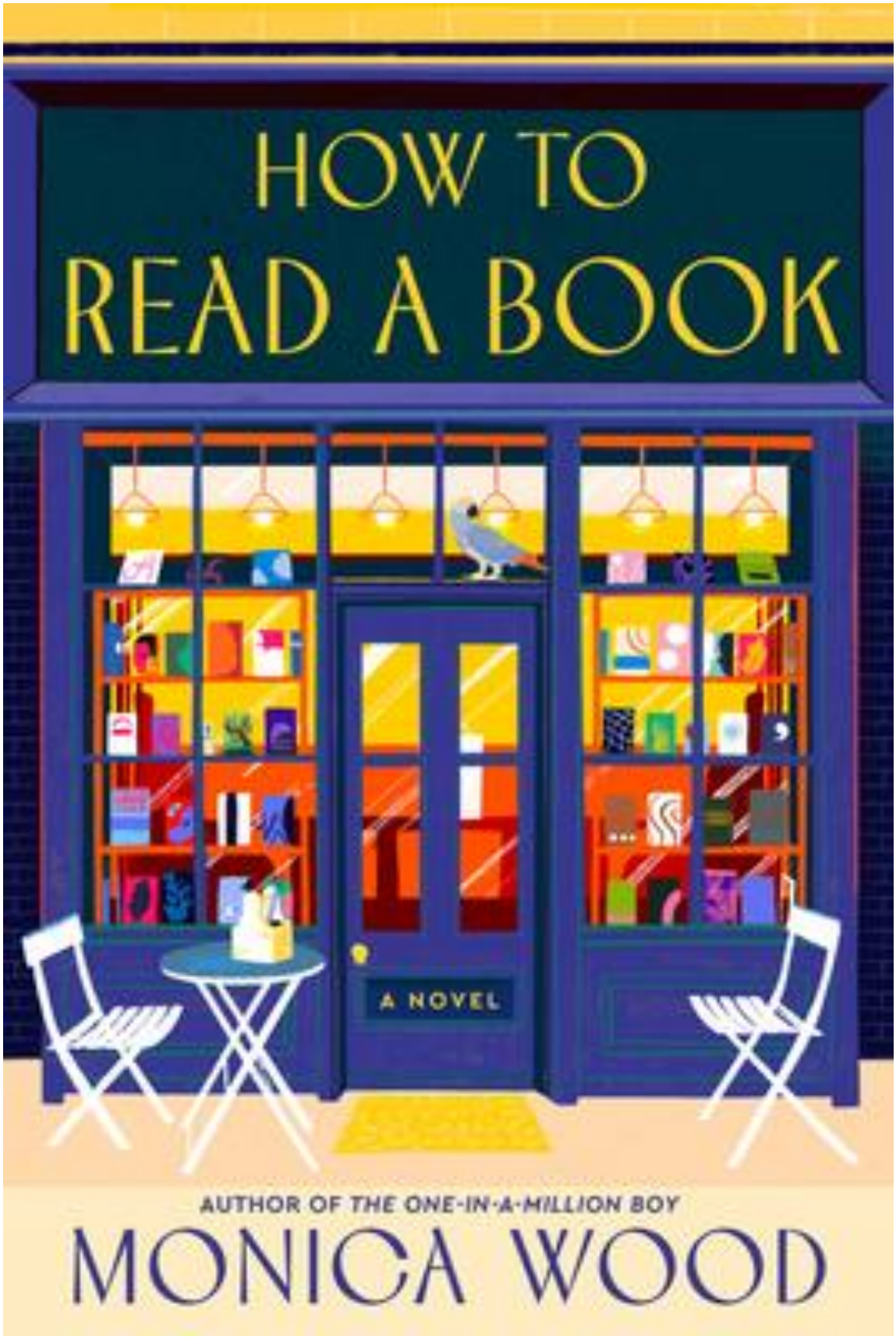
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

