

How To Read A Book

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Part I

The Dimensions of Reading

Chapter 1

The Activity and Art of Reading

This is a book for readers and for those who wish to become readers. Particularly, it is for readers of books. Even more particularly, it is for those whose main purpose in reading books is to gain increased understanding.

By “readers” we mean people who are still accustomed, as almost every literate and intelligent person used to be, to gain a large share of their information about and their understanding of the world from the written word. Not all of it, of course; even in the days before radio and television, a certain amount of information and understanding was acquired through spoken words and through observation. But for intelligent and curious people that was never enough. They knew that they had to read too, and they did read.

There is some feeling nowadays that reading is not as necessary as it once was. Radio and especially television have taken over many of the functions once served by print, just as photography has taken over functions once served by painting and other graphic arts. Admittedly, television serves some of these functions extremely well; the visual communication of news events, for example, has enormous impact. The ability of radio to give us information while we are engaged in doing other things—for instance, driving a car—is remarkable, and a great saving of time. But it may be seriously questioned whether the advent of modern communications media has much enhanced our understanding of the world in which we live.

Perhaps we know more about the world than we used to, and insofar as knowledge is prerequisite to understanding, that is all to the good. But knowledge is not as much a prerequisite to understanding as is commonly supposed. We do not have to *know* everything about something in order to *understand* it; too many facts are often as much of an obstacle to understanding as too few. There is a sense in which we moderns are inundated with facts to the detriment of understanding.

One of the reasons for this situation is that the very media we have mentioned

are so designed as to make thinking seem unnecessary (though this is only an appearance). The packaging of intellectual positions and views is one of the most active enterprises of some of the best minds of our day. The viewer of television, the listener to radio, the reader of magazines, is presented with a whole complex of elements—all the way from ingenious rhetoric to carefully selected data and statistics—to make it easy for him to “make up his own mind” with the minimum of difficulty and effort. But the packaging is often done so effectively that the viewer, listener, or reader does not make up his own mind at all. Instead, he inserts a packaged opinion into his mind, somewhat like inserting a cassette into a cassette player. He then pushes a button and “plays back” the opinion whenever it seems appropriate to do so. He has performed acceptably without having had to think.

Active Reading

As we said at the beginning, we will be principally concerned in these pages with the development of skill in reading books; but the rules of reading that, if followed and practiced, develop such skill can be applied also to printed material in general, to any type of reading matter—to newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, articles, tracts, even advertisements.

Since reading of any sort is an activity, all reading must to some degree be active. Completely passive reading is impossible; we cannot read with our eyes immobilized and our minds asleep. Hence when we contrast active with passive reading, our purpose is, first, to call attention to the fact that reading can be *more* or *less* active, and second, to point out that the *more active* the reading the *better*. One reader is better than another in proportion as he is capable of a greater range of activity in reading and exerts more effort. He is better if he demands more of himself and of the text before him.

Though, strictly speaking, there can be no absolutely passive reading, many people think that, as compared with writing and speaking, which are obviously active undertakings, reading and listening are entirely passive. The writer or speaker must put out some effort, but no work need be done by the reader or listener. Reading and listening are thought of as *receiving* communication from someone who is actively engaged in *giving* or *sending* it. The mistake here is to suppose that receiving communication is like receiving a blow or a legacy or a judgment from the court. On the contrary, the reader or listener is much more like the catcher in a game of baseball.

Catching the ball is just as much an activity as pitching or hitting it. The pitcher or batter is the *sender* in the sense that his activity initiates the motion of the ball. The catcher or fielder is the *receiver* in the sense that his activity terminates it. Both are active, though the activities are different. If anything is passive, it is the ball. It is the inert thing that is put in motion or stopped, whereas the players are active, moving to pitch, hit, or catch. The analogy with writing and reading is almost perfect. The thing that is written and read, like the ball, is the passive object common to the two activities that begin and

terminate the process.

We can take this analogy a step further. The art of catching is the skill of catching every kind of pitch-fast balls and curves, changeups and knucklers. Similarly, the art of reading is the skill of catching every sort of communication as well as possible.

It is noteworthy that the pitcher and catcher are successful only to the extent that they cooperate. The relation of writer and reader is similar. The writer isn't trying *not* to be caught, although it sometimes seems so. Successful communication occurs in any case where what the writer wanted to have received finds its way into the reader's possession. The writer's skill and the reader's skill converge upon a common end.

Admittedly, writers vary, just as pitchers do. Some writers have excellent "control"; they know exactly what they want to convey, and they convey it precisely and accurately. Other things being equal, they are easier to "catch" than a "wild" writer without "control."

There is one respect in which the analogy breaks down. The ball is a simple unit. It is either *completely* caught or not. A piece of writing, however, is a complex object. It can be received more or less completely, all the way from very little of what the writer intended to the whole of it. The amount the reader "catches" will usually depend on the amount of activity he puts into the process, as well as upon the skill with which he executes the different mental acts involved.

What does active reading entail? We will return to this question many times in this book. For the moment, it suffices to say that, given the same thing to read, one person reads it better than another, first, by reading it more actively, and second, by performing each of the acts involved more skillfully. These two things are related. Reading is a complex activity, just as writing is. It consists of a large number of separate acts, all of which must be performed in a good reading. The person who can perform more of them is better able to read.

The Goals of Reading: Reading for Information and Reading for Understanding

You have a mind. Now let us suppose that you also have a book that you want to read. The book consists of language written by someone for the sake of communicating something to you. Your success in reading it is determined by the extent to which you receive everything the writer intended to communicate.

That, of course, is too simple. The reason is that there are two possible relations between your mind and the book, not just one. These two relations are exemplified by two different experiences that you can have in reading your book.

There is the book; and here is your mind. As you go through the pages, either you understand perfectly everything the author has to say or you do not. If you do, you may have gained information, but you could not have increased

your understanding. If the book is completely intelligible to you from start to finish, then the author and you are as two minds in the same mold. The symbols on the page merely express the common understanding you had before you met.

Let us take our second alternative. You do not understand the book perfectly. Let us even assume—what unhappily is not always true—that you understand enough to know that you do not understand it all. You know the book has more to say than you understand and hence that it contains something that can increase your understanding.

What do you do then? You can take the book to someone else who, you think, can read better than you, and have him explain the parts that trouble you. (“He” may be a living person or another book—a commentary or textbook.) Or you may decide that what is over your head is not worth bothering about, that you understand enough. In either case, you are not doing the job of reading that the book requires.

That is done in only one way. Without external help of any sort, you go to work on the book. With nothing but the power of your own mind, you operate on the symbols before you in such a way that you gradually lift yourself from *a state of understanding less to one of understanding more*. Such elevation, accomplished by the mind working on a book, is highly skilled reading, the kind of reading that a book which challenges your understanding deserves.

