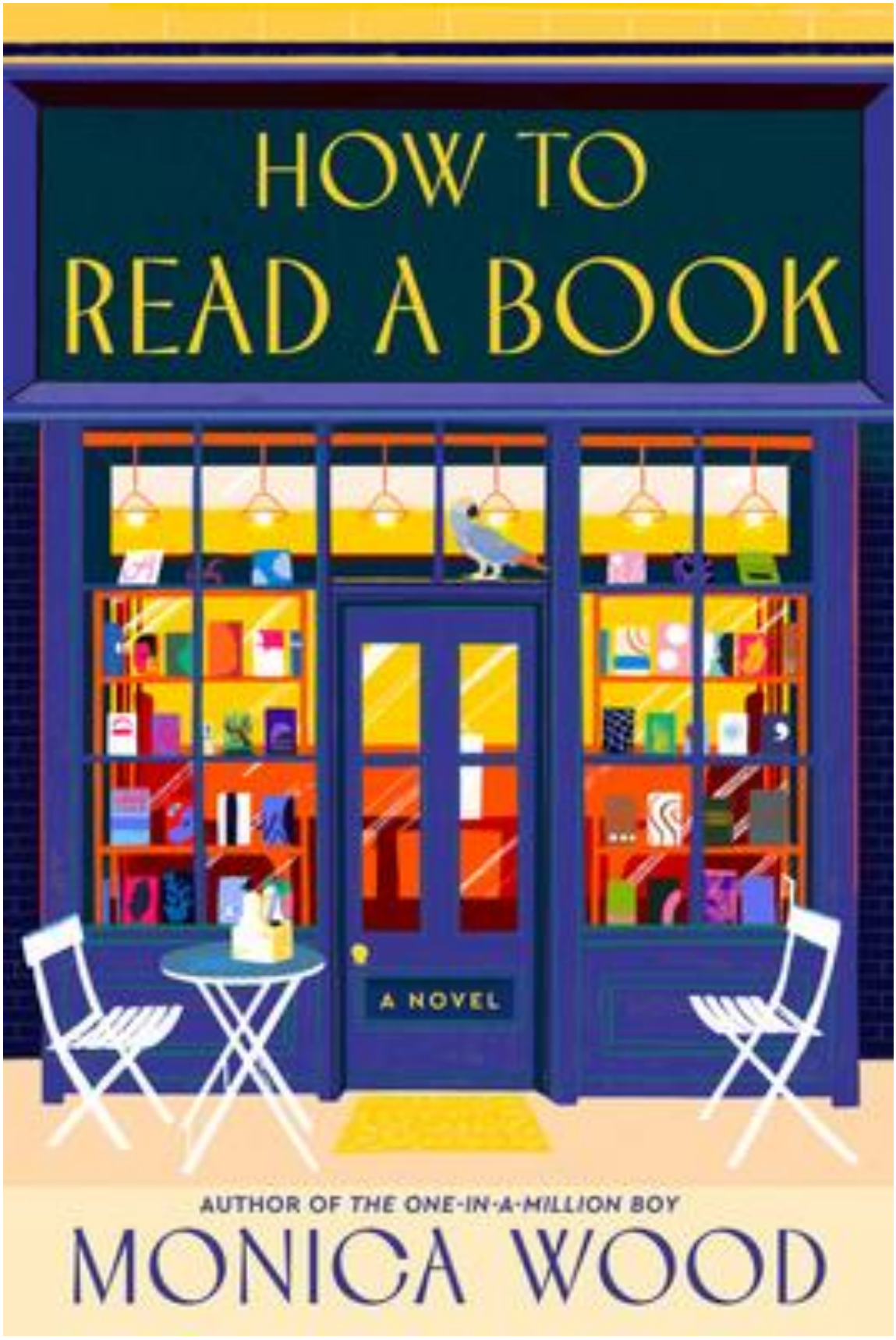
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

