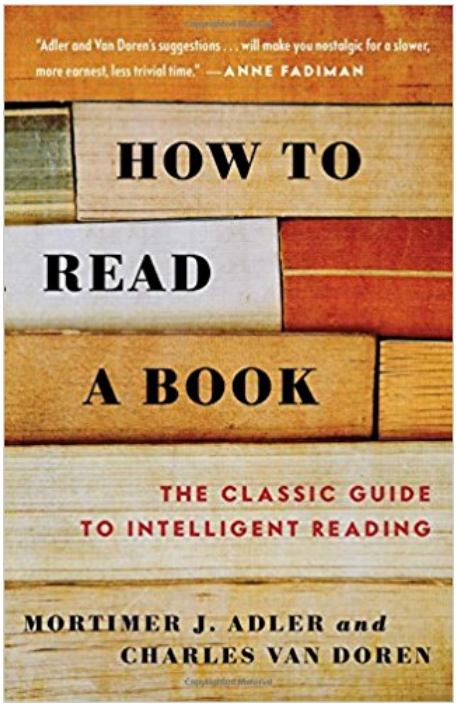
Best Summary + PDF: How to Read a Book, by Mortimer Adler

by Allen Cheng

https://www.allencheng.com/how-to-read-a-book-pdf-summary/



When you read a book, do you find yourself forgetting what you read? Do you regret wasting time on books that you should have skimmed instead?

If you read a lot of books a year, then **it makes sense to spend a few hours learning *how to read better*** and double the value from your reading. That's the point of How to Read a Book, a classic by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren.

The argument is compelling: after you learn phonics as a child and go through high school English, **no one really *teaches* you how to read *intelligently***. College courses rarely touch on this, and the workforce even less so.

As a result, plenty of adults read at an elementary level - not in the sense of having a limited vocabulary, but in absorbing the value of a book efficiently. **See if any of these problems apply to you:**

- You don't really know what a book is about until you start reading it.
- You read at the same pace, regardless of whether it's a good book or a terrible book.
- You don't critique your books, articulating exactly why you liked or disliked it.

In this How to Read a Book summary, learn:

- Tactics to understand what a book is about, in minutes

- How you should read a novel differently from a nonfiction book
- How to intelligently critique a book
- The highest possible level of reading

Full title: How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading, by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren

Summary in a Paragraph

Reading is an active activity, not a passive one. First, inspect a book to understand what its main argument is and how it's organized. Next, as you read the book, analyze how it develops its arguments. Finally, only after you understand the book, critique the author by agreeing or disagreeing, but always give reasons for your critique.

Introduction and Premise

- Reading books is a way of learning, with the author being your instructor.
- The more active the reading, the better.
    - Some consider reading to be passive in nature - at least, more passive than active doing or completely independent self-discovery.
    - However, because learning is active, reading with the purpose of understanding is necessarily active.
    - **As with live instruction, you should ask questions of the teacher**; but unlike with a live instructor, you must answer those questions yourself.
    - Instruction is aided discovery. The student must herself do the learning, much like a doctor may do many things for a patient, but the patient herself must follow instructions and get well.
- There are two types of reading
    - 1) reading to gain more information. If the information is thoroughly intelligible to you, if you do not feel in over your depth, you do not improve understanding. You collect facts of the type you already know. You simply know that something is the case.
    - 2) reading to understand. Here the content is initially better than the reader. It might throw light on all the facts she already knows. You become enlightened not just to what is the case, but why it is the case, its connection with other facts.
- The current environment is not conducive to understanding.
    - Most people are not taught how to read beyond elementary school. That is, **courses no longer teach how to learn more effectively by reading**. This book aims to bridge this gap.
    - Today media is packaged to make thinking unnecessary. Packaged opinions are inserted into people's minds, like a cassette in a cassette player, and the viewer pushes a button and

    plays back the opinion whenever it seems appropriate.
    - We are inundated with facts to the detriment of understanding.
- The best books challenge your reading ability and force you to grow as a reader.
- **To be well-read is not to have read a large quantity of books, but to have a high-quality understanding of good books.**

4 Key Questions to Answer while You're Reading:

- **What is this book about as a whole?**
    - The leading theme, and how the author develops the theme.
- **What is being said in detail, and how?**
    - The main ideas and assertions.
- **Is the book true, in whole or part?**
    - You must make up your own mind, if you are reading seriously.
- **What of it? Why is this important? What follows?**

No higher commendation can be given to a book than praise for the measure of truth it has achieved. (Yet today books win plaudits almost to the extent to which they flout the truth.)