Thus we can roughly define what we mean by the art of reading as follows: the process whereby a mind, with nothing to operate on but the symbols of the readable matter, and with no help from outside,¹ elevates itself by the power of its own operations. The mind passes from understanding less to understanding more. The skilled operations that cause this to happen are the various acts that constitute the art of reading.

To pass from understanding less to understanding more by your own intellectual effort in reading is something like pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. It certainly feels that way. It is a major exertion. Obviously, it is a more active kind of reading than you have done before, entailing not only more varied activity but also much more skill in the performance of the various acts required. Obviously, too, the things that are usually regarded as more difficult to read, and hence as only for the better reader, are those that are more likely to deserve and demand this kind of reading.

The distinction between reading for information and reading for understanding is deeper than this. Let us try to say more about it. We will have to consider both goals of reading because the line between what is readable in one way and what must be read in the other is often hazy. To the extent that we can keep these two goals of reading distinct, we can employ the word “reading” in two distinct senses.

The first sense is the one in which we speak of ourselves as reading newspapers, magazines, or anything else that, according to our skill and talents, is at once thoroughly intelligible to us. Such things may increase our store of in-

¹There is one kind of situation in which it is appropriate to ask for outside help in reading a difficult book. This exception is discussed in Chapter 18.

formation, but they cannot improve our understanding, for our understanding was equal to them before we started. Otherwise, we would have felt the shock of puzzlement and perplexity that comes from getting in over our depth—that is, if we were both alert and honest.

The second sense is the one in which a person tries to read something that at first he does not completely understand. Here the thing to be read is initially better or higher than the reader. The writer is communicating something that can increase the reader's understanding. Such communication between unequals must be possible, or else one person could never learn from another, either through speech or writing. Here by "learning" is meant understanding more, not remembering more information that has the same degree of intelligibility as other information you already possess.

There is clearly no difficulty of an intellectual sort about gaining new information in the course of reading if the new facts are of the same sort as those you already know. A person who knows some of the facts of American history and understands them in a certain light can readily acquire by reading, in the first sense, more such facts and understand them in the same light. But suppose he is reading a history that seeks not merely to give him some more facts but also to throw a new and perhaps more revealing light on *all* the facts he knows. Suppose there is greater understanding available here than he possessed before he started to read. If he can manage to acquire that greater understanding, he is reading in the second sense. He has indeed elevated himself by his activity, though indirectly, of course, the elevation was made possible by the writer who had something to teach him.

What are the conditions under which this kind of reading—reading for understanding—takes place? There are two. First, there is *initial inequality in understanding*. The writer must be "superior" to the reader in understanding, and his book must convey in readable form the insights he possesses and his potential readers lack. Second, *the reader must be able to overcome this inequality in some degree*, seldom perhaps fully, but always approaching equality with the writer. To the extent that equality is approached, clarity of communication is achieved.

In short, we can learn only from our "betters." We must know who they are and how to learn from them. The person who has this sort of knowledge possesses the art of reading in the sense with which we are especially concerned in this book. Everyone who can read at all probably has some ability to read in this way. But all of us, without exception, can learn to read better and gradually gain more by our efforts through applying them to more rewarding materials.

We do not want to give the impression that facts, leading to increased information, and insights, leading to increased understanding, are always easy to distinguish. And we would admit that sometimes a mere recital of facts can itself lead to greater understanding. The point we want to emphasize here is that this book is about the art of reading for the sake of increased understanding. Fortunately, if you learn to do that, reading for information will usually take care of itself.

Of course, there is still another goal of reading, besides gaining information

and understanding, and that is entertainment. However, this book will not be much concerned with reading for entertainment. It is the least demanding kind of reading, and it requires the least amount of effort. Furthermore, there are no rules for it. Everyone who knows how to read at all can read for entertainment if he wants to.

In fact, any book that can be read for understanding or information can probably be read for entertainment as well, just as a book that is capable of increasing our understanding can also be read purely for the information it contains. (This proposition cannot be reversed: it is *not* true that every book that can be read for entertainment can also be read for understanding.) Nor do we wish to urge you never to read a good book for entertainment. The point is, if you wish to read a good book for understanding, we believe we can help you. Our subject, then, is the art of reading good books when understanding is the aim you have in view.

Reading as Learning: The Difference Between Learning by Instruction and Learning by Discovery

Getting more information is learning, and so is coming to understand what you did not understand before. But there is an important difference between these two kinds of learning.

To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is the same, in what respects it is different, and so forth.

This distinction is familiar in terms of the differences between being able to remember something and being able to explain it. If you remember what an author says, you have learned something from reading him. If what he says is true, you have even learned something about the world. But whether it is a fact about the book or a fact about the world that you have learned, you have gained nothing but information if you have exercised only your memory. You have not been enlightened. Enlightenment is achieved only when, in addition to knowing what an author says, you know what he means and why he says it.

It is true, of course, that you should be able to remember what the author said as well as know what he meant. Being informed is prerequisite to being enlightened. The point, however, is not to stop at being informed.

Montaigne speaks of “an abecedarian ignorance that precedes knowledge, and a doctoral ignorance that comes after it.” The first is the ignorance of those who, not knowing their ABC’s, cannot read at all. The second is the ignorance of those who have misread many books. They are, as Alexander Pope rightly calls them, bookful blockheads, ignorantly read. There have always been literate ignoramuses who have read too widely and not well. The Greeks had a name for such a mixture of learning and folly which might be applied to the

bookish but poorly read of all ages. They are all *sophomores*.

To avoid this error—the error of assuming that to be widely read and to be well-read are the same thing—we must consider a certain distinction in types of learning. This distinction has a significant bearing on the whole business of reading and its relation to education generally.

In the history of education, men have often distinguished between learning by instruction and learning by discovery. Instruction occurs when one person teaches another through speech or writing. We can, however, gain knowledge without being taught. If this were not the case, and every teacher had to be taught what he in turn teaches others, there would be no beginning in the acquisition of knowledge. Hence, there must be discovery—the process of learning something by research, by investigation, or by reflection, without being taught.

Discovery stands to instruction as learning without a teacher stands to learning through the help of one. In both cases, the activity of learning goes on in the one who learns. It would be a mistake to suppose that discovery is active learning and instruction passive. There is no inactive learning, just as there is no inactive reading.

This is so true, in fact, that a better way to make the distinction clear is to call instruction “aided discovery.” Without going into learning theory as psychologists conceive it, it is obvious that teaching is a very special art, sharing with only two other arts—agriculture and medicine—an exceptionally important characteristic. A doctor may do many things for his patient, but in the final analysis it is the patient himself who must get well—grow in health. The farmer does many things for his plants or animals, but in the final analysis it is they that must grow in size and excellence. Similarly, although the teacher may help his student in many ways, it is the student himself who must do the learning. Knowledge must grow in his mind if learning is to take place.

