

TIPS FOR STUDYING

Many students have not learned how to study, or even read a book. It is to help them that I offer this brief summary of the rules for analyzing and synthesizing written material found in *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren.¹

I. Preliminaries.

1. Reading books for greater understanding is to be enlightened about the why, the how, and the ought of things. It is *active* reading, requiring attention, analytical skills, the exercise of the imagination, and critical thought on your part.

2. To learn the most out of the books assigned in any class you need to read them with pencil in hand, prepared to mark them up--to underline, highlight, and insert notes and commentaries throughout--and to write about them on separate sheets collected in a notebook. You need to *work* your way through the books assigned. If the assignment is anything like any of the great or classic books, it will be *above* your head, at least initially. If it were not, you would not learn anything from it. Learning from books is like lifting oneself up higher intellectually, mentally aiming to reach their level. A book has to challenge, puzzle, and make you wonder. If it does not do that, it will not help you in progressing from understanding government and politics (or the subject matter of any other class) less to understanding them more.

2. The first thing to do with any book is to inspect it. Read and ponder its title. Look over the table of contents, perusing the titles of sections and chapters. Skim the preface, introduction, and conclusion. Sample chapters or other sections that appear central to the book. Ask yourself the following questions: What is the subject matter of this book? What is the question or problem that the author is addressing? How does it appear to be related to what previous book(s) you have read in this or other classes? Next, give the entire book a fast read, without getting bogged down in places you don't understand. Mark those sections with question marks and go on. When you finish, ask yourself additional questions: What is the theme of this book, i.e., what holds its various parts together? What

¹Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*. Revised and Updated Edition. New York: Simon & Schuster, a Touchstone Book, 1972. Originally published in 1940 by Mortimer J. Adler. All page references are to the paperback edition, which is available from www.amazon.com and from The Great Books Foundation <www.greatbooks.org> (1-800-222-5870) for less than \$15.00.

Note: This is instructional material, originally prepared for the Spring 2001 session of POT 4601/5602 Masters of Political Thought. There is no pretense to originality here: the numbered rules and steps have been taken verbatim from Adler and Van Doren's marvelous book. The rest I have condensed and adapted, inserting examples of my own, for the purpose of assisting students to study more profitably the books assigned for my classes. Alfred G. Cuzán.

are some of the key words and phrases denoting the principal propositions--affirmations or denials about the truth of something--contained in the book? What solutions or answers does the author offer to the questions or problems posed at the outset? How much of this book appears to be true and how much false? How important are the apparent truths or falsehoods in this book? How are they related to what you have read before?

II. Now you are ready for the next step, which is reading the book *analytically*. *Reading a book analytically is chewing and digesting it. . . . Analytical reading is preeminently for the sake of understanding* (p. 19; italics here and elsewhere in the original).

Here are ten rules prescribed by Adler and Van Doren for reading analytically.

1. **YOU SHOULD KNOW WHAT KIND OF BOOK YOU ARE READING**
2. In your own words, summarize the theme of the book: **STATE THE UNITY OF THE WHOLE BOOK IN A SINGLE SENTENCE, OR AT MOST A FEW SENTENCES (A SHORT PARAGRAPH).**
3. Outline the book: **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.** Do the same for its chapters.
4. **DEFINE THE PROBLEM OR PROBLEMS THE AUTHOR IS TRYING TO SOLVE.** In your own words, specify what the author is trying to do.
5. Highlight key words and phrases denoting the central concepts or ideas of the book: **FIND THE IMPORTANT WORDS AND THROUGH THEM COME TO TERMS WITH THE AUTHOR.** Unless you know his vocabulary and terminology, you will fail to understand the author.
6. Identify the key sentences containing the central propositions (truth claims) of the book: **MARK THE MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCES IN A BOOK AND DISCOVER THE PROPOSITIONS THEY CONTAIN.** Now express these affirmations in your own words, being faithful to the *thought* of the author. Think of examples, real or imaginary.
7. Summarize, in your own words, the reasons offered in support of the author's key propositions: **LOCATE OR CONSTRUCT THE BASIC ARGUMENTS IN THE BOOK BY FINDING THEM IN THE CONNECTION OF SENTENCES.** The propositions and arguments constitute the heart of the book. Without laying them out before you in one place, you will not have a complete picture of what the author is saying.

8. **AFIND OUT WHAT THE AUTHOR-S SOLUTIONS ARE.** How does the author claim to solve the problems specified at the beginning of the book?