Ideally, you make a habit of asking these 4 questions **as you read**.

- Doing this at first feels clunky, but you need to train each skill separately before doing it all subconsciously.
- Treat the skill of reading like skiing. Reading is at least as complex as these acts.
    - Skiing at first feels awkward and frustrating. Even though you have been on two feet all your life, suddenly putting skis on changes everything.
    - Skiing is taught as separate acts (bend your knees, look down the hill, keep your back straight). Ideally, you don't think about the separate acts, instead integrating it into smooth movements. But to **forget them as separate acts, you have to learn them first as separate acts**.
- Any experienced learner knows that she shouldn't fear rules at the beginning of something new. After mastery, they coalesce and can be done automatically.

Techniques to engage with the book to better absorb it

- Underline or highlight major points
- Star the 10 most important statements or passages in the book
- Numbers in the margin to indicate a sequence of points to develop an argument
- Refer to other pages in the margin
- Write in the margin to record questions
- After finishing the book, outline the content of the book

The Four Levels of Reading

- Elementary Reading
    - This is pure mechanical reading of text and comprehension of what the symbols literally mean.
    - This is where most remedial courses aim, and the extent to which reading is taught.
- Inspectional Reading
    - This is a skimming of the book to understand its main points and its structure. It aims to gain the best understanding of the book in a limited time.
    - This is achieved by reading the table of contents, index, and key summaries of major chapters.
- Analytical Reading
    - This aims to gain the best understanding of the book in unlimited time.
    - Not only should you aim to understand what is being said, you should develop a personal opinion about its validity.
    - This isn’t necessary if your goal is simply information or entertainment.
- Syntopical Reading
    - This aims to compare books and authors to one another, to model dialogues between authors that may not be in any one of the books.

On What Books to Read

The vast majority of books will not strain your ability to read analytically. They deliver information that fits your current framework, or are read for entertainment.

There is a second class of books that teach you both how to read and how to live. This might be fewer than one out of every hundred, or one out of every thousand.

There is a final highest class of books, perhaps fewer than a hundred, that you can return to over and over again and they seem to have grown with you. You see new things in it that you did not see before. You should seek out these books, for they will teach you the most.

To identify these books, you might consider the desert island question - which 10 books would you take with you if you could never read any book ever again? These differ between humans, and you should start with the classics that interest you the most.

Elementary Reading

- Children learn to read quite magically.

    - At some point words suddenly have real meaning to them. Science is not clear on how this happens.
    - There are myriad systems for teaching language (from alphabetical to phonic) and the authors don't espouse any particular method.
    - Children become more capable readers as they build vocabulary and infer meanings from context clues.
- You encounter difficulties at this level when reading in a foreign language.
- Most remedial courses, and speed reading, deal with elementary reading. Little explicit instruction is given on higher levels of reading.

On speed reading:

- A helpful component of speed reading is is training your brain not to subvocalize. Exercise: use your hand to cover text, and move your hand downward faster than you can currently read. Your brain will be forced to catch up.
- However, after a point, reading faster necessarily trades off with comprehension.
    - When speed reading helps you avoid spending time on texts that don't deserve your analysis, this is good.
    - But you wouldn't want to speed read the Declaration of Independence.
- **More critical than speed reading is being able to modulate your reading speed dynamically.**
    - Read certain types of texts (fiction) faster than others (science textbooks).
    - Within a text, read key points more slowly than fluff.

Inspectional Reading

- **The goal is to gain the best understanding of the book in a limited time.** Set a target for 15 minutes to comprehend a 300-page book.
    - Think of yourself as a detective looking for clues to a book's general idea.
- The value of inspectional reading appears when you contrast it by breaking a fresh book from page one and reading it to the end. In the latter case, you are trying to understand what a book is *about* at the same time you are trying to understand it.
- Questions to ask yourself
    - What genre does the book fit into?
    - What is the book saying as a whole?
    - What is the structure of the book used to develop the main point?
- Techniques to understand the book at a high level
    - Read the title.
        - This can be more informative than you think. "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" suggests the book begins with the height of the Empire, at the Age of the Antonines.
    - Read the preface, blurb.
        - The author often explain what the book is about, and how to tackle it!
    - Read the table of contents.

