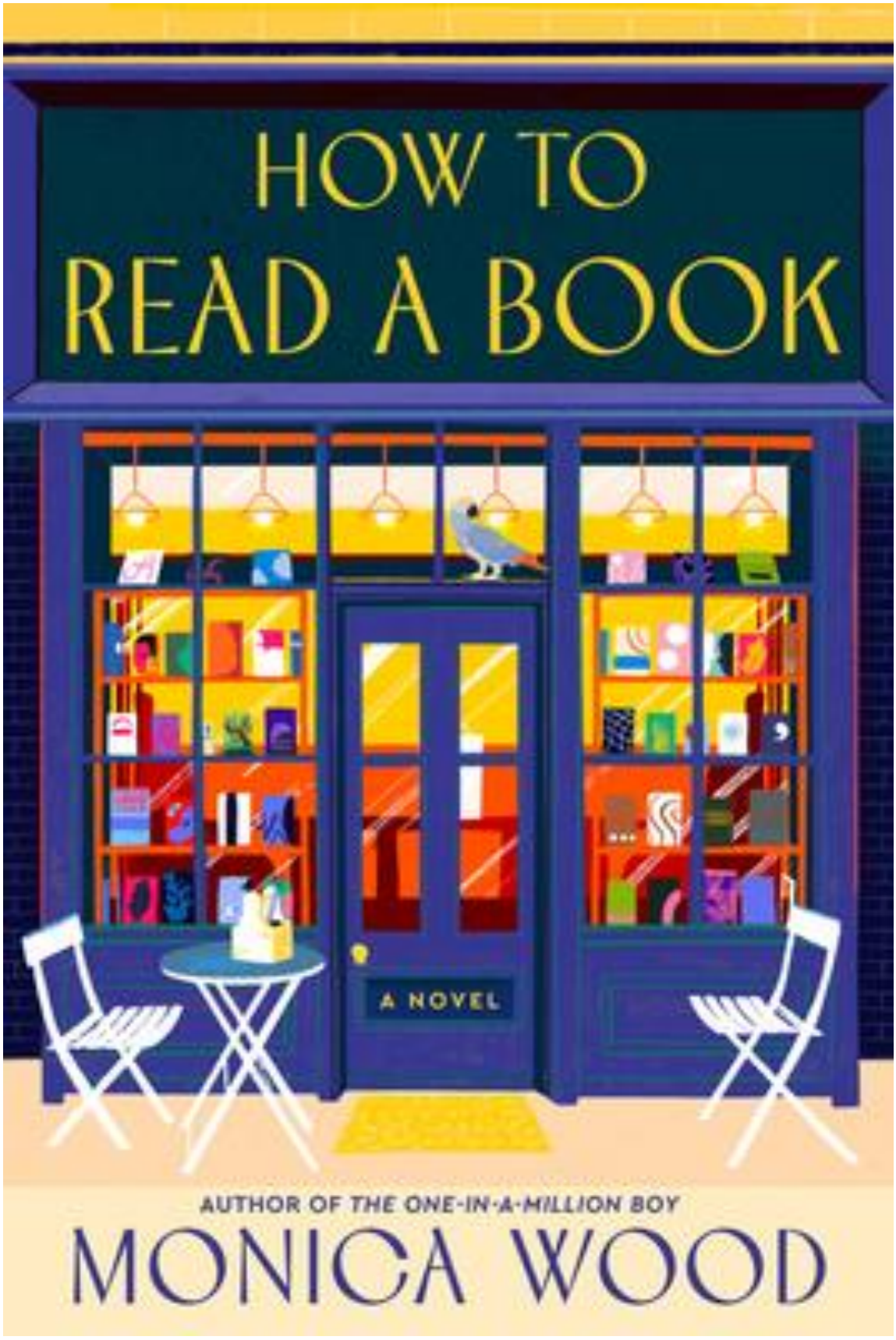
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