Chapter 7

X-raying a Book

Every book has a skeleton hidden between its covers. Your job as an analytical reader is to find it. A book comes to you with flesh on its bare bones and clothes over its flesh. It is all dressed up. You do not have to undress it or tear the flesh off its limbs to get at the firm structure that underlies the soft surface. But you must read the book with X-ray eyes, for it is an essential part of your apprehension of any book to grasp its structure. Recognition of the need to see the structure of a book leads to the discovery of the second and third rules for reading any book. We say “any book.” These rules apply to poetry as well as to science, and to any kind of expository work. Their application will be different, of course, according to the kind of book they are used on. The unity of a novel is not the same as the unity of a treatise on politics; nor are the parts of the same sort, or ordered in the same way. But every book without exception that is worth reading at all has a unity and an organization of parts. A book that did not would be a mess. It would be relatively unreadable, as bad books actually are. We will state these two rules as simply as possible. Then we will explain and illustrate them. The second rule of analytical reading can be expressed as follows: Rule 2. State the unity of the whole book in a single sentence, or at most a few sentences (a short

paragraph). This means that you must say what the whole book is about as briefly as possible. To say what the whole book is about is not the same as saying what kind of book it is. (That was covered by Rule 1.) The word “about” may be misleading here. In one sense, a book is about a certain type of subject matter, which it treats in a certain way. If you know this, you know what kind of book it is. But there is another, more colloquial sense of “about.” We ask a person what he is about, what he is up to. So we can wonder what an author is up to, what he is trying to do. To find out what a book is about in this sense is to discover its theme or main point. A book is a work of art. (Again, we want to warn you against too narrow a 53 CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 54 conception of “art.” We do not mean, or we do not only mean, “fine art” here. A book is the product of someone who has a certain skill in making. He is a maker of books and he has made one here for our benefit.) In proportion as it is good, as a book and as a work of art, it has a more nearly perfect, a more pervasive unity. This is true of music and paintings, of novels and plays; it is no less true of books that convey knowledge. But it is not enough to acknowledge this fact vaguely. You must apprehend the unity with definiteness. There is only one way to know that you have succeeded. You must be able to tell yourself or anybody else what the unity is, and in a few words. (If it requires too many words, you have not seen the unity but a multiplicity.) Do not be satisfied with “ feeling the unity” that you cannot express. The reader who says, “I know what it is, but I just can’t say it,”

probably does not even fool himself. The third rule can be expressed as follows: Rule 3. Set forth the major parts of the book, and show how these are organized into a whole, by being ordered to one another and to the unity of the whole. The reason for this mle should be obvious. If a work of art were absolutely simple, it would, of course, have no parts. But that is never the case. None of the sensible, physical things man knows is simple in this absolute way, nor is any human production. They are all complex unities. You have not grasped a complex unity if all you know about it is how it is one. You must also know how it is many, not a many that consists of a lot of separate things, but an organized many. If the parts were not organically related, the whole that they composed would not be one. Strictly speaking, there would be no whole at all but merely a collection. There is a difference between a heap of bricks, on the one hand, and the single house they can constitute, on the other. There is a difference between a single house and a collection of houses. A book is like a single house. It is a mansion having many rooms, rooms on different levels, of different sizes and shapes, with different outlooks, with different uses. The rooms are independent, in part. Each has its own structure and interior decoration. But they are not absolutely independent and separate. They are connected by doors and arches, by corridors and stairways, by what architects call a “traffic pattern.” Because they are connected, the partial function that each performs contributes its share to the usefulness of the whole house. Otherwise the house would

not be livable. The analogy is almost pedect. A good book, like a good house, is an orderly arrangement of parts. Each major part has a certain amount of independence. As we will see, it may have an interior structure of its own, and it may be decorated in a different way from other parts. But it must also be connected with the other parts—that is, related to them functionally—for otherwise it would not contribute its share to the intelligibility of the whole. As houses are more or less livable, so books are more or less readable. The most readable book is an architectural achievement on the part of the author. The best books are those that have the most intelligible structure. Though they are usually more complex than poorer books, their greater complexity is also a greater simplicity, because their parts are better organized, more unified. CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 55 That is one of the reasons why the best books are also the most readable. Lesser works are really more bothersome to read. Yet to read them well—that is, as well as they can be read—you must try to find some plan in them. They would have been better books if their authors had themselves seen the plan a little more clearly. But if they hang together at all, if they are a complex unity to any degree and not mere collections, there must be a plan and you must find it. Of Plots and Plans: Stating the Unity of a Book Let us return now to the second rule, which requires you to state the unity of a book. A few illustrations of the rule in operation may guide you in putting it into practice. Let us begin with a famous case. You probably read Homer’s Odyssey in school. If

