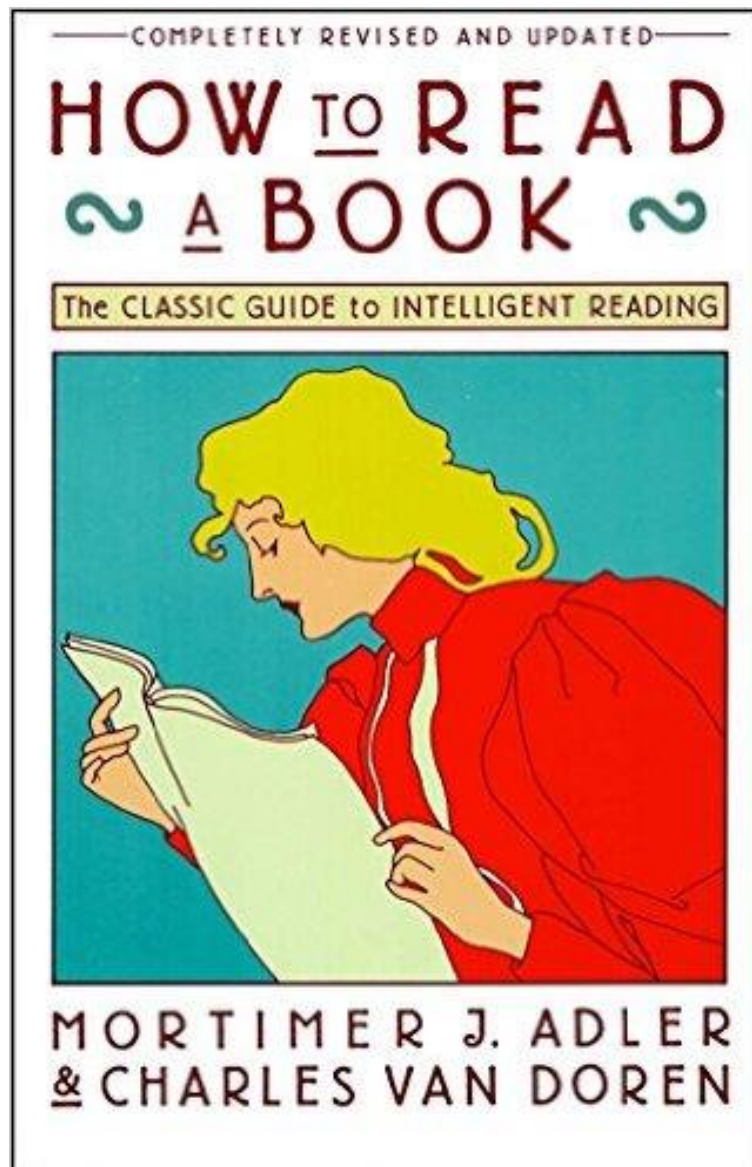




# ONLINE GREAT BOOKS

**HOW TO READ**



We joke all the time about needing a book called “How to Read How to Read a Book.” Instead of writing that book, we are offering this summary.

Reading is the process whereby we decode written symbols in order to understand the contents of another mind.

In light of what reading is, we still read for different goals. We read for entertainment, information, or understanding. The reading goal will drive the approach the reader should take.

# THE FOUR QUESTIONS OF ACTIVE READING

Adler says that we should always be asking questions while we are reading. Simultaneously, we should be attempting to answer these questions from our reading of the text. The proper questions to be asking are:

## 1. WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AS A WHOLE?

What's the leading theme and how does the author develop it?

## 2. WHAT IS BEING SAID IN DETAIL, AND HOW?

What are the main ideas, assertions and arguments that constitute the author's message?

## 3. IS THE BOOK TRUE, IN WHOLE OR IN PART?

You must answer the first two questions to answer this third question. Serious readers are obligated to make this determination.

## 4. WHAT OF IT?

We must judge the significance of the book by determining the importance of what the book has to teach.

# LEVELS OF READING

There are four levels of reading. In order to reach the highest level of reading, syntopical reading, you must engage in the three less involved levels. In other words, each of these levels builds on those previous to it.

## LEVEL 1 - ELEMENTARY READING

WHAT DOES THIS SAY?

This is the act of decoding the letters, words, and sentences on the page and determining what has been written. This level of reading involves the skills we are taught when we begin to read. Following the words with our eyes, recognizing known words, and sounding out others we don't understand are the skills necessary at this level of reading.

In Elementary Reading we are simply determining what the sentences say. The skill necessary to read at this level should have been taught to us when we were very, very early readers. Unfortunately many never progress past this skill level. Interestingly, most speed reading courses focus on improving skills related to this level of reading.

## LEVEL 2 - INSPECTIONAL READING

## WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Reading training in the 1970's and 80's focused on this type of reading. We called it skimming and scanning. When we read inspectionally we are trying to get the most from the book in a short period of time. We use "tips and tricks" to plow through the material to get the most bang for our buck.

