

## How to Be a Demanding Reader

*Mortimer Adler  
and Charles Van Doren<sup>1</sup>*

The rules for reading yourself to sleep are easier to follow than are the rules for staying awake while reading. Get into bed in a comfortable position, make sure the light is inadequate enough to cause a slight eyestrain, choose a book that is either terribly difficult or terribly boring—in any event, one that you do not really care whether you read or not—and you will be asleep in a few minutes. Those who are experts in relaxing with a book do not have to wait for nightfall. A comfortable chair in the library will do any time.

Unfortunately, the rules for keeping awake do not consist in doing just the opposite. It is *possible* to keep awake while reading in a comfortable chair or even in bed, and people have been known to strain their eyes by reading late in light too dim. What kept the famous candlelight readers awake? One thing certainly—it made a difference to them, a great difference, whether or not they read the book they had in hand.

Whether you manage to keep awake or not depends in large part on your goal in reading. If your aim in reading is to profit from it—to grow somehow in mind or spirit—you have to keep awake. That means reading as actively as possible. It means making an effort—an effort for which you expect to be repaid.

Good books, fiction or nonfiction, deserve such reading. To use a good book as a sedative is conspicuous waste. To fall asleep or, what is the same, to let your mind wander during the hours you planned to devote to reading for profit—that is, primarily for understanding—is clearly to defeat your own ends.

But the sad fact is that many people who can distinguish between profit and pleasure—between understanding, on the one hand, and entertainment or the mere satisfaction of curiosity, on the other hand—nevertheless fail to carry out their reading plans. They fail even if they know which books give which. The reason is that they do not know how to be demanding readers, how to keep their mind on what they are doing by making it do the work without which no profit can be earned.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Adler, Mortimer J. and Charles Van Doren *How to Read a Book* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972.

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

We have already discussed active reading extensively in this book. We have said that active reading is better reading, and we have noted that inspectional reading is always active. It is an effortful, not an effortless, undertaking. But we have not yet gone to the heart of the matter by stating 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.*

Any questions? No. The art of reading on any level above the elementary consists in the habit of asking the right questions in the right order. There are four main questions you must ask about any book<sup>2</sup>.

1. What is the book about as a whole? You must try to discover the leading theme of the book, and how the author develops this theme in an orderly way by subdividing it into its essential subordinate themes or topics.

2. What is being said in detail, and how? You must try to discover the main ideas, assertions, and arguments that constitute the author's particular message

3. Is the book true, in whole or part? You cannot answer this question until you have answered the first two. You have to know what is being said before you can decide whether it is true or not. When you understand a book, however, you are obligated, if you are reading seriously, to make up your own mind. Knowing the author's mind is not enough.

4. What of it? If the book has given you information, you must ask about its significance. Why does the author think it is important to know these things? Is it important to you to know them? And if the book has not only informed you, but also enlightened you, it is necessary to seek further enlightenment by asking what else follows, what is further implied or suggested.

We will return to these four questions at length in the rest of this book. Stated another way, they become the basic rules of reading with which Part Two is mainly concerned. They are stated here in question form for a very good reason. Reading a book on any level beyond the elementary is essentially an effort on your part to ask it questions (and to answer them to the best of your ability). That should never be forgotten. And that is why there is all the difference in the world between the demanding and the undemanding reader. The latter asks no questions—and gets no answers.

**The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks**

The four questions stated above summarize the whole obligation of a reader. They apply to anything worth reading—a book or an article or even an advertisement. Inspectional reading tends to provide more accurate answers to the first two questions than to the last two, but it nevertheless helps with those also. An analytical reading of a book has not been accomplished satisfactorily until you have answers to those last questions—until you have some idea of the book's truth, in whole or part, and of its significance, if only in your own scheme of things. The last

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<sup>2</sup> These four questions, as stated, together with the discussion of them that follows, apply mainly to expository or nonfiction books. However, the questions, when adapted, apply to fiction and poetry as well.

question—What of it?—is probably the most important one in syntopical reading. Naturally, you will have to answer the first three questions before attempting the final one

Knowing what the four questions are is not enough. You must remember to ask them as you read. The habit of doing that is the mark of a demanding reader. More than that, you must know how to answer them precisely and accurately. The trained ability to do that is the art of reading.