Chapter 8

Coming to Terms with an Author

The first stage of analytical reading has been accomplished when you have applied the four rules listed at the end of the last chapter, which together allow you to tell what a book is about and to outline its structure. You are now ready to go on to the next stage, which also comprises four rules of reading. The first of these we call, for short, coming to terms. Coming to terms is usually the last step in any successful business negotiation. All that remains is to sign on the dotted line. But in the analytical reading of a book, coming to terms is the first step beyond the outline. Unless the reader comes to terms with the author, the communication of knowledge from one to the other does not take place. For a term is the basic element of communicable knowledge. Words vs. Terms A term is not a word—at least, not just a word without further qualifications. If a term and a word were exactly the same, you would only have to find the important words in a book in order to come to terms with it. But a word can have many meanings, especially an important word. If the author uses a word in one meaning, and the reader reads it in another, words have passed between them, but they have not come to terms. Where there is unresolved ambiguity in communication, there is no communication, or at best communication must be incomplete.

Just look at the word “communication” for a moment. Its root is related to the word “common.” We speak of a community as a group of people who have something in common. Communication is an effort on the part of one person to share something with another person (or with an animal or a machine): his knowledge, his decisions, his sentiments. It succeeds only when it results in a common something, such as an item of information or knowledge that two 67 CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 68 parties share. When there is ambiguity in the communication of knowledge, all that is in common are the words that one person speaks or writes and another hears or reads. So long as ambiguity persists, there is no meaning in common between writer and reader. For the communication to be successfully completed, therefore, it is necessary for the two parties to use the same words with the same meanings—in short, to come to terms. When that happens, communication happens, the miracle of two minds with but a single thought. A term can be defined as an unambiguous word. That is not quite accurate, for strictly there are no unambiguous words. What we should have said is that a term is a word used unambiguously. The dictionary is full of words. They are almost all ambiguous in the sense that they have many meanings. But a word that has several meanings can be used in one sense at a time. When writer and reader somehow manage for a time to use a given word with one and only one meaning, then, during that time of unambiguous usage, they have come to terms. You cannot find terms in

dictionaries, though the materials for making them are there. Terms occur only in the process of communication. They occur when a writer tries to avoid ambiguity and a reader helps him by trying to follow his use of words. There are, of course, many degrees of success in this. Coming to terms is the ideal toward which writer and reader should strive. Since this is one of the primary achievements of the art of writing and reading, we can think of terms as a skilled use of words for the sake of communicating knowledge. At this point it is probably clear that we are speaking exclusively of expository writers and expository books. Poetry and fiction are not nearly so concerned with the unambiguous use of words as expository works—works that convey knowledge in the broad sense of the word that we have been employing. It can even be argued that the best poetry is that which is the most richly ambiguous, and it has been said with justice that any good poet is sometimes intentionally ambiguous in his writing. This is an important insight about poetry to which we will return later. It is obviously one of the primary differences between the poetical and the expository or scientific realms of literary art. We are now ready to state the fifth rule of reading (an expository work). Stated roughly, it is this: You must spot the important words in a book and figure out how the author is using them. But we can make that a little more precise and elegant: Rule 5. Find the important words and through them come to terms with the author. Note that the rule has two parts. The first part is to locate the important words, the words that make a difference.

The second part is to determine the meaning of these words, as used, with precision. This is the first rule for the second stage of analytical reading, the aim of which is not the outlining of a book's structure but the interpretation of its contents or message. The other rules for this stage, to be discussed in the next chapter, are like this one in an important respect. They also require you to take two steps: a step dealing with the language as such, and a step beyond the language to the thought that lies behind it. CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 69 If language were a pure and perfect medium for thought, these steps would not be separate. If every word had only one meaning, if words could not be used ambiguously, if, in short, each word was an ideal term, language would be a diaphanous medium. The reader would see straight through the writer's words to the content of his mind. If that were the case, there would be no need at all for this second stage of analytical reading. Interpretation would be unnecessary. But of course that is far from the case. There is no use crying about it, no use making up impossible schemes for an ideal language, as the philosopher Leibniz and some of his followers have tried to do. Indeed, if they succeeded, there would be no more poetry. The only thing to do, therefore, in expository works, is to make the best of language as it is, and the only way to do that is to use language as skillfully as possible when you want to convey, or to receive, knowledge. Because language is imperfect as a medium for conveying knowledge, it also functions as an obstacle to communication.