Chapter 4

The Second Level of Reading: Inspectional Reading

Inspectional reading is a true level of reading. It is quite distinct from the level that precedes it (elementary reading) and from the one that follows it in natural sequence (analytical reading). But, as we noted in Chapter 2, the levels of reading are cumulative. Thus, elementary reading is contained in inspectional reading, as, indeed, inspectional reading is contained in analytical reading, and analytical reading in syntopical reading. Practically, this means that you cannot read on the inspectional level unless you can read effectively on the elementary level. You must be able to read an author's text more or less steadily, without having to stop to look up the meaning of many words, and without stumbling over the grammar and syntax. You must be able to make sense of a majority of the sentences and paragraphs, although not necessarily the best sense of all of them. What, then, is involved in inspectional reading? How do you go about doing it? The first thing to realize is that there are two types of inspectional reading. They are aspects of a single skill, but the beginning reader is well-advised to consider them as two different steps or activities. The experienced reader learns to perform both steps simultaneously, but for the moment we will treat them as if they were quite distinct. Inspectional Reading I: Systematic Skimming or Prereading Let us return to the basic situation to which we have referred before. There is a book or other reading matter, and here is your mind. What is the first thing that you do? Let us assume two further elements in the situation, elements that are quite 24 CHAPTER 4. THE SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING25 common. First, you do not know whether

you want to read the book. You do not know whether it deserves an analytical reading. But you suspect that it does, or at least that it contains both information and insights that would be valuable to you if you could dig them out. Second, let us assume—and this is very often the case—that you have only a limited time in which to find all this out. In this case, what you must do is skim the book, or, as some prefer to say, pre-read it. Skimming or pre-reading is the first sublevel of inspectional reading. Your main aim is to discover whether the book requires a more careful reading. Secondly, skimming can tell you lots of other things about the book, even if you decide not to read it again with more care. Giving a book this kind of quick once-over is a threshing process that helps you to separate the chaff from the real kernels of nourishment. You may discover that what you get from skimming is all the book is worth to you for the time being. It may never be worth more. But you will know at least what the author's main contention is, as well as what kind of book he has written, so the time you have spent looking through the book will not have been wasted. The habit of skimming should not take much time to acquire. Here are some suggestions about how to do it. 1. Look at the title page, and, if the book has one, at its preface. Read each quickly. Note especially the subtitles or other indications of the scope or aim of the book or of the author's special angle on his subject. Before completing this step you should have a good idea of the subject, and, if you wish, you may pause for a moment to place the book in the appropriate category in your mind. What pigeonhole that already contains other books does this one belong in? 2. Study the table of contents to obtain a general sense of the book's structure; use it as you would a road map before taking a trip. It is astonishing how many people never even glance at a book's table of contents unless they wish to look something up in it. In fact, many authors spend a considerable amount of time in creating the

table of contents, and it is sad, to think their efforts are often wasted. It used to be a common practice, especially in expository works, but sometimes even in novels and poems, to write very full tables of contents, with the chapters or parts broken down into many subtitles indicative of the topics covered. Milton, for example, wrote more or less lengthy headings, or "Arguments," as he called them, for each book of Paradise Lost. Gibbon published his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire with an extensive analytical table of contents for each chapter. Such summaries are no longer common, although occasionally you do still come across an analytical table of contents. One reason for the decline of the practice may be that people are not so likely to read tables of contents as they once were. Also, publishers have come to feel that a less revealing table of contents is more seductive than a completely frank and open one. Readers, they feel, will be attracted to a book with more or less mysterious chapter ti- CHAPTER 4. THE SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING26 tles—they will want to read the book to find out what the chapters are about. Even so, a table of contents can be valuable, and you should read it carefully before going on to the rest of the book. At this point, you might turn back to the table of contents of this book, if you have not already read it. We tried to make it as full and informative as we could. Examining it should give you a good idea of what we are trying to do. 3. Check the index if the book has one—most expository works do. Make a quick estimate of the range of topics covered and of the kinds of books and authors referred to. When you see terms listed that seem crucial, look up at least some of the passages cited. (We will have much more to say about crucial terms in Part Two. Here you must make your judgment of their importance on the basis of your general sense of the book, as obtained from steps 1 and 2.) The passages you read may contain the crux—the point on which the book hinges—or the new departure

which is the key to the author's approach and attitude. As in the case of the table of contents, you might at this point check the index of this book. You will recognize as crucial some terms that have already been discussed. Can you identify, for example, by the number of references under them, any others that also seem important? 4. If the book is a new one with a dust jacket, read the publisher's blurb. Some people have the impression that the blurb is never anything but sheer puffery. But this is quite often not true, especially in the case of expository works. The blurbs of many of these books are written by the authors themselves, admittedly with the help of the publisher's public relations department. It is not uncommon for authors to try to summarize as accurately as they can the main points in their book. These efforts should not go unnoticed. Of course, if the blurb is nothing but a puff for the book, you will ordinarily be able to discover this at a glance. But that in itself can tell you something about the work. Perhaps the book does not say anything of importance—and that is why the blurb does not say anything, either. Upon completing these first four steps you may already have enough information about the book to know that you want to read it more carefully, or that you do not want or need to read it at all. In either case, you may put it aside for the moment. If you do not do so, you are now ready to skim the book, properly speaking. 5. From your general and still rather vague knowledge of the book's contents, look now at the chapters that seem to be pivotal to its argument. If these chapters have summary statements in their opening or closing pages, as they often do, read these statements carefully. 6. Finally, turn the pages, dipping in here and there, reading a paragraph or two, sometimes several pages in sequence, never more than that. Thumb through the book in this way, always looking for signs of