not, you must know the story of Odysseus, or Ulysses, as the Romans call him, the man who took ten years to return from the siege of Troy only to find his faithful wife Penelope herself besieged by suitors. It is an elaborate story as Homer tells it, full of exciting adventures on land and sea, replete with episodes of all sorts and many complications of plot. But it also has a single unity of action, a main thread of plot that ties everything together. Aristotle, in his Poetics, insists that this is the mark of every good story, novel, or play. To support his point, he shows how the unity of the Odyssey can be summarized in a few sentences. A certain man is absent from home for many years; he is jealously watched by Poseidon, and left desolate. Meanwhile his home is in a wretched plight; suitors are wasting his substance and plotting against his son. At length, tempest-tossed, he himself arrives; he makes certain persons acquainted with him; he attacks the suitors with his own hand, and is himself preserved while he destroys them. “This,” says Aristotle, “is the essence of the plot; the rest is episode.” After you know the plot in this way, and through it the unity of the whole narrative, you can put the parts into their proper places. You might find it a good exercise to try this with some novels you have read. Try it on some good ones, such as Fielding’s Tom Jones or Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment or Joyce’s modern Ulysses. The plot of Tom Jones, for instance, can be reduced to the familiar formula: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. That, indeed, is the plot of every romance. To recognize this is to learn what it means to say that there are only a small

number of plots in the world. The difference between good and bad stories having the same essential plot lies in what the author does with it, how he dresses up the bare bones. You do not always have to find out the unity of a book 1ll by yourself. The author often helps you. Sometimes, the title is all you have to read. In the eighteenth century, writers had the habit of composing elaborate titles that told the reader what the whole book was about. Here is a title by Jeremy Collier, an CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 56 English divine who attacked what he considered to be the obscenity—we would say pornography, perhaps—of Restoration drama much more learnedly than is customary nowadays: A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage, together with the Sense of Antiquity upon this Argument. You can guess from this that Collier recites many flagrant instances of the abuse of morals and that he supports his protest by quoting texts from those ancients who argued, as Plato did, that the stage corrupts youth, or, as the early Church fathers did, that plays are seductions of the flesh and the devil. Sometimes the author tells you the unity of his plan in his preface. In this respect, expository books differ radically from fiction. A scientific or philosophical writer has no reason to keep you in suspense. In fact, the less suspense he keeps you in, the more likely you are to sustain the effort of reading him through. Like a newspaper article, an expository book may summarize itself in its first paragraph. Do not be too proud to accept the author's help if he proffers it, but do not rely too completely on what he says in

the preface, either. The best-laid plans of authors, like those of mice and other men, often go awry. Be guided by the prospectus the author gives you, but always remember that the obligation of finding the unity belongs finally to the reader, as much as the obligation of having one belongs to the writer. You can discharge that obligation honestly only by reading the whole book. The introductory paragraph of Herodotus' history of the war between the Greeks and the Persians provides an excellent summary of the whole. It runs: These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicamassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud. That is a good beginning for you as a reader. It tells you succinctly what the whole book is about. But you had better not stop there. After you have read the nine parts of Herodotus' history through, you will probably find it necessary to elaborate on that statement to do justice to the whole. You might want to mention the Persian kings—Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes; the Greek heroes of the war—primarily Themistocles; and the major events—the crossing of the Hellespont and the decisive battles, notably Thermopylae and Salamis. All the rest of the fascinating details, with which Herodotus richly prepares you for his climax, can be left out of your summary of the plot. Note, here, that the unity of a history is a single thread of plot, very much as in fiction. So far

