengagement. We are not only reading less, we are reading less well: we are not only reading less well, we are losing our capacity to focus and pay attention to the world around us with empathy. As I thought about this as I perused the exhibit, van Gogh letters began inject in my psyche an antidote to the problems laid out in "To Read or not to Read." Vincent communicated in a foreign tongue with his acute sensitivity, and to impress upon the reader what he felt as sacred. The key word is "communicate," and the report points out the severe consequences if we continue to lose our capacity to communicate. We may, if we go down this road, no longer have the capacity to be moved by van Gogh or any other artist: we would not have the patience and longing in our hearts to do so.”

What if Fujimura is right about this? What if losing our ability to read actually results in our losing our ability to appreciate even visual images? So, for example, do you find yourself *more* able to concentrate on a single, important task after you’ve been spending a lot of time surfing the web, or *less*? (Are you sure you’re entirely *aware* of how long your attention span is? How long did it take you to read this chapter?)

One of the tests of how long your attention span is and how good your concentration will be whether or not you have been able to finish the reading for this class and move systematically through the “Questions to Guide Your Reading.” Have you? If not, did you blow off the reading by saying, “Yeah, well, that’s just a lot of *boring crap*”? Well, yes, perhaps. But then, *lots* of things you’ll be asked to read in life might seem (or be) boring – and not too infrequently, they’ll even be somewhat crappy. But you’ll have to do it anyway. Indeed, in this economy, changing as it does every four or five years, almost every employee at every company in the U.S. feels nearly constant pressure to update his or her skills or get re-educated in current technology. And that process *unavoidably* (I’m sorry to inform you) will involve lots of *reading* and *study* of written materials. Are you ready?

The good news is, reading is a skill – like playing poker – and it can be *developed*. The only question is, are you interested in developing that *skill*, or are you going to keep covering up your lack of skill by saying, “It’s too *boring*.” For people who don’t understand baseball or soccer or poker, the game is *boring*, because they can’t do it, and they don’t understand it. But for people who understand the game and appreciate the skill, this can be the introduction to a magical and very personal experience.

So, ask yourself this: If reading is necessarily going to be an important part of your life – that is, if you want to be increasingly successful in the current economy (I’m not saying that economic success is the most important goal you should have, but if it is one of your goals) – and if only people who understand and appreciate the skill of reading do it with any amount of ease and joy, then logically, what should your next step be? A trip to the video game console? [Here’s a hint: How many employers do you think train, or re-train, their employees using video game interfaces? Not many. Indeed, not any. And if you reply, “But in the future, they *might* do just that!” I’ll simply say: “Yes, and they told us we would be getting all our education on television by now when I was a kid.” (And trust me, I watched *hours* of television to prepare myself for the coming revolution.) Problem was, that didn’t happen. So, sure kid, video games and the internet: that’s all you’ll need to gain understanding and get a quality education in the Twenty-First Century. And I’ve got a wonderful bridge in Brooklyn for sale – very inexpensive.

Seriously. What skills do you *really* believe will serve you well in terms of success and quality-of-life over the next century of so? Think about it. The future begins *now*.

5. “There is a sense,” says Adler on p. 4 of his book, “in which we moderns are inundated with facts” to the detriment of what? What do you think? Has the situation gotten any better since 1940? Do you ever feel as though you are

“inundated” with facts and information – say, about the War in Iraq or Global Warming or International Politics – but have precious little grasp of the whole picture?

* to the detriment of *understanding*

6. What, according to Adler, is “one of the reasons for this situation”?

* 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 media presents a whole “package” of intellectual positions and views – “all the way from ingenious rhetoric [or skillfully selected images] to carefully selected data and statistics” – to make it easy for him or her to “make up his own mind.” But the package is often done so effectively that the viewer does not make up his own mind at all, but merely accepts what has been spoon fed to him.

Active Reading

7. According to Adler, reading of any sort is an activity, but reading can be *more* or *less* active. Better reading is more – what – active or passive?

* active

8. On p. 5, Adler points out that, for many people: “Reading and listening are thought of as *receiving* communication from someone who is actively engaged in *giving* or *sending* it.” What is the mistake in this view? What analogy does Adler suggest to replace this image? What are the elements of the analogy? And at what point does the analogy break down?

* The mistake here is to suppose that receiving communication is like receiving a blow (that is to say, that it’s purely receptive, requiring nothing on the part of the receiver).

* “On the contrary, the reader or listener is much more like the catcher in a game of baseball. He is *receiving* the pitch, yes, but he is as active as the pitcher.

* The catcher must learn to catch all different sorts of pitches.

* The pitcher and catcher are successful only to the extent that they cooperate.

* BUT, the analogy breaks down because the ball is a simple unit: it is either completely caught or not, whereas one’s grasp of a text can be *more* or *less*.

The Goals of Reading: Reading for Information and Reading for Understanding

9. What is the distinction between “reading for information” and “reading for understanding”? Does the distinction make sense to you? That is to say, do you understand that not all reading is “reading for information”? (Which, by the way, is the reason not all lectures can be done in Power Point presentations: Because not all lectures are primarily about communicating *information*. More often, they are about trying to increase *understanding*. Which, by the way, is the reason not all tests can be fill-in-the-blank or multiple choice. These kinds of questions merely test your stock of *information*. To demonstrate *understanding*, you need to *write essays* or *give oral presentations*.)

Reading as Learning: The Difference Between Learning by Instruction and Learning by Discovery

10. On p. 11, Adler remarks that, “Getting more information is learning, and so is coming to understand what you did

not understand before. But there is an important difference between these two kinds of learning.” What is the difference?

* To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is the same, in what respects it is different, and so forth.

* Enlightenment is achieved only when, in addition to knowing what an author says, you know what he means and why he says it.

11. Let’s think about this statement a bit more: “To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened [that is, to understand something that you did not understand before] is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is the same, in what respects it is different, and so forth.” How does Mortimer Adler’s notion of “understanding” compare to Josef Pieper’s description of *intellectus* (understanding)? How do both compare to the following statement from Pope John Paul II’s document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: “*Integration of knowledge is a process, one which will always remain incomplete; moreover, the explosion of knowledge in recent decades, together with the rigid compartmentalization of knowledge within individual academic disciplines, makes the task increasingly difficult.... [But] university scholars [should] be engaged in a constant effort to determine the relative place and meaning of each of the various disciplines within the context of a vision of the human person and the world....*”

* For both, “understanding” is something that involves seeing the part in terms of the whole. (Man is *capax universi*: has the capacity to grasp the whole.)

* Pieper puts more emphasis on “understanding” being non-discursive (not the result of a dialectical process). And Adler puts more emphasis (in this passage) on seeing the “connections with other facts.”

* Pope John Paul II deepens that idea of “seeing the connections” to the integration of all knowledge and suggests that students should be engaged in a constant effort to determine the relative place and meaning of each of the various disciplines within the larger context of a Catholic vision of the nature of the human person and the world.

* Thus we might say that, “understanding” – in the sense of “seeing the connections within the context of a vision of the whole – is something that should be going on both within one’s education as a whole and each time one picks up and reads a book.

12. At the top of p. 12, Adler distinguishes two types of literary ignorance. The first he calls (following the Sixteenth-Century French writer Michel de Montaigne) “abecedarian ignorance” – that is, someone who does not know his or her ABC’s. (Take ABCD, make it into a word, put “arian” on the end of it, and what do you get? Abecedarian.) What is the second type of ignorance? What name did the Greeks have for this sort of person (one who mixes learning and folly)?

* the ignorance of those who have misread many books

* sophomore (sophos = wise; moron = fool)

13. What is the distinction Adler makes between “learning by instruction” and “learning by discovery”? Why does the first depend upon the second? (Adler answers this question.) Why is it important in your education that you not only develop the ability to “learn by instruction,” but also the ability to “learn by discovery”? (Adler does not answer this question directly, but you should be able to figure it out from what he says.) What kinds of assignments do you suppose a college or university ought to assign if it wanted to help its students gain the ability to “learn by discovery”? List at least three.

* Instruction occurs when one person teaches another through speech or writing. We can, however, gain knowledge without being taught. If this were not the case, and every teacher had to be taught what he in turn teaches others, there would be no beginning in the acquisition of knowledge.

* Hence there must be **discovery** – the process of learning something by research, by investigation, or by reflection, without being taught.

* Students must not only “learn by instruction” but also “learn by discovery” because (A) there will not always be instructors around – especially as they leave the warm embrace of school. And (B) Because, as Adler points out: “A doctor may do many things for his patient, but in the final analysis it is the patient himself who must get well – grow in health. The farmer does many things for his plants or animals, but in the final analysis it is they that must grow in size and excellence. Similarly, although the teacher may help his student in many ways, it is the student himself who must do the learning. Knowledge must grow in his mind if learning is to take place.”

* Kinds of assignments?: research projects and presentations; laboratory experiments; field research (as in Environmental Science); undergraduate research day

14. Consider the following passage from your text (pp. 12-13): “A doctor may do many things for his patient, but in the final analysis it is the patient himself who must get well – grow in health. The farmer does many things for his plants or animals, but in the final analysis it is they that must grow in size and excellence. Similarly, although the teacher may help his student in many ways, it is the student himself who must do the learning. Knowledge must grow in his mind if learning is to take place.” What do you think about this comparison? Do you think Adler is right? If so, what would that imply about who is ultimately responsible for each student’s education? (Does the old saying “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” make any sense to you?)

* each student is responsible for his or her own education; teachers can teach, but students must do the learning, or else nothing happens

15. Why, according to Adler, do many people “regard thinking as more closely associated with research and unaided discovery than with being taught”? What is Adler’s response? What do you think? Do you think that there may be a possibility that, contrary to what you may previously have assumed, reading and listening are not thoughtless, effortless, passive activities, and that they involve many of the same active skills that are involved in the art of unaided discovery?

* Because they suppose reading and listening to be relatively effortless.

* But, insists Adler, reading and listening are not thoughtless, effortless, passive activities

* The art of reading (and we might add, the art of listening) involves all of the same skills that are involved in the art of unaided discovery.