The rules of interpretive reading are directed to overcoming that obstacle. We can expect a good writer to do his best to reach us through the barrier language inevitably sets up, but we cannot expect him to do the job all by himself. We must meet him halfway. We, as readers, must try to tunnel through from our side of the barrier. The likelihood of a meeting of minds through language depends on the willingness of both reader and writer to work together. Just as teaching will not avail unless there is a reciprocal activity of being taught, so no author, regardless of his skill in writing, can achieve communication without a reciprocal skill on the part of readers. If that were not so, the diverse skills of writing and reading would not bring minds together, however much effort was expended, any more than the men who tunnel through from opposite sides of a mountain would ever meet unless they made their calculations according to the same principles of engineering. As we have pointed out, each of the rules of interpretive reading involves two steps. To get technical for a moment, we may say that these rules have a grammatical and a logical aspect. The grammatical aspect is the one that deals with words. The logical step deals with their meanings or, more precisely, with terms. So far as communication is concerned, both steps are indispensable. If language is used without thought, nothing is being communicated. And thought or knowledge cannot be communicated without language. As arts, grammar and logic are concerned with language in relation to thought and thought in relation to language. That is why skill in

both reading and writing is gained through these arts. This business of language and thought—especially the distinction between words and terms—is so important that we are going to risk being repetitious to be sure the main point is understood. The main point is that one word can be the vehicle for many terms, and one term can be expressed by many words. Let us illustrate this schematically in the following manner. The word “reading” has been used in many senses in the course of our discussion. Let us take three of these senses: By the word “reading” we may mean (1) reading to be entertained, CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 70 (2) reading to get information, and (3) reading to achieve understanding. Now let us symbolize the word “reading” by the letter X, and the three meanings by the letters a, b, and c. What is symbolized in this scheme by Xa, Xb, and Xc, are not three words, for X remains the same throughout. But they are three terms, on the condition, of course, that you, as reader, and we, as writers know when X is being used in one sense and not another. If we write Xa in a given place, and you read Xb, we are writing and you are reading the same word, but not in the same way. The ambiguity prevents or at least impedes communication. Only when you think the word as we think it, do we have one thought between us. Our minds cannot meet in X, but only in Xa or Xb or Xc. Thus we come to terms. Finding the Key Words We are now prepared to put flesh on the rule that requires the reader to come to terms. How does he go about doing it? How does he find the important or key words in

a book? You can be sure of one thing. Not all the words an author uses are important. Better than that, you can be sure that most of his words are not. Only those words that he uses in a special way are important for him, and for us as readers. This is not an absolute matter, of course, but one of degree. Words may be more or less important. Our only concern is with the fact that some words in a book are more important than others. At one extreme are the words that the author uses as the proverbial man in the street does. Since the author is using these words as everyone does in ordinary discourse, the reader should have no trouble with them. He is familiar with their ambiguity and he has grown accustomed to the variation in their meanings as they occur in this context or that. For example, the word "reading" occurs in A. S. Eddington's book, The Nature of the Physical World. He speaks of "pointer-readings," the readings of dials and gauges on scientific instruments. He is using the word "reading" in one of its ordinary senses. It is not for him a technical word. He can rely on ordinary usage to convey what he means to the reader. Even if he used the word "reading" in a different sense somewhere else in the book—in a phrase, let us say, such as "reading nature"—he could be confident that the reader would note the shift to another of the word's ordinary meanings. The reader who could not do this could not talk to his friends or carry on his daily business. But Eddington is not able to use the word "cause" so lightheartedly. That may be a word of common speech, but he is using it in a definitely special sense when he