The difference between learning by instruction and learning by discovery—or, as we would prefer to say, between aided and unaided discovery—is primarily a difference in the materials on which the learner works. When he is being instructed—discovering with the help of a teacher—the learner acts on something communicated to him. He performs operations on discourse, written or oral. He learns by acts of reading or listening. Note here the close relation between reading and listening. If we ignore the minor differences between these two ways of receiving communication, we can say that reading and listening are the same art—the art of being taught. When, however, the learner proceeds without the help of any sort of teacher, the operations of learning are performed on nature or the world rather than on discourse. The rules of such learning constitute the art of unaided discovery. If we use the word “reading” loosely, we can say that discovery—strictly, unaided discovery—is the art of reading nature or the world, as instruction (being taught, or aided discovery) is the art of reading books or, to include listening, of learning from discourse.

What about thinking? If by “thinking” we mean the use of our minds to gain knowledge or understanding, and if learning by discovery and learning by instruction exhaust the ways of gaining knowledge, then thinking must take place during both of these two activities. We must think in the course of reading

and listening, just as we must think in the course of research. Naturally, the kinds of thinking are different—as different as the two ways of learning are.

The reason why many people regard thinking as more closely associated with research and unaided discovery than with being taught is that they suppose reading and listening to be relatively effortless. It is probably true that one does less thinking when one reads for information or entertainment than when one is undertaking to discover something. Those are the less active sorts of reading. But it is not true of the more active reading—the effort to understand. No one who has done this sort of reading would say it can be done thoughtlessly.

Thinking is only one part of the activity of learning. One must also use one's senses and imagination. One must observe, and remember, and construct imaginatively what cannot be observed. There is, again, a tendency to stress the role of these activities in the process of unaided discovery and to forget or minimize their place in the process of being taught through reading or listening. For example, many people assume that though a poet must use his imagination in writing a poem, they do not have to use their imagination in reading it. 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. The reason for this is that reading in this sense is discovery, too—although with help instead of without it.

Present and Absent Teachers

We have been proceeding as if reading and listening could both be treated as learning from teachers. To some extent that is true. Both are ways of being instructed, and for both one must be skilled in the art of being taught. Listening to a course of lectures, for example, is in many respects like reading a book; and listening to a poem is like reading it. Many of the rules to be formulated in this book apply to such experiences. Yet there is good reason to place primary emphasis on reading, and let listening become a secondary concern. The reason is that listening is learning from a teacher who is present—a living teacher—while reading is learning from one who is absent.

If you ask a living teacher a question, he will probably answer you. If you are puzzled by what he says, you can save yourself the trouble of thinking by asking him what he means. If, however, you ask a book a question, *you must answer it yourself*. In this respect a book is like nature or the world. When you question it, it answers you only to the extent that you do the work of thinking and analysis yourself.

This does not mean, of course, that if the living teacher answers your question, you have no further work. That is so only if the question is simply one of fact. But if you are seeking an explanation, you have to understand it or nothing has been explained to you. Nevertheless, with the living teacher available to you, you are given a lift in the direction of understanding him, as you are not when the teacher's words in a book are all you have to go by.

Students in school often read difficult books with the help and guidance of teachers. But for those of us who are not in school, and indeed also for those of us who are when we try to read books that are not required or assigned, our continuing education depends mainly on books alone, read without a teacher's help. Therefore if we are disposed to go on learning and discovering, we must know how to make books teach us well. That, indeed, is the primary goal of this book.

Chapter 5

The Second Level of Reading: Inspectional Reading

The rules for reading yourself to sleep are easier to follow than are the rules for staying awake while reading. Get into bed in a comfortable position, make sure the light is inadequate enough to cause a slight eyestrain, choose a book that is either terribly difficult or terribly boring—in any event, one that you do not really care whether you read or not—and you will be asleep in a few minutes. Those who are experts in relaxing with a book do not have to wait for nightfall. A comfortable chair in the library will do any time.

Unfortunately, the rules for keeping awake do not consist in doing just the opposite. It is *possible* to keep awake while reading in a comfortable chair or even in bed, and people have been known to strain their eyes by reading late in light too dim. What kept the famous candlelight readers awake? One thing certainly—it made a difference to them, a great difference, whether or not they read the book they had in hand.

Whether you manage to keep awake or not depends in large part on your goal in reading. If your aim in reading is to profit from it—to grow somehow in mind or spirit—you have to keep awake. That means reading as actively as possible. It means making an effort—an effort for which you expect to be repaid.

Good books, fiction or nonfiction, deserve such reading. To use a good book as a sedative is conspicuous waste. To fall asleep or, what is the same, to let your mind wander during the hours you planned to devote to reading for profit—that is, primarily for understanding—is clearly to defeat your own ends.

But the sad fact is that many people who can distinguish between profit and pleasure—between understanding, on the one hand, and entertainment or the mere satisfaction of curiosity, on the other hand—nevertheless fail to carry out their reading plans. They fail even if they know which books give which. The reason is that they do not know how to be demanding readers, how to keep their mind on what they are doing by making it do the work without which no profit

can be earned.

The Essence of Active Reading: The Four Basic Questions a Reader Asks

We have already discussed active reading extensively in this book. We have said that active reading is better reading, and we have noted that inspectional reading is always active. It is an effortful, not an effortless, undertaking. But we have not yet gone to the heart of the matter by stating the one simple prescription for active reading. It is: *Ask questions while you read—questions that you yourself must try to answer in the course of reading.*

Any questions? No. The art of reading on any level above the elementary consists in the habit of asking the right questions in the right order. There are four main questions you must ask about any book.¹

1. WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AS A WHOLE? You must try to discover the leading theme of the book, and how the author develops this theme in an orderly way by subdividing it into its essential subordinate themes or topics.

2. WHAT IS BEING SAID IN DETAIL, AND HOW? You must try to discover the main ideas, assertions, and arguments that constitute the author's particular message.

3. IS THE BOOK TRUE, IN WHOLE OR PART? You cannot answer this question until you have answered the first two. You have to know what is being said before you can decide whether it is true or not. When you understand a book, however, you are obligated, if you are reading seriously, to make up your own mind. Knowing the author's mind is not enough.

4. WHAT OF IT? If the book has given you information, you must ask about its significance. Why does the author think it is important to know these things? Is it important to you to know them? And if the book has not only informed you, but also enlightened you, it is necessary to seek further enlightenment by asking what else follows, what is further implied or suggested.

