

IN THE SERVICE OF GOOD WRITING

How To Read (and Write) a Book

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ABSTRACT

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren's classic *How to Read a Book* gives useful guidance. It explains how to evaluate whether a book is worth reading. It also gives you tips for getting the most out of the books that you read. Their advice on reading also suggests some tips for better writing. Pick an important topic and say something important about it. Do your research and organize your presentation. Keep your writing clear and simple. Make clear and reasoned arguments and anticipate the objections that your audience may raise. Above all, make sure that your title, front matter, back matter, and book cover tell the reader what your book is about and why it is worth reading.

In 1940, Mortimer Adler published the first edition of his classic book *How to Read a Book*.¹ In 1972, he and Charles Van Doren published an extensively updated edition.² As I was reading the 1972 edition, I realized that it also provides hints on how to make your writing more readable.

By 1972, millions of books had already been published. Some books are informative, and some are just amusing. You might read a detective novel just once, purely for entertainment. You might dip into a reference book from time to time to find bits of information. There are surprisingly few great books—books that are worth reading carefully, or even repeatedly. In an appendix, Adler and Van Doren provided a list of great books by 137 authors. Some of these are medical texts (see Box: Great Books on Medicine).

Adler and Van Doren wanted to teach you how to sort through books to find the ones that really matter, and how to get the most out of reading them. Yet their discussion also offers hints on how to improve your own writing. These hints can be organized by the levels of reading that Adler and Van Doren defined: elementary, superficial, analytical, critical, and syntopic. As I discuss each level of reading, I will offer my own rules for better writing.

ELEMENTARY READING

Elementary reading means the ability to translate the marks on a page into words in your mind. The major weakness of *How to Read a Book* is the authors' baffling denial of an obvious fact. Many American schools were (and still are) using a bad method for teaching reading. English is an alphabetic language. It is written with letters that stand for sounds. Thus, to teach English-speakers to read, you start by teaching the 26 letters of the English alphabet. Then, the students should learn the 70 rules for how those letters can be used to represent English's 44 phonemes (speech sounds). Roughly 85% of English words follow those rules.³ Once students learn the rules, which takes about three months,⁴ they will be able to read tens of thousands of words. Yet instead of teaching those phonetic rules, many educators ask students to memorize whole words (sight words), with-out regard to the letter-sound relationships.

Adler and Van Doren suggested that the ability to read develops, as if by magic, after children have memorized a few hundred sight words. They should have known that there is no such magic. They alluded dismissively to Rudolf Flesch's 1955 bestseller *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What*

GREAT BOOKS ON MEDICINE

In the appendix to the 1972 edition of *How to Read a Book*,² Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren provided a list of 137 authors whose greatest works are worth reading carefully and perhaps repeatedly. Some of these might be of particular interest to medical writers:

- Hippocrates – [Medical writings](#)
- Galen – *On the Natural Faculties*
- William Harvey – *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals; On the Circulation of the Blood; On the Generation of Animals*
- Claude Bernard – *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*
- William James – *The Principles of Psychology*
- Thomas Mann – *The Magic Mountain*
- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – *The Cancer Ward*

*You Can Do About It.*⁵ Flesch explained that children should be directly taught how to sound words out from left to right. Of course, many children learn to read well despite the use of the sight word method. Either they break the letter-sound code for themselves, or they learn it from a tutor. The rest remain mired in functional illiteracy.

Writers have a vested interest in the performance of public schools. Writing is pointless if your intended audience cannot read well. Fortunately, writers can use their power of the pen to demand that public schools use better methods of teaching reading. Writers must also compensate for their readers' poor reading skills. Many adults have never learned to sound out words. For this reason, writers should strive to obey the following two rules:

Rule 1: Try to use short, simple words that your readers already know, rather than using big words or words that readers have never seen before.

Rule 2: Write short, simple sentences.

If you obey those rules, your writing will be more accessible, in two important ways: it will be easier to understand, and it will be easier to find online. Search engines give a higher ranking to Web pages that have higher readability scores. (Some word processing programs can calculate the Flesch-Kincaid readability scores.)

INSPECTIONAL READING

Adler and Van Doren described two levels of inspectional reading. The first involves a quick inspection of the book's title, its table of contents, its index, and its cover. During this inspection, the reader asks the following questions: What is the book about? What kind of book is it (eg, fact or fiction, practical or theoretical)? What kind of material does the book cover? To help your readers answer those questions about your writing, obey the following rules:

Rule 3: Write about something interesting.

Rule 4: Make the framework of your book clear. Use meaningful chapter titles and meaningful subheadings in the text, and include a table of contents, as well as an index, if possible.

Rule 5: Make sure that the title and the cover of the book say what the book is about and why it is worth reading.

Rule 6: If you are writing an eBook, provide links that make it easy for readers to find the information they want.

The second level of inspectional reading involves reading a book through from beginning to end, without stopping to look up or ponder things that you don't immediately understand. To make this experience better for the reader, follow rules 1 through 5.

ANALYTICAL READING

During analytic reading of a book, the reader asks several questions: What kind of book is it (eg, fiction or nonfiction, practical or theoretical)? What is its unity (main message)? How do its parts fit together? What questions is the author asking? What problems is the author trying to solve? Your readers will find it easier to answer these questions if you followed rules 1 through 6.