People go to sleep over good books not because they are unwilling to make the effort, but because they do not know how to make it. Good books are over your head; they would not be good for you if they were not. And books that are over your head weary you unless you can reach up to them and pull yourself up to their level. It is not the stretching that tires you, but the frustration of stretching unsuccessfully because you lack the skill to stretch effectively. To keep on reading actively, you must have not only the will to do so, but also the skill—the art that enables you to elevate yourself by mastering what at first sight seems to be beyond you.

## **How to Make a Book Your Own**

If you have the habit of asking a book questions as you read, you are a better reader than if you do not. But, as we have indicated, merely asking questions is not enough. You have to try to answer them. And although that could be done, theoretically, in your mind only, it is much easier to do it with a pencil in your hand. The pencil then becomes the sign of your alertness while you read.

It is an old saying that you have to "read between the lines" to get the most out of anything. The rules of reading are a formal way of saying this. But we want to persuade you to "write between the lines," too. Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.

When you buy a book, you establish a property right in it, just as you do in clothes or furniture when you buy and pay for them. But the act of purchase is actually only the prelude to possession in the case of a book. Full ownership of a book only comes when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it—which comes to the same thing—is by writing in it.

**Merely asking questions is not enough. You have to try to answer them**

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks. Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the thoughts of the author.

Reading a book should be a conversation between you and the author. Presumably he knows more about the subject than you do; if not, you probably should not be bothering with his book. But 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.

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully Here are some devices that can be used:

1. Underlining—of major points; of important or forceful statements.
2. Vertical lines at the margin—to emphasize a statement already underlined or to point to a passage too long to be underlined.
3. Star, asterisk, or other doodad at the margin—to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or dozen most important statements or passages in the book. You may want to fold a corner of each page on which you make such marks or place a slip of paper between the pages. In either case, you will be able to take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it to the indicated page, refresh your recollection.
4. Numbers in the margin—to indicate a sequence of points made by the author in developing an argument.
5. Numbers of other pages in the margin—to indicate where else in the book the author makes the same points, or points relevant to or in contradiction of those here marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together. Many readers use the symbol "Cf" to indicate the other page numbers; it means "compare" or "refer to".
6. Circling of key words or phrases—This serves much the same function as underlining.
7. Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page—to record questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raises in your mind; to reduce a complicated discussion to a simple statement; to record the sequence of major points right through the book. The endpapers at the back of the book can be used to make a personal index of the author's points in the order of their appearance.

**What kept the famous candlelight readers awake?**

To inveterate book-markers, the front endpapers are often the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. But that expresses only their financial ownership of the book. The front endpapers are better reserved for a record of your thinking. After finishing the book and making your personal index on the back endpapers, turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page or point by point (you have already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic outline and an order of parts. That outline will be the measure of your understanding of the work; unlike a bookplate, it will express your intellectual ownership of the book.

### **The Three Kinds of Note-making**

There are three quite different kinds of notes that you will make in your books as well as about them. Which kind you make depends upon the level at which you are reading.

When you give a book an inspectional reading, you may not have much time to make notes in it; inspectional reading, as we have observed, is always limited as to time. Nevertheless, you are asking important questions about a book when you read it at this level, and it would be desirable, even if it is not always possible, to record your answers when they are fresh in your mind.

The questions answered by inspectional reading are: first, what kind of book is it? second, what is it about as a whole? and third, what is the structural order of the work whereby the author develops his conception or understanding of that general subject matter? You may and probably should make notes concerning your answers to these questions, especially if you know that it may be days or months before you will be able to return to the book to give it an analytical reading. The best place to make such notes is on the contents page, or perhaps on the title page, which are otherwise unused in the scheme we have outlined above.

The point to recognize is that these notes primarily concern the structure of the book, and not its substance—at least not in detail. *We therefore call this kind of note-making structural.*

In the course of an inspectional reading, especially of a long and difficult book, you may attain some insights into the author's ideas about his subject matter. Often, however, you will not; and certainly you should put off making any judgment of the accuracy or truth of the statements until you have read the book more carefully. Then, during an analytical reading, you will need to give answers to questions about the truth and significance of the book. The notes you make at this level of reading are, therefore, not structural but conceptual. They concern the author's concepts, and also your own, as they have been deepened or broadened by your reading of the book.