Present and Absent Teachers

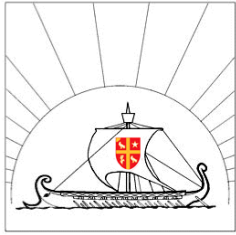
16. What is the difference between “listening” (say, to a live lecture) and “reading” – especially when it comes to questions?

* If you are puzzled by what a teacher says, you can ask him what he means. If, however, you ask a book a question, *you must answer it yourself*. When you question it, it answers you only to the extent that you do the work of thinking and analysis yourself.

17. Does this distinction imply that, when a teacher answers your questions, you can be more passive than when reading? Or is there still a sense in which, when the teacher answers your question, *you still must answer it yourself*? (Here’s a hint: Ultimately no, listening to a teacher should not be purely passive. Listening to a lecture should be as critical and analytical an activity as reading a book, which should be as critical and analytical as any research you do in the lab or in the field. We, contrary to the expectations of many students who come to college, are not merely trying to jam a lot of “stuff” into your head under the threat of expulsion: “Be ready to spit this information back at me on demand, or face termination.” We want you to *question*. We want you to *think*. We fight students on this score

more than on anything else. They *hate* us when we ask them to *question* and to *think*. Consider for a moment: Of all these “Questions to Guide Your Reading” you’ve been doing now for the past several weeks, which are the ones that annoyed you the most? The ones that asked you straightforwardly to memorize and spit back something from the book? Or the longer ones that asked you to *question* and to *think*? My experience has been that students are bored by the memorize-and-spit-back questions, but they rely on them to “get the grade.” And although they are sometimes *intrigued* (“interested” might be too strong a word) by the longer questions that demand critical engagement with the text, they generally skip over them as “pointless” or else find them downright annoying.

Perhaps our notions that reading is largely passive and that education in general is meant to be largely passive are not so unrelated as we might suppose. Perhaps both are related to the mistaken notion that “education” is primarily about the communicating of “information,” rather than about empowering students to *learn, think, discover, and answer questions for themselves* — a mistaken notion about education, by the way, that lies behind the sophomoric notion that education can be imparted by *computers*, or television, or radio, or any other purely passive medium. Ask yourself this: Once the computer answers you question, must you still answer the question *for yourself*. In other words, once the *information* appears on the computer screen or on the written page, is there still work to be done to *understand* what you are reading?)



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*

Chapter 2: The Levels of Reading

1. Note that in the first paragraph of this chapter, Adler gives the reader a nice summary of what was covered in chapter 1. This is not an uncommon practice. You should keep it in mind whenever you read to look for convenient “summaries” of the contents. One good place to look is the “Preface” or “Introduction” to the book. Another is the beginning of chapters. Did you grasp everything from the previous chapter that Adler summarizes in the first paragraph of this chapter? If not, why not?

2. What are Adler’s four levels of reading? Please describe each level and indicate the goal of the reader when he or she is reading at that level.

(i) Elementary Reading:

* Question the reader asks: “What does the sentence say?”

* Goal: Just to understand what the author is saying.

(ii) Inspectional Reading:

* Aim: To get the most out of a book within a given time – usually a relatively short time, and always (by definition) too short a time to get out of the book everything that can be gotten.

* Other names: skimming, pre-reading; but *not* casual or random browsing – better: the *art of skimming systematically*

* Question the reader asks: What is the book about? What is its structure? What are its parts? What *kind* of book is it (novel, history, scientific treatise, philosophy)?

(iii) Analytical Reading:

* Other names: thorough reading, complete reading. Some books are to be tasted; others are to be chewed and digested.

* The reader asks *many questions*.

* Aim or Goal: Analytical reading is preeminently for the sake of understanding.

(iv) Syntopical or Comparative Reading:

* Having read a number of books, the reader places them in relation to one another and to a subject about which they all revolve.

* NB: We will not be spending any time in this course on Syntopical Reading; we will focus attention only on the first three levels. We just don’t have enough time given our course constraints. But the students are of course free to read that section at the end on their own. We will have finished every other section *up to* that one.



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* Chapter 4: The Second Level of Reading: Inspectional Reading

NB: A few comments first about chapter 3 on “The First Level of Reading: Elementary Reading”:

Please note that, to save time, we are skipping chapter 3. In it, Adler first gives a brief historical introduction to certain contemporary theories about how children learn to read. In what follows, he gives his own description of the “four more or less clearly distinguishable stages in the child’s progress toward what is called mature reading ability.” You are free to read and review this material on your own.

For our purposes, there are only the following two points from this chapter I would wish to bring your attention. First, after describing the fourth and final stage of elementary reading, wherein the student “is now capable of reading almost anything, but still in a relatively unsophisticated manner,” Adler makes the following important comment: “We mention all this because it is highly germane to the message of this book. We assume – we must assume – that you, our reader, have attained ninth grade literacy, that you have mastered the elementary level of reading....” In this course, we too have made and will continue to make that assumption. And here is where you, the student, may need to take an extra degree of responsibility for yourself.

If, upon self-reflection, you realize that you simply can’t read English prose adequately, even at an elementary level – that is to say, you cannot get through a page of text without having to look up numerous words or phrases in the dictionary – then you need to ask for extra help. What do I mean by looking up “numerous words or phrases”? Look, almost everyone has certain words on a page he or she may not know. But most of us are still able to understand what is being said *from context*. We fill in the meaning of the unknown word. If you simply cannot do that, or if you are going to the dictionary more than five or six times per page, then you should seek out extra help.

See Adler on p. 31.

Please understand, there should be no shame in this. Sometimes the problem has been the result of a poor education system (which is certainly not your fault); sometimes it has been the result of the fact that English may not be your native language (which is not a “fault” at all). But it is our job to set you up for success, not failure. And one of the things you will undoubtedly have noticed already is that a university education involves a lot of *reading*. If you can’t do it, then we are merely setting you up for failure, and we don’t want to do that. So, for example if English is not your native language, there is absolutely no reason to feel ashamed. You can’t even begin to imagine how badly I or most of my colleagues would do if we were forced to take classes in Spanish, German, Vietnamese, or Mandarin. The results would be tragic. But be that as it may, you are asking us to prepare you for civic life and professional vocations within an English-speaking culture. Not having the ability to read and write literate English prose is as crippling in this society as it would be crippling not to know German in Germany or Italian in Italy. I know, I’ve been to both places, and my German and Italian are terrible. And don’t even get me started about trying to use my terrible Spanish when I visited Spain. All of these countries were spectacularly beautiful and the people endlessly fascinating, but it was deeply frustrating not to be able to communicate with them in the depth and to the degree I wanted because of my inability to speak the language. And Lord only knows what sort of job I could have been hired for in any of these countries. I’m not sure I would have been qualified even to teach *English* — unless I had been assigned to help refine the English of people who already spoke English.

So don’t let a bad education happen to you. If you need remedial reading instruction, ask for it. If you learn nothing else from the first part of this book it should be that education must be largely an *active* process on your part, and *not*, as many people suppose, purely passive. So here is your first “warning” or “disclaimer” of the course: The kind of instruction and the kind of assignments we will be doing from here on out will not help you very much if you haven’t attained that first elementary level of reading. Get that help if you need it, and then you’ll be able to get much more out of this book and its assignments.

That brings us to our second point. For those of you who *have* attained a ninth-grade level of reading (or better), you may be asking yourself: “Why am I reading a book about reading? I know how to read.” Well, yes and no. As Adler points out on p. 28 of his text, reading instruction beyond the elementary level is rarely offered in U.S. high schools, and even more rarely in colleges and universities. These are skills that colleges and universities often *presume* the students have when they arrive on campus, *even though this is rarely the case*. By requiring you to read this book, we are simply trying to “live in the real world,” so to speak, and deal realistically with the students we actually have, and not rely on the kind of skills that very few students actually possess. Again, we are trying to set you up for success, not “bury our heads in the sand” and then express “surprise” and “amazement” when some of you fail. If you doubt my comment that “very few students actually possess” the kind of reading skill they need to be successful, just take a look at the following comment on p. 29 of Adler’s book:

“A good liberal arts high school, if it does nothing else, ought to produce graduates who are competent analytical readers. A good college, if it does nothing else, ought to produce competent syntopical readers. A college degree ought to represent general competence in reading such that a graduate could read any kind of material for general readers and be able to undertake independent research on almost any subject.... Often, however, three of four years of graduate study are required before students attain this level of reading ability, and they do not always attain it even then.”

And remember, Adler wrote this book originally in 1940, when high schools and colleges in this country were doing an appreciably better job than they tend to do now:

So trust us: there are skills covered in this book that you can learn to your benefit — skills that many of your counterparts at other colleges and universities will *not* be getting. We wouldn’t be doing it if we weren’t convinced doing it will help you to succeed both here, in school, and later in life. And for those of you whose first reaction to the book is, “But this is all just common sense, “ again, *just trust us*. As the old saying goes, “common sense is not all that common.” Tiger Woods became the best golfer in the world by *mastering the basics*, and then re-mastering and re-mastering them again and again and again. (He’s re-tooled his swing three times.) The first step to wisdom is realizing you may have something to learn. And you will almost never go wrong by going back to the basics and re-mastering them.

On that note, let’s move on to chapter 4 and Professor Adler’s discussion of the “second level of reading”: namely, “inspectional reading.

1. According to Prof. Adler, the first thing to realize about inspectional reading, is that there are two types of inspectional reading. What are they? (This question will force you to look ahead in the book; that is to say, it will force you to do what the chapter is trying to teach you to do: “skim,” “pre-read.”)

* Inspectional Reading 1: Systematic Skimming or Pre-Reading

* Inspectional Reading 2: Superficial Reading (starts on p. 36)

Inspectional Reading 1: Systematic Skimming or Pre-Reading

2. With regard to the first – that is, “skimming” or “pre-reading” – what are the six suggestions Prof. Adler gives on how to do it?

* (i) Look at the title page and, if the book has one, at its preface

* (ii) Study the table of contents. Look over the chapters and all the various parts and sub-headings into which the text has been divided.

