

NOTES FROM: *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer J. Adler

SUMMARY: This is a classic reading guide from the 1950s that is one of the better books out there about how to get the most out of your reading. It's fairly dry and academic in places - and again, a certain air of elitism can be detected in certain places - but I thought it was wonderful, and it definitely helped me out tremendously.

In the book, Adler covers the four different types of reading and when each is appropriate, how to select your own reading list based on what you're interested in and what's most useful to know, how to ask great questions while you're reading the book, and a lot more that will really take your reading to the next level.

“True freedom is impossible without a mind made free by discipline.”

A book that challenges your understanding deserves to be studied intensely and until understanding is gained by uninterrupted reflection

A reader can understand something that a higher skilled writer has written, because all learning is based on that same notion of the plasticity of the human mind and its ability to learn what it didn't understand before

When you question an idea in a book, it answers you only to the extent that you do the work of thinking and analysis yourself

Skim the table of contents and stuff first, or else you'll be trying to get a rough idea of what the book is about at the same time as you are trying to improve your understanding of the material itself

The ideal is not merely to read faster, but to read at different speeds, and to know when the different speeds are appropriate

Ask questions when you read that you will have to answer in the course of your reading

Ask, what is the book about on the whole?

Ask, what is being said in detail and how?

Ask, is the book true, in whole or part?

Ask, what is the significance?

There are few authors who execute their plan perfectly

You can't describe the unity of a book without first describing the parts that make up that unity

The important terms to know are sometimes the words that give you the most trouble

Ideally, you should be able to restate what the author is trying to say in your own words

No one is really teachable who does not exercise his independent judgement

You must be able to understand before you can criticize

It is an error to suppose that to criticize means always to disagree

Suspending judgement is also an act of criticism because you are in effect saying that something has not yet been shown

Ask critics to state in their own words what you have said. If they can't do it, then you are entirely justified in ignoring them.

The language that we use to communicate is an imperfect medium, clouded by emotion and colored by interest

Disagreement can be covered on by rationality, and you should always be open to being taught

No higher commendation can be given any work of the human mind than to praise it for the measure of truth it has achieved

Being well-read should refer to quality and not just quantity

Thomas Hobbes: "If I read as many books as most men do, I would be as dull-witted as they are."

Read every book according to its merits

Reading earlier writers can help you read the later ones

The great books are involved in a prolonged conversation with earlier and later writers and readers

Philosophy must be read almost exclusively from earlier to later works, since they all build on one another

Beauty is harder to analyze than truth

If we must escape from reality, it should be to a deeper, or a greater reality

The rules of reading a great work of literary art should clear away all that stops us from feeling as deeply as we possibly can

When reading fiction, live in the universe of the author's creation, and participate in the scene as though you were a present observer

In novels and in life, we understand more looking backward than we can reasonably expect looking forward, or even in the moment when events are happening

We often like or dislike a book without really knowing why, usually owing to unconscious factors and yearnings that are satisfied or unsatisfied by the book and certain characters within it

When good characters are rewarded and bad characters are punished, it is extremely satisfying to us because we wish life were that way

Read lyric poems all the way through at first without stopping, even if you think you don't understand them

The full meaning of a poem is found in the whole, and not in any particular part

The second time through, read a poem out loud

It's essential to read more than one account of any period in history if we are to understand it

An author cannot be blamed for not doing what he did not try to do

It isn't possible to write a completely true autobiography

In reading books about our own time, we do not have the advantage of distance

The search for wisdom begins in childhood, but for many people it stops there as well

A mind not agitated by good questions cannot appreciate the significance of even the best answers

The best philosophical books ask the same sort of questions that children ask

Try to discover the controlling principles that pervade the work of the author that might be holdovers from previous books or other assumed postulates

The discovery that you come to on your own will be far more valuable to you than anyone else's ideas

The disagreements among others are relatively unimportant. Your responsibility is only to make up your own mind

The questions philosophers ask are simply more important than those asked by anyone else. Except children.

You cannot understand a book if you refuse to hear what it is saying

There has hardly been a single human action that has not been called - in one way or another - an act of love

In syntopical reading, the author can help you solve your own problem without having ever intended to

Decide which list of books is relevant to the particular question you are asking and then find the relevant passages in each

In syntopical reading, you have to impose a common terminology on all of the authors you are reading

Draft a set of questions that each author can be supposed to be answering, and then outline the issues surfaced by the differing answers to those questions

All possible sides of an exacting issue cannot possibly be exhaustively enumerated. Nevertheless, the syntopical reader should try.

To read syntopically, you need to know which books to read. But unless you can read syntopically, you won't know which books to read.

You have to stretch your mind by reading books that are slightly more difficult than what you are comfortable with

There are some books that will continue to extend you, regardless of how good a reader you become, and those are the books that you should be seeking out

There is no book that will be completely beyond your grasp if you apply to it all the steps of intelligent reading

When you return to one of very few books that are worth reading a second time, you find that the book has grown along with you

Seek out the few books that have this value for you and read them over and over