

WIKIPEDIA

# *How to Read a Book*

---

*How to Read a Book* is a 1940 book by Mortimer Adler. He co-authored a heavily revised edition in 1972 with Charles Van Doren, which gives guidelines for critically reading good and great books of any tradition. The 1972 revision, in addition to the first edition, treats genres (poetry, history, science, fiction, et cetera), inspectional and syntopical reading.

## Contents

---

### Overview of the last edition

- Part I: The Dimensions of Reading
- Part II: The Third Level of Reading: Analytical Reading
- Part III: Approaches to Different Kinds of Reading Matter
- Part IV: The Ultimate Goals of Reading

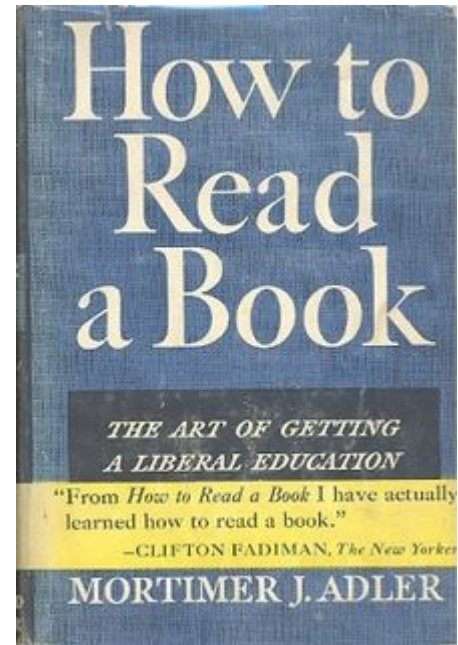
### Reading list (1972 edition)

### Publication data

### See also

### References

### External links



First edition (publ. Simon & Schuster)

## Overview of the last edition

---

*How to Read a Book* is divided into four parts, each consisting of several chapters.

### Part I: The Dimensions of Reading

Adler explains for whom the book is intended, defines different classes of reading, and tells which classes will be addressed. He also makes a brief argument favoring the Great Books, and explains his reasons for writing *How to Read a Book*.

There are three types of knowledge: practical, informational, and comprehensive. He discusses the methods of acquiring knowledge, concluding that practical knowledge, though teachable, cannot be truly mastered without experience; that only informational knowledge can be gained by one whose understanding equals the author's; that comprehension (insight) is best learned from who first achieved said understanding — an "original communication".

The idea that communication directly from those who first discovered an idea is the best way of gaining understanding is Adler's argument for reading the Great Books; that any book that does not represent original communication is inferior, as a source, to the original, and that any teacher, save those who discovered the subject he or she teaches, is inferior to the Great Books as a source of comprehension.

Adler spends a good deal of this first section explaining why he was compelled to write this book. He asserts that very few people can read a book for understanding, but that he believes that most are capable of it, given the right instruction and the will to do so. It is his intent to provide that instruction. He takes time to tell the reader about how he believes that the educational system has failed to teach students the art of reading well, up to and including undergraduate, university-level institutions. He concludes that, due to these shortcomings in formal education, it falls upon individuals to cultivate these abilities in themselves. Throughout this section, he relates anecdotes and summaries of his experience in education as support for these assertions.

## Part II: The Third Level of Reading: Analytical Reading

Here, Adler sets forth his method for reading a non-fiction book in order to gain understanding. He claims that three distinct approaches, or readings, must all be made in order to get the most possible out of a book, but that performing these three levels of readings does not necessarily mean reading the book three times, as the experienced reader will be able to do all three in the course of reading the book just once. Adler names the readings "structural", "interpretative", and "critical", in that order.

**Structural Stage:** The first stage of analytical reading is concerned with understanding the structure and purpose of the book. It begins with determining the basic topic and type of the book being read, so as to better anticipate the contents and comprehend the book from the very beginning. Adler says that the reader must distinguish between practical and theoretical books, as well as determining the field of study that the book addresses. Further, Adler says that the reader must note any divisions in the book, and that these are not restricted to the divisions laid out in the table of contents. Lastly, the reader must find out what problems the author is trying to solve.

