How to Read a Book

Most people approach an academic reading assignment like a mystery novel: they begin at the beginning and read each word until the end. While this is the only proper way to read a mystery, it is an ineffectual way to study; those who read the mystery end first are actually better prepared to do reading for class. The secret of mastering academic reading is to become familiar with the contents of a book as quickly as possible.

Begin with what some call “conceptualizing” the book or article. What is this book about, and why was it written? What is being said, how, and for whom? If it is a class assignment, ask why the instructor thinks it is worth your time, and what you are supposed to gain from it. Look at the title; read the preface quickly—usually the author will tell you why the work was written. Study a book’s table of contents. Look at the index; read the publisher’s blurb. Read the conclusion of the book, then the opening and closing paragraphs of each chapter. Find what seem to be the pivotal chapters, and skim them quickly. For articles, note subheadings, or look for a breakdown of the major points in the first paragraph or two and then try to find where the author begins to discuss each point; read the conclusion or final paragraphs. Try to pigeonhole the work: if your mind were a large closet with many shelves, which shelf would this work fit on? Where on that shelf, next to whom? Do you have to build a new shelf? (the more you read, the more shelves you will build as you go along, and the larger the closet will become—when you have stopped building new shelves, you have stopped learning and thinking).

Do all of this before you begin reading sequentially; conceptualization of an article will take about fifteen minutes, a book, an hour.

Conceptualization is a first reading of a book or article; now it is time to read again, more deeply. This is what some call “analytical reading.” Here you read word for word, cross-examining the author as you go: What is being said in detail? Is it true? So what? Ask questions (see below). This is an active, interactive reading. Read with a pencil, underlining and numbering main points, adding comments, question marks, check marks. Mark words you don’t understand to look up later. Prepare your own personal index in the back endpapers of a book; note where the ten or twelve most important passages occur. Needless to say, don’t mark library books or journals; zerox the appropriate pages for marking. It costs more, but you learn more.

Once you have finished analytical reading, it is time to move to the third step, the review. Go over the work again, much as you went over it the first time, but with much more experience now. Was your evaluation of the structure correct? Has your view of the author’s ideas changed? Use the front endpapers of a book to record your thoughts and summaries. How does this work change your view of the subject matter, of life, of the world? If the answer is “not at all,” then the work was not worth spending this much time on; choose more worthy material next time. While this may not be an option for assigned readings, remember that you cannot fairly evaluate an assignment until you have reached this stage; to give up after a few pages because it is “boring” or “too hard” is not worthy of a serious student, and is usually a sign of poor reading habits. If you follow the method outlined here, few assignments will be boring, because your mind is working actively with the text.

Some may object that this is a slow method of reading. This is true in the short term; only by prolonged exposure does one become familiar with a subject. But in the long term it is a more efficient method of reading, for the reader improves with practice both in skill and in knowledge.
Questions for Analytical Reading

A. The First Stage of Analytical Reading: 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 has tried to solve.

B. The Second Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Interpreting a Book’s Contents.
   1. Come to terms with the author by interpreting his key words.
   2. Grasp the author’s leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences.
   3. Know the author’s arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.
   4. Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not; and of the latter, decide which the author knew he had failed to solve.

C. The Third Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Criticizing a Book as a Communication of Knowledge.
   1. General Maxims of Intellectual Etiquette.
      a. Do not begin criticism until you have completed your outline and your interpretation of the book. (Do not say you agree, disagree, or suspend judgment, until you can say “I understand.”)
      b. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously.
      c. Demonstrate that you recognize the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any critical judgment you make.
   2. Special Criteria for Points of Criticism.
      a. Show wherein the author is uniformed.
      b. Show wherein the author is misinformed.
      c. Show wherein the author is illogical.
      d. Show wherein the author’s analysis or account is incomplete.

Note: Of these last four, the first three are criteria for disagreement. Failing in all of these, you must agree, at least in part, although you may suspend judgment on the whole, in the light of the last point.