* (iii) Check the index [or bibliography] to get a quick idea of the range of topics and the kinds of books the author is referring to.

* (iv) Read the publisher’s blurb [or a check a good book review].

* (v) Look now at the chapters that seem to be pivotal to the argument of the book. Check to see whether there are “summary statements” at the beginning and/or end of the chapters.

* (vi) Finally, turn the pages, dipping in here and there, reading a paragraph or two, sometimes several pages in sequence, looking for signs of the main argument. Also, do not fail to read the last few pages of the book, looking for a summary or conclusion.

Inspectional Reading 2: Superficial Reading

3. The second sort of inspectional reading is what Prof. Adler calls “superficial reading.” What does he mean by

“superficial reading”? What, in other words, is the “important helpful rule of reading that is generally overlooked”?

* That rule is simply this: *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.*

* Pay attention to what you can understand and do not be stopped by what you cannot immediately grasp. Go right on reading past the point where you have difficulties in understanding, and you will soon come to things you do understand. Concentrate on these. Don't miss the forest for the trees.

4. Adler makes a rather odd, perhaps even disturbing comment at the bottom of p. 36 and top of p. 37. On these two pages, he recommends the following: “If you let yourself get stalled ... you are lost. In most cases, you will not be able to puzzle the thing out by sticking to it. [And here is the disturbing part.] **You will have a much better chance of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book through at least once.**” A *second* reading? What in the world could he be talking about? You read a book, you're done, you throw it away. Right? Why would anyone read a book *a second time*? I mean, you already know how it ends!

Well, that is the difference between “great books” and “cheap, trashy novels”: you can read a “great book” over and over and over again, getting more out of it each time. With “cheap, trashy novels,” it's like hearing the punch-line of a joke or the answer to a riddle: once you know the ending, the thing has been drained of whatever interest it might have had. So yes, many of the books that we ask you to read will require a *second* or *third* or even a lifetime's worth of reading. Not all of them, mind you, but some of them. So, for example, Dr. Hittinger (the Vice President for Academic Affairs of the University) had a professor when he was an undergraduate – a legendary Notre Dame scholar by the name of Joseph Evans – who would re-read Josef Pieper's *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* every single year. But as Prof. Adler points out, “you will have a much better chance of understanding a book on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book *through* at least once.”

This problem comes up all the time for instructors. People will say to us: “But students can't understand everything in that book. It's too *hard* for them.” The presumption here is that, if a student can't understand everything in a book, then he or she shouldn't be asked to read it. But that would be like saying, if a student can't paint like Picasso, she shouldn't be asked to draw. Or if a student can't play tennis like Roger Federer, he shouldn't be asked to work on his back-hand. *Of course* there are things you won't be able to do – at first – when you come to college. If you understood everything perfectly and had all the skills you needed, you wouldn't be paying us all this money to teach you, now would you? Your skills need to be *developed*.

But as any great coach will tell you, you shouldn't practice with opponents who are worse than you, whom you can beat easily. Rather, you should challenge yourself as often as possible against opponents who are *better* than you. The trick, of course, is finding an opponent who is just enough better to challenge you, and not so much better that the game is a blow-out. And that is our job too. We will try to challenge you with books that are more difficult than anything you've read in the past, but are not *so* difficult that you won't be able to understand anything. In reading, sometimes you'll be getting books that are like playing tennis against your little sister. Other times, you might find yourself with a book that's like playing tennis against John McEnroe (nothing but trouble). But just remember: it's the *hard, challenging* books that make you better, not the easy ones. The same is true for all sorts of things: you need to persevere if you want to get anywhere. Nothing worth doing can be done without discipline. So please, don't come to us whining: “But that book you assigned was *hard*. I didn't understand it.” Yes, this is *college*. It's called *education*. Get used to it. This is what you're paying us for: to help you become *better*, not for us to stroke your ego.

So, when you are assigned a difficult book, don't get bogged down. Get through the whole thing *once*, and then repeat as necessary. Do your skimming and outlining. Try to get the main ideas. And *then* go back and see whether the difficult passages make sense. If you're still having trouble, ask for help. That is what professors are for. We genuinely *want* to help, but (A) we can't always tell who needs help, and (B) we're not going to *beg*. In college, you are given much more freedom than you were in high school. But along with that freedom comes more *responsibility*. If you're not getting it, you need to ask for help.

One more comment. Adler's comment about not getting bogged down when you're faced with a difficult reading assignment is almost always true of *writing assignments* as well. Students have this strange notion that they are supposed to “give birth” to written essays the way Athena was given birth by Zeus: streaming forth directly from their heads into finished form. It doesn't happen. It hasn't worked that way for most great writers, and it probably won't happen that way for you. Take, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous book *The Great Gatsby*. According to Fitzgerald himself, there isn't a line in that book that hasn't been re-written *at least* fifteen times. Numerous studies have shown, moreover, that success in writing comes from re-writing. Don't expect to produce an acceptable piece of literate prose unless you've done at least three drafts of it. The days of churning out a paper the night before (or the

hour before) class need to be over. But in order to get to drafts two and three, you have to finish draft one. So allow yourself to write the first draft fairly freely, not stopping to edit yourself every sentence. There will be time enough for that when you go back and re-read your paper (Read my own writing? Is he kidding?) and *revise* it. You will have much more pleasure (and success) reading and writing if you “don’t sweat the small stuff” and instead focus on the important points. With regard to reading, that is what “inspectional reading” is meant to help you to do.

Now, a question. On p. 37, Adler suggests that, “The tremendous pleasure that can come from reading Shakespeare, for instance, was spoiled for generations of high school students who were forced to go through *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, or *Hamlet*, scene by scene, looking up all the strange words in a glossary and studying all the scholarly footnotes. As a result, they never really read a Shakespearean play. By the time they reached the end, they had forgotten the beginning and lost sight of the whole.” Were you one of those students for whom Shakespeare was spoiled by this sort of pedantic approach? Or did you get to p. 10 and quit because, “This is too *boring*”? Does Adler’s advice seem helpful to you?

On Reading Speeds

5. On p. 38 of his book, Prof. Adler asks: “What about speed reading?” Good question. What does he say about speed reading? What is the speed at which you should read?

* With regard to rates of reading, then, the ideal is not merely to be able to read faster, but to be able to read at *different speeds* – and to know when the different speeds are appropriate.”

* It is wasteful to read a book slowly that deserves only a fast reading;

* Some books should be read quickly; and a few should be read at a rate, usually quite slow, that allows for complete comprehension.

* “A good speed reading course should teach you to read at many different speeds, not just one speed that is faster than anything you can manage now. It should enable you to vary your rate of reading in accordance with the nature and complexity of the material.

Fixations and Regressions

6. What are “fixations” and “regressions” in reading?

* Fixations: When the eye “fixates” as it moves across the line of text.

* Regressions: Re-reading the line or part of a line one has already read.

* Yes, these slow down reading dramatically, and these problems can be removed by “speed-reading techniques.” In fact, curing these problems is *the* trick to speed reading.

The Problems of Comprehension

7. What is the key to good comprehension while speed reading? [Hint: There is none. What do you have to do instead of “speed reading” everything?]

* The problem of speed reading is the problem of comprehension. That is to say, you need to know which things can be read over quickly, and which need to be read more slowly.

* For real understanding, you need to read analytically.

Summary of Inspectional Reading

8. What does Adler mean when he says: “There is no single right speed at which you should read”?

* The ability to read at various speeds and to know when each speed is appropriate is the ideal.

* The formula: *Every book should be read no more slowly than it deserves, and no more quickly than you can read it with satisfaction and comprehension.*

* Don’t be afraid to race through even the hardest book. You will then be prepared to read it well the second time.

9. At the end of the chapter, Prof. Adler strives to connect the two different types of inspectional reading discussed in this chapter with the two different types of analytical reading, which will be discussed in later chapters. According to Prof. Adler, systematic skimming serves to prepare the analytical reader to be able to do what? Superficial reading serves to prepare the analytical reader to be able to do what? (NB: You may not fully understand these two stages of analytical reading right now, but they will make more sense when we get to them in later chapters. Right now, just remember that there is a paragraph here at the end of this chapter to which you might want to return when we get to the section on analytical reading, so that you can see the connections between inspectional reading and analytical reading.)

- * Systematic skimming serves to prepare the analytical reader to analyze the book's structure.
- * Superficial reading is the first necessary step in the interpretation of a book's contents.



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* Chapter 5: How To Be A Demanding Reader

1. Have you experienced the situation Prof. Adler describes on p. 45 of his book – namely, you get a book with all the best intentions in the world of reading it from cover to cover; you sit down in a pleasant place with your book in hand, open to the first page, and before you’ve reached the bottom of that page, you’re fast asleep? We all have. Indeed, as I sit writing this, I am looking at a good friend of mine, a gifted Dominican scholar who has an endowed chair at a leading university in Switzerland, who has come to this coffee shop with me so that both of us can “get some work done.” He is sitting in a chair and has dozed off reading St. Augustine’s *City of God*, a book I know he admires greatly. It happens to the best of us. *But*, you can’t get the benefits of reading if you can’t stay awake. And as Prof. Adler points out: “Whether you manage to keep awake or not depends in large part on your goal in reading.” What is Prof. Adler’s advice on how best to “stay awake” and get the most out of your reading? (Hint: My Dominican friend is not only sitting in an overstuffed chair, which might have been fine at other times of the day, but not at 11:30 p.m., and he brought a book to read for “general interest.” I, on the other hand, am sitting at a table typing out sentences from this book on my computer because if I don’t finish this set of questions sometime soon, the Vice President for Academic Affairs will have my head on a platter.)

* Read “as actively as possible.”

* You have to know how to be a demanding reader, how to keep your mind on what you are doing by making it do with work without which no profit can be earned.

The Essence of Active Reading: The Four Basic Questions a Reader Asks

2. What, according to Prof. Adler, is the “one simple prescription for active reading?”

* It is: Ask questions while you read – questions that you yourself must try to answer in the course of reading.