        - Less effective if books now obfuscate titles to generate a sense of mystery.
    - Scan the index for range of topics covered. More important topics will have more pages.
    - Find the main chapters of the book, and read the summary areas of those chapters.
    - Thumb through the book, listening for the basic pulsebeat.
    - [I also like reading the top Amazon reviews of the book, which have useful summaries.]
- **When tackling a difficult book, never pause to look up things you don't know.** This will make you miss the forest for the trees.
    - Even if you understand less than 50%, this cursory reading will improve your comprehension on the second time around, ultimately saving time.
    - We were taught to pay attention to things we didn't understand, to go to a dictionary with an unfamiliar word, to define every allusion and consult footnotes.
    - The author bemoans the way Shakespeare is taught - students never really *read* Shakespeare.

[How to Read a Book puts these next two sections as part of Analytical Reading, but they fit thematically better into Inspectional Reading for me.]

Categorizing a Book

When starting a book, figure out what genre of book it is. According to How to Read a Book, this prepares you to customize your engagement with the particular type of text, much as a philosophy teacher might instruct differently from a physics teacher.

The broad categorizations are:

- Fiction vs Expository
    - Expository books convey knowledge - opinions, theories, data.
- Theoretical vs Practical
    - Theoretical works describe what *is* or that something is the case. Practical works teach you *how* to do something.
    - Questions about the validity of something are theoretical; raising questions about the purpose it serves is practical.
    - Any book that instructs you on what you should do is practical, including books on ethics (how to live our life) and economics (eg how to organize economic life of societies).
- Within theoretical books: History vs Science vs Philosophy
    - History describes events that happened on a particular date in a particular place. Science and Philosophy books treat matters that can happen at any time or place - seeking timeless laws.
    - Science deals with data that is outside the realm of your everyday comprehensible experience (eg cellular proteins doing things unobservable to you; species evolving beyond your observable time scale). Philosophy deals with things that are accessible to you everyday (eg the nature of happiness).

[This is more relevant if you switch your reading often, eg from Nietzsche to Aeschylus. If you only read

a specific genre, this becomes less important.]

X-Raying a Book

Every good book has a skeleton that forms the structure of the book. **The author covers the skeleton with flesh; your job is to strip it away to expose the skeleton again.**

The methodical way to do this:

- Articulate the unity of the book in a sentence.
    - Often the author does this for you. Science/philosophy writers have no reason to keep you in suspense, as suspense will deter you from reading it through.
- Construct an outline of the major parts of the book, showing the relation to each other and to the unity of the whole.
    - Done methodically, it lists the major sections of the book; then outlines each section of the book; then outlines each subsection.
    - Not every book deserves this treatment. Give the book the treatment it deserves.
    - Aquinas's commentaries on Aristotle are good examples.

Note that books are not meant to be published as mere outlines. The flesh of a book adds life to the skeleton

If you can't do the two above, then the fault may be in the book, as the author has failed to do her job.

Examples:

Unity of The Wealth of Nations: "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."

Outline of Aristotle's Ethics: "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."

Analytical Reading

This is the meat of How to Read a Book, since it's the most unfamiliar to readers and critical for syntopical reading, covered next.

Understand the Author

Discover the author’s intention. **Find out what the author’s problems were.**

- What are the main questions the book tries to answer?
- Which questions are primary and which secondary?

Typical questions on theoretical topics:

- Does something exist? What kind of thing is it? What caused it to exist? Under what conditions can it exist? Why does it exist? What are the consequences of its existence? What are its characteristic properties? What are its relations to other things of a similar sort, or a different sort? How does it behave?

Typical questions on practical topics:

- 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, and the wrong thing? Under what conditions would it be better to do this rather than that?

Find What the Book Says

Understand the keywords of the author, and what is meant by them.

- The same word can mean different things to different authors. Different words can mean the same thing for the same author.
- Find the meaning of the word through context.
- Clues that a word is important:
    - Te author quarrels with other writers about it.
    - You struggle to understand it.

Find the author’s leading propositions in her most important sentences.

- The important sentences are the ones that express the judgments on which the argument rests.