as unity is concerned, this rule of reading elicits the same kind of answer in history and in fiction. A few more illustrations may suffice. Let us take a practical book first. The unity of Aristotle's Ethics can be stated thus: CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 57 This is an inquiry into the nature of human happiness and an analysis of the conditions under which happiness may be gained or lost, with an indication of what men must do in their conduct and thinking in order to become happy or to avoid unhappiness, the principal emphasis being placed on the cultivation of the virtues, both moral and intellectual, although other goods are also recognized as necessary for happiness, such as wealth, health, friends, and a just society in which to live. Another practical book is Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations. Here the reader is aided by the author's own statement of "the plan of the work" at the very beginning. But that takes several pages. The unity can be more briefly stated as follows: This is an inquiry into the source of national wealth in any economy that is built on a division of labor, considering the relation of the wages paid labor, the profits returned to capital, and the rent owed the landowner, as the prime factors in the price of commodities. It discusses the various ways in which capital can be more or less gainfully employed, and relates the origin and use of money to the accumulation and employment of capital. Examining the development of opulence in different nations and under different conditions, it compares the several systems of political economy, and argues for the beneficence of free trade. If a reader grasped the unity

of The Wealth of Nations in this way, and did a similar job for Marx's Das Kapital, he would be well on the way toward seeing the relation between two of the most influential books of the past two centuries. Darwin's The Origin of Species provides us with a good example of the unity of a theoretical book in science. Here is a statement of it: This is an account of the variation of living things during the course of countless generations and the way in which this results in new groupings of plants and animals; it treats both of the variability of domesticated animals and of variability under natural conditions, showing how such factors as the struggle for existence and natural selection operate to bring about and sustain such groupings; it argues that species are not fixed and immutable groups, but that they are merely varieties in transition from a less to a more marked and permanent status, supporting this argument by evidences from extinct animals found in the earth's crust, and from comparative embryology and anatomy. That may seem like a big mouthful, but the book was an even bigger one for a great many readers in the nineteenth century, partly because they did not go to the trouble of finding out what it was really about. Finally, let us take Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding as a theoretical book in philosophy. You may recall our observing that Locke himself CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 58 summarized his work by saying that it was "an inquiry into the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion and assent." We

would not quarrel with so excellent a statement of plan by the author, except to add two subordinate qualifications to do justice to the first and third parts of the essay: it will be shown, we would add, that there are no innate ideas, but that all human knowledge is acquired from experience; and language will be discussed as a medium for the expression of thought, its proper use and most familiar abuses to be indicated. There are two things we want you to note before we proceed. The first is how frequently you can expect the author, especially a good one, to help you to state the plan of his book. Despite that fact, most readers are at a total loss if you ask them to say briefly what the whole book is about. Partly this is owing to the widespread inability to speak concise English sentences. Partly it is owing to neglect of this rule in reading. But it also indicates that many readers pay as little attention to the author's introductory words as they ordinarily do to his title. The second point is a word of caution. Do not take the sample summaries we have given you as if they were, in each case, a final and absolute formulation of the book's unity. A unity can be variously stated. There is no one right way to do it. One statement is better than another, of course, in proportion as it is brief, accurate, and comprehensive. But quite different statements may be equally good, or equally bad. We have here sometimes stated the unity of a book quite differently from the author's expression of it, and without apologies to him. You may differ similarly from us. After all, a book is something different to each reader. It would not be surprising if that

difference expressed itself in the way the reader stated its unity. This does not mean, however, that anything goes. Though readers are different, the book is the same, and there can be an objective check upon the accuracy and fidelity of the statements anyone makes about it. Mastering the Multiplicity: The Art of Outlining a Book Let us tum now to the other structural rule, the rule that requires us to set forth the major parts of the book in their order and relation. This third rule is closely related to the second. A well-stated unity indicates the major parts that compose the whole; you cannot comprehend a whole without somehow seeing its parts. But it is also true that unless you grasp the organization of its parts, you cannot know the whole comprehensively. Why, then, make two rules here instead of one? It is primarily a matter of convenience. It is easier to grasp a complex and unified structure in two steps than in one. The second rule directs your attention toward the unity, the third toward the complexity, of a book. There is another reason for the separation. The major parts of a book may be seen at the moment when you grasp its unity. CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 59 But these parts are themselves usually complex and have an interior structure you must see. Hence the third rule involves more than just an enumeration of the parts. It means outlining them, that is, treating the parts as if they were subordinate wholes, each with a unity and complexity of its own. A formula can be stated for operating according to this third rule. It will guide you in a general way. According to the second rule, we had to say: The whole book is