We will return to these four questions at length in the rest of this book. Stated another way, they become the basic rules of reading with which Part Two is mainly concerned. They are stated here in question form for a very good reason. Reading a book on any level beyond the elementary is essentially an effort on your part to ask it questions (and to answer them to the best of your ability). That should never be forgotten. And that is why there is all the

¹These four questions, as stated, together with the discussion of them that follows, apply mainly to expository or nonfiction works. However, the questions, when adapted, apply to fiction and poetry as well. The adaptations required are discussed in Chapters 14 and 15.

difference in the world between the demanding and the undemanding reader. The latter asks no questions—and gets no answers.

The four questions stated above summarize the whole obligation of a reader. They apply to anything worth reading—a book or an article or even an advertisement. Inspectional reading tends to provide more accurate answers to the first two questions than to the last two, but it nevertheless helps

with those also. An analytical reading of a book has not been accomplished satisfactorily until you have answers to those last questions—until you have some idea of the book's truth, in whole or part, and of its significance, if only in your own scheme of things. The last question—What of it?—is probably the most important one in syntopical reading. Naturally, you will have to answer the first three questions before attempting the final one.

Knowing what the four questions are is not enough. You must remember to ask them as you read. The *habit* of doing that is the mark of a demanding reader. More than that, you must know how to answer them precisely and accurately. The trained ability to do that is the *art* of reading.

People go to sleep over good books not because they are unwilling to make the effort, but because they do not know how to make it. Good books are over your head; they would not be good for you if they were not. And books that are over your head weary you unless you can reach up to them and pull yourself up to their level. It is not the stretching that tires you, but the frustration of stretching unsuccessfully because you lack the skill to stretch effectively. To keep on reading actively, you must have not only the will to do so, but also the skill—the art that enables you to elevate yourself by mastering what at first sight seems to be beyond you.

How to Make a Book Your Own

If you have the habit of asking a book questions as you read, you are a better reader than if you do not. But, as we have indicated, merely asking questions is not enough. You have to try to answer them. And although that could be done, theoretically, in your mind only, it is much easier to do it with a pencil in your hand. The pencil then becomes the sign of your alertness while you read.

It is an old saying that you have to “read between the lines” to get the most out of anything. The rules of reading are a formal way of saying this. But we want to persuade you to “write between the lines,” too. Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.

When you buy a book, you establish a property right in it, just as you do in clothes or furniture when you buy and pay for them. But the act of purchase is actually only the prelude to possession in the case of a book. Full ownership of a book only comes when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it—which comes to the same thing—is by writing in it.

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading, if it is active,

is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks. Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the thoughts of the author.

Reading a book should be a conversation between you and the author. Presumably he knows more about the subject than you do; if not, you probably should not be bothering with his book. But understanding is a two-way operation; the learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to be willing to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. Marking a book is literally an expression of your differences or your agreements with the author. It is the highest respect you can pay him.

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully. Here are some devices that can be used:

1. UNDERLINING—of major points; of important or forceful statements.
2. VERTICAL LINES AT THE MARGIN—to emphasize a statement already underlined or to point to a passage too long to be underlined.
3. STAR, ASTERISK, OR OTHER DOODAD AT THE MARGIN—to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or dozen most important statements or passages in the book. You may want to fold a corner of each page on which you make such marks or place a slip of paper between the pages. In either case, you will be able to take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it to the indicated page, refresh your recollection.
4. NUMBERS IN THE MARGIN—to indicate a sequence of points made by the author in developing an argument.
5. NUMBERS OF OTHER PAGES IN THE MARGIN—to indicate where else in the book the author makes the same points, or points relevant to or in contradiction of those here marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together. Many readers use the symbol “Cf” to indicate the other page numbers; it means “compare” or “refer to.”
6. CIRCLING OF KEY WORDS OR PHRASES—This serves much the same function as underlining.
7. WRITING IN THE MARGIN, OR AT THE TOP OR BOTTOM OF THE PAGE—to record questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raises in your mind; to reduce a complicated discussion to a simple statement; to record the sequence of major points right through the book. The endpapers at the back of the book can be used to make a personal index of the author’s points in the order of their appearance.

To inveterate book-markers, the front endpapers are often the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. But that expresses only their financial ownership of the book. The front endpapers are better reserved for a record of your thinking. After finishing the book and making your personal index on the back endpapers, turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page or point by point (you have already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic outline and an order of parts. That outline will be the measure of your understanding of the work; unlike a bookplate, it will express your intellectual ownership of the book.

The Three Kinds of Note-making

There are three quite different kinds of notes that you will make in your books as well as about them. Which kind you make depends upon the level at which you are reading.

When you give a book an inspectional reading, you may not have much time to make notes in it; inspectional reading, as we have observed, is always limited as to time. Nevertheless, you are asking important questions about a book when you read it at this level, and it would be desirable, even if it is not always possible, to record your answers when they are fresh in your mind.

The questions answered by inspectional reading are: first, what kind of book is it? second, what is it about as a whole? and third, what is the structural order of the work whereby the author develops his conception or understanding of that general subject matter? You may and probably should make notes concerning your answers to these questions, especially if you know that it may be days or months before you will be able to return to the book to give it an analytical reading. The best place to make such notes is on the contents page, or perhaps on the title page, which are otherwise unused in the scheme we have outlined above.

The point to recognize is that these notes primarily concern the structure of the book, and not its substance—at least not in detail. *We therefore call this kind of note-making structural.*

In the course of an inspectional reading, especially of a long and difficult book, you may attain some insights into the author's ideas about his subject matter. Often, however, you will not; and certainly you should put off making any judgment of the accuracy or truth of the statements until you have read the book more carefully. Then, during an analytical reading, you will need to give answers to questions about the truth and significance of the book. The notes you make at this level of reading are, therefore, not structural but *conceptual*. They concern the author's concepts, and also your own, as they have been deepened or broadened by your reading of the book.

There is an obvious difference between structural and conceptual note-making. What kind of notes do you make when you are giving several books a syntopical reading—when you are reading more than one book on a single subject? Again, such notes will tend to be conceptual; and the notes on a page may refer you

not only to other pages in that book, but also to pages in other books.

There is a step beyond even that, however, and a truly expert reader can take it when he is reading several books syntopically. That is to make notes about the *shape of the discussion*—the discussion that is engaged in by all of the authors, even if unbeknownst to them. For reasons that will become clear in Part Four, we prefer to call such notes *dialectical*. Since they are made concerning several books, not just one, they often have to be made on a separate sheet (or sheets) of paper. Here, a structure of concepts is implied—an order of statements and questions about a single subject matter. We will return to this kind of note-making in Chapter 20.