discusses the theory of causation. How that word is to be understood makes a difference that both he and the reader must bother about. For the same reason, the word “reading” is important in this book. We cannot get along with merely using it in an ordinary way. An author uses most words as men ordinarily do in conversation, with a range of meanings, and trusting to the context to indicate the shifts. Knowing this fact is some help in detecting the more important words. We must not CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 71 forget, however, that at diferent times and places the same words are not equally familiar items in daily usage. Contemporary writers will employ most words as they are ordinarily used today, and you will know which words these are because you are alive today. But in reading books written in the past, it may be more difficult to detect the words the author is using as most people did at the time and place he was writing. The fact that some authors intentionally employ archaic words, or archaic senses of words, complicates the matter further, as does the translation of books from foreign languages. Nevertheless, it remains true that most of the words in any book can be read just as one would use them in talking to one’s friends. Take any page of this book and count the words we are using in that way: all the prepositions, conjunctions, and articles, and almost all of the verbs, nouns, adverbs, and adjectives. In this chapter so far, there have been only a few important words: “word,” “term,” ambiguity,” “communication,” and perhaps one or two more. Of these,

“term” is clearly the most important; all the others are important in relation to it. You cannot locate the key words without making an effort to understand the passage in which they occur. This situation is somewhat paradoxical. If you do understand the passage, you will, of course, know which words in it are the most important. If you do not fully understand the passage, it is probably because you do not know the way the author is using certain words. If you mark the words that trouble you, you may hit the very ones the author is using specially. That this is likely to be so follows from the fact that you should have no trouble with the words the author uses in an ordinary way. From your point of view as a reader, therefore, the most important words are those that give you trouble. It is likely that these words are important for the author as well. However, they may not be. It is also possible that words that are important for the author do not bother you, and precisely because you understand them. In that case, you have already come to terms with the author. Only where you fail to come to terms have you work still to do. Technical Words and Special Vocabularies So far we have been proceeding negatively by eliminating the ordinary words. You discover some of the important words by the fact that they are not ordinary for you. That is why they bother you. But is there any other way of spotting the important words? Are there any positive signs that point to them? There are several. The first and most obvious sign is the explicit stress an author places upon certain words and not others. He may do this in many

ways. He may use such typographical devices as quotation marks or italics to mark the word for you. He may call your attention to the word by explicitly discussing its various senses and indicating the way he is going to use it here and there. Or he may emphasize the word by defining the thing that the word is used to name. CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 72 No one can read Euclid without knowing that such words as “point,” “line,” “plane,” “angle,” “parallel,” and so forth are of the first importance. These are the words that name geometrical entities defined by Euclid. There are other important words, such as “equals,” “whole,” and “part,” but these do not name anything that is defined. You know they are important from the fact that they occur in the axioms. Euclid helps you here by making his primary propositions explicit at the very beginning. You can guess that the terms composing such propositions are basic, and that underlines for you the words that express these terms. You may have no difficulty with these words, because they are words of common speech, and Euclid appears to be using them that way. If all authors wrote as Euclid did, you may say, this business of reading would be much easier. But that of course is not possible, although there have in fact been men who thought that any subject matter could be expounded in the geometrical manner. The procedure—the method of exposition and proof—that works in mathematics is not applicable in every field of knowledge. In any event, for our purposes it is sufficient to note what is common to every sort of exposition. Every field of knowledge

has its own technical vocabulary. Euclid makes his plain right at the beginning. The same is true of any writer, such as Galileo or Newton, who writes in the geometrical manner. In books differently written or in other fields, the technical vocabulary must be discovered by the reader. If the author has not pointed out the words himself, the reader may locate them through having some prior knowledge of the subject matter. If he knows something about biology or economics before he begins to read Darwin or Adam Smith, he certainly has some leads toward discerning the technical words. The rules of analyzing a book's structure may help here. If you know what kind of book it is, what it is about as a whole, and what its major parts are, you are greatly aided in separating the technical vocabulary from the ordinary words. The author's title, chapter headings, and preface may be useful in this connection. From this you know, for example, that "wealth" is a technical word for Adam Smith, and "species" for Darwin. Since one technical word leads to another, you cannot help but discover other technical words in a similar fashion. You can soon make a list of the important words used by Adam Smith: labor, capital, land, wages, profits, rent, commodity, price, exchange, productive, unproductive, money, and so forth. And here are some you cannot miss in Darwin: variety, genus, selection, survival, adaptation, hybrid, fittest, creation. Where a field of knowledge has a well-established technical vocabulary, the task of locating the important words in a book treating that subject matter is relatively easy. You can spot them positively through having