about so and so and such and such. That done, we might obey the third rule by proceeding as follows: (1) The author accomplished this plan in five major parts, of which the first part is about so and so, the second part is about such and such, the third part is about this, the fourth part about that, and the fifth part about still another thing. (2) The first of these major parts is divided into three sections, of which the first considers X, the second considers Y, and the third considers Z. (3) In the first section of the first part, the author makes four points, of which the first is A, the second B, the third C, and the fourth D. And so on and so forth. You may object to this much outlining. It would take a lifetime to read a book that way. But of course this is only a formula. The rule looks as if it required an impossible amount of work from you. In fact, the good reader does this sort of thing habitually, and hence easily and naturally. He may not write it all out. He may not even at the time of reading have made it all verbally explicit. But if he were called upon to give an account of the structure of the book, he would do something that approximated the formula we have described. The word “approximation” should relieve your anxiety. A good rule always describes the ideal performance. But a person can be skilled in an art without being the ideal artist. He can be a good practitioner if he merely approximates the rule. We have stated the rule here for the ideal case. You should be satisfied if you make a very rough approximation to what is required. Even when you become more skilled, you will not want to read every book with the same degree of effort.

You will not find it profitable to expend all your skill on some books. Even the best readers try to make a fairly close approximation to the requirements of this rule for only a relatively few books. For the most part, they are satisfied with a rough notion of the book's structure. The degree of approximation varies with the character of the book and your purpose in reading it. Regardless of this variability, the rule remains the same. You must know how to follow it, whether you follow it closely or only in a rough fashion. You should understand that the limitations on the degree to which you can approximate the rule are not only ones of time and effort. You are a finite, mortal creature; but a book is also finite and, if not mortal, at least defective in the way all things made by man are. No book deserves a perfect outline because no book is perfect. It goes only so far, and so must you. This rule, after all, does not call for your putting things into the book that the author did not put there. Your outline is of the book itself, not the subject matter that the book is about. Perhaps the outline of a subject matter could be extended indefinitely, but not your outline of the book, which gives the subject matter only more or less definitive treatment. Hence you should not feel that we are CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 60 urging you merely to be lazy about following this rule. You could not follow it out to the bitter end even if you wanted to. The forbidding aspect of the formula for setting forth the order and relation of the parts may be somewhat lessened by a few illustrations of the rule in operation. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to illustrate this

rule than the other one about stating the unity. A unity, after all, can be stated in a sentence or two, at most a short paragraph. But in the case of a large and complex book, a careful and adequate outline of the parts, and their parts, and their parts down to the least structural unit that is comprehensible and worthwhile identifying, would take a great many pages to write out. Theoretically, the outline could be longer than the original. Some of the great medieval commentaries on the works of Aristotle are longer than the works they comment on. They include, of course, more than an outline, for they undertake to interpret the author sentence by sentence. The same is true of certain modern commentaries, such as the great ones on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. And a variorum edition of a Shakespeare play, which includes an exhaustive outline as well as other things, is many times as long—perhaps ten times as long—as the original. You might look into a commentary of this sort if you want to see the rule followed as close to pedection as man can do. Aquinas, for instance, begins each section of his commentary with a beautiful outline of the points that Aristotle has made in a particular part of his work; and he always says explicitly how that part fits the structure of the whole, especially in relation to the parts that come before and after. Let us take something easier than a treatise of Aristotle. Aristotle is probably the most compact of prose writers; you would expect that an outline of one of his works would be extensive and difficult. Let us also agree that, for the sake of the example, we will not carry the