The second phase of analytical reading involves coming to terms with the author. This means making sense of the key terminology that the author is using. A term is a word or expression that has a precise meaning in some contexts or is peculiar to a science, art, profession, or subject. Adler and Van Doren urged readers to "distinguish between the author's *vocabulary* and his [sic] *terminology*" [emphasis in original].² By *vocabulary*, they mean the words that are being used. By *terminology*, they mean the precise meaning that the author intends those words to convey. In other words, readers must struggle to figure out what the author really meant. Readers would rather not have to do so much work. As writers, we must strive to make it easy for our readers to understand what we mean. To achieve that goal, obey the following rules:

Rule 7: Whenever possible, use common words, and use them according to their standard meanings, as spelled out in a well-respected dictionary.

Rule 8: If you must use an uncommon word, define it the first time you use it.

Rule 9: If you must use a common word in an uncommon way, explain the meaning that you want that word to convey.

The third phase of analytical reading involves identifying and evaluating the arguments that the author has made. Adler and Van Doren explain that readers often must try to find the book's most important sentences. Then, the readers must try to piece together the argument that the author seems to be making. Your readers will find it easier to find and evaluate your arguments if you followed Rule 10.

Rule 10: If you need to explain why someone should believe something, or if you want to persuade them to do something, make your argument clear and simple.

Adler and Van Doren emphasized the importance of the classical trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) for helping one develop skills in analytic reading. Grammar is the study of how words are altered and combined to form meaningful sentences in a given language. Logic is the study of how sentences are combined to form arguments. Rhetoric is generally described as the art of persuasion, but it provides the basis for critical thinking. You must learn some grammar

before you begin to study logic. You must learn something about logic before you can begin to study rhetoric.⁶ Yet by 1972, the National Council of Teachers of English had been working for nearly a decade to suppress grammar instruction in American grammar schools.⁷ Readers who have never studied the trivium will have poor skills in analytical reading. Thus, many readers have poor thinking skills. For this reason, writers must strive to keep their writing clear and their arguments simple.

After identifying and evaluating the author's arguments, the reader can then ask two other questions: Which problems has the author solved? Which problems has the author failed to solve? As Adler and Van Doren noted, some authors clearly address the possible objections to their conclusions. For example, in his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas headed many sections with a question. He then offered possible answers, followed by possible objections. He then expressed his own opinion by saying, "I answer that..." By taking this approach, Aquinas showed that he had given the topic careful thought. He also handled the foreseeable objections. You might not have the space to go into that much detail, but you should try to obey the following rules:

Rule 11: Do your homework, and make reasonable arguments based on the best available evidence.

Rule 12: Try to anticipate the most likely objections that a typical reader, and especially an intelligent reader, might raise.

CRITICAL READING

Adler and Van Doren felt that one should not agree or disagree with an author—or even suspend judgment—unless one truly understands what the author meant to say. They argued that suspending judgment is itself an act of criticism. It means taking the position that the author did not make an adequate case. You cannot render that judgment unless you understand what the author wrote.

Adler and Van Doren also urged readers to be civil. When you disagree with an author, you should do so reasonably, rather than for the thrill of conflict. They also stressed the difference between knowledge and opinion. When criticizing a work, it is fair to evaluate the author's grasp of the facts. You might point out where the author was uninformed, or perhaps misinformed. You might also point out illogical arguments or an incomplete analysis. Of course, your readers might do critical reading of your own work. If you followed Rule 11 and Rule 12, your readers might not share your opinions, but they will have little room for legitimate criticism.

SYNTOPICAL READING

Syntopical reading means reading several books on the same topic. In the first step, the reader compiles a tentative bibliography on the subject. Then, the reader can inspect those books to see whether they truly relate to the subject. By inspecting those books, the reader will get a clearer idea of the subject. Then, the reader will identify the most relevant passages. The reader must then apply steps similar to those in analytical reading:

- Reconcile differences in terminology among authors.
- Establish a set of issues that all authors seem to be addressing, directly or indirectly.
- Rate those issues as major or minor.
- Assess where the authors agree—and where they disagree—on those issues
- Analyze the discussion among the authors in a way that throws maximum light on the subject.

When you write a review article, you do much of this work for your intended readers. You should start by doing a thorough search of the literature. The goal is to compile all the evidence relevant to some important question. If you have studied statistics, you might do a meta-analysis, which is a statistical analysis that combines the results of multiple scientific studies. Fortunately, there are published guidelines (the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines)⁸ for the conduct of meta-analyses. You can also use commercial software to do the statistical analyses. As you compile the evidence, you should use proper bibliographic citations. (I strongly recommend using citation management software, such as Endnote.) Thus, your reference list will serve as a bibliography. As you analyze the evidence, you may have to reconcile differences in terminology. You would then identify the major and minor issues. Do the authors agree or disagree about these issues? What light does the combined input from these various authors shed on the subject at hand?

CONCLUSION

To write a great book, or even a great article, you must find an important topic and say something important about it. You must also follow the basic disciplines that you may have learned in grammar school and high school. Say something intelligent and say it intelligibly. To reach the broadest possible audience, you must apply the principles of plain language: use short, simple words in short, simple sentences. To appeal to a more specific audience, you must do your homework. Make sure that you know what you are talking about and make reasoned arguments based on the best available evidence. Use proper citations to help your readers find and evaluate the supporting evidence for them-

selves. Put your thoughts into an organized structure that will allow readers to identify your main points and evaluate your arguments with minimal effort on their part. Make sure that your title, your chapter titles and subheadings, and your promotional materials express what your book is about and how valuable it is.

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