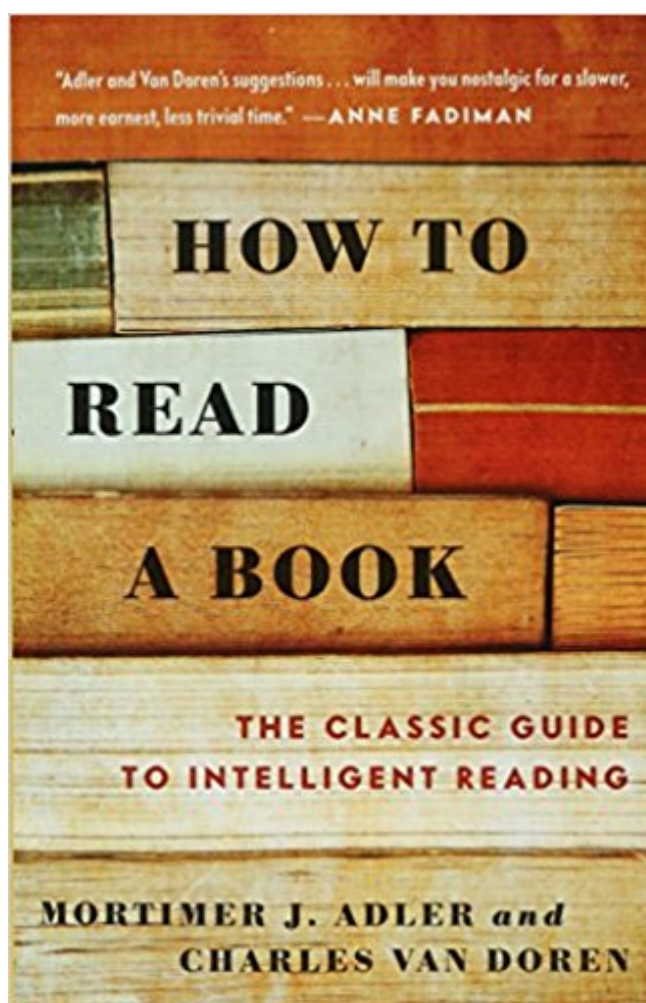


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# How To Read A Book: The Classic Guide To Intelligent Reading (A Touchstone Book)



## Synopsis

With half a million copies in print, *How to Read a Book* is the best and most successful guide to reading comprehension for the general reader, completely rewritten and updated with new material. Originally published in 1940, this book is a rare phenomenon, a living classic that introduces and elucidates the various levels of reading and how to achieve them—from elementary reading, through systematic skimming and inspectional reading, to speed reading. Readers will learn when and how to “judge a book by its cover,” and also how to X-ray it, read critically, and extract the author’s message from the text. Also included is instruction in the different techniques that work best for reading particular genres, such as practical books, imaginative literature, plays, poetry, history, science and mathematics, philosophy and social science works. Finally, the authors offer a recommended reading list and supply reading tests you can use measure your own progress in reading skills, comprehension, and speed.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"These four hundred pages are packed full of high matters which no one solicitous of the future of American culture can afford to overlook." (Jacques Barzun)"It shows concretely how the serious work of proper reading may be accomplished and how much it may yield in the way of instruction and delight." (The New Yorker)"There is the book; and here is your mind.' Adler and Van Doren's suggestions on how to connect the two will make you nostalgic for a slower, more earnest, less

trivial time." (Anne Fadiman)

Dr. Mortimer J. Adler was Chairman of the Board of the Encyclopedia Britannica, Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, Honorary Trustee of the Aspen Institute, and authored more than fifty books. He died in 2001. Dr. Charles Van Doren earned advanced degrees in both literature and mathematics from Columbia University, where he later taught English and was the Assistant Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research. He also worked for Encyclopedia Britannica in Chicago.>

I first read this book 50 years ago and then took from it one basic idea that has guided my reading ever since... That one idea was that every good non-fiction book deserves 3 readings. The purpose of the first rapid read is to get an overview of the general thrust or central thesis of the book. The second reading involves digging in, an attempt to understand and analyze the author's central argument or thesis, and the third reading is for the purpose of argument, i.e., of reflecting on where we agree with the book and where we disagree, and why... 50 years after that first reading, I still try to follow the advice (above), and find it as helpful and true today as it was back then. So, what in particular did I gain in from my current reading of this fine book, this gem? Three or four things, all of which are, at least to me, important. First, re the value of reading the intro or the preface in which the author often says specifically and explicitly what his central thesis is. Second, re the value of reading the last chapter or even the very last 8 to 10 paragraphs in which the author may, once again, summarize the whole central purpose and argument of the book, which gives you a key to understanding the work in its entirety. And, third, don't begin arguing with a book until you are certain that you have understood it as well as you possibly can. Bottom-line, I'm happy that I went back to reread this fine book.