some acquaintance with the field, or negatively by knowing what words must be technical, because they are not ordinary. Unfortunately, there are many fields in which a technical vocabulary is not well established. Philosophers are notorious for having private vocabularies. There are some words, of course, that have a traditional standing in philosophy. Though they may not be used by all writers in the same sense, they are nevertheless technical CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 73 words in the discussion of certain problems. But philosophers often find it necessary to coin new words, or to take some word from common speech and make it a technical word. This last procedure is likely to be most misleading to the reader who supposes that he knows what the word means, and therefore treats it as an ordinary word. Most good authors, however, anticipating just this confusion, give very explicit warning whenever they adopt the procedure. In this connection, one clue to an important word is that the author quarrels with other writers about it. When you find an author telling you how a particular word has been used by others, and why he chooses to use it otherwise, you can be sure that word makes a great difference to him. We have here emphasized the notion of technical vocabulary, but you must not take this too narrowly. The relatively small set of words that express an author's main ideas, his leading concepts, constitutes his special vocabulary. They are the words that carry his analysis, his argument. If he is making an original communication, some of these words are likely to be used by him in a very special

way, although he may use others in a fashion that has become traditional in the field. In either case, these are the words that are most important for him. They should be important for you as a reader also, but in addition any other word whose meaning is not clear is important for you. The trouble with most readers is that they simply do not pay enough attention to words to locate their difficulties. They fail to distinguish the words that they do not understand sufficiently from those they do. All the things we have suggested to help you find the important words in a book will be of no avail unless you make a deliberate effort to note the words you must work on to find the terms they convey. The reader who fails to ponder, or at least to mark, the words he does not understand is headed for disaster. If you are reading a book that can increase your understanding, it stands to reason that not all of its words will be completely intelligible to you. If you proceed as if they were all ordinary words, all on the same level of general intelligibility as the words of a newspaper article, you will make no headway toward interpretation of the book. You might just as well be reading a newspaper, for the book cannot enlighten you if you do not try to understand it. Most of us are addicted to non-active reading. The outstanding fault of the non-active or undemanding reader is his inattention to words, and his consequent failure to come to terms with the author. Finding the Meanings Spotting the important words is only the beginning of the task. It merely locates the places in the text where you have to go to work. There is another part of this fifth rule of reading. Let us tum to

that now. Let us suppose you have marked the words that trouble you. What next? There are two main possibilities. Either the author is using these words in a single sense throughout or he is using them in two or more senses, shifting his meaning from place to place. In the first alternative, the word stands for CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 74 a single term. A good example of the use of important words so that they are restricted to a single meaning is found in Euclid. In the second alternative, the word stands for several terms. In the light of these alternatives, your procedure should be as follows. First, try to determine whether the word has one or many meanings. If it has many, try to see how they are related. Finally, note the places where the word is used in one sense or another, and see if the context gives you any clue to the reason for the shift in meaning. This last will enable you to follow the word in its change of meanings with the same flexibility that characterizes the author's usage. But, you may complain, everything is clear except the main thing. How does one find out what the meanings are? The answer, though simple, may appear unsatisfactory. But patience and practice will show you otherwise. The answer is that you have to discover the meaning of a word you do not understand by using the meanings of all the other words in the context that you do understand. This must be the way, no matter how merry-go-roundish it may seem at first. The easiest way to illustrate this is to consider a definition. A definition is stated in words. If you do not understand any of the words used in the definition, you