- How to find them
    - Special sentences may be formatted stylistically or set apart.
    - The important words are often contained in the important sentences.
    - Don’t pause over the sentences that interest you - pause at the ones that puzzle you.
- Unpack complicated sentences to find all the propositions the author is making.
- State the proposition in your own words - this is the best way to verify that you understand it.
    - If you can’t do this, the author has merely transferred words to you, not knowledge.
    - Being unable to do this may make you confuse restatements of the proposition for distinct propositions, mch like “2 + 2 = 4” and “4 - 2 = 2” are really the same arithmetic relationship, but different restatements.
    - This is helpful for syntopical reading - different authors say the same thing in different words, and this will help you see how they agree and disagree.
- In addition, define an example or cite your own experience.
    - “Nothing acts except what is actual.” - One’s bank account doesn’t grow by merely possible showers.

Find the author’s arguments in sequences of sentences.

- The authors’ propositions are merely opinions unless they are supported by reasons. The author’s argument explains that the conclusion follows from the premises.
    - You must distinguish between genuine knowledge and mere opinion.
- A good book usually summarizes itself as its arguments develop.
- An orator’s great trick is to leave certain things unsaid that would be challenged if they were made explicit.
- Find what things the orator says must be assumed, what can be proved, and what need not be proved because it is self-evident.

How to Use External Resources

As much as possible, you should struggle with the book independently on a first pass. This will help you see the forest for the trees, rather than getting mired in minutiae.

When you use an external resource, understand 1) what you hope to get from consulting it, 2) the limitations of the resource.

Here is how to use external resources:

- Dictionary
    - Dictionaries contain the commonly accepted definitions of words and their transformation throughout time.
    - The author, however, may use words to mean far different things, which is why you must understand terms from the context of the book.
    - Use it only for the most important words that are critical for understanding.
- Encyclopedia

    - These contain facts, and not arguments on subjective questions ("what makes man happy?), other than what people have said. It also contains no imaginative literature.
    - Use it resolve disagreements about facts.
- Summaries/abstracts
    - Note that many of these have incorrect interpretations or incomplete treatments.
    - Ideally you've written these yourself.
    - Use these to recover your knowledge about the book after you've read it.
    - Do not use these as a substitute for reading the book yourself. You'll also learn to use these as a crutch and get lost in understanding a book without one.
    - Exception: use them in syntopical reading to know if a work will be relevant to your project.
- Commentaries/reviews
    - Best to avoid these until after your read-through. Otherwise you'll start the book biased and focus on things that support the commentary.

Criticizing a Book

Up until this point, you've been keeping your mouth shut and absorbing the author. **From this point on, you can argue with the author and express yourself.**

- There is no book so good that no fault can be found with it.
- Reading a book is like a conversation. Your obligation as a reader is to talk back, even though the author isn't there.
- We've been conditioned to think that teachable students are those who passively swallow knowledge without independent judgment. The opposite is true - the teachable reader is the most critical.

Determine which of her problems the author has solved, which she has not, and decide if the author knew she had failed to solve.

Until you've completed your understanding, you don't have the right to say I agree, I disagree, or I suspend judgment.

- Much like a conversation, you need to give the author the chance to express herself fully before passing judgment. If you interrupted the author at each sentence to say she's wrong, you're not having a conversation that can lead to learning.
- You must finish the other tasks above (outlining the book, defining main terms, understanding the main arguments) before criticizing.
    - Say that you read an author state "all men are equal." Without understanding the author, you might take this to mean that "all men are equally endowed at birth in physicality and skill," but the author might really mean "all men should have equal political rights."
- **Imagine how silly this sentiment is: "I don't know what you're saying, but I disagree."**
    - If a person argues with you but cannot state your argument in her own words, you can

reject her criticism.
- The knowledge to understand the author may be present in other works by the author.
    - Thus one can't criticize *The Communist Manifesto* without having understood *Capital*.
- Agreeing is as valid a critical action as disagreeing. You can be wrong in agreeing.
- Furthermore, you can suspend judgment if you feel the author does not make a sufficiently reasoned argument.

Do not be contentious or combative for its own sake.

- Many see a discussion as something to be won, rather than an opportunity to discover the truth. They close themselves to learning something new or changing their mind.
- A disagreement is an opportunity to teach, and an opportunity to be taught.
- Do not play devil's advocate by default. Don't resent the author for being right or teaching you something new.
- Inversely, don't accept the author's word as true simply because she seems more educated than you.
- Separate your emotional reaction to the book from the rational one.
- Read the book sympathetically, earnestly trying to take take author's point of view.

When you agree or disagree, you must give reasons for your disagreement.