I have always had a nagging feeling that I didn't know how to read well. This book showed me that I was right. But it also showed me that I wasn't expected to know how to read well (not with the kind of education most of us receive) and that I wasn't alone in my ignorance. Reading well involves hard work and precise skills. This book provides the latter • the former is up to us. We take reading for granted because we are supposed to be fully alphabetised at around tenth grade. We are not told that this is just the first level of reading • Elementary Reading (Part 1, Ch. 3) • when you learn to recognise the written symbols and to convey meaning from them. You learn how

to grow your vocabulary on your own and to transfer and compare concepts from different reading materials. But most of us stop there. And from there we live the rest of our lives treating books in undeserving ways, wasting too much time on the bad ones and granting so little time to the good ones. The great ones, we hardly read, because they scare us. The problem of wasting time can be drastically diminished by applying the second level of reading *Inspectional Reading* (Part 1, Ch. 4). This level means “skimming systematically” to grasp as much as you can from a book in a limited time-frame (possibly just a few minutes). That was an important skill on Adler and Doren’s time when libraries were the norm, but it is even more important now when you have digital previews of a plethora of books in services such as . If “Customer Review” sections existed during their time, I am sure they would also have devoted a portion of Chapter 4 to provide insights on how to better profit from them. The problem of spending little time on the good (or great) books can only be solved by the third level of reading *Analytical reading* (Part 2). Without it, you either refrain from reading a good book altogether (specially a great one) or you read it badly. “Reading badly”, the book explains, is to read passively. Reading analytically is very active and it is hard work. To help us in this endeavour, the book provides extensive advice on how to physically mark the books we read (Part 1, Ch. 5). These note-taking techniques are indispensable to read well and the reader is advised to experiment with them and adapt them to his own style of understanding and to the new types of media now available. To read analytically you have to ask yourself a number of questions while reading and you must make your best to answer them yourself. The authors present these questions in sequence, but they are quick to explain that in practice (and with experience) we should try to answer them mostly simultaneously. First, you need to know what the book is about as a whole (Ch. 6 and Ch. 7). This means first categorising the book, then expressing its unity in as few words as possible. You should then proceed to outline its main parts, each of which should be treated as a subordinate whole and have its unity also expressed. This process could continue ad aeternum, but “the degree of approximation varies with the character of the book and your purpose in reading it”. At the end, you should have identified what questions the author wants to answer himself. After this more “descriptive” stage, you should now try to grasp the author’s message (Ch. 8 and Ch. 9). This means first reconciling the grammatical and the logical aspects of what he writes by matching his chosen words with the terms they express. Only then you can identify the important sentences and paragraphs (the grammatical units) in order to establish the author’s leading propositions and

arguments (the units of thought and knowledge  $\hat{A} \hat{=}$  the logical units). Once you have reached actual understanding by identifying and interpreting the author's terms, propositions and arguments, you can now evaluate if the author has answered the questions (the problems) you identified earlier. You and the author are now peers and the best thing you can do now is to praise him by criticising his book (Ch. 10 and Ch. 11). However, in order to do so, there are rules, just like there are rules to reach understanding  $\hat{A}$  • there is an intellectual etiquette grounded on rhetorical skills the reader must possess. You should understand first and only then criticise, but not contentiously or disputatiously. You may disagree based on the author's lack of information, misinformation or reasoning fallacies. You may also judge the author's completeness as faulty. But the most important maxim is to do so with the sole intention of conveying and discussing knowledge, not opinions.