9. Be sure you understand before agreeing or disagreeing with the author: **YOU MUST BE ABLE TO SAY, WITH REASONABLE CERTAINTY, I UNDERSTAND, BEFORE YOU CAN SAY ANY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING: I AGREE, OR I DISAGREE OR I SUSPEND JUDGMENT.**

10. Be reasonable: **WHEN YOU DISAGREE, DO SO REASONABLY, AND NOT DISPUTATIONOUSLY OR CONTENTIOUSLY.** Look for the truth of the thing, not at **winning** an argument or scoring points.

III. Finally, we come to the highest level of reading, what Adler and Van Doren call **syntopical reading.** This involves comparative reading, or reading *across* several or many books, placing **them** in relation to one another and to a subject about which they all revolve (p. 20). The subject is chosen by the reader because of its intrinsic interest (or because it is the subject of a course or term paper assigned for class). *In syntopical reading, it is you and your concerns that are primarily to be served, not the books that you read* (p. 316).

The purpose of syntopical reading is not mere comparison, but **to construct an analysis of the subject that *may not be in any of the books*** (p. 20, emphasis in the original). Any one book may offer only a partial or biased view of the subject. By comparing systematically what several authors say about the same subject or problem, the reader arrives at an understanding of the topic that cannot be found in any of them. Syntopical reading synthesizes relevant passages from two or more books, comparing concepts, arguments, evidences, and conclusions, in the process generating insights out of the material that perhaps none of the authors, or no previous reader, had seen or anticipated before.

Syntopical reading builds on inspectional and analytical reading. It takes reading one step higher. According to Adler and Van Doren, there are five steps in syntopical reading. The first step assumes that you have already identified a bibliography of works on the subject of your interest.

1. **AFINDING THE RELEVANT PASSAGES.** Inspect all the works you have selected for comparison with the aim of identifying those passages that address your interest. Search for them in the table of contents, in the index, and by skimming through each book.

2. **ABRINGING THE AUTHORS TO TERM.** Several authors addressing the same topic are unlikely to use the same terms. In order to allow for comparison, you need to choose the terms which will be used to convey the ideas of two or more authors, none of whom may have used the term you have selected. A common terminology must be imposed across the several contributions to the topic. So, in syntopical reading, ***It is you who must establish the terms, and bring your authors to them rather than the other way around*** (p. 318). For example, comparing two or more authors=

conjectures about how man is likely to act in the absence of government, or under socialism, is to confront their ideas about human nature, even if none of the authors explicitly used that term.

3. **GETTING THE QUESTIONS CLEAR.** In order to compare key propositions advanced by two or more authors, the best thing to do is to frame a set of questions that shed light on our problem and to which each of our authors gives answers (p. 319). Be it noted that an author may not have addressed the question directly or explicitly, but his answer may be inferred from what he said about another, related question, or from the structure of his general argument. Of course, it is possible that an author may be silent on that topic, or that his answer is indeterminate.

4. **DEFINING THE ISSUES.** Sometimes the question is clear and several authors address it unambiguously. But it often happens that this is not the case. Then defining the issue may involve framing the question in a way that was not explicitly employed by any of the authors whose writings you are studying. Thus, the task of the syntopical reader is to define the issues in such a way as to insure that they are joined as well as may be. Sometimes this forces him to frame the question in a way that is not explicitly employed by any author (p. 321).

Step 5. **ANALYZING THE DISCUSSION.** Having arranged what two or more authors have to say about the same subject, the last step is to attempt to extract some truth from the *conflict of opposing answers*. For some questions, the weight of argument and evidence may favor one answer over others. The conclusion may be clear and unassailable. But when it comes to those perennial questions that have preoccupied thinkers for centuries, there may not be a final or definitive answer to your original question. Rather, the truth of the matter may lie in the *ordered discussion itself*, rather than in any set of propositions or assertions about it (p. 322).

This is not to say that the truth is always elusive or unattainable. Simply, it involves the recognition that on fundamental questions the truth may not lie wholly on any one side of the controversy, or that each side has gotten hold only of a part, or that there may be still other parts of the truth that remain to be found. Or, as J. S. Mill put it, *Even [intellectual] progress, which ought to superadd, for the most part only substitutes one partial and incomplete truth for another; improvement consisting chiefly in this, that the new fragment of truth is more wanted, more adapted to the needs of the time than that which it displaces. . . .*²

² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, New York: Penguin Books, 1982, p. 109.