process out to the relative perfection that would be possible if we had a great number of pages available. The United States Constitution is an interesting, practical document, and a very well-organized piece of writing. If you examine it, you should have no difficulty in finding its major parts. They are pretty clearly indicated, though you have to do some thinking to make the main divisions. Here is a suggested outline of the document: First: The Preamble, setting forth the purpose (s) of the Constitution; Second: The first Article, dealing with the legislative department of the government; Third: The second Article, dealing with the executive department of the government; Fourth: The third Article, dealing with the judicial department of the government; Fifth: The fourth Article, dealing with the relationship between the state governments and the federal government; CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 61 Sixth: The fifth, sixth, and seventh Articles, dealing with the amendment of the Constitution, its status as the supreme law of the land, and provisions for its ratifications; Seventh: The first ten amendments, constituting the Bill of Rights; Eigth: The remaining amendments up to the present day. Those are the major divisions. Now let us outline one of them, the Second, comprising the Constitution's first Article. Like most of the other Articles, it is divided into Sections. Here is a suggested outline. II, 1: Section 1, establishing legislative powers in a Congress of the United States, divided into two bodies, a Senate and a House of Representatives; II, 2: Sections 2 and 3, respectively describing the composition of the House and

Senate and stating the qualifications of members. In addition, it is stated that the House has the sole power of impeachment, while the Senate has the sole power of trying impeachments; II, 3: Sections 4 and 5, having to do with the election of members of both branches of Congress and with the internal organization and affairs of each; II, 4: Section 6, stating the perquisites and emoluments of members of both branches, and stating one limitation on civil employment of members; II, 5: Section 7, defining the relationship between the legislative and executive departments of the government and describing the President's veto power; II, 6: Section 8, stating the powers of Congress; II, 7: Section 9, stating some limitations on the powers outlined in Section 8; II, 8: Section 10, stating limitations on the powers of the states and the extent to which they must give over certain powers to the Congress. We could then proceed to make a similar outline of all the other major divisions, and, after completing that, return to outline the Sections in tum. Some of these, for example Section 8 in Article I, would require the identification of many different topics and subtopics. Of course, this is only one way of doing the job. There are many others. The first three Articles could be grouped together in one major division, for instance; or instead of two divisions with respect to the amendments, more major divisions could be introduced, grouping the amendments according to the problems they dealt with. We suggest that. you try your hand at making your own division of the Constitution into its main parts. Go even further than CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 62 we did, and try

to state the parts of the parts as well. You may have read the Constitution many times, but if you have not applied this rule before, you will find that it reve.als much in the document that you never saw. Here is one more example, again very brief. We have already stated the unity of Aristotle's Ethics. Now let us attempt a first approximation of its structure. The whole is divided into the following main parts: A first, treating of happiness as the end of life, and discussing it in relation to all other practicable goods; a second, treating of the nature of voluntary action, and its relation to the formation of good and bad habits; a third, discussing the various virtues and vices, both moral and intellectual; a fourth, dealing with moral states that are neither virtuous nor vicious; a fifth, treating of friendship; and a sixth and last, discussing pleasure, and completing the account of human happiness begun in the first. These divisions obviously do not correspond to the ten books of the Ethics. Thus, the first part is accomplished in the first book; the second part runs through Book II and the first half of Book Ill; the third part extends from the rest of Book III through the end of Book VI; the discussion of pleasure occurs at the end of Book VII and again at the beginning of Book X. We mention this to show you that you need not follow the apparent structure of a book as indicated by its chapter divisions. That structure may, of course, be better than the outline you develop, but it may also be worse; in any event, the point is to make your own outline. The author made his in order to write a good book. You must make yours in order to read it well. If he were a perfect

writer and you a perfect reader, it would follow that the two would be the same. In proportion as either of you falls away from perfection, all sorts of discrepancies will inevitably result. This does not mean that you should ignore chapter headings and sectional divisions made by the author; we did not ignore them in our analysis of the Constitution, although we did not slavishly follow them, either. They are intended to help you, just as titles and prefaces are. But you must use them as guides for your own activity, and not rely on them passively. There are few authors who execute their plan perfectly, but there is often more plan in a good book than meets the eye at first. The surface can be deceiving. You must look beneath it to discover the real structure. How important is it to discover that real structure? We think very important. Another way of saying this is to say that Rule 2—the requirement that you state the unity of a book—cannot be effectively followed without obeying Rule 3—the requirement that you state the parts that make up that unity. You might, from a cursory glance at a book, be able to come up with an adequate statement of its unity in two or three sentences. But you would not really know that it was adequate. Someone else, who had read the book better, might know this, and award you high marks for your efforts. But for you, from your point of view, it would have been merely a good guess, a lucky hit. This is why the third rule is absolutely necessary as a complement to the second one. A very simple example will show what we mean. A two-year-old child, just having begun to talk, might say that “two plus two is four.”