- Without reasons, you're merely expressing opinions. And fighting opinions with opinions is an endless battle with no victory.
- Likewise, you should distinguish between the author's knowledge (arguments backed by evidence) and the author's opinions (not backed by evidence).
- Without reasons, you can't be sure that the disagreement is due to misunderstanding.
- Be aware of your own assumptions, and that your opponent may be entitled to different assumptions.
    - "Good controversy should not be a quarrel about assumptions." If the author asks you to take something for granted, you should honor her request.

According to How to Read a Book, If you disagree with the author, your criticism must fit into a set of categories:

- **The author is uninformed: l**acks knowledge that is relevant to the argument.
    - Darwin lacked knowledge of later Mendelian genetics.
    - An author ignores the relevant work of predecessors.
- **The author is misinformed:** asserts what is not the case; proposes as true/likely what it is false/unlikely.
    - Aristotle was misinformed about how females participate in animal reproduction, and thus came to unsupportable conclusions about procreation.
    - You must be able to argue the greater probability of a conclusion contrary to the author's.
    - The misinformation should be relevant to the argument.
        - Aquinas supposed that heavenly bodies were composed of different matter from terrestrial bodies; but this was not relevant to his metaphysical account of matter.
- **The author is illogical:** commits some logical fallacy.

    - Non sequitur: the conclusion simply does not follow from the reasons offered.
        - Machiavelli: “The chief foundations of all states are good laws. As there cannot be good laws where the state is not well armed, it follows that where they are well armed they have good laws.”
        - The inversion of a logical statement is not equivalent to the original statement - there can be well-armed states that do not have good laws.
    - Inconsistency: two things the author has tried to say are incompatible.
- **The author’s analysis is incomplete:** the author has not solved all the problems she started with, or seen the implications of the materials used, or failed to make distinctions relevant.
    - Aristotle’s *Politics* is incomplete because his acceptance of slavery prohibited him from conceiving of universal suffrage.
    - To a Christian believing in personal immortality, Marcus Aurelius is incomplete in his treatment of human happiness.
- If you can’t support any of these remarks, then you are obligated to agree with the author.
    - You cannot say, “I find nothing wrong with your premises or reasoning, but I don’t agree with your conclusions.” All you can mean by this is that you do not *like* the conclusions.

Approaches for Different Genres

The above principles apply generally to all books, in particular expository books. This section treats different genres and guides on how to adjust the four key questions:

- What is this book about as a whole?
- What is being said in detail, and how?
- Is the book true, in whole or part?
- What of it? Why is this important? What follows?

Practical Books

Practical books concern how to do things better. They can be mainly a book of rules (like a cookbook) or a set of principles that generate rules (like The Wealth of Nations), or somewhere in between.

The practical book itself can never solve its targeted problems directly. It requires action on the reader’s part.

Because the book is a means to an end, you must decide whether you agree with the author’s end. If you don’t believe in economic justice, then you’ll disagree with Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, no matter the quality of the means.

Note that practical books are not purely theoretical emotionless treatments, like math proofs are. To be effective, they contain rhetoric or propaganda that appeal to the heart as well as the mind.

- Be wary of separating the arguments from the oratory “emotive use of words.”
- But don’t be completely resistant - weigh the appeals and open yourself accordingly.

Understand the context of the author.

- Know something about the author’s life and times, and how it affected the problems she saw and the rules she espouses.
- For *Leviathan*, Hobbes lived in the English civil wars and was distressed by social disorder.
- For *The Prince*, know the Italian political situation and Machiavelli’s relation to the Medicis.

- What is this book about as a whole?
    - What problems are being addressed?
    - Discover the rules that are being recommended.
- What is being said in detail, and how?
    - Discover the principles that justify the rules.
    - Find the applications of the rules to concrete cases.
- Is the book true, in whole or part?
    - Does the rule actually work?
    - Do you desire the end that the rule guides to?
- What of it? Why is this important? What follows?
    - If you agree with the book’s means and end, then you are obligated to put the means to action. Not doing so is *not* a sign of laziness; it’s a sign that you don’t fully agree.
    - Figure out how the rules should be applied in practice.

Imaginative Literature

Most of the principles so far apply to expository writing, where the aim is to convey information or lead to action. The goal of imaginative literature is different: to convey an experience. A work of fine art is “fine” because it is an end in itself.