**Interpretive Stage:** The second stage of analytical reading involves constructing the author's arguments. This first requires the reader to note and understand any special phrases and terms that the author uses. Once that is done, Adler says that the reader should find and work to understand each proposition that the author advances, as well as the author's support for those propositions.

**Critical Stage:** In the third stage of analytical reading, Adler directs the reader to critique the book. He asserts that upon understanding the author's propositions and arguments, the reader has been elevated to the author's level of understanding and is now able (and obligated) to judge the book's merit and accuracy. Adler advocates judging books based on the soundness of their arguments. Adler says that one may not disagree with an argument unless one can find fault in its reasoning, facts, or premises, though one is free to dislike it in any case.

The method presented is sometimes called the *Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE)* method, though this term is not used in the book.

## Part III: Approaches to Different Kinds of Reading Matter

In Part III, Adler briefly discusses the differences in approaching various kinds of literature and suggests reading several other books. He explains a method of approaching the Great Books – read the books that influenced a given author prior to reading works by that author – and gives several examples of that method.

## Part IV: The Ultimate Goals of Reading

The last part of the book covers the fourth level of reading: syntopical reading. At this stage, the reader broadens and deepens his or her knowledge on a given subject—e.g., love, war, particle physics, etc.—by reading several books on that subject. In the final pages of this part, the author expounds on the philosophical benefits of reading: "growth of the mind", fuller experience as a conscious being.

## Reading list (1972 edition)

---

Appendix A in the 1972 edition provided the following recommended reading list:

1. Homer – *Iliad*, *Odyssey*
2. The Old Testament
3. Aeschylus – Tragedies
4. Sophocles – Tragedies
5. Herodotus – *Histories*
6. Euripides – Tragedies
7. Thucydides – *History of the Peloponnesian War*
8. Hippocrates – Medical Writings
9. Aristophanes – Comedies
10. Plato – Dialogues
11. Aristotle – Works
12. Epicurus – *Letter to Herodotus*; *Letter to Menoecus*
13. Euclid – *Elements*
14. Archimedes – Works
15. Apollonius of Perga – *Conic Sections*
16. Cicero – Works
17. Lucretius – *On the Nature of Things*
18. Virgil – Works
19. Horace – Works
20. Livy – *History of Rome*
21. Ovid – Works
22. Plutarch – *Parallel Lives*; *Moralia*
23. Tacitus – *Histories*; *Annals*; *Agricola*; *Germania*
24. Nicomachus of Gerasa – *Introduction to Arithmetic*
25. Epictetus – *Discourses*; *Encheiridion*
26. Ptolemy – *Almagest*
27. Lucian – Works