Forming the Habit of Reading

Any art or skill is possessed by those who have formed the habit of operating according to its rules. This is the way the artist or craftsman in any field differs from those who lack his skill.

Now there is no other way of forming a habit of operation than by operating. That is what it means to say one learns to do by doing. The difference between your activity before and after you have formed a habit is a difference in facility and readiness. After practice, you can do the same thing much better than when you started. That is what it means to say practice makes perfect. What you do very imperfectly at first, you gradually come to do with the kind of almost automatic perfection that an instinctive performance has. You do something as if you were born to it, as if the activity were as natural to you as walking or eating. That is what it means to say that habit is second nature.

Knowing the rules of an art is not the same as having the habit. When we speak of a man as skilled in any way, we do not mean that he knows the rules of making or doing something, but that he possesses the habit of making or doing it. Of course, it is true that knowing the rules, more or less explicitly, is a condition of getting the skill. You cannot follow rules you do not know. Nor can you acquire an artistic habit—any craft or skill—without following rules. The art as something that can be taught consists of rules to be followed in operation. The art as something learned and possessed consists of the habit that results from operating according to the rules.

Incidentally, not everyone understands that being an artist consists in operating according to rules. People point to a highly original painter or sculptor and say, “He isn’t following rules. He’s doing something entirely original, something that has never been done before, something for which there are no rules.” But they fail to see what rules it is that the artist follows. There are no final, unbreakable rules, strictly speaking, for making a painting or sculpture. But there are rules for preparing canvas and mixing paints and applying them, and for moulding clay or welding steel. Those rules the painter or sculptor must have followed, or else he could not have made the thing he has made. No matter how original his final production, no matter how little it seems to obey the “rules” of art as they have traditionally been understood, he must be skilled to produce

it. And this is the art—the skill or craft—that we are talking about here.

From Many Rules to One Habit

Reading is like skiing. When done well, when done by an expert, both reading and skiing are graceful, harmonious activities. When done by a beginner, both are awkward, frustrating, and slow.

Learning to ski is one of the most humiliating experiences an adult can undergo (that is one reason to start young). After all, an adult has been walking for a long time; he knows where his feet are; he knows how to put one foot in front of the other in order to get somewhere. But as soon as he puts skis on his feet, it is as though he had to learn to walk all over again. He slips and slides, falls down, has trouble getting up, gets his skis crossed, tumbles again, and generally looks—and feels—like a fool.

Even the best instructor seems at first to be no help. The ease with which the instructor performs actions that he says are simple but that the student secretly believes are impossible is almost insulting. How can you remember everything the instructor says you have to remember? Bend your knees. Look down the hill. Keep your weight on the downhill ski. Keep your back straight, but nevertheless lean forward. The admonitions seem endless—how can you think about all that and still ski?

The point about skiing, of course, is that you should not be thinking about the separate acts that, together, make a smooth tum or series of linked turns—instead, you should merely be looking ahead of you down the hill, anticipating bumps and other skiers, enjoying the feel of the cold wind on your cheeks, smiling with pleasure at the fluid grace of your body as you speed down the mountain. In other words, you must learn to forget the separate acts in order to perform all of them, and indeed any of them, well. But in order *to forget them as separate acts, you have to learn them first as separate acts*. Only then can you put them together to become a good skier.

It is the same with reading. Probably you have been reading for a long time, too, and starting to learn all over again can be humiliating. But it is just as true of reading as it is of skiing that you cannot coalesce a lot of different acts into one complex, harmonious performance until you become expert at each of them. You cannot telescope the different parts of the job so that they run into one another and fuse intimately. Each separate act requires your full attention while you are doing it. After you have practiced the parts separately, you can not only do each with greater facility and less attention but can also gradually put them together into a smoothly running whole.

All of this is common knowledge about learning a complex skill. We say it here merely because we want you to realize that learning to read is at least as complex as learning to ski or to typewrite or to play tennis. If you can recall your patience in any other learning experience you have had, you will be more tolerant of instructors who will shortly enumerate a long list of rules for reading.

The person who has had one experience in acquiring a complex skill knows

that he need not fear the array of rules that present themselves at the beginning of something new to be learned. He knows that he does not have to worry about how all the separate acts in which he must become separately proficient are going to work together.

The multiplicity of the rules indicates the complexity of the one habit to be formed, not a plurality of distinct habits. The parts coalesce and telescope as each reaches the stage of automatic execution. When all the subordinate acts can be done more or less automatically, you have formed the habit of the whole performance. Then you can think about tackling

an expert run you have never skied before, or reading a book that you once thought was too difficult for you. At the beginning, the learner pays attention to himself and his skill in the separate acts. When the acts have lost their separateness in the skill of the whole performance, the learner can at last pay attention to the goal that the technique he has acquired enables him to reach.

We hope we have encouraged you by the things we have said in these pages. It is hard to learn to read well. Not only is reading, especially analytical reading, a very complex activity—much more complex than skiing; it is also much more of a mental activity. The beginning skier must think of physical acts that he can later forget and perform almost automatically. It is relatively easy to think of and be conscious of physical acts. It is much harder to think of mental acts, as the beginning analytical reader must do; in a sense, he is thinking about his own thoughts. Most of us are unaccustomed to doing this. Nevertheless, it can be done, and a person who does it cannot help learning to read much better.

Part II

The Third Level of Reading: Analytical Reading

The First Stage of Analytical Reading, or 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 is trying to solve.

The Second Stage of Analytical Reading

We have now described the second stage of analytical reading. Another way to say this is that we have now set forth the materials for answering the second basic question that you must ask about a book, or indeed anything that you read. You will recall that that second question is *What is being said in detail, and how?* Applying Rules 5 through 8 clearly helps you to answer this question. When you have come to terms with the author, found his key propositions and arguments, and identified his solutions of the problems that he faced, you will know what he is saying in his book, and you are thus prepared to go on to ask the final two basic questions about it.

Since we have now completed another stage in the analytical reading process, let us, as before, pause a moment to write out the rules of this stage for review.

The Second Stage of Analytical Reading, or Rules for Finding What a Book Says (Interpreting Its Contents)

5. Come to terms with the author by interpreting his key words.
6. Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences.
7. Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.
8. Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not; and as to the latter, decide which the author knew he had failed to solve.

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Chapter 11

Agreeing or Disagreeing with an Author

The first thing a reader can say is that he understands or that he does not. In fact, he must say he understands, in order to say more. If he does not understand, he should keep his peace and go back to work on the book.

There is one exception to the harshness of the second alternative. “I don’t understand” may itself be a critical remark. To make it so, the reader must be able to support it. If the fault is with the book rather than himself, the reader must locate the sources of trouble. He should be able to show that the structure of the book is disorderly, that its parts do not hang together, that some of it lacks relevance, or, perhaps, that the author equivocates in the use of important words, with a whole train of consequent confusions. To the extent that a reader can support his charge that the book is unintelligible, he has no further critical obligations.