$\hat{A}$  "Knowledge consists in those opinions that can be defended  $\hat{A}$  and  $\hat{A}$  "opinion is unsupported judgement.  $\hat{A}$  You must be sure to distinguish between both. So you have described the book, you have understood it and you have criticised it  $\hat{A}$  • now what? This is the last (and possibly most important) question you should make. If the book has enlightened you, even if just a little, you must go further  $\hat{A}$  • you might even have to act upon it. I like what the authors say about this question applied to historical books:  $\hat{A}$  "The answer to the question lies in the direction of practical, political action.  $\hat{A}$  History shows what has been done, so it is a lesson of what we can do or avoid doing. In the same way, whatever the kind of enlightenment you had by reading the book, you have had a glimpse of truth  $\hat{A}$  • you can't ignore it now that you know it. Part 3 is useful in that it provides some interesting aspects of specific types of reading material, namely practical books, history (including biographies and current events), imaginative literature (including plays and poems), science and mathematics, philosophy and the social sciences. While a pleasure to read, it is not imperative that you do so if you have fully grasped the analytical reading process. There is, however, a lot of value in this part of the book, specially in the later chapters, and the reader is strongly advised to read it. One thing I should say is that, while they detail interesting aspects of reading imaginative literature, their techniques mostly apply to expository works. I think their best advice with respect to the former is  $\hat{A}$  "don't try to resist the effect that a work of imaginative literature has on you  $\hat{A}$ . This means allowing the work to show you  $\hat{A}$  "a deeper, or greater reality  $\hat{A}$ . And this reality is  $\hat{A}$  "the reality of our inner life  $\hat{A}$ . We don't need any more rules than this one. The last part of

the book presents the fourth (and highest) level of reading *the Syntopicon* • Syntopical reading *the Syntopicon* • or reading two or more books on the same subject. By reading syntopically you are not concerned with understanding each book in all its details *the Syntopicon* • in fact, you won't read any of the individual books analytically (not at the present syntopical reading effort, at least). Here you are reading each book for what it may contribute to your own problem, not for the book's own sake. Furthermore, you are not reading to find the truth or to establish your own voice *the Syntopicon* • you would be only one more voice in the conversation. You are simply trying to understand the controversy itself, to establish the many voices you hear in a pure exercise of dialectical objectivity. This is a fantastic topic, which the authors have materialised in their greatest contribution to mankind, in my opinion *the Syntopicon* • the *Syntopicon*, volumes II and III of the *Great Books of the Western World*. The reader is very much advised to check it out. The book ends with two appendices. The first one provides a fascinating list of great books *the Syntopicon* • the *endlessly readable* *the Syntopicon* • books. The list may seem overwhelming at first glance (and it is!), but the authors are prompt to address the reader and explain that the list does not have any time frame attached to it. I say it should just be begun *the Syntopicon* • even an ignorant reader like me will be so flabbergasted by what he will learn that he will never stop reading it. This is a project for your life as a whole *the Syntopicon* • to never stop reading these books. For a much more restrictive (but also magnificent) reading list, the reader is referred to the 10-year-reading plan provided in Adler's *Great Books*. The second appendix provides exercises and tests on all four levels of reading. I must admit that I hadn't read them until I got this far in my review. I then decided to do it and now I tell you this: just read it. If you have had literature classes as an undergraduate or graduate student, you might find it slightly commonplace. But if you haven't, like me, you will be glad you read it. Like they state at the beginning of the appendix, the selected texts are "themselves worth reading", so you can't lose much by doing so. It is a delightful taste of what awaits you in your future exploits of the *Great Books* *the Syntopicon* • if you do well and accept the challenge, of course. On my part, simply put, this book has changed my life. It not only showed me "how" to read a book, but it also showed me "what" to read. I'll be forever in debt with two of the greatest absent teachers I've had, Dr. Mortimer J. Adler and Dr. Charles Van Doren.

This book will both inspire you to read better and show you how. I just finished it this morning and it gave me the confidence to begin a 'tough' reading list beginning with Plato and Aristotle and work

my way through Rousseau and Ludwig Von Mises. Overall, it taught me to try harder on harder books to reap the great dividends from the classics. Another huge bonus has been the lesson on reading with varying speeds, including speed reading. I'm now reading twice as fast, comprehending much more, and tackling harder books. Well worth it, highly recommended. Only criticism is that while useful, the appendices turn into a bit of a sales pitch (understandably so) of their "Great Books" series, which I'd actually like to get. Best \$11 you'll ever spend on a book.

A good guide and worth taking a look at. The reading level is just a tad bit higher than other modern books, but I guess that's the whole point of reading a book like this: to learn how to read better.

Excellent description of the process we engage when we read. Better yet, the authors describe how one best employs the process to read more effectively and with longer lasting outcomes. The points raised in the book came as a pleasant surprise to someone who has read for both pleasure and for information for 55 years. I am delighted to realize that there remains more than a few things for this old dog to learn. And the book itself is wonderfully written! Two for one!

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