3. According to Prof. Adler, what are the four basic questions a reader (that would be *you*) should ask about any book?

* (i) What is the book about as a whole?

- leading theme; how the author develops the theme in an orderly way by subdividing it into its essential subordinate themes or topics

* (ii) What is being said in detail, and how?

- main ideas, assertions, arguments

* (iii) Is the book true, in whole or in part?

- you ask the first two questions first; but then you must ask the third

- Remember: “Seek first to understand, and *then* to be understood.

* (iv) What of it? (That is to say, who would care and why? If this book is true, what difference would it make? Be careful: If it is a famous book, it probably has made a difference to a lot of people. Your question should be: why? Or perhaps: What are they seeing that I’m not?)

4. According to Prof. Adler, what is the “mark of a demanding reader”?

* Not only knowing the four questions, but remembering to ask them as you read. The *habit* of asking these questions as you read is the mark of a demanding reader.

How To Make A Book Your Own

5. What, according to Prof. Adler, is the best way to “make a book your own”? Another way of asking the same question is this: According to Prof. Adler: “Full ownership of a book only comes when you have made it a part of

yourself.” What is the best way to make yourself a part of the book? How does Adler’s advice about “making a book your own” help with this problem of “staying awake”?

* WRITE in it.

* Why is marking in a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake – not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading should be active. Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the thoughts of the author.

6. What does Adler mean when he says that “understanding is a two-way operation”?

* the learner has to question himself and question the teacher.

* He even has to be willing to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. Marking a book is literally an expression of your differences or your agreements with the author. It is the highest respect you can pay him.

7. Let’s think for a moment about the following comment (from p. 49): “the learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to be willing to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying.” He means that *metaphorically*, right? I mean, you’re not supposed to question or argue with an actual classroom *teacher*, are you? Wrong.

Most of the advice Adler is giving about reading could be transferred to taking notes in class. Taking notes in class is vital because it means you are engaging in *active listening*. Taking notes in class should be as *active* a process as reading. Indeed, even more so. Because you can actually *ask questions*. But even if you don’t ask your questions *out loud*, in front of everyone – and there are times when, due to the nature of the class, interrupting to ask a question would not be entirely appropriate – even so, you should always be asking questions *in your notes*. Your notes should *not* be a mere word-for-word transcript of what the professor has said; you should make an *outline* or take *summary notes*. Write down enough to jog your memory about what was said, but not every word. Along with your summary notes, however, you should also be writing down your *questions* or *comments*. Taking notes this way will not only help your retention and comprehension, it will *keep you awake* during class!

When your professor gets to the end of a class period, if he were to ask: “Does anyone have any questions about anything we’ve covered today?” you should be able to flip back through your notes and find one within seconds. If you *don’t* have a question, you haven’t been listening.

Contrary to what many students seem to think, we are *not* interested in stuffing you full of a lot of our own brilliant ideas. Now granted, there’s no question but that most of the faculty have the “gift of gab.” We can talk on and on and on. That’s why we became teachers: so we could sit around all day reading books and gabbing with people (our usual past-times) and actually get *paid* for it. It’s a scandal really. Be that as it may, there is not one of us who looks upon teaching as getting you to swallow what we’re spoon-feeding you. That’s boring for you and miserable for us. We want you to learn to *question* and to *think for yourselves*. Just as marking up a book with questions and comments is “the highest respect you can pay” an author, so too marking up your notebook with questions and comments is the highest respect you can pay your professors. We want for you to *engage with* the material, not just suck it up and regurgitate it on demand.

Trust me, no faculty member wants a class full of “yes-men” or students silent as the Sphinx. Most of us really enjoy the give-and-take of challenging questions and arguments – *if*, that is, the questions are *respectful* and *thoughtful*, and not just disruptive. Nobody likes a brown-nosing suck-up. But then again, it’s not particularly productive to have a student in class who replies whenever called upon with: “I *hate* this book; *hate it, hate it, hate it;*” or, “This book, and this class, are *soooo boring;*” or “Huh? What was the question again?” or “O-my-god, Thomas Aquinas is, like, some kind of Stalinist Nazi or something – like, I don’t even get what he’s *saying*. Why can’t he just speak *English* or something? (Answer: he was Italian, wrote in Latin, and lived in the Thirteenth Century, and you can’t be both a Stalinist *and* a Nazi.) So let me repeat: Marking up your notebook with questions and comments is the highest respect you can pay your professors. And if you *don’t* have questions after a lecture, you haven’t been listening.

Here is my question. You’ve been reading books and articles now for this class for several weeks. Do any of them have any pencil marks in them? Any questions or comments? If I were to look at your copy of this page of questions, would I see writing on it? Or would the paper be as clean and white as the day it slid out of the copy machine?

8. What are the kinds of markings you can make in a book that are useful for helping you to read a book intelligently? On a related point: Why do you suppose it is better to make all your notes and comments *in the book itself*, rather than

in a separate notebook?

- * (i) underlining
- * (ii) vertical lines at the margin
- * (iii) star or asterisk or some other marginal notation
- * (iv) numbers in the margin
- * (v) cross-reference to other pages where the author makes a similar point
- * (vi) circling of key words or phrases
- * (vii) writing in the margins
- * Why make notes in the book? You'll lose a separate notebook.

The Three Kinds of Note-Making

9. What are the three different kinds of notes that you can make in your books as well as about them? (By the way, this is the third or fourth *list* you've been offered so far in this book. Are you keeping track of them? Have you, for example, begun to write each one of them down in the front end-pages of the book for easy reference later on? If not *all* of them, at least the ones you consider especially useful? If not, why not? Do you think you'll really want to go leafing through all the pages of the book looking for a particularly list when you need it sometime in the future? And even if you don't think you'll ever want to refer to any of *these* lists in the future, what about books and subjects that you *will* be tested on? Would writing down important points in the front and back of the book be useful for easier reviewing for tests?)

* (i) Structural

- what kind of book is it? What is it about as a whole? What is the structural order of the work?

* (ii) Conceptual

- the truth and significance of the book

* (iii) Dialectical

- putting this book into a dialogue with others on a similar or related topic

Forming the Habit of Reading

10. As Prof. Adler points out: "There is no other way of forming a habit [or gaining a skill] of operation" other than what?

* by operating. One learns by doing.

* Knowing the rules of an art is not the same as having the habit. (But then again, you cannot follow rules you do not know.)

From Many Rules to One Habit

11. In this section, Prof. Adler makes an analogy between learning to ski and learning to read. Please explain the comparison. Now consider this: Have you ever tried to learn to ski? Or play tennis? Or chess? Or pretty much any other complex skill? Does Adler's comparison make any sense to you? Do you understand what he means about the relationship between the "rules" and "the habit"? How about the relationship between learning the separate acts and mastering the skill as a whole?

* Learning to ski (and read) is difficult because the instructor is telling you all sorts of separate acts. To be able to ski well, you must learn to forget the separate acts in order to perform all of them, and indeed any of them, well.

* But in order to forget them as separate acts, you have to learn them first as separate acts. Only then can you begin to put them together and become better.

12. And finally: What if Prof. Adler is right, when he says on p. 55, that: "learning to read is at least as complex as learning to ski or to typewrite or to play tennis"? Have you ever considered the possibility that reading is a *skill* that must be developed? Have you, for example, ever had the experience of learning the basics of a skill and then thinking to yourself, "Well, I guess I know how to ski now," only to find yourself skiing next to (or playing chess with) someone who can *really* perform that skill, after which you say to yourself: "I guess I really *don't* know how to ski (or play chess) at all?" Then what happened? Did you give up? Or decide to get better? Did you "get better" by forgetting all the rules? Or by practice, practice, practice, until all of those weird, bizarre little things your coach used to go on and on about all of sudden one day started to make sense? Would you think about your education differently if you thought of reading as a skill – like golf – and then thought of your professor as like the "Tiger Wood" of reading Dante or Homer or Aristotle?

I don't say that to impress you with your faculty members, but only to point out that, if you had Tiger Wood tutoring you on your golf swing, would you stand there and whine about how hard it is (*especially* with the guy who won the U.S. Open with a torn knee ligament and a broken leg), or would you concentrate harder and practice more – *not* necessarily because you thought you could “become” Tiger Wood, but because, heck, it's *Tiger Wood*, and how much better could you be if you listened to Tiger Wood? And let's be serious, if you spent \$18,000 to have Tiger Wood as a teacher for a day, and you spent the whole time whining and refusing to pick up the club, what kind of loser would you be? I mean, it's not only the *money* you would have wasted, but the unbelievable *opportunity*. (And I don't even like golf.) Now think: Would it *really* be so much different if you paid someone \$18,000 to teach you to read, and then spent the whole time whining and refusing to pick up a book?



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

**Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*
Part Two: The Third Level of Reading: Analytical Reading**

Chapter 6: Pigeonholing a Book

NB: Those of you who have been following Prof. Adler's advice in the section on "inspectional reading" may have taken a look at the Table of Contents of this book. If you had, you would have discovered that the author had divided the book into four parts. Now your first instinct upon hearing that the book is divided into four parts might be to say: "Oh, yes, I get it: the four parts of the book correspond to the four levels of reading: Elementary, Inspectional, Analytic, and Syntopical." Sorry, but no.

In actual fact, the four parts are divided as follows: Part One deals with "The Dimensions of Reading." Part Two deals with the "The Third level of Reading: Analytical Reading." (It should be obvious by this point that Adler dealt with the first two levels of reading in Part One.) Part Three, then, deals with "Approaches to Different Kinds of Reading Matter"; that would include the differences between reading stories, plays, and tragedies versus reading history, science and mathematics, and philosophy. And finally, Part Four (which we will not have a chance to read and discuss as a group this semester) is entitled "The Ultimate Goals of Reading" and deals mostly with the fourth level of reading, what Adler calls "Syntopical Reading."

So, now that we are beginning chapter 6, we are also beginning Part Two: the part that deals with Analytical Reading. In fact, this whole section, consisting of chapters 6 through 12, will deal with ways to read "analytically." Clearly, then, the author considers this third level of reading to be very important.