Let us suppose, however, that you are reading a good book. That means it is a relatively intelligible one. And let us suppose that you are finally able to say “I understand.” If, in addition to understanding the book, you agree thoroughly with what the author says, the work is over. The analytical reading is completely done. You have been enlightened, and convinced or persuaded. It is clear that we have additional steps to consider only in the case of disagreement or suspended judgment. The former is the more usual case.

To the extent that authors argue with their readers—and expect their readers to argue back—the good reader must be acquainted with the principles of argument. He must be able to carry on civil, as well as intelligent, controversy. That is why there is need for a chapter of this sort in a book on reading. *Not simply by following an author’s arguments, but only by meeting them as well, can the reader ultimately reach significant agreement or disagreement with his author.*

The meaning of agreement and disagreement deserves a moment’s further consideration. The reader who comes to terms with an author and grasps his

propositions and reasoning shares the author's mind. In fact, the whole process of interpretation is directed toward a meeting of minds through the medium of language. Understanding a book can be described as a kind of agreement between writer and reader. They agree about the use of language to express ideas. Because of that agreement, the reader is able to see through the author's language to the ideas he is trying to express.

If the reader understands a book, how can he disagree with it? Critical reading demands that he make up his own mind. But his mind and the author's have become as one through his success in understanding the book. What mind has he left to make up independently?

There are some people who make the error that causes this apparent difficulty: they fail to distinguish between two senses of "agreement." In consequence, they wrongly suppose that where there is understanding between men, disagreement is impossible. They say that all disagreement is simply owing to misunderstanding.

The error in this becomes obvious as soon as we remember that the author is making judgements about the world in which we live. He claims to be giving us theoretical knowledge about the way things exist and behave, or practical knowledge about what should be done. Obviously, he can be either right or wrong. His claim is justified only to the extent that he speaks truly, to the extent that he says what is probable in the light of evidence. Otherwise, his claim is unfounded.

If you say, for instance, that "all men are equal," we may take you to mean that all men are equally endowed at birth with intelligence, strength, and other abilities. In the light of the facts as we know them, we disagree with you. We think you are wrong. But suppose we have misunderstood you. Suppose you meant by these words that *all men should have equal political rights*. Because we misapprehended your meaning, our disagreement was irrelevant. Now suppose the mistake corrected. Two alternatives still remain. We can agree or disagree, *but now if we disagree, there is a real issue between us*. We understand your political position, but hold a contrary one.

Issues about matters of fact or policy—issues about the way things are or should be—are real in this sense only when they are based on a common understanding of what is being said. Agreement about the use of words is the indispensable condition for genuine agreement or disagreement about the facts being discussed. It is because of, not in spite of, your meeting the author's mind through a sound interpretation of his book that you are able to make up your own mind as concurring in or dissenting from the position he has taken.

Prejudice and Judgment

Now let us consider the situation in which, having said you understand, you proceed to disagree. If you have tried to abide by the maxims stated in the previous chapter, you disagree because you think the author can be shown to be wrong on some point. You are not simply voicing your prejudice or expressing

your emotions. Because this is true, then, from an ideal point of view, there are three conditions that must be satisfied if controversy is to be well conducted.

The first is this. Since men are animals as well as rational, it is necessary to acknowledge the emotions you bring to a dispute, or those that arise in the course of it. Otherwise you are likely to be giving vent to feelings, not stating reasons. You may even think you have reasons, when all you have are strong feelings.

Second, you must make your own assumptions explicit. You must know what your prejudices—that is, your prejudgments—are. Otherwise you are not likely to admit that your opponent may be equally entitled to different assumptions. *Good controversy should not be a quarrel about assumptions.* If an author, for example, explicitly asks you to take something for granted, the fact that the opposite can also be taken for granted should not prevent you from honoring his request. If your prejudices lie on the opposite side, and if you do not acknowledge them to be prejudices, you cannot give the author's case a fair hearing.

Third and finally, an attempt at impartiality is a good antidote for the blindness that is almost inevitable in partisanship. Controversy without partisanship is, of course, impossible. But to be sure that there is more light in it, and less heat, each of the disputants should at least try to take the other fellow's point of view. If you have not been able to read a book *sympathetically*, your disagreement with it is probably more contentious than civil.

These three conditions are, ideally, the *sine qua non* of intelligent and profitable conversation. They are obviously applicable to reading, insofar as that is a kind of conversation between reader and author. Each of them contains sound advice for readers who are willing to respect the civilities of disagreement.

But the ideal here, as elsewhere, can only be approximated. The ideal should never be expected from human beings. We ourselves, we hasten to admit, are sufficiently conscious of our own defects. We have violated our own rules about good intellectual manners in controversy. We have caught ourselves attacking a book rather than criticizing it, knocking straw men over, denouncing where we could not support denials, proclaiming our prejudices as if ours were any better than the author's.

We continue to believe, however, that conversation and critical reading *can* be well disciplined. We are therefore going to substitute for those three ideal conditions, a set of prescriptions that may be easier to follow. They indicate the four ways in which a book can be adversely criticized. Our hope is that if a reader confines himself to making these points, he will be less likely to indulge in expressions of emotion or prejudice.

The four points can be briefly summarized by conceiving the reader as conversing with the author, as talking back. After he has said, "I understand but I disagree," he can make the following remarks to the author: (1) "*You are uninformed*"; (2) "*You are misinformed*"; (3) "*You are illogical—your reasoning is not cogent*"; (4) "*Your analysis is incomplete*."

These may not be exhaustive, though we think they are. In any event, they are certainly the principal points a reader who disagrees can make. They are somewhat independent. Making one of these remarks does not prevent you from

making another. Each and all can be made, because the defects they refer to are not mutually exclusive.

But, we should add, the reader cannot make any of these remarks without being definite and precise about the respect in which the author is uninformed or misinformed or illogical. A book cannot be uninformed or misinformed about everything. It cannot be totally illogical. Furthermore, the reader who makes any of these remarks must not only make it definitely, by specifying the respect, but he must also support his point. He must give reasons for saying what he does.

Judging the Author's Soundness

The first three remarks are somewhat different from the fourth, as we will presently see. Let us consider each of them briefly, and then turn to the fourth.

1. To say that an author is *uninformed* is to say that he lacks some piece of knowledge that is relevant to the problem he is trying to solve. Notice here that unless the knowledge, if possessed by the author, would have been relevant, there is no point in making this remark. To support the remark, you must be able yourself to state the knowledge that the author lacks and show how it is relevant, how it makes a difference to his conclusions.