28. Marcus Aurelius – Meditations
29. Galen – On the Natural Faculties
30. The New Testament
31. Plotinus – The Enneads
32. St. Augustine – On the Teacher; Confessions; City of God; On Christian Doctrine
33. The Song of Roland
34. The Nibelungenlied
35. The Saga of Burnt Njál
36. St. Thomas Aquinas – Summa Theologica
37. Dante Alighieri – The Divine Comedy; The New Life; On Monarchy
38. Geoffrey Chaucer – Troilus and Criseyde; The Canterbury Tales
39. Leonardo da Vinci – Notebooks
40. Niccolò Machiavelli – The Prince; Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy
41. Desiderius Erasmus – The Praise of Folly
42. Nicolaus Copernicus – On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres
43. Thomas More – Utopia
44. Martin Luther – Table Talk; Three Treatises
45. François Rabelais – Gargantua and Pantagruel
46. John Calvin – Institutes of the Christian Religion
47. Michel de Montaigne – Essays
48. William Gilbert – On the Loadstone and Magnetic Bodies
49. Miguel de Cervantes – Don Quixote
50. Edmund Spenser – Prothalamion; The Faerie Queene
51. Francis Bacon – Essays; Advancement of Learning; Novum Organum, New Atlantis
52. William Shakespeare – Poetry and Plays
53. Galileo Galilei – Starry Messenger; Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences
54. Johannes Kepler – Epitome of Copernican Astronomy; Concerning the Harmonies of the World
55. William Harvey – On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals; On the Circulation of the Blood; On the Generation of Animals
56. Thomas Hobbes – Leviathan
57. René Descartes – Rules for the Direction of the Mind; Discourse on the Method; Geometry; Meditations on First Philosophy
58. John Milton – Works
59. Molière – Comedies
60. Blaise Pascal – The Provincial Letters; Pensees; Scientific Treatises
61. Christiaan Huygens – Treatise on Light
62. Benedict de Spinoza – Ethics
63. John Locke – Letter Concerning Toleration; Of Civil Government; Essay Concerning Human Understanding; Thoughts Concerning Education
64. Jean Baptiste Racine – Tragedies
65. Isaac Newton – Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy; Optics
66. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz – Discourse on Metaphysics; New Essays Concerning Human Understanding; Monadology
67. Daniel Defoe – Robinson Crusoe

68. Jonathan Swift – *A Tale of a Tub*; Journal to Stella; Gulliver's Travels; A Modest Proposal
69. William Congreve – *The Way of the World*
70. George Berkeley – *Principles of Human Knowledge*
71. Alexander Pope – *Essay on Criticism*; *Rape of the Lock*; *Essay on Man*
72. Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu – *Persian Letters*; *Spirit of Laws*
73. Voltaire – *Letters on the English*; *Candide*; *Philosophical Dictionary*
74. Henry Fielding – *Joseph Andrews*; *Tom Jones*
75. Samuel Johnson – *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; *Dictionary*; *Rasselas*; *The Lives of the Poets*
76. David Hume – *Treatise on Human Nature*; *Essays Moral and Political*; *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
77. Jean-Jacques Rousseau – *On the Origin of Inequality*; On the Political Economy; *Emile – or, On Education*, *The Social Contract*
78. Laurence Sterne – *Tristram Shandy*; *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*
79. Adam Smith – *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*; *The Wealth of Nations*
80. Immanuel Kant – *Critique of Pure Reason*; *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*; *Critique of Practical Reason*; *The Science of Right*; *Critique of Judgment*; *Perpetual Peace*
81. Edward Gibbon – *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Autobiography
82. James Boswell – Journal; *Life of Samuel Johnson*, LL.D.
83. Antoine Laurent Lavoisier – *Traité Élémentaire de Chimie* (Elements of Chemistry)
84. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison – *Federalist Papers*
85. Jeremy Bentham – Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation; Theory of Fictions
86. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – *Faust*; *Poetry and Truth*
87. Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier – Analytical Theory of Heat
88. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel – *Phenomenology of Spirit*; *Philosophy of Right*; *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*
89. William Wordsworth – Poems
90. Samuel Taylor Coleridge – Poems; *Biographia Literaria*
91. Jane Austen – *Pride and Prejudice*; *Emma*
92. Carl von Clausewitz – *On War*
93. Stendhal – *The Red and the Black*; *The Charterhouse of Parma*; On Love
94. Lord Byron – *Don Juan*
95. Arthur Schopenhauer – Studies in Pessimism
96. Michael Faraday – Chemical History of a Candle; Experimental Researches in Electricity
97. Charles Lyell – *Principles of Geology*
98. Auguste Comte – The Positive Philosophy
99. Honoré de Balzac – *Père Goriot*; *Eugenie Grandet*
100. Ralph Waldo Emerson – Representative Men; Essays; Journal
101. Nathaniel Hawthorne – *The Scarlet Letter*
102. Alexis de Tocqueville – *Democracy in America*
103. John Stuart Mill – *A System of Logic*; *On Liberty*; Representative Government; *Utilitarianism*; *The Subjection of Women*; Autobiography
104. Charles Darwin – *The Origin of Species*; *The Descent of Man*; Autobiography