Be that as it may, what I would like you to do with chapter 6 is to "systematically skim" it, just as Prof. Adler instructed you to do in chapter 4. (There is no better time to start using the skills you are being taught than right now.) That is to say, take note of the *point* the writer is making, while not spending too much time focusing a lot of attention on the various examples he gives.

In section two, for example ("The Importance of Classifying Books"), you will find Adler's "first rule of analytical reading." You should have detected it even while quickly skimming the chapter because the author has placed it ALL IN CAPITAL LETTERS. When the author does that, it is a signal to the reader to PAY ATTENTION. Get it? So, start by looking at the section heading, "The Importance of Classifying Books," and try to get the idea of the section (Why is classifying books important?) without worrying about memorizing all the examples (*Main Street*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *Middletown*, *The Andromeda Strain*, etc.). Then go on to the section entitled "What You Can Learn from the Title of a Book"), find out what you can about "learning from the title of a book," and move on. In a similar way, find out the basic difference between "Practical vs. Theoretical Books" without worrying too much about who Immanuel Kant is, or John Locke, or Karl Marx. The section isn't really *about* Kant or Locke or Marx; they are merely *examples*. If you don't know who they are, try to get to the main point and move on. Finally, find out why it is important to identify the "Kinds of Theoretical Books." Here's a hint: Look on p. 73 at the paragraph that begins with the words: "It is important to know this because" *Look for such phrases*. The author is on your side.

Skimming this chapter should take you no longer than five minutes. Seriously. Get the basic idea and get out. There's no need to remember all the details about *Pornoy's Complaint*. But you should be able to give a decent one-or-two-sentence description of the difference between *theoretical* and *practical* books. Then move on to chapter 7, which we will read more slowly.



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* Chapter 7: X-Raying a Book

1. According to Prof. Adler, every book has something hidden between its covers. What is it? What is your job as an analytical reader? What, in other words, is “an essential part of your appreciation of any book”?

 - * Every book has a skeleton hidden between its covers.
 - * Your job as an analytical reader is to find it.
 - * An essential part of your appreciation of any books is to grasp its structure.

2. What are Adler’s “second and third rules for reading any book”? (What, by the way, was the “first rule” for reading any book? Did you write it down in the front end-papers of the book, as Adler suggested? Why not? Will you write Rules 2 and 3 down in the front pages of the book now for easy reference? What, you don’t think that when we get to Rules 4 and 5, I’m not going to ask you about Rules 1, 2, and 3? “O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see; who have ears but do not hear!” as the prophet Jeremiah would say.)

 - * Rule 2: State the unity of the whole book in a single sentence, or at most a few sentences (a short paragraph).
 - * 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 unity of the whole.

3. Prof. Adler makes the follow interesting comment on p. 77: “You have not grasped a complex unity if all you know about it is *how it is one*. You must also know *how it is many*, not a many that consists of a lot of separate things, but an organized many. If the parts were not organically related, the whole that they composed would not be one. Strictly speaking, there would be no whole at all but merely a collection.” The same thing could be said, in fact, about a liberal arts education.

A liberal arts education, as Pope John Paul II suggests in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, involves a search for the truth, and the Truth, ultimately (Catholics, among others, believe), is one. But there are many different disciplines and thus many different ways of coming at the truth. In this course, we have tried to reveal something of the essence of a liberal arts education. We have taken a look at various short “statements” of what a liberal arts education *is* (or at least, what it is *supposed to be*). This abiding question about the meaning and purpose of a liberal arts education is one that we hope you will carry with you throughout your years at the university and beyond, into the education that must continue throughout your life.

What we have not yet discussed sufficiently, however, are the various *parts* of a liberal arts education and the relationship between them. This too is a question that you must carry with you into your future education. There is no way in such a brief course that we can do justice to each of the various disciplines at the university. Four years will hardly be enough. Our way of introducing you to the differences between the various disciplines in this class will be to discuss the differences between reading a historical text vs. reading a philosophical text vs. reading a scientific text vs. reading a novel, poem, or a play. In all of these classes, you will be *reading*. But the *kind* of reading you will be doing, and the *way in which you approach* the task of reading, will not be the same in all cases. All classes require reading; all classes require taking notes. And yet, the way in which you exercise those skills in the different disciplines will differ to some degree or another. There are other important differences between the disciplines, of course, but this much will have to do for now.

One of your tasks as you move through your four years of college education will be to try to resolve the problem of the “fragmentation of knowledge” that Pope John Paul II and Alasdair MacIntyre addressed. But this does not mean that you are supposed to gloss over the important differences between the disciplines. As Pope John Paul II repeated time and again in *Ex Corde*, each discipline has its own proper autonomy and methodology. A Catholic liberal arts education is not about replacing the proper methodology of biology or chemistry or psychology with theology. Nor, however, does it allow biology or chemistry or psychology to efface the essential insights of both

philosophy and theology – especially those with regard to the nature and dignity of the human person. Our goal is to see the unity that unites the diverse elements, as well as how the diverse elements play their proper part within the unity. Your education is meant to be a whole made up of its proper parts, where the proper parts direct our eyes to a vision of the whole. Only then, when we have seen how the parts fit together into a coherent and integrated whole will we have truly and authentically nourished that human capacity Josef Pieper talked about in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* to be *capax universi*: “capable of grasping the whole.”

Now, a question: On p. 77, Prof. Adler compares a book to a house. Explain the analogy.

* The many parts have their own integrity, but they also fit together into a coherent whole.

Of Plots and Plans: Stating the Unity of a Book

4. Adler points out that a good place to look for an author’s summary of his whole book is in the preface or on the first few pages of the book. Does Adler believe that you can rely completely on what an author says in the preface? (NB: It might be worthwhile to read at least *some* of the summaries of the works he gives in this section of the chapter if for no other reason than that I will be asking you in a future assignment to make a similar summary of a book. That is to say, I will be asking you to put into practice Rules 1, 2, and 3 by writing a statement of the unity and the different parts of a book to be announced when you get to that point. Well, okay, it’s Josef Pieper’s *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*.)

* No. The best-laid plans of authors often go awry. Be guided by what the author says, but always remember that the obligation of finding the unity belongs finally to the reader.

Mastering Multiplicity: The Art of Outlining a Book

5. According to Adler, is it necessary to follow the apparent structure of a book as indicated by its chapter divisions when outlining a book?

* Not necessarily. That structure may be better than your outline; it may be worse. The point is to develop your own outline.

The Reciprocal Arts of Reading and Writing

6. On p. 90, Prof. Adler says: “In general, the two rules of reading that we have been discussing [Rule 2 on stating the unity of the book and Rule 3 on how the parts are ordered to the whole] look as if they were rules of writing also. Of course they are.” And later on p. 91, he adds: “We can summarize all of this by recalling the old-fashioned maxim that a piece of writing should have unity, clarity, and coherence.” Yes, it should. Now my question to you is this: If you should be able to state the unity and make a coherent outline of a good book, shouldn’t you also be able to state the unity and make a coherent outline of the papers you write for us? (Oops. Now *that* might be a problem!)

Please understand: I’m not giving you that old grammar-school teacher’s advice that you should write from an outline. Not everyone writes that way. In fact, very few people are able to write that way. Most of us need a first draft to “brain-storm” before we know what we want to say. Writing is a way of thinking; it is a way of thinking through a problem. And so, when you first sit down to write, it may well be that you have no idea what you want to say. Don’t let yourself get stuck.

There is an old writer’s trick that goes something like this: When you find yourself with what is sometimes called “writer’s block,” instead of writing your actual text, write down what you would like to write *about*. So, for example, if you have to do a paper on the character of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, and you don’t know what to say, write about what you want to write about: “I want to write a paper about Achilles, and in this paper I would like to argue that Achilles is a spoiled brat. He is totally self-involved, and he doesn’t seem to care about anyone else more than his own glory....” Before the end of the first page, you’ll find yourself actually *writing the paper*, instead of merely writing *about* the paper you would *like* to write. You need to *get the ideas flowing*. Once they are flowing, let them come.

But please don’t misunderstand me: Rarely, if ever, will this practice produce a good paper – *on the first draft*. But it will give you a host of ideas to work with. Take those ideas, rearrange them, organize them, and on your second or third draft, you may have an acceptable paper.

So, even if you don’t *start* with an outline, by the time you are *finished*, you should be able to state the unity (Rule 2) and make an outline (Rule 3) of your own paper, just as you would for any book. If someone else in the dorm or in your class *can’t* state the unity correctly and make any sort of sensible outline of your paper, you need to re-write it. Period. Exclamation point. No exceptions. If you come to me with one of your papers, and I ask you to state the basic idea or thesis of your paper, and then lay out how you organized the paper to support that thesis, if you can’t do

it, trust me, I'll be sending you back to do another draft and come back to me when you've actually written something worth reading.

Bottom line: Unity, clarity, coherence: you're looking for those characteristics in books you read; we're looking for those characteristics in the papers you write. Why? Because having the skill to produce unity, clarity, and coherence is precisely what distinguishes good writers from bad. So help us help you: Read and outline your own papers after you've written them, so that *you* know whether or not you've produced unity, clarity, and coherence.

Discovering the Author's Intentions

7. What is Adler's fourth rule of analytical reading?

* Rule 4: Find out what the author's problems were. The author of the book starts with a question or set of questions. The book ostensibly contains the answer or answers.

8. What is the fallacy that is called by some literary critics the "intentional fallacy"?

* The "intentional fallacy": the fallacy of thinking you can discover what was in an author's mind from the book he has written.

