

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

HOW TO READ A BOOK: THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO INTELLIGENT READING

A BOOK REVIEW

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
DR 30020 DOCTORAL COLLOQUIUM

BY

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Adler, Mortimer J., and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1972. Kindle. 425 pp. \$12.99.

Biographical Information of the Authors

Mortimer J. Alder joins Charles Van Doren in *How to Read a Book*. Adler earned a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from Columbia University. He was also an educator at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the University of North Carolina. He was also a philosopher who insisted that reading classical literature was essential in education. Adler collaborated with Charles Van Doren who studied liberal arts and astrophysics, finally completing a Ph.D. in English from Columbia University. Together these authors provide a broad and excellent authority on this work. They identify four levels of reading, substantially supporting each level with practical principles to guide the reader. The goal of this book is to encourage a reader to engage with any book they read to increase their understanding of a subject.

Synopsis

The authors stated, “The art of reading, in short, includes all of the same skills that are involved in the art of unaided discovery: keenness of observation, readily available memory, range of imagination, and, of course, an intellect trained in analysis and reflection” (8). They believe that reading a book can teach the reader well by “elevating the power” of their “own operations” of the mind (8). The book is organized into four parts that provide a logical progression which accomplish two purposes. First, introduce and expand on instructions for effective reading, and second, establish systematic principles to guide a reader to engage in reading toward that goal of being taught well. In the majority of the book the authors discuss specific information regarding the third level of reading, known as “analytical reading.”

Importance is placed on actively reading and gaining skills. Developing skills equips a reader to consider and compare a topic from different authors so as to develop their own conclusions on a subject. The term they employ for this kind of reading is “syntopical reading,” which is the fourth level of reading.

Adler and Van Doren express perspectives about reading levels corresponding to academic levels. The writers indicate that the level of “elementary reading,” the first level, ought to be mastered by ninth grade. They also indicate that a good liberal arts high school ought to prepare its graduates for competency in Analytical Reading, the third level of reading. Finally, they posit that colleges ought to produce competent “syntopical” readers.

The third level of reading identified by Adler and Van Doren encourages the reader to address “analytical reading” and is probably the most important aspect of reading. The authors intend for “analytical readers” to develop the ability to efficiently consider elements of a book without having to read it comprehensively. “Analytical reading” helps determine the unity of the book and summarize the theme into a short statement or at most a paragraph. The process of “analytical reading” requires an understanding of the major parts of a book, its organization, and its coherency.

In the third level of reading, they encourage the reader to identify what problems the writer was facing as the writer answered a question or series of questions. Active reading at this level requires one to formulate the questions as clearly as possible. Concluding what that main question is, or the subordinate questions, can be a difficult task, but one that will prove beneficial in the comprehension and analyzation of the material.

In order to analyze a book effectively, a reader will be required to understand a few things that might otherwise be overlooked. Adler and Van Doren committed to teach about the

need to understand the propositions that the author develops as they employ the elements of vocabulary and terms. They emphasize the necessity of understanding the basics of language, sentence structures, paragraphs, and grammatical structure. They insist that the reader understands the propositions and arguments that comprise thoughts and logic. As the reader identifies the logic of an author, they will be able to answer the questions the author faced. To successfully read the book, Adler and Van Doren encourage their reader to mark specific elements: important words and terms, key sentences that express the determinations of the author, and major points which contain affirmations or denials on the topic addressed (118-21).

Adler and Van Doren direct their readers to develop the ability to attain the fourth level of reading, “syntopical reading.” The goal requires the aforementioned disciplines, so that the reader is able to efficiently read more than one book on a single subject. The authors establish five principles for syntopical reading: (1) find the relevant passages; (2) bring the author to terms; (3) get the questions clear; (4) define the issues; and (5) analyze the discussion (307-13).

Of the five steps, the second is considered by the authors to be the most difficult. “Bringing the author to terms” (309) means that the reader engages in translation work. The reader will attempt to take the terms, logic, and determinations of a variety of authors and utilize them to solve their own neutral arguments. Effectively solving a neutral argument requires an extensive bibliography on the topic. The reader will also examine those books in order to consider how they can clarify the subject.

Critical Evaluation

Two sections particularly interested this reviewer encouraging new perspectives and skills for reading. The first was the section on Inspectional Reading. The instructions the authors give to aid a reader in determining the worth of a book are extensive and practical, especially if

someone is considering the importance of reading a book for “syntopical” purposes. By developing “syntopical reading” skills a reader will be able to efficiently research and draw conclusions on their topic. Intentionally employing the level of inspectional reading will help a reader to understand the author’s “special angle on his subject” (33). Time spent understanding the table of contents and the book’s structure will help determine the value of reading the book in either large portions or entirety. “Inspectional reading” will also aid in identifying specific books and authors as a bibliography is constructed.

The second section that particularly impacted this reviewer focused on the basic questions that a reader should ask: (1) what is the book about as a whole; (2) what is being said in detail, and how; (3) is the book true, in whole or part; and (4) what of it? The previous four questions establish a foundation and direction that will encourage every reader to work at making the book their own (46).

This reviewer was especially grateful that Adler and Van Doren identified that these principles can also be employed in writing. They emphasize that unity, clarity, and coherence are what make “a basic maxim of good writing” (91). The observation of this review is that most of the adults in the modern era do not indicate mastery of the second and third levels. Therefore, modern students bound for college and students pursuing post-graduate work should carefully consider *How to Read a Book* for successful preparation.

Conclusion

How to Read a Book is a worthy guide to read and revisit for any reader wanting to grasp and grapple with the thoughts of others who have communicated in print. The book contains principles which will aid a reader to critically engage the author and subject without becoming contentious. The work encourages a systematic and comprehensive development of practical

skills that can be applied by readers as they grow in their thoughts on subjects. Adler and Van Doren identify that it is not necessary for a reader to understand everything expressed in a book. They encourage every reader to engage to learn what they can because this is successful reading. It is the opinion of this reviewer that *How to Read a Book* can strengthen every reader and should be required reading at the collegiate level.