A few illustrations here must suffice. Darwin lacked the knowledge of genetics that the work of Mendel and later experimentalists now provides. His ignorance of the mechanism of inheritance is one of the major defects in *The Origin of Species*. Gibbon lacked certain facts that later historical research has shown to have a bearing on the fall of Rome. Usually, in science and history, the lack of information is discovered by later researches. Improved techniques of observation and prolonged investigation make this the way things happen for the most part. But in philosophy, it may happen otherwise. There is just as likely to be loss as gain with the passage of time. The ancients, for example, clearly distinguished between what men can sense and imagine and what they can understand. Yet, in the eighteenth century, David Hume revealed his ignorance of this distinction between images and ideas, even though it had been so well established by the work of earlier philosophers.

2. To say that an author is misinformed is to say that he asserts what is not the case. His error here may be owing to lack of knowledge, but the error is more than that. Whatever its cause, it consists in making assertions contrary to fact. The author is proposing as true or more probable what is in fact false or less probable. He is claiming to have knowledge he does not possess. This kind of defect should be pointed out, of course, only if it is relevant to the author's conclusions. And to support the remark you must be able to argue the truth or greater probability of a position contrary to the author's.

For example, in one of his political treatises, Spinoza appears to say that democracy is a more primitive type of government than monarchy. This is con-

trary to well-ascertained facts of political history. Spinoza's error in this respect has a bearing on his argument. Aristotle was misinformed about the role that the female factor plays in animal reproduction, and consequently came to unsupported conclusions about the processes of procreation. Aquinas erroneously supposed that the matter of the heavenly bodies is essentially different from that of terrestrial bodies, because he supposed that the former change only in position, and are otherwise unalterable. Modern astrophysics corrects this error and thereby improves on ancient and medieval astronomy. But here is an error that has limited relevance. Making it does not affect Aquinas' metaphysical account of the nature of all sensible things as composed of matter and form.

These first two points of criticism may be related. Lack of information, as we have seen, may be the cause of erroneous assertions. Further, whenever a man is *misinformed* in a certain respect, he is also *uninformed* in the same respect. But it makes a difference whether the defect is simply negative or positive as well. Lack of relevant knowledge makes it impossible to solve certain problems or support certain conclusions. Erroneous suppositions, however, lead to wrong conclusions and untenable solutions. Taken together, these two points charge an author with defects in his premises. He needs more knowledge than he possesses. His evidences and reasons are not good enough in quantity or quality.

3. To say that an author is *illogical* is to say that he has committed a fallacy in reasoning. In general, fallacies are of two sorts. There is the *non sequitur*, which means that what is drawn as a conclusion simply does not follow from the reasons offered. And there is the occurrence of inconsistency, which means that two things the author has tried to say are incompatible. To make either of these criticisms, the reader must be able to show the precise respect in which the author's argument lacks cogency. One is concerned with this defect only to the extent that the major conclusions are affected by it. A book may safely lack cogency in irrelevant respects.

It is more difficult to illustrate this third point, because few really good books make obvious slips in reasoning. When they do occur, they are usually elaborately concealed, and it requires a very penetrating reader to discover them. But we can show you a patent fallacy in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Machiavelli writes:

The chief foundations of all states, new as well as old, are good laws. As there cannot be good laws where the state is not well armed, it follows that where they are well armed they have good laws.

Now it simply does not follow from the fact that good laws depend on an adequate police force, that where the police force is adequate, the laws will necessarily be good. We are ignoring the highly questionable character of the first contention. We are only interested in the *non sequitur* here. It is truer to say that happiness depends on health than that good laws depend on an effective police force, but it does not follow that all who are healthy are happy.

In his *Elements of Law*, Hobbes argues in one place that all bodies are nothing but quantities of matter in motion. The world of bodies, he says, has no qualities whatsoever. Then, in another place, he argues that man is himself nothing but a body, or a collection of atomic bodies in motion. Yet, admitting the existence of sensory qualities—colors, odors, tastes, and so forth—he concludes that they are nothing but the motions of atoms in the brain. The conclusion is inconsistent with the position first taken, namely, that the world of bodies in motion is without qualities. What is said of all bodies in motion must apply to any particular group of them, including the atoms of the brain.

This third point of criticism is related to the other two. An author may, of course, fail to draw the conclusions that his evidences or principles imply. Thus his reasoning is incomplete. But we are here concerned primarily with the case in which *he reasons poorly from good grounds*. It is interesting, but less important, to discover lack of cogency in reasoning from premises that are themselves untrue, or from evidences that are inadequate.

A person who from sound premises reaches a conclusion invalidly is, in a sense, misinformed. But it is worthwhile to distinguish the kind of erroneous statement that is owing to bad reasoning from the kind previously discussed, which is owing to other defects, especially insufficient knowledge of relevant details.

Judging the Author's Completeness

The first three points of criticism, which we have just considered, deal with the soundness of the author's statements and reasoning. Let us turn now to the fourth adverse remark a reader can make. It deals with the completeness of the author's execution of his plan—the adequacy with which he discharges the task he has chosen.

Before we proceed to this fourth remark, one thing should be observed. Since you have said you understand, your failure to support any of these first three remarks obligates you to agree with the author as far as he has gone. You have no freedom of will about this. It is not your sacred privilege to decide whether you are going to agree or disagree.

If you have not been able to show that the author is uninformed, misinformed, or illogical on relevant matters, you simply cannot disagree. You must agree. You cannot say, as so many students and others do, "I find nothing wrong with your premises, and no errors in reasoning, but I don't agree with your conclusions." All you can possibly mean by saying some thing like that is that you do not *like* the conclusions. You are not disagreeing. You are expressing your emotions or prejudices. If you have been convinced, you should admit it. (If, despite your failure to support one or more of these three critical points, you still honestly feel unconvinced, perhaps you should not have said you understood in the first place.)

The first three remarks are related to the author's terms, propositions, and arguments. These are the elements he used to solve the problems that initi-

ated his efforts. The fourth remark—that the book is incomplete—bears on the structure of the whole.

4. To say that an author's *analysis is incomplete* is to say that he has not solved all the problems he started with, or that he has not made as good a use of his materials as possible, that he did not see all their implications and ramifications, or that he has failed to make distinctions that are relevant to his undertaking. It is not enough to say that a book is incomplete. Anyone can say that of any book. Men are finite, and so are their works, every last one. There is no point in making this remark, therefore, unless the reader can define the inadequacy precisely, either by his own efforts as a knower or through the help of other books.