9. At first glance, the "intentional fallacy" – the fallacy of thinking you can discover what was in an author's mind from the book he has written – might not seem like a fallacy at all. I mean, don't you discover what the author is thinking from reading his book? Well, in a sense yes, and in a sense no. You can certainly understand what the author was trying to say *by means of* the story, the poem, or the play. But you should never simply assume that what the author is communicating *by means of* the story, the poem, or the play is necessarily the author's own position on an issue. Some authors are trying to express the complexities in a number of different positions by means of the various characters they create or the various approaches they adopt. It is one thing to say, "Here is what Shakespeare was attempting to communicate by means of his play *The Taming of the Shrew*." It is quite another to try to "get behind" the text to peer into the mind or intentions of the author; to say, for example, that Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* in order to show that women should be submissive to men. (Is it possible, on the contrary, that Shakespeare was making fun of that sort of sexism by means of the play? And who is *really* the shrew in the play? The woman Kate? Or the man Petruchio? Both are pretty shrewish. And both seem to tame each other within the bonds of marriage.) Similarly, it is one thing to say, "The Roman poet Virgil was exploring the value and limitations of the ancient Greek ideal of the hero in the context of Roman culture and society in his epic poem the *Aeneid*." It would be quite another to claim "Virgil wrote *The Aeneid* in order to suck up to Caesar Augustus." (If you want to defend that thesis about Virgil, you'd better have some really good historical evidence.) Students who have spent too much time listening to the kind of pseudo-psychology one finds on *Oprah* or other television or radio shows will sometimes suggest elaborate psychological theories about authors about whom they know next to nothing: "Shakespeare clearly hated his mother;" "I think Aristotle was obviously a mean man;" "Emily Dickinson was just repressed." In all of these cases, you would just be *guessing*. Don't. The goal here is to *grasp the idea expressed by the writer by means of the book*, not to try to *read the writer's mind or grasp his or her ultimate intentions*.

What Adler is talking about in Rule 4 is something much simpler and more straightforward. In following this rule, you should extend to other authors the same courtesy you would wish extended to you. If you were writing a paper on "Supply Side Economics," one of your classmates might accuse you of trying to suck up to your conservative economics professor, just as if you were writing a paper on "Third World Poverty," someone else might accuse you of trying to suck up to your liberal politics professor. Now in both cases, they might be right, but it seems unfair to conclude that your intentions are impure simply because of the topic of your paper. Wouldn't you prefer it if readers simply took your paper and its arguments at face value? You want them to judge the quality of *your work*, not to start guessing at the purity or impurity of your motives, don't you? Well that's the courtesy you should extend to the authors you read.

You should be asking not, "What is the author's *soul* like?" but rather: "What is the question the author is trying to answer, and what is the significance of posing the question in this way?" If Plato, or Aristotle, or Thomas Aquinas thinks a certain question is important, the response of a good reader is not, "Why do they think such a silly thing is important?" or "My, my, what silly people these dead, white guys must have been!" but rather: "Why would these intelligent gentlemen have thought this issue was important? What are they seeing that perhaps I am not? What significance is there for these authors in asking this question in this way?" Most people don't write books because they have nothing else better to do. Writing generally requires too much *effort* for that. Most people write books

because they think they have something important to say. They may be wrong about whether they have something important to say, but our job as readers is to try to discover what important thing they were *trying* (even if somewhat unsuccessfully) to say. Most of my students expect me to read their papers in just this way. Fair enough. Now it's time for *you* to read the things you read in just this way.

A question: When Prof. Adler tells you to “find out what the author’s problems were,” is he talking about the author’s psychological or physical or emotional problems? Or is he talking about something else?

* No, the “author’s problems” are not his or her psychological, physical, or emotional problems. He is talking about the questions the author is exploring or trying to answer by means of the book.



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* Chapter 8: Coming to Terms with an Author

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Prof. Adler summarizes the previous chapter by saying: “The first stage of analytical reading has been accomplished when you have applied the four rules listed at the end of the last chapter, which together allow you to tell what a book is about and to outline its structure. Now you are ready to go on to the next stage” Before we go on to the next stage, let’s review. What are the first four rules of analytical reading? (Have you written them in the front end-papers of your book yet? I *told* you I was going to ask.)

* Rule 1: Classify the book according to kind and subject matter.

* Rule 2: State the unity of the whole book in a single sentence, or at most a few sentences (a short paragraph).

* 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 unity of the whole.

* Rule 4: Find out what the author’s problems were. The author of the book starts with a question or set of questions. The book ostensibly contains the answer or answers.

2. “Now,” says Adler, we are “ready to go on to the next stage.” Hooray. How many rules of reading can we expect to get in this section?

* There are 4 rules in this, the second stage of analytical reading.

Words vs. Terms

3. What is Adler’s Rule 5 of analytical reading? Please explain the two parts of the rule.

* Rule 5: Find the important words and through them come to terms with the author.

* First part: locate the important words: the words that make a difference.

* Second part: determine the meaning of these words, as used, with precision.

4. How does Adler distinguish “words” from “terms”? For “communication to be successfully completed,” says Adler, what is necessary?

* Terms are a skilled use of words for the sake of communicating knowledge.

* One “word” can be the vehicle for many “terms,” and one “term” can be expressed by many “words.”

* For communication to be successful, it is necessary for the two parties to use the same words *with the same meanings* – in short, to come to terms.

5. Another way of getting at what Adler means by his distinction between “words” and “terms” is simply to ask yourself, “What does the author *mean* when he is using this word? Does he or she mean the same thing I mean when I use that word, or something different?” On, p. 100, Adler illustrates what he means by reference to his own book. He observes that: “The word *reading* has been used in many senses in the course of our discussion.” He then distinguishes three of these senses: “By the word “reading” we may mean (1) reading to be entertained, (2) reading to get information, and (3) reading to achieve understanding.” Now consider the following three fairly-common sentences:

(a) Reading is fun.

(b) Reading takes time.

(c) Reading can change your life.

Which senses of the word “reading” are implied in each of these three sentences? Each sentence uses the same word: “reading.” But it should be pretty clear that the word “reading” is not necessarily being used in the same sense in all three sentences. “Reading can change your life” is a true statement, but not necessarily about reading that is done for entertainment. Similarly, “Reading is fun” is also a true statement, but not necessarily about reading that is done to get information.

How about this commonly-used word: “love”? What are the different meanings of the word “love” in the following sentences:

- (a) I love my car.
- (b) I love my wife.
- (c) I love these old shoes.
- (d) I love this city.

All four sentences use the same word, “love,” but one can scarcely imagine that one means exactly the same thing by that word in all four sentences. (Do you *really* love your wife in the same sense that you love your car?)

Or how about the word “good”? As in:

- (a) This chocolate cake is really *good*.
- (b) This book is really *good*.
- (c) What you did for your brother was really *good*.
- (d) Saint Vincent de Paul was really *good*.
- (e) Do you think this mayonnaise is any *good*?
- (f) This interest rate is really *good*?

Do you suppose it would be important when you are reading (or listening) to be clear about what sense of “good” the person has in mind. I will often ask students when they say something is *good*: “Do you mean “good” *aesthetically*, “good” *morally*, or “good” in the sense of “beneficial for me”?”

Finding the Key Words

Technical Words and Special Vocabularies

6. How do you, as a reader, spot the key words in a text?

* Not all the words an author uses are “key” words. Only those words that he uses in a special way are important for him, or for us as readers. Thus look for the words that are not being used in a common, ordinary way.

* Other signs of special words:

- (i) explicit stress an author places upon certain words (quotation marks; italics; calling attention to it explicitly in the text; defining it specially for the reader)
- (ii) special or technical words within a discipline
- (iii) when an author quarrels with other writers about a word
- (iv) Basic rule: If the word is important for the *author*, it should be important for you, the reader.

Finding the Meanings

7. On p. 106, Adler says: “Spotting the important words is only the beginning of the task. It merely locates the places in the text where you have to go to work. There is another part of this fifth rule of reading. Let us turn to that now. Let us suppose you have marked the words that trouble you. What next?” Good question. What next?

* Determine whether the author is using the key word in a single sense or in two or more senses.

8. How does one find out what meanings the various key words have?

* The answer is that you have to discover the meaning of a word you do not understand by using the meanings of all the other words in the context that you do understand.

9. On p. 110, Adler suggests that you distinguish between an author’s *vocabulary* and his *terminology*. How does Adler describe the difference? Which of these two – *vocabulary* and *terminology* – can be found in a dictionary? And which can be found only by reading the word in the context as the author uses it? [This distinction reveals, by the way, why you can rarely use a dictionary definition of a key term when writing a paper. So, for example, if you are reading Cicero’s essay “On Duty,” please don’t simply go to the dictionary and look up the word “duty,” and then write: “Duty, according to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, means” To understand what Cicero mean by “duty,” you have to read his essay!]

* If you make a list in one column of the important words (*vocabules*), and in another of their important meanings (their use as “terms”), you will see the relation between the vocabulary and the terminology.

* The definitions of words can be found in a dictionary. But the meaning of the word as the author is using it – something which is not totally unrelated to the dictionary definition, but not entirely the same either – can only be uncovered by reading the book itself.



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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* Chapter 9: Determining an Author's Message

1. What are Adler's sixth and seventh rules of analytical reading? [Hint: If you can't find them right away, think: Where are the best places to find summaries of the contents of a chapter?]

* Rule 6: Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences.

* Rule 7: Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.

* Answer to hint: Students should have looked in (a) the Table of Contents, (b) the beginning of the chapter, (c) the end of the chapter, or (d) the beginning of the next chapter. In this case, the end of the chapter would have worked.

2. What is it important that we know not only the author's *propositions* (Rule 6), but also his or her *arguments* (Rule 7)?

* Propositions are nothing but expressions of personal opinion unless they are supported by reasons (and arguments).

* If it is the book and the subject with which it deals that we are interested in, and not just the author, we want to know not merely what his propositions are, but also *why he thinks we should be persuaded to accept them*.

3. Let's think about that last rule again: namely, that we should seek to know not only a person's *propositions*, but also his or her *arguments* on behalf of those propositions. Many of us seek to know the first and forget about the second. That is, we will often ask our friends and fellow interlocutors something like this: "What is your position on higher taxes?" The only reply we often seem to have any patience for is something that can be summed up in a proposition: "I am for (or against) higher taxes." "Ah," we say to our interlocutor, "clearly you must be some kind of dirty Republican (or Democrat). Hmm, I thought as much." And off we go, smug in our supposed knowledge of what the person thinks.

