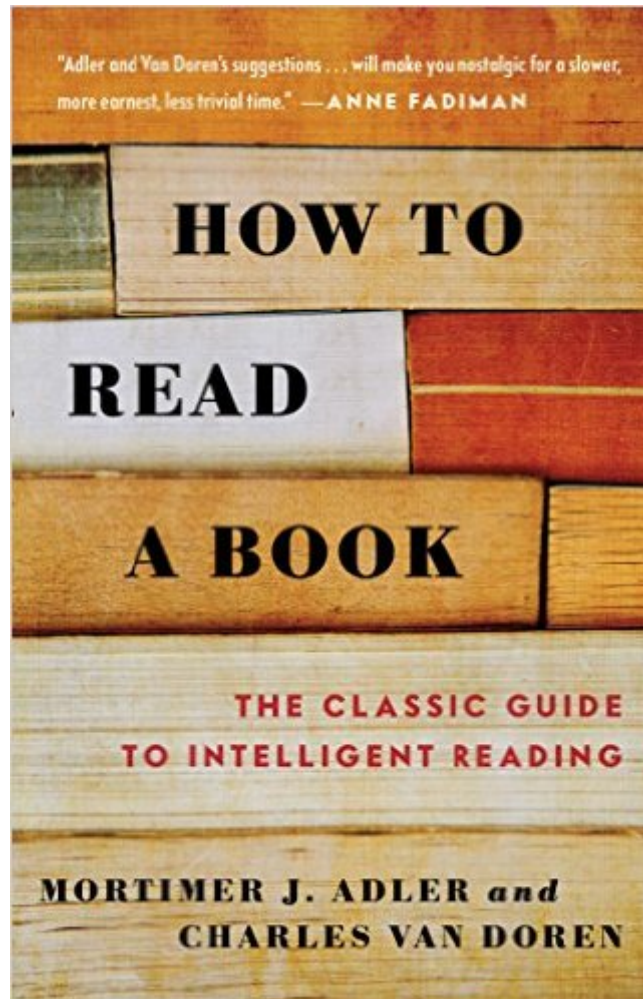


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How To Read A Book (A Touchstone Book)



Synopsis

With half a million copies in print, *How to Read a Book* is the best and most successful guide to reading comprehension for the general reader, completely rewritten and updated with new material. Originally published in 1940, this book is a rare phenomenon, a living classic that introduces and elucidates the various levels of reading and how to achieve them—from elementary reading, through systematic skimming and inspectional reading, to speed reading. Readers will learn when and how to judge a book by its cover, and also how to X-ray it, read critically, and extract the author's message from the text. Also included is instruction in the different techniques that work best for reading particular genres, such as practical books, imaginative literature, plays, poetry, history, science and mathematics, philosophy and social science works. Finally, the authors offer a recommended reading list and supply reading tests you can use to measure your own progress in reading skills, comprehension, and speed.

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Customer Reviews

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested"

(Francis Bacon). This is one of those books. *How to Read a Book* is a classic guide to intelligent reading and my opinion is that it should be standard reading, particularly for the college-bound student. Don't let the title fool you. This book is not a simplistic review of what you learned in the second grade. The book is divided into four parts. Part one includes what Adler calls the first two levels of reading: elementary and inspectional reading. In total he sets forth four levels of reading: elementary reading, inspectional reading, analytical reading and syntopical reading. He proceeds to tell us that reading is an active process since the teacher is not available to deliberate. In keeping with this activity we are told how to read faster while comprehending more, how to find answers to our questions from within the book and how to make the right kind of notes in the book. Part two contains the third level of reading: analytical reading. "Reading a book analytically is chewing and digesting it" (p.19). We now learn how to determine the type of literature we are reading, what type of structure it has and we learn that we must come to grasp with the author's vocabulary. The point of all this is to understand the message of the author. If we are unable to state the author's message concisely in our own terms, we have learned nothing. Only after we first understand what the author is saying, can we begin criticize him fairly. Once we have read analytically, we can agree with the author, disagree with him or we can postpone judgment until we have learned more if we wish. Adler suggests that we do not consult other study helps until we first have read the book analytically.

As a book reviewer for the past 20 years, with hundreds of reviews in print and electronic media, I think I know a little about reading books. I was fascinated to find that Adler and Van Doren have, in *HOW TO READ A BOOK*, clearly articulated what I had discovered on my own. Most people read at an elementary level. Common print media -- newspapers, magazines -- are geared to this first level, that of eighth or ninth grade. Reading at this level is simple and unsophisticated. It is a fairly simple procedure. As someone once said, "You just pick up a book and look at every word until you've seen them all." The second level of reading is inspectional. Two steps are performed simultaneously. The reader skims, or pre-reads, by studying the title page, preface, table of contents, index, dust jacket and a chapter or two. He thumbs through the book, reading a bit here and there. Then he reads the entire book superficially without bothering whether he understands it or not. I might argue that if you don't understand what you're reading, you're not reading at all. However, this is the kind of reading I do when I'm selecting a book to review. It is just the beginning. Adler and Van Doren argue that this kind of superficial reading can prepare a reader for enjoying more difficult works. "The tremendous pleasure that can come from reading Shakespeare, for example, was spoiled for

generations of high school students who were forced to go through 'Julius Caesar,' 'As You Like It,' or 'Hamlet' scene by scene, looking up all the strange words in a glossary and studying all the footnotes," write the authors. "As a result, the never read a Shakespeare play. By the time they reached the end, they had forgotten the beginning and lost sight of the whole...

There's no doubt that effective reading is a skill which has to be developed through deliberate practice, and this book provides mostly good advice which should help develop that skill more quickly (but I don't agree with all of Adler's advice). Adler's advice pertains to aspects such as doing preliminary reconnaissance of a book by systematically skimming it, classifying the book by genre, identifying the author's aims, grasping the way the author uses terminology, distilling the central message of the book along with its implications and the structure of its supporting arguments, judging the book fairly, and drawing on multiple books on the same subject in order to reach a synoptic understanding of the subject. The main point is that reading books effectively comes down to reading them actively, motivated by a sincere desire to understand, learn, and grow; without that motivation, the reader is really just going through the motions and perhaps shouldn't even bother trying. Readers who are already skilled will have picked up most or all of the strategies and techniques recommended by Adler on their own, through trial and error. Therefore, the value of the book is that it should expedite the development of this skill for less skilled readers, and it should reinforce (and validate) this skill for those who are already skilled readers. All of this sounds pretty good, so why 3 stars? Because Adler has made the book much too long, with the result that his key points can easily get lost in his endless babbling, not to mention making the book very tedious to read. If Adler had cut out the fat and trimmed the book from 400 pages down to 100 pages, the book probably would have easily deserved 5 stars.

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