Thus, as a reader you should open yourself to being emotionally affected - don’t resist the effect. Allow it to move you. Likewise, don’t criticize imaginative writing until you appreciate what the author has tried to make you experience.

Where expository writing defines its terms with explicit precision, imaginative works deal in ambiguity. Having multiple meanings enhances the richness and forth of a set of words [and the likelihood that it’ll resonate with the reader].

Imaginative works are judged by how well they reflect reality. Not necessarily in verisimilitude (as science fiction or fantasy violate) but rather whether what is being said rings true - characterization, how characters respond to events, whether themes are revealed that reflect your experiences.

Reading imaginative works should be active and critical. When you say you like or dislike a fictional work, you should articulate why, and what is good or bad about the book.

Imaginative works don’t contain explicit terms, propositions and arguments, but the analogy works:

- The terms are the set pieces: the setting, the characters, and the events.
- The terms are connected in propositions: the characters live and breathe in the world.
- The arguments are the interaction between the propositions: how the characters respond to events.

The analogy breaks down on inspection, but the purpose of this reasoning is to enhance your pleasure by understanding why you like something.

- What is this book about as a whole?
    - Summarize the plot of the book in a few sentences.
- What is being said in detail, and how?
    - What are the elements of the work - its setting, characters (and their thoughts and actions), events?
    - What is the shape of the plot, to climax and aftermath?
- Is the book true, in whole or part?
    - Do the characters behave realistically?
    - What have you learned from the experience?
- What of it? Why is this important? What follows?
    - Does it satisfy your heart and mind? Do you appreciate the beauty of the work?

Specific advice for types of imaginative literature:

- Stories/Novels
    - Stories are universally enjoyed - the authors suspect this is because it serves our unconscious needs.
        - Readers live out fantasies in the characters - passionate love, empire construction, overcoming struggle.
        - People crave a feeling of order and justice. In bad stories, people seem to be punished or rewarded with no rhyme or reason.
        - The great books tend to satisfy the deep unconscious needs of almost everybody.
    - **Read it quickly with total immersion, ideally in one sitting.** Don’t draw it out just to savor it, since this is indulging your unconscious feelings about it.Don’t disapprove
    - Suspend your disbelief about events. Don’t disapprove of something a character does before you understand why he does it. And don’t judge the world until you’ve lived in it to the extent of your ability.
    - **If the book has a lot of characters, don’t worry about knowing them all.** This is just like moving to a new town. The important ones will keep resurfacing.
    - Once the story ends, it ends. Your imagination of what the characters do afterward is meaningless.
- Plays

    - Most plays are not complete when read, since they're meant to be performed on the stage. They lack stage direction.
    - **Pretend that you're directing the play. Instruct the actors on where to stand**, where to face, and how to say their lines. Tell them the importance of certain lines.
    - Some lines of plays are ambiguous - how you choose to act will affect the interpretation of the scene.
        - eg Shakespeare's Hamlet has a scene where Hamlet's line "ha, ha! Are you honest?" could be construed as him knowing his father is listening to him, or not.
    - When confused by a line, say it aloud and with meaning - this will clarify many a line without having to consult a dictionary.
    - In tragedies (eg Aeschylus), the essence of tragedy is time, or the lack of it. There is no problem in Greek tragedy that couldn't have been solved with more time. We see what should have been done, but would we have been able to see it in time?
- Poetry
    - Poetry is a spontaneous overflowing of the personality. Defining what constitutes poetry is difficult, but you know it when you see it.
    - Read it through without stopping and trying too hard to understand every single line. The essence of a poem is never in the first line, but rather in the whole.
    - Then read it aloud. You'll pick up on new insights.
    - Most poems are about a conflict, even if it's not explicitly stated (eg love vs time, life and death, transience vs eternity)
    - Poems often stand alone. Don't feel you have to know about the author and the times.
    - Read great poetry over a lifetime - you'll discover new things about it.

History

According to the authors, history has a greater impact on people's actions today than any other type of work. Philosophical ideals and utopias reveal only the sad difference with today's state. History shows the actions of people in the past, making it less imposing for you to repeat them (in the case of good achievements) or avoid their mistakes.

The way to read history is not just to learn what happened, but also to learn the way people act in all times and places, especially now.

It's hard enough in a modern day court to prove that anything happened, with live witnesses. History works try to establish that something happened in the past with no live witnesses to question. Historians must infer what happened from source material, and often have to impose patterns and infer motivations.