But is that fair? Do you like it when people think they have you "figured out" by listening to your one-word or one-sentence answer to a question? Most of us imagine (sometimes wrongly) that we have fairly sophisticated and well-thought-out ideas about things. What if we actually had the patience to give our interlocutors the respect they deserve by listening not only to their *position*, but also to the reasons *why* they hold that position? Isn't that what really *listening* to a person means: listening not only to *what* they say, but listening for the reasons *why* they say it? The same effort should be involved whether we agree or disagree with a person. It is no better to *agree* with a person not understanding *why* you agree, than it is to *disagree*, not understanding why you disagree.

So the next time someone says to you, "Well, *Michael Jordan* thinks that the NBA is paying its players too much money," *you* should reply: "*Why* does Michael Jordan think that?" and *not*: "Well, if Michael Jordan says it, it *must* be true." And if someone says: "You don't want to disagree with Michael Jordan, do you?" *you* should reply: "It depends on why Michael Jordan says what he says. I don't want to disagree with him if he has good arguments. But I don't want to agree with him if he has stupid arguments, whether it's Michael Jordan or not. So *let's get to the arguments.*"

Sentences vs. Propositions

4. On p. 117, Adler says: "Sentences are grammatical units. They are units of language. Propositions and arguments are logical units, or units of thought and knowledge." Explain the difference.

5. On p. 118, Adler has copied out for you the following sentence from *The Prince*, a book by Renaissance thinker Niccolò Machiavelli: "A prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he [at least] avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared [as long as] he is not hated, which will always be [the case] as long as he abstains from [taking] the property of his citizens and from [taking] their women." This is one sentence. Does this one sentence contain just one *proposition*, or does it contain more than one? Can you, for example, disagree with part of the sentence and agree with another part?

* more than one proposition

* Yes, you may think Machiavelli is wrong in recommending fear to a prince; but you might also acknowledge his shrewdness in suggesting that the prince had better not arouse hatred along with the fear, and you might also agree that keeping his hands off his subjects' property and women is an indispensable condition of not being hated.

Finding the Key Sentences

6. How does one locate the most important sentences in a book? (And why is identifying the key sentences crucial in terms of your reading speed and comprehension?) How, then, does one interpret these sentences to discover the one or more propositions they contain?

* From the author's point of view, the important sentences are the ones that express the judgments on which his whole argument rests.

* The heart of his communication lies in the major affirmations and denials he is making, the reasons he gives for doing so. You have to see the main sentences as if they were raised from the page in high relief.

* Some authors help you do this: by underlining, italics, or set forth in special sections or sentences.

* Look for the key words. The key words often lead you to key sentences and key propositions. The propositions will lead you to the *argument* of the book.

Finding the Propositions

7. On p. 124, Prof. Adler says: "Let us suppose that you have located the leading sentences. Another step is required by Rule 6 [which, as you will recall, is "Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences"]. You must discover the proposition or propositions that each of these sentences contains." How is this done?

* This is just another way of saying that you must know what the sentence means. You discover terms [that is, the meaning of a word] by discovering what a word means in a given usage. [That is, you must understand what the word means *in context*, as it is being used by the author.] You discover propositions similarly by interpreting all the words that make up the sentence, and especially its principal words.

8. Once you have found the key sentences in a book, you need to understand what they mean. What two things should you be able to do, according to Prof. Adler, to show that you have actually *understood* the propositions in a book, and are not merely repeating by rote memorization – without understanding – the words of a sentence?

* State it in your own words.

* Can you point to some experience you have had that the proposition describes or to which the proposition is in any way relevant? Can you exemplify the general truth that has been enunciated by referring to a particular instance of it?

9. On p. 128, Prof. Adler defines his use of the term "the vice of verbalism." [Please note: The words "the vice of verbalism" might mean a number of things in a number of different contexts for a number of different authors. Prof. Adler is using the words "the vice of verbalism" with a specific meaning to refer to a specific problem. Thus, it has become one of his "terms." That is why I have asked you: How does he define the *term* "the vice of verbalism"?)

* The vice of "verbalism" can be defined as the bad habit of using words without regard for the thoughts they should convey and without awareness of the experiences to which they should refer.

* It is repeating the words in an empty way, without truly understanding what they mean.

10. Do you understand what Prof. Adler is referring to when, on p. 128, he refers to the "slavery to words rather than mastery over them"? (If you don't understand what he means, then what position do you suppose you're in: slavery or mastery?)

Finding the Arguments

11. Up to this point in the chapter, Adler has been developing ideas related to Rule 6: "Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences." With this section, he turns to Rule 7: "Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences." At the beginning of this section, he points out that one cannot always find the argument of a book by following the order of the paragraphs; and this for two reasons. First, there is not general agreement among writers about when or how often paragraph breaks should be used. And second, there are many paragraphs in a book that are not directly related to the central argument. That is why Adler suggests another formulation of Rule 7. What is it?

* Find if you can the paragraphs in a book that state its important arguments; but if the arguments are not expressed in this way, your task is to construct the arguments, by taking a sentence from this paragraph, and one from another, until you have gathered together the sequence of sentences that state the propositions that compose the argument.

* The key here is to **find the key sentences and key propositions**, and then tie them together into a coherent argument.

12. Does Prof. Adler believe that readers must understand arguments the way a logician does in order to understand books? (By the same token, would having a better understanding of arguments help you to read and understand books better?)

* No, to the first, and Yes, to the parenthetical question.

13. On pp. 132 and 133, Adler lays out a few guidelines to help you when dealing with arguments. (There are three of them, to be more precise.) What are they? (These are very rudimentary, and it would be good for you to learn more about arguments, but these will have to do for now.)

* (i) Every argument must involve a number of statements, stating both conclusion and reasons for the conclusion. If you find the conclusion first, then look for the reasons. If you find the reasons first, see where they lead.

* (ii) Discriminate between two different kinds of argument: those that use one or more particular facts as evidence for a more general conclusion (inductive) [the kind of reasoning used when offering experimental evidence] vs. those that offer a series of general statements to prove some further generalization (deductive) [later described as “reasoning from other general truths”].

* (iii) Observe what things the author says he must *assume*, what he says can be *proved* or otherwise evidenced, and what things need not be proved because they are *self-evident*. The author may reveal his presuppositions, but then again, he may not. (He may not even be aware of them.) Either way, you are responsible for finding them.

Finding the Solutions

14. What is Adler’s eighth rule for analytical reading?

* Rule 8: Find out what the author’s solutions are. Or as stated in the conclusion to this chapter: “Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not; and as to the latter, decide which the author knew he had failed to solve.

15. You’ve now covered the first two stages of analytical reading, and the first eight rules. Remember, however, you won’t necessarily read *every* book with same degree of precision. Some you will read quickly – merely skimming – others more slowly. Even for those you merely skim, the following rules will be helpful to a greater or lesser extent. But for those things you read that *are* worthy of more attention and analysis, the following rules will definitely be worth remembering:

I. The First Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Finding What a Book Is About

1. Classify the book according to kind and subject matter.
2. State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity.
3. Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and outline these parts as you have outlined the whole.
4. Define the problem or problems the author has tried to solve.

II. The Second Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Interpreting a Book’s Contents

5. “Come to terms” with the author by interpreting his key words.
 6. Grasp the author’s leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences.
 7. Know the author’s arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.
- * NB: Important corollary to Rule 7: Try to be aware of the author’s assumptions and pre-suppositions.
8. Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not; and of the latter, decide which the author knew he had failed to solve.

Now let’s consider further. You too are a writer. You too will be producing expository prose over the next four years, and for most of you, for the rest of your life. Ask yourself this: When you are finished writing something, would your readers be able to approach what you have written using these same rules of analytical reading? Would your readers

be able, for example, to “enumerate the parts in their order and relation”? Would they be able to identify “key terms” and understand their meaning? Would they be able to diagram your *argument*? Do you even *have* an argument? Or just a series of disconnected assertions? Have you given sufficient *evidence* to support your conclusions? Are you aware of your own pre-suppositions? Or is your writing an example of prejudice building on prejudice? Do you know what problem you are setting out to solve, and how you have solved it (or not)? In short, do you understand that the rules we are discussing with regards to analytical reading are the standards you should be applying to your own analytical writing? And finally, if your professor asks you concerning one of your papers: “Where’s the argument and the evidence?”, will you reply: “Huh? Papers are supposed to have *arguments*? Whuh?” Or will you be able to show him or her the outline of the argument?



The University of St. Thomas

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Questions to Guide Your Reading

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* Chapter 10: Criticizing a Book Fairly

1. The first step in reading or in conversation is revealed in the old saying that goes: “Seek ye first to understand, and *then* to be understood.” The wisdom of this old saying is embodied in Adler’s Rule 9 of analytical reading: “Do not begin criticism until you have completed your outline and interpretation of the book.” That is to say, do not deign to say you agree or disagree until you can honestly say, “I understand.”

But by the same token, it is just as important if you are to become a good reader to move on to the next stage of analytical reading: that is, entering into a kind of conversation with the author. In a sense, of course, that conversation should be going on all the while you are reading. That is what *active* reading is all about: underlining, making notes in the margin, and all the rest are ways of *entering into a conversation with* the book you are reading. All along as you read, you should be asking: What is the author saying? What is the argument he or she is making? Does that argument make sense? That is the greatest honor you can do to any writer: to take him or her seriously by taking his or her arguments seriously – seriously enough to *listen attentively* and then *make up your own mind*.

Most writers hate fawning admirers: people who “love” the author’s propositions or conclusions – these are usually people who love to have their own prejudices reinforced – without appreciating or understanding the *arguments*. Great authors will often maintain: “You cannot understand *what* I am saying, unless you understand *why* I am saying it.” Great authors will usually prefer an intelligent disagreement over fawning agreement every time.