 the main contention, listening for the basic pulsebeat of

the matter. Above all, do not fail to read the last two or three pages, or, if these are an epilogue, the last few pages of the main part of the book. Few authors are able to resist the temptation to sum up what they think is new and important about their work in these pages. You do not want to miss this, even though, as sometimes happens, the author himself may be wrong in his judgment. You have now skimmed the book systematically; you have given it the first type of inspectional reading. You should know a good deal about the book at this point, after having spent no more than a few minutes, at most an hour, with it. In particular, you should know whether the book contains matter that you still want to dig out, or whether it deserves no more of your time and attention. You should also be able to place the book even more accurately than before in your mental card catalogue, for further reference if the occasion should ever arise. Incidentally, this is a very active sort of reading. It is impossible to give any book an inspectional reading without being alert, without having all of one's faculties awake and working. How many times have you daydreamed through several pages of a good book only to wake up to the realization that you have no idea of the ground you have gone over? That cannot happen if you follow the steps outlined here—that is, if you have a system for following a general thread. Think of yourself as a detective looking for clues to a book's general theme or idea, alert for anything that will make it clearer. Heeding the suggestions we have made will help you sustain this attitude. You will be surprised to find out how much time you will save, pleased to see how much more you will grasp, and relieved to discover how much easier it all can be than you supposed. lnspectional Reading II: Superficial Reading The title of this section is intentionally provocative. The word "superficial" ordinarily has a negative connotation. We are quite serious, however, in using the term. Everyone has had the experience of struggling fruitlessly with a difficult

book that was begun with high hopes of enlightenment. It is natural enough to conclude that it was a mistake to try to read it in the first place. But that was not the mistake. Rather it was in expecting too much from the first going over of a difficult book. Approached in the right way, no book intended for the general reader, no matter how difficult, need be a cause for despair. What is the right approach? The answer lies in an important and helpful rule of reading that is generally overlooked. That rule is simply this: In tackling a difficult book for the first time, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away. Pay attention to what you can understand and do not be stopped by what you cannot immediately grasp. Go right on reading past the point where you
 have difficulties in understanding, and you will soon come to things you do understand. Concentrate on these. Keep on in this way. Read the book through, undeterred and undismayed by the paragraphs, footnotes, comments, and references that escape you. If you let yourself get stalled, if you allow yourself to be tripped up by any one of these stumbling blocks, you are lost. In most cases, you will not be able to puzzle the thing out by sticking to it. You will have a much better chance of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book through at least once. What you understand by reading the book through to the end—even if it is only fifty percent or less—will help you when you make the additional effort later to go back to the places you passed by on your first reading. And even if you never go back, understanding half of a really tough book is much better than not understanding it at all, which will be the case if you allow yourself to be stopped by the first difficult passage you come to. Most of us were taught to pay attention to the things we did not understand. We were told to go to a dictionary when we met an

unfamiliar word. We were told to go to an encyclopedia or some other reference work when we were confronted with allusions or statements we did not comprehend. We were told to consult footnotes, scholarly commentaries, or other secondary sources to get help. But when these things are done prematurely, they only impede our reading, instead of helping it. The tremendous pleasure that can come from reading Shakespeare, for instance, was spoiled for generations of high school students who were forced to go through Julius Caesar, As You Like It, or Hamlet, scene by scene, looking up all the strange words in a glossary and studying all the scholarly footnotes. As a result, they never really read a Shakespearean play. By the time they reached the end, they had forgotten the beginning and lost sight of the whole. Instead of being forced to take this pedantic approach, they should have been encouraged to read the play at one sitting and discuss what they got out of that first quick reading. Only then would they have been ready to study the play carefully and closely because then they would have understood enough of it to learn more. The rule applies with equal force to expository works. Here, indeed, the best proof of the soundness of the rule—give a book a first superficial reading—is what happens when you do not follow it. Take a basic work in economics, for example, such as Adam Smith's classic The Wealth of Nations. (We choose this book as an example because it is more than a textbook or a work for specialists in the field. It is a book for the general reader.) If you insist on understanding everything on every page before you go on to the next, you will not get very far. In your effort to master the fine points, you will miss the big points that Smith makes so clearly about the factors of wages, rents, profits, and interest that enter into the cost of things, the role of the market in determining prices, the evils of monopoly, the reasons for free trade. You will miss the forest for the trees. You will not be reading well on any level. CHAPTER 4. THE

SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING29 On Reading Speeds We described inspectional reading in Chapter 2 as the art of getting the most out of a book in a limited time. In describing it further in the present chapter, we have in no way changed that definition. The two steps involved in inspectional reading are both taken rapidly. The competent inspectional reader will accomplish them both quickly, no matter how long or difficult the book he is trying to read. That working definition, however, inevitably raises the question, What about speed reading? What is the relation between the levels of reading and the many speed reading courses, both academic and commercial, that are offered at the present day? We have already suggested that such courses are basically remedial—that is, that they provide instruction mainly, if not exclusively, in reading on the elementary level. But more needs to be said. Let it be understood at once that we are wholly in favor of the proposition that most people ought to be able to read faster than they do. Too often, there are things we have to read that are not really worth spending a lot of time reading; if we cannot read them quickly, it will be a terrible waste of time. It is true enough that many people read some things too slowly, and that they ought to read them faster. But many people also read some things too fast, and they ought to read those things more slowly. A good speed reading course should therefore teach you to read at many different speeds, not just one speed that is faster than anything you can manage now. It should enable you to vary your rate of reading in accordance with the nature and complexity of the material. Our point is really very simple. Many books are hardly worth even skimming; some should be read quickly; and a few should be read at a rate, usually quite slow, that allows for complete comprehension. It is wasteful to read a book slowly that deserves only a fast reading; speed reading skills can help you solve that problem. But this is only one reading problem. The obstacles that

stand in the way of comprehension of a difficult book are not ordinarily, and perhaps never primarily, physiological or psychological. They arise because the reader simply does not know what to do when approaching a difficult—and rewarding—book. He does not know the rules of reading; he does not know how to marshal his intellectual resources for the task. No matter how quickly he reads, he will be no better off if, as is too often true, he does not know what he is looking for and does not know when he has found it. With regard to rates of reading, then, the ideal is not merely to be able to read faster, but to be able to read at different speeds—and to know when the different speeds are appropriate. Inspectional reading is accomplished quickly, but that is not only because you read faster, although in fact you do; it is also because you read less of a book when you give it an inspectional reading, and because you read it in a different way, with different goals in mind. Analytical reading is ordinarily much slower than inspectional reading, but even when you are giving a book an analytical reading, you should not read all of it at the same rate of speed. Every book, no matter how difficult, contains interstitial CHAPTER 4. THE SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING30 material that can be and should be read quickly; and every good book also contains matter that is difficult and should be read very slowly. Fixations and Regressions Speed reading courses properly make much of the discovery—we have known it for half a century or more—that most people continue to sub-vocalize for years after they are first taught to read. Films of eye movements, furthermore, show that the eyes of young or untrained readers “fixate” as many as five or six times in the course of each line that is read. (The eye is blind while it moves; it can only see when it stops.) Thus single words or at the most two-word or three-word phrases are being read at a time, in jumps across the line. Even worse than that, the eyes of incompetent readers regress as often

as once every two or three lines—that is, they return to phrases or sentences previously read. All of these habits are wasteful and obviously cut down reading speed. They are wasteful because the mind, unlike the eye, does not need to “read” only a word or short phrase at a time. The mind, that astounding instrument, can grasp a sentence or even a paragraph at a “glance”—if only the eyes will provide it with the information it needs. Thus the primary task—recognized as such by all speed reading courses—is to correct the fixations and regressions that slow so many readers down. Fortunately, this can be done quite easily. Once it is done, the student can read as fast as his mind will let him, not as slow as his eyes make him. There are various devices for breaking the eye fixations, some of them complicated and expensive. Usually, however, it is not necessary to employ any device more sophisticated than your own hand, which you can train yourself to follow as it moves more and more quickly across and down the page. You can do this yourself. Place your thumb and first two fingers together. Sweep this “pointer” across a line of type, a little faster than it is comfortable for your eyes to move. Force yourself to keep up with your hand. You will very soon be able to read the words as you follow your hand. Keep practicing this, and keep increasing the speed at which your hand moves, and before you know it you will have doubled or trebled your reading speed. The Problem of Comprehension But what exactly have you gained if you increase your reading speed significantly? It is true that you have saved time—but what about comprehension? Has that also increased, or has it suffered in the process? There is no speed reading course that we know of that does not claim to be able to increase your comprehension along with your reading speed. And on the whole, there is probably some foundation for these claims. The hand (or some other device) used as a timer tends not only to increase your reading rate, but also to improve your