Therefore, you should always be wary of what is written:

- What does the author want to prove?
- Whom does she want to convince?
- What special knowledge does she assume?

- What special language does she use?
- Does she really know what she is talking about?

It’s necessary to read more than one account of the history of an event if we want to understand it. This is all the more important if the event has practical significance for us (like the Civil War).

- What is this book about as a whole?
    - Know the limited scope of the work. A history of the Civil War is not a history of the world in the 19th century.
- What is being said in detail, and how?
    - Is the work divided into chapters that correspond to years, or is it divided by subject (economics in one, wars in another)?
    - Which of these is most important to the author?
- Is the book true, in whole or part?
    - Did the historian misunderstand the sources, perhaps because of deficiency in her grasp of human nature?
        - eg earlier historians may not have sufficiently discussed economic matters and self-interest in their works.
    - Did the historian misuse sources, or omit key sources?
- What of it? Why is this important? What follows?
    - Does it satisfy your heart and mind? Do you appreciate the beauty of the work?

Of different types of historical works:

- Biographies
    - The definitive biography is usually written after several other biographies have been written.
    - Autobiographies and authorized biographies (where the subject (or her estate) gives exclusive right to private materials) should be assumed to be biased. The subjects have incentive to hide the negative and embellish the positive - this is the way his friends want the subject to be known to the world.
- Current Events
    - We can’t be sure that we’re getting at the facts.
    - Whom is the work written for? If it’s intended for a group that already agrees with the author, you may find it frustrating if you are outside the group.
    - Since these primarily convey information, you need not perform the full analysis. But you should continue asking the critical questions.
    - **When reading digests of news, be wary of what is left out**.

Math and Science

Historical math and science works tend to be more accessible than people think because 1) historically, they were written for broad readership; 2) they tend to clarify upfront their terms and propositions.

Modern works tend to be written by experts for experts for reasons of expediency, since fields have become deeply specialized. Thus they contain jargon and require prior training. The techniques in this book don't apply as well here.

When reading math, remember that **math is a language like any other**, with its own conventions and grammar. It is in fact easier to understand than most languages, since it is not spoken and there are no emotional connotations. Treat it like this and it will become less inscrutable.

When reading science, the goal is not just to absorb the scientific laws and hypotheses, but more broadly to understand the history and philosophy of science. The scientific problem is to describe the phenomena as accurately as possible, and to interconnect different kinds of phenomena.

- What is this book about as a whole?
    - State as clearly as you can the problem the author has tried to solve.
- What is being said in detail, and how?
    - What experimental data are required to believe the arguments? They are likely outside the realm of your experience.
    - What assumptions are required to form the propositions?
- Is the book true, in whole or part?
- What of it? Why is this important? What follows?
    - Theoretical conclusions can have important practical consequences (eg on climate change).

Philosophy

Philosophical works discuss the kinds of questions that children ask - broadly:

- Theoretical/speculative: what is or what happens
    - Metaphysics: about being or existence
    - Nature: about becoming and changes
    - Epistemology: about knowledge, its causes and limits
- Practical/normative: what should be done
    - Ethics: right vs wrong
    - Politics: good society and the individual in relation to the community
- The questions are varied and deep.
    - On existence: What is the difference between existing and not existing? What are properties of al lthings that exist, and those of things that do not? Are there different modes of existence? Does everything exist physically, or do some things exist non-materially? And so on.
- Note that not all questions asked by philosophers were philosophical - like the composition of terrestrial vs celestial bodies.

Adults lose this curiosity at some point in development, and philosophers help evoke the questions again.

Up until 1930, philosophical books were written for the general reader.

Unlike science, which often requires external data, philosophy deals with questions that can be answered entirely within the mind. There is nothing to do but think.

Philosophical works occur in various forms: 1) dialogues (like Plato); 2) essays written straightforwardly (like Aristotle); 3) meeting of objections, first giving the wrong answer then countering (like Aquinas); 4) systemization, formalizing in mathematical form (Descartes); 5) aphorisms, containing pithy statements requiring heavy lifting by the reader (like Nietzsche).

On theological works: treat the dogma with the same respect you treat assumptions of a mathematician. Take the assumptions to be true, then see what arguments and conclusions result. Do not discard the entire work, assuming the arguments are as dogmatic as the assumptions.