But for good conversations to arise, there must be *intelligent* disagreement. Being contrary or disagreeable is not the same as intelligently disagreeing. This is a difficult distinction for many people to understand. In our society, we tend to have two distinct modes of responding to an argument, and we find both in college classrooms. Either students will say: “Well, everyone should be allowed his or her own opinion, so I’ll say nothing.” Or there will be a loud shouting match. Both of these responses will often be found coming from the same person.

Is there something in between the commandment “Never disagree with anyone no matter what he or she says” and the tendency to bite people’s heads off who disagree with us? Is it possible, for example, to enter into a *dialogue*? To enter into a process of *questioning with* and *thinking through* issues with someone else? A process in which you will not become either a silent bystander nor a belligerent opponent, but a *partner* in the search for the truth? A process in which you will be analyzing *arguments* and *evidence*, not attacking a *person*?

These are the challenges of a liberal arts education. Neither will you want to sit idly by while your teachers and the books they assign take control of your mind, nor will you want to shout down every opinion proposed to you before your interlocutor has had a chance to get it out of his or her mouth. Your goal should be to *learn* what you can from others. And for that to happen, you need to be “teachable.” “Teachable” does not mean merely “compliant.” Far from it. No teacher wants fawning agreement any more than good authors want fawning fans. Good teachers prefer intelligent disagreement to unintelligent agreement. You learn from others by not only listening to *what* they say, but by trying to understand *why* they are saying it. Then you test your own ideas against theirs in a common search for the truth.

So here’s a question: Are you *teachable*? If someone disagrees with you, do you take it as a personal offense? Do you just clam up? Do you get angry and annoyed? Or do you take disagreement as an occasion for learning something?

Here’s another way of putting the same question: If you were wrong about something, would you want someone else to tell you? Would you want someone else to *show* you how and why you’re wrong? Or would you prefer to remain in ignorance and not submit yourself to that threat to your ego? Be honest. Are you *teachable*? If not, how do you expect us to *teach* you? Is there something required on *your* part if any real learning is to take place over the next four years? If so, what? (And I’m not just talking about things like “studying” and “doing your homework,” but what we might call an even deeper “openness to reality,” to use a term from Pieper’s *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*.)

Teachability as a Virtue

2. According to Prof. Adler, “No one is really teachable” who does not do what? (Does his assertion about “teachability” surprise you?) Who, then, is “the most teachable” sort of person?

* No one is really teachable who does not freely exercise his power of independent judgment. He can be trained, perhaps, but not taught.

* The most teachable reader is, therefore, the most critical. He is the reader who finally responds to a book by the greatest effort to make up his own mind on the matters under discussion.

* But, by the same token, teachability requires that a teacher (or any other fellow interlocutor, such as fellow students) be fully heard, and more than that, *understood* before he or she is judged {either positively or negatively}.

The Role of Rhetoric

3. According to Prof. Adler, “rhetoric is involved in every situation in which communication takes place.” Please explain what he means.

* If we are talkers, we wish not only to be understood but also to be agreed with in some sense. If our purpose in trying to communicate is serious [and in much comedy as well], we wish to convince or persuade.

4. What does Adler mean when says “one must be not only a *responsive* but also a *responsible* listener”?

* You are responsive to the extent that you follow what has been said and note the intention that prompts it. But you also have a responsibility of taking a position. When you take it, it is yours, not the author’s. **To regard anyone except yourself as responsible for your judgment is to be a slave, not a free man. It is from this fact that the liberal arts acquire their name.**

5. What, according to Prof. Adler, is the role of rhetorical skill on the part of the speaker or writer? What, then, reciprocally, is the role of rhetorical skill on the part of the reader or listener?

* On the part of the speaker or writer: rhetorical skill is knowing how to convince or persuade.

* On the part of the reader or listener: rhetorical skill is knowing how to react to anyone who tries to convince or persuade us.

6. Consider for a moment: Why would having rhetorical skill as a reader or listener be especially important in this day and age?

* Because there are plenty of people trying to convince us of all sorts of things – and they are especially ingenious at knowing how to “push our emotional buttons” and play to our prejudices.

The Importance of Suspending Judgment

7. Why, according to Prof. Adler, is it important to know when to “suspend judgment”?

* To agree is just as much an exercise of critical judgment on your part as to disagree. You can be just as wrong in agreeing as in disagreeing. To agree without understanding is inane. To disagree without understanding is imprudent.

* Thus, suspending judgment is also an act of criticism. It is taking the position that something has not been shown. You are saying that you are not convinced or persuaded one way or the other.

* It is important because it helps to keep you from agreeing or disagreeing when you don’t have good reasons to do one or the other.

8. Have you ever had the experience that Prof. Adler describes on p. 143 in which someone says to you, in effect: “I don’t know what you mean, but I still think you’re wrong”? How did it make you feel? Do you think *you* have ever been guilty of disagreeing with someone else, without *really* understanding what he or she meant? How do you suppose that person felt? What is Prof. Adler’s advice when someone says to you, in effect: “I don’t know what you mean, but I still think you’re wrong”?

* Ask them to re-state what you have said *in their own words*.

9. Now turn the advice around. If you were in a disagreement with someone, and she asked you to re-state her position *in your own words*, would you be willing (and able) to do it? If you can’t re-state the position *in your own words*, would you consider your interlocutor “entirely justified in ignoring” your criticisms? Or would you insist that, even though you’re clearly not listening or paying attention to *them*, they should obviously be listening and paying attention to *you*? Indeed, do you refuse to listen or pay attention to anybody? (And please don’t try to tell me that you

never ask anyone to listen or pay attention to you. I spend hours reading and writing in a coffee shop. I know what happens when people don't think they've been listened or paid attention to. It's not pretty.) And finally: If you were to disagree with an author in class, and the professor asked you "Why do you disagree? Give me some reasons?", would you be surprised or offended? Do you assume that people should just listen to what you say, accept it, and not ask *why*?

The Importance of Avoiding Contentiousness

10. What is Adler's Rule 10?

* Rule 10: When you disagree, do so reasonably, and not disputatiously or contentiously.

11. Do you agree with Adler that "there is no point in winning an argument if you know or suspect you are wrong"? Do you agree, moreover, that "Most people [seem to] think that winning the argument is what matters, not learning the truth"? Do you agree, finally, that "It goes without saying that a reader should admit a point when he sees it," and that even more, "he also should not feel *whipped* by having to agree with an author" or interlocutor? (One question is, "Do you agree with Adler – *intellectually*?" Another is: "Do you feel *whipped* by having to agree with someone else – in reality?" Why do you suppose you do something different in reality from what your mind tells you is the right thing to do?

On the Resolution of Disagreements

12. According to Adler, "disagreement is futile agitation" unless it is undertaken with a certain hope. What is that hope?

* With the hope that it may lead to the resolution of an issue. Yes, it is true, not everyone always *does* agree; but conversations and discussions are built on the hope that reasonable men and women *can* agree.

13. On p. 148, Adler makes the following touching appeal. He says of a person who finds himself in disagreement with another that: "He should be as much prepared to have his own mind changed as seek to change the mind of another. He should always keep before him the possibility that he misunderstands or that he is ignorant of some point. No one who looks upon disagreement as an occasion for teaching another should forget that it is also an occasion for being taught." Sounds nice. Is it true of you?

14. At the bottom of p. 148, Adler says the following: "The trouble is that many people regard disagreement as unrelated to either teaching or being taught. They think that everything is just a matter of opinion. I have mine, and you have yours; and our right to our opinions is as inviolable as our right to private property. On such a view, communication cannot be profitable if the profit to be gained is an increase in knowledge. Conversation is hardly better than a ping-pong game of opposed opinions, a game in which no one keeps score, no one wins, and everyone is satisfied because he does not lose – that is, he ends up holding the same opinions he started with." Would that be your view? If so, what on your view would be the value of discussion? (Please don't say: "Well, I *might* learn something, so I listen *just in case*," because then you would be agreeing with Adler, and sharing his hope, that conversations *can* – at least sometimes – lead to agreement and increased understanding. And please also understand that saying, "Well, I just like to hear what other people have to say" is nice, but probably not true. Most people *don't* like listening to positions different from their own, nor do they generally have the patience to listen to arguments at all. When we listen to other people, we generally do so *for a reason*. We either want to learn something new, or we want to make a new friend, or for guys, they often want the woman to think they care about her *mind* and not just sex. But rarely do people just sit around and listen to other people babble "just because they like to hear what other people have to say.")

15. Here's another way of putting the question. If you believe that "our right to our opinions is as inviolable as our right to private property," then let me ask you this: Is our right to private property an absolute right? Or does the right to private property bring with it certain *responsibilities* (such as, perhaps, the right to help people in need, especially in times of trouble or natural disaster)? Similarly, you certainly do have a right to your opinion. But does the right to formulate your own opinion on important matters bring with it certain *responsibilities*? If so, what are those responsibilities?

16. What is Adler's eleventh rule for analytical reading?

* Rule 11: Respect the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion, by giving reasons for any critical judgment you make.

17. When you disagree with an author or an interlocutor, do you usually feel compelled to give *reasons* for any critical judgments you make? Or do you feel an expression of your *opinion* is sufficient? That is, do you usually just say something like: “I disagree,” or “That’s just stupid,” or “How unbelievably idiotic can you be!” or “Anyone who would hold that view doesn’t, like, belong *on the planet*,” and let it go at that, feeling no need at all to justify your position? If the latter, how do you like it if, having laid out what you consider to be an interesting and important argument about something, your interlocutor replies: “Huh? What kind of stupid crap is that? I don’t even know what you’re talking about. You must be some kind of a hopeless idiot if you think *that*.” Would that make you angry? Would it be any better if the person had said instead: “Yes, that’s all very interesting, sweetie pie, but I just don’t agree”? (Okay, I admit I added the “sweetie pie” bit in order to emphasize the patronizing character of the response: The person disagrees but sees no reason to give any reason *why*? That means he or she is treating you like a *child*. They are, in effect, patting you on the head and saying: “Yes, that’s nice dear. Now go and play. What you just said has absolutely no relevance to me or to my life.”) All of this brings us to issue of how one should agree or disagree with someone else. And that is the topic of the next chapter.