Objectively, this CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 63 is a true statement; but we would be wrong to conclude from it that the child knew much mathematics. In fact, the child probably would not know what the statement meant, and so, although the statement by itself was adequate, we would have to say that the child still needed training in the subject. Similarly, you might be right in your guess about a book's main theme or point, but you still need to go through the exercise of showing how and why you stated it as you did. The requirement that you outline the parts of a book, and show how they exemplify and develop the main theme, is thus supportive of your statement of the book's unity. The Reciprocal Arts of Reading and Writing In general, the two rules of reading that we have been discussing look as if they were rules of writing also. Of course they are. Writing and reading are reciprocal, as are teaching and being taught. If authors and teachers did not organize their communications, if they failed to unify them and order their parts, there would be no point in directing readers or listeners to search for the unity and uncover the structure of the whole. Nevertheless, although the rules are reciprocal, they are not followed in the same way. The reader tries to uncover the skeleton that the book conceals. The author starts with the skeleton and tries to cover it up. His aim is to conceal the skeleton artistically or, in other words, to put flesh on the bare bones. If he is a good writer, he does not bury a puny skeleton under a mass of fat; on the other hand, neither should the flesh be too thin, so that the bones show through. If the flesh is thick

enough, and if flabbiness is avoided, the joints will be detectible and the motion of the parts will reveal the articulation. Why is this so? Why should not an expository book, one that attempts to present a body of knowledge in an ordered way, be merely an outline of the subject? The reason is not only that most readers cannot read outlines, and that such a book would be repellent to a self-respecting reader who thought that if he could do his job, the author ought to do his. There is more to it than that. The flesh of a book is as much a part of it as the skeleton. This is as true of books as it is of animals and human beings. The flesh—the outline spelled out, “read out,” as we sometimes say—adds an essential dimension. It adds life, in the case of the animal. Just so, actually writing the book from an outline, no matter how detailed, gives the work a kind of life that it would not otherwise have had. We can summarize all of this by recalling the old-fashioned maxim that a piece of writing should have unity, clarity, and coherence. That is, indeed, a basic maxim of good writing. The two rules we have been discussing in this chapter relate to writing that follows that maxim. If the writing has unity, we must find it. If the writing has clarity and coherence, we must appreciate it by finding the distinction and the order of the parts. What is clear is so by the distinctness of its outlines. What is coherent hangs together in an orderly disposition of parts. CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 64 These two rules, therefore, can be used to distinguish well made books from badly made ones. If, after you have attained sufficient skill, no amount of effort on your part results in your

apprehension of the unity of a book, and if you are also not able to discern its parts and their relation to one another, then very likely the book is a bad one, whatever its reputation. You should not be too quick to make this judgment; perhaps the fault is in you instead of the book. However, neither should you fail ever to make it and always assume that the fault is in you. In fact, whatever your own failings as a reader, the fault is usually in the book, for most books—the very great majority—are badly made books in the sense that their authors did not write them according to these rules. These two rules can also, we might add, be used in reading any substantial part of an expository book, as well as the whole. If the part chosen is itself a relatively independent, complex unity, its unity and complexity must be discerned for it to be well read. Here there is a significant difference between books conveying knowledge and poetical works, plays, and novels. The parts of the former can be much more autonomous than the parts of the latter. The person who says of a novel that he has “read enough to get the idea” does not know what he is talking about. He cannot be correct, for if the novel is any good at all, the idea is in the whole and cannot be found short of reading the whole. But you can get the idea of Aristotle’s Ethics or Darwin’s Origin of Species by reading some parts carefully, although you would not, in that case, be able to observe Rule 3. Discovering the Author’s Intentions There is one more rule of reading that we want to discuss in this chapter. It can be stated briefly. It needs little explanation and no illustration. It really repeats in another