concentration on what you are reading. As long as CHAPTER 4. THE SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING31 you are following your hand it is harder to fall asleep, to daydream, to let your mind wander. So far, so good. Concentration is another name for what we have called activity in reading. The good reader reads actively, with concentration. But concentration alone does not really have much of an effect on comprehension, when that is properly understood. Comprehension involves much more than merely being able to answer simple questions of fact about a text. This limited kind of comprehension, in fact, is nothing but the elementary ability to answer the question about a book or other reading material: “What does it say?” The many further questions that, when correctly answered, imply higher levels of comprehension are seldom asked in speed reading courses, and instruction in how to answer them is seldom given. To make this clearer, let us take an example of something to read. Let us take the Declaration of Independence. You probably have a copy of it available. Take it down and look at it. It occupies less than three pages when printed. How fast should you read it? The second paragraph of the Declaration ends with the sentence: “To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.” The following two pages of “ facts,” some of which, incidentally, are quite dubious, can be read quickly. It is not necessary to gain more than a general idea of the kind of facts that Jefferson is citing, unless, of course, you are a scholar concerned with the historical circumstances in which he wrote. Even the last paragraph, ending with the justly celebrated statement that the signers “mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour,” can be read quickly. This is a rhetorical flourish, and it deserves what mere rhetoric always deserves. But the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence require more than a first rapid reading. We doubt that there is anyone who can read those first two paragraphs

at a rate much faster than 20 words a minute. Indeed, individual words in the famous second paragraph—words like “inalienable,” “rights,” “liberty,” “happiness,” “consent,” “ just powers”—are worth dwelling over, puzzling about, considering at length. Properly read, for full comprehension, those first two paragraphs of the Declaration might require days, or weeks, or even years. The problem of speed reading, then, is the problem of comprehension. Practically, this comes down to defining comprehension at levels beyond the elementary. Speed reading courses, for the most part, do not attempt this. It is worth emphasizing, therefore, that it is precisely comprehension in reading that this book seeks to improve. You cannot comprehend a book without reading it analytically; analytical reading, as we have noted, is undertaken primarily for the sake of comprehension (or understanding). Summary of Inspectional Reading A few words in summary of this chapter. There is no single right speed at which you should read; the ability to read at various speeds and to know when each speed is appropriate is the ideal. Great speed in reading is a dubious CHAPTER 4. THE SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING32 achievement; it is of value only if what you have to read is not really worth reading. A better formula is this: Every book should be read no more slowly than it deserves, and no more quickly than you can read it with satisfaction and comprehension. In any event, the speed at which they read, be it fast or slow, is but a fractional part of most people’s problem with reading. Skimming or pre-reading a book is always a good idea; it is necessary when you do not know, as is often the case, whether the book you have in hand is worth reading carefully. You will find that out by skimming it. It is generally desirable to skim even a book that you intend to read carefully, to get some idea of its form and structure. Finally, do not try to understand every word or page of a difficult book the first time through. This is the most

important rule of all; it is the essence of inspectional reading. Do not be afraid to be, or to seem to be, superficial. Race through even the hardest book. You will then be prepared to read it well the second time.

We have now completed our initial discussion of the second level of reading—inspectional reading. We will return to the subject when we come to Part Four, where we will show what an important role inspectional reading plays in syntopical reading, the fourth and highest level of reading. However, you should keep in mind during our discussion of the third level of reading—analytical reading—which is described in the second part of this book, that inspectional reading serves an important function at that level, too. The two stages of inspectional reading can both be thought of as anticipations of steps that the reader takes when he reads analytically. The first stage of inspectional reading—the stage we have called systematic skimming—serves to prepare the analytical reader to answer the questions that must be asked during the first stage of that level. Systematic skimming, in other words, anticipates the comprehension of a book's structure. And the second stage of inspectional reading—the stage we have called superficial reading—serves the reader when he comes to the second stage of reading at the analytical level. Superficial reading is the first necessary step in the interpretation of a book's contents. Before going on to explain analytical reading, we want to pause for a moment to consider again the nature of reading as an activity. There are certain actions the active or demanding reader must perform in order to read well. We will discuss them in the next chapter.