- What is this book about as a whole?
    - State the questions the work tries to answer.
- What is being said in detail, and how?
    - Discover the controlling principles of the author.
        - Plato assumed that conversation about philosophy is the most important of all human activities.
        - Aristotle believed that happiness is the *whole* of the good, not the *highest* good.
    - Define the terms: they often come from common speech but are used in a very special sense.
- Is the book true, in whole or part?
    - You must answer the important questions for yourself, with arguments to back them up. Taking the opinions of others is not solving the questions, but evading them.
- What of it? Why is this important? What follows?
    - Theoretical conclusions can have important practical consequences (eg on climate change).

Social Sciences

This group includes economics, politics, sociology, psychology, and possibly those of professional trades (law, business).

Social sciences are deceptively easy to read, since they use jargon that has penetrated daily life - words like “society,” “culture,” “gross national product.” The topics relate to your everyday experience. However, **for this reason you likely come in with preexisting bias,** which must be ignored to read analytically.

Furthermore, unlike science works, social science works tend not to define the essential terms and postulates. This is aggravated by the blending together of multiple fields, thus creating a struggle to

define terms like “economic depression” as clearly as “isosceles triangle.”

Typically there is no single authoritative work on any subject, so you must read several. One sign of this is the need for social science authors to release revised editions of their works to avoid obsolescence.

This brings us to the final section of the book, on syntopical reading.

Syntopical Reading

According to How to Read a Book, the most challenging of all types of reading is syntopical reading, which applies the analytical skills across a multitude of texts.

The ultimate aim is to understand all the conflicting viewpoints relating to a subject. It’s not to devise your own synthetic answer, as this would merely be an entry into the literature.

Where in analytical reading you were the student and the book was the master, in syntopical reading you must be the master of your own inquisition. It is now time to determine what is applicable or not to your subject.

The major steps are:

- Create a total bibliography of works that may be relevant to your subject.
    - Many of the important works may not be obvious, e.g. may not have the keyword in their titles.
- Inspect all of the books on your bibliography to decide which are relevant to your subject, and to better define the subject.
    - As you research, you may find that your subject is more difficult to define than you imagined. Imagine love, which has been attributed to everything in the universe. Do we speak of love for men, women, parents, children, mankind, money, animals, wine, football?
    - You may have to iterate between reading works and defining your subject.
- Find the most relevant passages within the bibliography.
    - Read the book quickly. You are reading it for your ultimate purpose, not for its own sake.
    - You may use a syntopicon that organizes passages across works by subject. like *Great Works of the Western World*.
- **Bring the authors to terms with each other.**
    - Authors in different fields may use entirely different terms that mean the same thing, and the same terms in different fields may mean entirely different things.
    - You must establish the controls and bring order to the chaos.
    - This is in some sense like translating Latin to French, or making Aristotle talk to Nietzsche.
- Frame a set of questions to which most of the authors can be interpreted as giving answers.
    - This may not be explicit - you may have to infer that *if* the author were asked the question,

then she would have answered in this way.

- **Define the issues by ranging the opposing answers of authors.**
    - Often differences in answers are due to different conceptions of the question, and different views of the subject.
- Order the questions and issues to throw maximum light on the subject.
    - Show how the questions are answered differently and say why.
    - Point to texts that support classification of answers.
    - Generally, order more general questions before less general questions.
    - Relations between issues.
    - Avoid trying to assert the truth or falsity of any view - this fails the goal of the syntopic reading to be objective.

The authors suggest ignoring imaginative works from syntopical reading, because the propositions are obscured by plot and are rarely explicitly attributed to the author (a character's speech could be satirical).

The ideal is to be objective, but this is difficult to uphold, especially in subtle ways like the summarization of arguments and the ordering of answers. The antidote to this is constant reference to the actual text of the authors.

Example of the author's syntopical reading on the subject of progress:

- Coming to terms: progress is used primarily to indicate change for the better, though a minority referred to is as negative changes. The authors then had to refer to the latter as "non-meliorative advances" rather than progress, thus changing the original authors' term.
- The major question is, does progress occur in history? To this the major answers are 1) yes, 2) no, 3) we cannot know.
    - However, there are quite a few ways of saying each of these.
    - There is also controversy: 1) is progress necessary, or contingent on other occurrences? 2) will progress continue indefinitely? 3) is there progress in human nature as well as in human institutions?
- Finally, there are 6 respects in which progress occurs: 1) knowledge, 2) technology, 3) economic, 4) political, 5) moral, 6) in the fine arts.