Let us illustrate this point briefly. The analysis of types of government in Aristotle's *Politics* is incomplete. Because of the limitations of his time and his erroneous acceptance of slavery, Aristotle fails to consider, or for that matter even to conceive, the truly democratic constitution that is based on universal suffrage; nor can he imagine either representative government or the modern kind of federated state. His analysis would have to be extended to apply to these political realities. Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* is an incomplete account because Euclid failed to consider other postulates about the relation of parallel lines. Modern geometrical works, making these other assumptions, supply the deficiencies. Dewey's *How We Think* is an incomplete analysis of thinking because it fails to treat the sort of thinking that occurs in reading or learning by instruction in addition to the sort that occurs in investigation and discovery. To a Christian who believes in personal immortality, the writings of Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius are an incomplete account of human happiness.

This fourth point is strictly not a basis for disagreement. It is critically adverse only to the extent that it marks the limitations of the author's achievement. A reader who agrees with a book in part—because he finds no reason to make any of the other points of adverse criticism—may, nevertheless, suspend judgment on the whole, in the light of this fourth point about the book's incompleteness. Suspended judgment on the reader's part responds to an author's failure to solve his problems perfectly.

Related books in the same field can be critically compared by reference to these four criteria. One is better than another in proportion as it speaks more truth and makes fewer errors. If we are reading for knowledge, that book is best, obviously, which most adequately treats a given subject matter. One author may lack information that another possesses; one may make erroneous suppositions from which another is free; one may be less cogent than another in reasoning from similar grounds. But the profoundest comparison is made with respect to the completeness of the analysis that each presents. The measure of such completeness is to be found in the number of valid and significant distinctions that the accounts being compared contain. You may see now how useful it is to have a grasp of the author's terms. The number of distinct terms is correlative with the number of distinctions.

You may also see how the fourth critical remark ties together the three

stages of analytical reading of any book. The last step of structural outlining is to know the problems that the author is trying to solve. The last step of interpretation is to know which of these problems the author solved and which he did not. The final step of criticism is the point about completeness. It touches structural outlining insofar as it considers how adequately the author has stated his problems, and interpretation insofar as it measures how satisfactorily he has solved them.

The Third Stage of Analytical Reading

We have now completed, in a general way, the enumeration and discussion of the rules of analytical reading. We can now set forth all the rules in their proper order and under appropriate headings.

I. 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 is trying to solve.

II. The Second Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Interpreting a Book's Contents

5. Come to terms with the author by interpreting his key words.
6. Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences.
7. Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.
8. Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not; and as of the latter, decide which the author knew he had failed to solve.

III. The Third Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Criticizing a Book as a Communication of Knowledge

A. *General Maxims of Intellectual Etiquette*

9. 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.")

10. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously.
11. Demonstrate that you recognize the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any critical judgment you make.

B. *Special Criteria for Points of Criticism*

12. Show wherein the author is uninformed.
13. Show wherein the author is misinformed.
14. Show wherein the author is illogical.
15. 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.

We observed at the end of Chapter 7 that applying the first four rules of analytical reading helps you to answer the first basic question you must ask about a book, namely, *What is the book about as a whole?* Similarly, at the end of Chapter 9, we pointed out that applying the four rules for interpretation helps you to answer the second question you must ask, namely, *What is being said in detail, and how?* It is probably clear that the last seven rules of reading—the maxims of intellectual etiquette and the criteria for points of criticism—help you to answer the third and fourth basic questions you must ask. You will recall that those questions are: *Is it true?* and *What of it?*

The question, *Is it true?* can be asked of anything we read. It is applicable to every kind of writing, in one or another sense of “truth”—mathematical, scientific, philosophical, historical, and poetical. No higher commendation can be given any work of the human mind than to praise it for the measure of truth it has achieved; by the same token, to criticize it adversely for its failure in this respect is to treat it with the seriousness that a serious work deserves. Yet, strangely enough, in recent years, for the first time in Western history, there is a dwindling concern with this criterion of excellence. Books win the plaudits of the critics and gain widespread popular attention almost to the extent that they flout the truth—the more outrageously they do so, the better. Many readers, and most particularly those who review current publications, employ other standards for judging, and praising or condemning, the books they read—their novelty, their sensationalism, their seductiveness, their force, and even their power to bemuse or befuddle the mind, but not their truth, their clarity, or their power to enlighten. They have, perhaps, been brought to this pass by the fact that so much of current writing outside the sphere of the exact sciences manifests so little concern with truth. One might hazard the guess that if saying something that is true, in any sense of that term, were ever again

to become the primary concern it should be, fewer books would be written, published, and read.

Unless what you have read is true in some sense, you need go no further. But if it is, you must face the last question. You cannot read for information intelligently without determining what significance is, or should be, attached to the facts presented. Facts seldom come to us without some interpretation, explicit or implied. This is especially true if you are reading digests of information that necessarily select the facts according to some evaluation of their significance, some principle of interpretation. And if you are reading for enlightenment, there is really no end to the inquiry that, at every stage of learning, is renewed by the question, What of it?

These four questions, as we have already pointed out, summarize all the obligations of a reader. The first three, moreover, correspond to something in the very nature of human discourse. If communications were not complex, structural outlining would be unnecessary. If language were a perfect medium instead of a relatively opaque one, there would be no need for interpretation. If error and ignorance did not circumscribe truth and knowledge, we should not have to be critical. The fourth question turns on the distinction between information and understanding. When the material you have read is itself primarily informational, you are challenged to go further and seek enlightenment. Even when you have been somewhat enlightened by what you have read, you are called upon to continue the search for significance.

Before proceeding to Part Three, perhaps we should stress, once again, that these rules of analytical reading describe an ideal performance. Few people have ever read any book in this ideal manner, and those who have, probably read very few books this way. The ideal remains, however, the measure of achievement. You are a good reader to the degree in which you approximate it.

When we speak of someone as “well-read,” we should have this ideal in mind. Too often, we use that phrase to mean the quantity rather than the quality of reading. A person who has read widely but not well deserves to be pitied rather than praised. As Thomas Hobbes said, “If I read as many books as most men do, I would be as dull-witted as they are.”

The great writers have always been great readers, but that does not mean that they read all the books that, in their day, were listed as the indispensable ones. In many cases, they read fewer books than are now required in most of our colleges, but what they did read, they read well. Because they had mastered these books, they became peers with their authors. They were entitled to become authorities in their own right. In the natural course of events, a good student frequently becomes a teacher, and so, too, a good reader becomes an author.

Our intention here is not to lead you from reading to writing. It is rather to remind you that one approaches the ideal of good reading by applying the rules we have described in the reading of a single book, and not by trying to become superficially acquainted with a larger number. There are, of course, many books worth reading well. There is a much larger number that should be only inspected. To become wellread, in every sense of the word, one must know

how to use whatever skill one possesses with discrimination—by reading every book according to its merits.