obviously cannot understand the meaning of the word that names the thing defined. The word “point” is a basic word in geometry. You may think you know what it means (in geometry), but Euclid wants to be sure you use it in only one way. He tells you what he means by first defining the thing he is later going to use the word to name. He says: “A point is that which has no part.” How does that help to bring you to terms with him? You know, he assumes, what every other word in the sentence means with sufficient precision. You know that whatever has parts is a complex whole. You know that the opposite of complex is simple. To be simple is the same as to lack parts. You know that the use of the words “is” and “that which” means that the thing referred to must be an entity of some sort. Incidentally, it follows from all this that, if there are no physical things without parts, a point, as Euclid speaks of it, cannot be physical. This illustration is typical of the process by which you acquire meanings. You operate with meanings you already possess. If every word that was used in a definition had itself to be defined, nothing could ever be defined. If every word in a book you were reading was entirely strange to you, as in the case of a book in a totally foreign language, you could make no progress at all. That is what people mean when they say of a book that it is all Greek to them. They simply have not tried to understand it, which would be justifiable if it were really in Greek. But most of the words in any English book are familiar words. These words surround the strange words, the technical words, the words that may cause the reader some

trouble. The surrounding words are the context for the words to be interpreted. The reader has all the materials he needs to do the job. We are not pretending the job is an easy one. We are only insisting that it is not an impossible one. If it were, no one could read a book to gain in understanding. The fact that a book can give you new insights or enlighten you CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 75 indicates that it probably contains words you may not readily understand. If you could not come to understand those words by your own efforts, then the kind of reading we are talking about would be impossible. It would be impossible to pass from understanding less to understanding more by your own operations on a book. There is no rule of thumb for doing this. The process is something like the trial-and-error method of putting a jigsaw puzzle together. The more parts you put together, the easier it is to find places for the remaining parts, if only because there are fewer of them. A book comes to you with a large number of words already in place. A word in place is a term. It is definitely located by the meaning that you and the author share in using it. The remaining words must be put in place. You do this by trying to make them fit this way or that. The better you understand the picture that the words so far in place already partially reveal, the easier it is to complete the picture by making terms of the remaining words. Each word put into place makes the next adjustment easier. You will make errors, of course, in the process. You will think you have managed to find where a word belongs and how it fits, only to discover later that

the placement of another word requires you to make a whole series of readjustments. The errors will get corrected because, so long as they are not found out, the picture cannot be completed. Once you have had any experience at all in this work of coming to terms, you will soon be able to check yourself. You will know whether you have succeeded or not. You will not blithely think you understand when you do not. In comparing a book to a jigsaw puzzle, we have made one assumption that is not true. A good puzzle is, of course, one all of whose parts fit. The picture can be perfectly completed. The same is true of the ideally good book, but there is no such book. In proportion as books are good, their terms will be so well made and put together by the author that the reader can do the work of interpretation fruitfully. Here, as in the case of every other rule of reading, bad books are less readable than good ones. The rules do not work on them, except to show you how bad they are. If the author uses words ambiguously you cannot find out what he is trying to say. You can only find out that he has not been precise. But, you may ask, does not an author who uses a word in more than a single sense use it ambiguously? And is it not the usual practice for authors to use words in several senses, especially their most important words? The answer to the first question is No; to the second, Yes. To use a word ambiguously is to use it in several senses without distinguishing or relating their meanings. (For example, we have probably used the word “important” ambiguously in this chapter, for we were not always clear as to whether we meant

important for the author or important for you.) The author who does that has not made terms that the reader can come to. But the author who distinguishes the several senses in which he is using a critical word and enables the reader to make a responsive discrimination is offering terms. You should not forget that one word can represent several terms. One way to remember this is to distinguish between the author's vocabulary and his CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 76 terminology. If you make a list in one column of the important words, and in another of their important meanings, you will see the relation between the vocabulary and the terminology. There are several further complications. In the first place, a word that has several distinct meanings can be used either in a single sense or in a combination of senses. Let us take the word "reading" again as an example. In some places, we have used it to stand for reading any kind of book. In others, we have used it to stand for reading books that instruct rather than entertain. In still others, we have used it to stand for reading that enlightens rather than informs. Now if we symbolize here, as we did before, these three distinct meanings of "reading" by Xa, Xb, and Xc, then the first usage just mentioned is Xabc, the second is Xbc, and the third Xc. In other words, if several meanings are related, one can use a word to stand for all of them, for some of them, or for only one of them at a time. So long as each usage is definite, the word so used is a term. In the second place, there is the problem of synonyms. The repetition of a single word over and over is awkward and