**There is all the difference in the world between the demanding and the undemanding reader. The latter asks no questions—and gets no answers**

There is an obvious difference between structural and conceptual note-making. What kind of notes do you make when you are giving several books a syntopical reading—when you are reading more than one book on a single subject? Again, such notes will tend to be conceptual; and the notes on a page may refer you not only to other pages in that book, but also to pages in other books.

There is a step beyond even that, however, and a truly expert reader can take it when he is reading several books syntopically. That is to make notes about the *shape of the discussion*—the discussion that is engaged in by all of the authors, even if unbeknownst to them. For reasons that will become clear in Part Four, we prefer to call such notes *dialectical*. Since they are made concerning several books, not just one, they often have to be made on a separate sheet (or sheets) of paper. Here, a structure of concepts is implied—an order of statements and questions about a single subject matter. (...)

## **From Many Rules to One Habit**

Reading is like skiing. When done well, when done by an expert, both reading and skiing are graceful, harmonious activities. When done by a beginner, both are awkward, frustrating, and slow.

Learning to ski is one of the most humiliating experiences an adult can undergo (that is one reason to start young). After all, an adult has been walking for a long time; he knows where his feet are; he knows how to put one foot in front of the other in order to get somewhere. But as soon as he puts skis on his feet, it is as though he had

to learn to walk all over again He slips and slides, falls down, has trouble getting up, gets his skis crossed, tumbles again, and generally looks—and feels- like a fool

Even the best instructor seems at first to be no help. The ease with which the instructor performs actions that he says are simple but that the student secretly believes are impossible is almost insulting. How can you remember everything the instructor says you have to remember? Bend your knees. Look down the hill. Keep your weight on the downhill ski. Keep your back straight, but nevertheless lean forward. The admonitions seem endless—how can you think about all that and still ski?

The point about skiing, of course, is that you should not be thinking about the separate acts that, together, make a smooth turn or series of linked turns—instead, you should merely be looking ahead of you down the hill, anticipating bumps and other skiers, enjoying the feel of the cold wind on your cheeks, smiling with pleasure at the fluid grace of your body as you speed down the mountain. In other words, 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 put them together to become a good skier.

It is the same with reading. Probably you have been reading for a long time, too, and starting to learn all over again can be humiliating. But it is just as true of reading as it is of skiing that you cannot coalesce a lot of different acts into one complex, harmonious performance until you become expert at each of them. You cannot telescope the different parts of the job so that they run into one another and fuse intimately. Each separate act requires your full attention while you are doing it. After you have practiced the parts separately, you can not only do each with greater facility and less attention but can also gradually put them together into a smoothly running whole.

All of this is common knowledge about learning a complex skill. We say it here merely because we want you to realize that learning to read is at least as complex as learning to ski or to typewrite or to play tennis. If you can recall your patience in any other learning experience you have had, you will be more tolerant of instructors who will shortly enumerate a long list of rules for reading.

The person who has had one experience in acquiring a complex skill knows that he need not fear the array of rules that present themselves at the beginning of something new to be learned. He knows that he does not have to worry about how all the separate acts in which he must become separately proficient are going to work together.

**Reading is like skiing. When done well, when done by an expert, both reading and skiing are graceful**

The multiplicity of the rules indicates the complexity of the one habit to be formed, not a plurality of distinct habits. The parts coalesce and telescope as each reaches the stage of automatic execution. When all the subordinate acts can be done more or less automatically, you have formed the habit of the whole performance. Then you can think about tackling an expert run you have never skied before, or reading a book that you once thought was too difficult for you. At the

beginning, the learner pays attention to himself and his skill in the separate acts When the acts have lost their separateness in the skill of the whole performance, the learner can at last pay attention to the goal that the technique he has acquired enables him to reach.

We hope we have encouraged you by the things we have said in these pages. It is hard to learn to read well. Not only is reading, especially analytical reading, a very complex activity—much more complex than skiing; it is also much more of a mental activity. The beginning skier must think of physical acts that he can later forget and perform almost automatically. It is relatively easy to think of and be conscious of physical acts. It is much harder to think of mental acts, as the beginning analytical reader must do; in a sense, he is thinking about his own thoughts. Most of us are unaccustomed to doing this. Nevertheless, it can be done, and a person who does it cannot help learning to read much better.