### **Tips and tricks to conduct Inspectional Reading.**

1. Do a systematic skim through the material.
2. Read the title page and skim the preface.
3. Read the table of contents: try to figure out what the structure and arguments are.
4. Check the index: Use the index to figure out what the big topics are. Spot check a few topics of interest. Estimate the range and breadth of topics covered.
5. Read the publisher's blurb on the dust jacket. These are normally very good short summaries of the text.
6. Find the chapters that seem pivotal to the book: read the opening and/or closing passages/pages carefully.
7. Thumb through entire book, read a paragraph here, a paragraph there, perhaps read a couple of pages in a row. You are reading just to get the main beats in the book.

Now you should know what the book is about. That is all you will know about it at this point.

### LEVEL 3 – analytical reading

What does the book mean?

Analytical Reading is thorough, complete reading. It is done for comprehension. It is not undertaken for informational or entertainment purposes. The goal of Analytical Reading is understanding.

At [www.onlinegreatbooks.com](http://www.onlinegreatbooks.com), you'll have to read the materials with AT LEAST this level of understanding.

Analytical Reading techniques differ based on the type of book you are reading. The approach will differ based on if the book is practical, theoretical, historical, imaginative, scientific, philosophical, etc.

**It is helpful when doing Analytical Reading to:**

1. Underline key sentences.
2. Mark key sections.
3. Use asterisks and stars.
4. List other page numbers with related references in the margin.
5. Circle key words or phrases.
6. Write in margins; sides, top, and bottom.
7. Make notes about the content of the subject.
8. Make notes about the truth and significance of the book.
9. Make notes about how the argument is made and how it fits with other's arguments.

In order to move beyond Level Two's cursory understanding, we must engage in Analytical Reading to achieve a deeper understanding of the text. Adler tells us in a stepwise fashion how we might do this.

# ADLER'S RULES FOR READING BOOKS

## THE FIRST STAGE OF ANALYTICAL READING

- 1. You must know what kind of book you are reading and you should know this as early in the process as possible, preferably before you begin to read.**

Adler says we must “pigeonhole” a book before we read very much. We must determine if the book is a novel, play, practical, theoretical, or some other kind of book ASAP. It is clear that scientific, fiction, practical or any other kinds of books must each be read with a different approach.

- 2. You must state the unity of the whole book in a single sentence, or at most a few sentences.**

Summarizing the themes and ideas in the book very succinctly forces the reader to carefully organize and evaluate his understanding of what was read. Excellent books are written with beauty and unity. We must apprehend this unity.

- 3. You must set forth the major parts of the book, and show how these are organized into a whole, by being ordered with one another and to the unity of the whole.**

Any work of art is composed of constituent parts. Recognizing those parts and how they fit in to the unity is crucial to the appreciation of that art. Just as a building may be built from a heap of bricks, understanding how the bricks are used to build walls, rooms, doorways, arches, and more leads us to more fully appreciate the entire structure.

**4. Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.**

In doing the first three, you are ready to identify what problem the author is trying to solve. If you cannot, you didn't "get it."

THE Second STAGE OF ANALYTICAL READING

**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.**

**8. Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not. Decide what the author knew he had failed to solve them.**

THE THIRD STAGE OF ANALYTICAL READING

Maxims of Intellectual Etiquette

**9. Do not begin criticism until you have completed your outline and your interpretation of the book. In your mind you should say only "I understand", not "I agree" or "I disagree."**

**10. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously.**

**11. Demonstrate that you recognize the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any critical judgment you make.**

SPECIAL CRITERIA FOR POINTS OF CRITICISM

**12. Show wherein the author is uninformed.**

**13. Show wherein the author is misinformed.**

**14. Show wherein the author is illogical.**

**15. Show wherein the author's analysis or account is incomplete.**

If you fail in showing the last four, you must agree, at least in part, with the author.

The fourth and highest level of reading is the most complex and difficult level of reading. It requires a great deal of introspection and attention from the reader. We might also call this comparative reading.

In Syntopical Reading the reader compares the book he just read to knowledge of every other book he has read and integrates that knowledge. This is not a comparison of two or more books. The Syntopical Reader learns about and analyses topics or subjects that may not even be in the book at hand. This is the most difficult type of reading by far.

Mere comparison of texts is not enough, syntopical reading involves more. With the help of the books being read, the syntopical reader is able to construct an analysis of the subject that may not be in any of the books. Syntopical Reading is the most active and effortful kind of reading.

#### THE FIVE STEPS IN SYNTOPICAL READING

1. Find the relevant passages.
2. Bring the author to common terms with other authors you've read.
3. Get the questions clear.
4. Define the issues at hand.
5. Analyze the discussion.

The cautious reader can use these rules to mentally reconcile disparate works and draw new and important conclusions from the materials.