boring, except in mathematical writing, and so good authors often substitute different words having the same or very similar meanings for important words in their text. This is just the opposite of the situation where one word can stand for several terms; here, one and the same term is represented by two or more words used synonymously. We can express this symbolically as follows. Let X and Y be two diferent words, such as “enlightenment” and “insight.” Let the letter a stand for the same meaning that each can express, namely, a gain in understanding. Then Xa and Ya represent the same term, though they ate distinct as words. When we speak of reading “ for insight” and reading “ for “enlightenment,” we are referring to the same kind of reading, because the two phrases are being used with the same meaning. The words are different, but there is only one term for you as a reader to grasp. This is important, of course. If you supposed that every time an author changed his words, he was shifting his terms, you would make as great an error as to suppose that every time he used the same words, the terms remained the same. Keep this in mind when you list the author’s vocabulary and terminology in separate columns. You will find two relationships. On the one hand, a single word may be related to several terms. On the other hand, a single term may be related to several words. In the third place, and finally, there is the matter of phrases. If a phrase is a unit, that is, if it is a whole that can be the subject or predicate of a sentence, it is like a single word. Like a single word, it can refer to something being talked about in some

way. It follows, therefore, that a term can be expressed by a phrase as well as by a word. And all the relations that exist between words and terms hold also between terms and phrases. Two phrases may express the same term, and one phrase may express several terms, according to the way its constituent words are used. In general, a phrase is less likely to be ambiguous than a word. Because it is a group of words, each of which is in the context of the others, the single words CHAPTER 8. COMING TO TERMS WITH AN AUTHOR 77 are more likely to have restricted meanings. That is why a writer is likely to substitute a fairly elaborate phrase for a single word if he wants to be sure that you get his meaning. One illustration should suffice. To be sure that you come to terms with us about reading, we substitute phrases like “reading for enlightenment” for the single word “reading.” To make doubly sure, we may substitute a more elaborate phrase, such as “the process of passing from understanding less to understanding more by the operation of your mind upon a book.” There is only one term here, a term referring to the kind of reading that this book is mostly about. But that one term has been expressed by a single word, a short phrase, and a longer one. This has been a hard chapter to write, and probably a hard one to read. The reason is clear. The rule of reading we have been discussing cannot be made fully intelligible without going into all sorts of grammatical and logical explanations about words and terms. In fact, we have actually done very little explaining. To give an adequate account of these matters would take many chapters.

We have merely touched upon the most essential points. We hope we have said enough to make the rule a useful guide in practice. The more you put it into practice, the more you will appreciate the intricacies of the problem. You will want to know something about the literal and metaphorical use of words. You will want to know about the distinction between abstract and concrete words, and between proper and common names. You will become interested in the whole business of definition: the difference between defining words and defining things; why some words are indefinable, and yet have definite meanings, and so forth. You will seek light on what is called "the emotive use of words," that is, the use of words to arouse emotions, to move men to action or change their minds, as distinct from the communication of knowledge. And you may even become interested in the relation between ordinary "rational" speech and "bizarre" or "crazy" talk—the speech of the mentally disturbed, where almost every word carries weird and unexpected but nevertheless identifiable connotations. If the practice of analytical reading elicits these further interests, you will be in a position to satisfy them by reading books on these special subjects. And you will profit more from reading such books, because you will go to them with questions born of your own experience in reading. The study of grammar and logic, the sciences that underlie these rules, is practical only to the extent you can relate it to practice. You may never wish to go further. But even if you do not, you will find that your comprehension of any book will be

enormously increased if you only go to the trouble of finding its important words, identifying their shifting meanings, and coming to terms. Seldom does such a small change in a habit have such a large effect.