105. Charles Dickens – *Pickwick Papers*; *David Copperfield*; *Hard Times*
106. Claude Bernard – *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*
107. Henry David Thoreau – *Civil Disobedience*; *Walden*
108. Karl Marx – *Capital*; *Communist Manifesto*
109. George Eliot – *Adam Bede*; *Middlemarch*
110. Herman Melville – *Moby-Dick*; *Billy Budd*
111. Fyodor Dostoevsky – *Crime and Punishment*; *The Idiot*; *The Brothers Karamazov*
112. Gustave Flaubert – *Madame Bovary*; *Three Stories*
113. Henrik Ibsen – *Plays*
114. Leo Tolstoy – *War and Peace*; *Anna Karenina*; *What is Art?*; *Twenty-Three Tales*
115. Mark Twain – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; *The Mysterious Stranger*
116. William James – *The Principles of Psychology*; *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; *Pragmatism*; *Essays in Radical Empiricism*
117. Henry James – *The American*; *The Ambassadors*
118. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche – *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; *Beyond Good and Evil*; *The Genealogy of Morals*; *The Will to Power*
119. Jules Henri Poincaré – *Science and Hypothesis*; *Science and Method*
120. Sigmund Freud – *The Interpretation of Dreams*; *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*; *Civilization and Its Discontents*; *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*
121. George Bernard Shaw – *Plays and Prefaces*
122. Max Planck – *Origin and Development of the Quantum Theory*; *Where Is Science Going?*; *Scientific Autobiography*
123. Henri Bergson – *Time and Free Will*; *Matter and Memory*; *Creative Evolution*; *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*
124. John Dewey – *How We Think*; *Democracy and Education*; *Experience and Nature*; *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry*
125. Alfred North Whitehead – *An Introduction to Mathematics*; *Science and the Modern World*; *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*; *Adventures of Ideas*
126. George Santayana – *The Life of Reason*; *Skepticism and Animal Faith*; *Persons and Places*
127. Vladimir Lenin – *The State and Revolution*
128. Marcel Proust – *Remembrance of Things Past*
129. Bertrand Russell – *The Problems of Philosophy*; *The Analysis of Mind*; *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*; *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits*
130. Thomas Mann – *The Magic Mountain*; *Joseph and His Brothers*
131. Albert Einstein – *The Meaning of Relativity*; *On the Method of Theoretical Physics*; *The Evolution of Physics*
132. James Joyce – 'The Dead' in *Dubliners*; *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; *Ulysses*
133. Jacques Maritain – *Art and Scholasticism*; *The Degrees of Knowledge*; *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*; *True Humanism*
134. Franz Kafka – *The Trial*; *The Castle*
135. Arnold J. Toynbee – *A Study of History*; *Civilization on Trial*
136. Jean-Paul Sartre – *Nausea*; *No Exit*; *Being and Nothingness*
137. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – *The First Circle*; *The Cancer Ward*

## Publication data

---

- Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*, (1940) OCLC 822771595 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/822771595>)
  - 1967 edition published with subtitle *A Guide to Reading the Great Books* ISBN 978-0-671-21209-4 OCLC 500166716 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/500166716>)
  - 1972 revised edition, coauthor Charles Van Doren, New York: Simon and Schuster. ISBN 1-567-31010-9 OCLC 788925161 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/788925161>)

## See also

---

- *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*
- Reading (process)

## References

---

## External links

---

- "Center for the Study of The Great Ideas" (<http://www.thegreatideas.org/HowToReadABook.htm>). *thegreatideas.org*.

---

Retrieved from "[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=How\\_to\\_Read\\_a\\_Book&oldid=837894527](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=How_to_Read_a_Book&oldid=837894527)"

---

**This page was last edited on 23 April 2018, at 17:33 (UTC).**

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using [this site](#), you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.