form what you have already done if you have applied the second and third rules. But it is a useful repetition because it throws the whole and its parts into another light. This fourth rule can be stated thus: Rule 4. Find out what the author's problems were. The author of a book starts with a question or a set of questions. The book ostensibly contains the answer or answers. The writer may or may not tell you what the questions were as well as give you the answers that are the fruits of his work. Whether he does or does not, and especially if he does not, it is your task as a reader to formulate the questions as precisely as you can. You should be able to state the main question that the book tries to answer, and you should be able to state the subordinate questions if the main question is complex and has many parts. You should not only have a fairly adequate grasp of all the questions involved but should also be able to put the questions in an intelligible order. Which are primary and which secondary? Which questions must be answered first, if others are to be answered later? You can see how this rule duplicates, in a sense, work you have already done CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 65 in stating the unity and finding its parts. It may, however, actually help you to do that work. In other words, following the fourth rule is a useful procedure in conjunction with obeying the other two. And since the rule is a little more unfamiliar than the other two, it may be even more helpful to you in tackling a difficult book. We want to emphasize, however, that we do not mean for you to fall into what is called by critics the intentional fallacy. That is the

fallacy of thinking you can discover what was in an author's mind from the book he has written. This applies particularly to literary works; it is a grave error, for example, to try to psychoanalyze Shakespeare from the evidence of Hamlet. Nevertheless, even with a poetical work, it is often extremely helpful to try to say what the author was trying to do. In the case of expository works, the rule has obvious merit. And yet most readers, no matter how skilled in other respects, very often fail to observe it. As a result, their conception of a book's main point or theme may be extremely deficient, and of course their outline. of its structure will be chaotic. They will fail to see the unity of a book because they do not see why it has the unity it has; and their apprehension of the book's skeletal structure will lack comprehension of the end that it serves. If you know the kinds of questions anyone can ask about anything, you will become adept in detecting an author's problems. They can be formulated briefly: Does something exist? What kind of thing is it? What caused it to exist, or under what conditions can it exist, or why does it exist? What purpose does it serve? What are the consequences of its existence? What are its characteristic properties, its typical traits? What are its relations to other things of a similar sort, or of a different sort? How does it behave? These are all theoretical questions. What ends should be sought? What means should be chosen to a given end? What things must one do to gain a certain objective, and in what order? Under these conditions, what is the right thing to do, or the better rather than the worse? Under what

conditi_ons would it be better to do this rather than that? These are all practical questions. This list of questions is far from being exhaustive, but it does represent the types of most frequently asked questions in the pursuit of theoretical or practical knowledge. It may help you discover the problems a book has tried to solve. The questions have to be adapted when applied to works of imaginative literature, and there too they will be useful. The First Stage of Analytical Reading We have now stated and explained the first four rules of reading. They are rules of analytical reading, although if you inspect a book well before reading it, that will help you to apply them. It is important at this point to recognize that these first four rules are connected and form a group of rules having a single aim. Together, they provide the reader who applies them with a knowledge of a book's structure. When you have applied them to a book, or indeed to anything fairly lengthy and difficult CHAPTER 7. X-RAYING A BOOK 66 that you may be reading, you will have accomplished the first stage of reading it analytically. You should not take the term "stage" in a chronological sense, unless perhaps at the very beginning of your exercise as an analytical reader. That is, it is not necessary to read a book through in order to apply the first four rules, then to read it again and again in order to apply the other rules. The practiced reader accomplishes all of these stages at once. Nevertheless, you must realize that knowing a book's structure does constitute a stage toward reading it analytically. Another way to say this is that applying these first four rules helps you to

answer the first basic question about a book. You will recall that that first question is: What is the book about as a whole? You will also recall that we said that this means discovering 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. Clearly, applying the first four rules of reading will provide most of what you need to know in order to answer this question—although it should be pointed out that your answer will improve in accuracy as you proceed to apply the other rules and to answer the other questions. Since we have now described the first stage of analytical reading, let us pause a moment to write out the first four rules in order, under the appropriate heading, for review. The First Stage of Analytical Reading, or Rules for Finding What a Book Is About 1. Classify the book according to kind and subject matter. 2. State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity. 3. Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and outline these parts as you have outlined the whole. 4. Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.