



WHY YOU CAN'T READ

Mortimer Adler

PART 2 OF 3

II

The first reading is structural or analytic. It involves four steps, a mastery of which would require much rhetorical sophistication. I shall confine myself to stating the four steps in rules and discussing each briefly.

1. You must know what kind of a book you are reading, and you must know this before you begin to read it. By kind of book I mean the dimension of literature in which it falls, the type of subject matter. Is it poetry, i.e., belles-lettres, or expository literature, i.e., history, science, philosophy? The absolute primacy of this rule of classification will be seen by anyone who can guess the confusion of a person who plodded through a novel, all while supposing it to be a philosophical discourse or breezed through a scientific truth treatise thinking it a history. But, you may ask, how can one classify a book before reading it? The answer is provided by the author and publisher in the form of a title and subtitle, a table of contents or analytical Index, in the preface or introduction. The number of students who will ignore all of these items and beginning to read a book and go through many pages

puddles puzzled by what they find, makes me less apologetic for saying anything as obvious as this.

Of course, to interpret the signs of subject matter or kind which titles, subtitles and chapter headings provide, the reader must have some broad lines of classification already in mind. I shall mention only the leading ones: first the division between imaginative literature (poetry or belles-lettres) and expositions of knowledge; then within the poetic dimension such divisions as a lyric, dramatic and epic or novel: then within the dimension of knowledge, first the distinction between theoretic and practical discourse, such as mathematics and morals, and second, the distinction of history, science, philosophy and theology. In the second case, there are many subordinate divisions of subject matter.

So important are these distinctions that it is almost impossible to formulate rules of reading general enough to apply to every kind of book indifferently. For example, the rules I am now stating apply, as they are stated only to books in the dimension of knowledge, and not the poetry. While there are analogous rules for reading belles-lettres, the formulation would be different in many specifications. Even within the dimension of knowledge, these rules are most clearly applicable to science and philosophy and less to history because of the poetic character of all historical narrative. In fact, different rules of reading can be made specific for different kinds of books; for every kind or subject matter that is really distinct, the arts of reading must be appropriately adapted. There is, in short, a plurality of grammars, logics and rhetorics as numerous as there are species of literature. One must learn to read Euclid in a different way from Gibbon and Newton in a different way from Dostoevsky. But I shall proceed with this account of rules which are superficial enough to be appropriate for all books intended by their authors to convey knowledge.

2. You must be able to say what the book is about in one or two sentences. If it is a good book, it is a good work of art, and a good work of art has a unity. It is not enough to acknowledge this. You must apprehend the unity with definiteness, and the test of this achievement on your part is whether you can say what the whole is about in a few sentences.

3. But a work of art is not a simple unity. It is a complex whole, whose unity has been made out of organization of many parts. Therefore, next you must be able to say what the major parts of the book are and how they are ordered to one another and to the whole. And yet, further, these parts are complex wholes having parts, and

in turn similarly, you must carry your structural the section down to the least units of which the whole is compounded.

I can give you a formula for the analysis to be made in the second and third steps. You must say: the whole book is about (so-and-so and such and such). Then you say: the author accomplishes this in five major parts, of which the first is about (so-and-so), the second about (such and such), the third about (this and that), and so on. Next, the first of these major parts is divided into three sections, of which the first considers... , the second considers..., and so on for each of the major parts. Finally, for each of the subordinate sections you say, in the first section the author makes five points, of which the first is, the second is, the third is, and so on.

4. Finally, you can summarize your first apprehension of the book in terms of the problems the author tried to solve. If he is a good author, he had genuine problems and tried to solve them. What are they? How are they ordered to one another? Knowing what his problems were is necessary if you are to understand the answers he tried to give, and certainly if you are ever to judge whether he succeeded and to what extent. This four steps will help tie in the first reading with the remaining two.

This first group of rules readily discriminates good books from bad. The latter lack clear unity, or an order and coherence of parts, and fail to define the problems which generated them. A person who had good reading habits would find it easier to read a good book well than a bad one; in fact, would find it easier not to read a bad book at all. It should be clear also why you cannot learn to read well unless you work on good materials, first-rate works of art. Only the most expertly trained readers and not novices, can find their way about in a bad book.

III

The second reading is constructive or synthetic. It also involves four steps, and here mastery of the procedure depends on sound training in grammar and logic as correlative of disciplines. We are here concerned with discovering the elements of communicable knowledge by construing the language of the text. On the grammatical side, the book consist of words, sentences and paragraphs. If these are rightly construed, we shall find the terms, propositions and arguments which constitute the authors teaching. There is a correlation here between words and terms, sentences and propositions, paragraphs and arguments; but it is not a simple one-to-one relation between the grammatical elements of language and

logical elements of thought. To suppose the relationship is simple is the mistake commonly made by all who lack sufficient training in the liberal arts, who can't read, in short.

1. First, you must try to discover the basic terms which carry the author's meaning. You must come to terms with your author before you can determine what he is proposing, i.e., his propositions. You can do this only through his words, and by an active grammatical discernment. A book contains many words, but they are obviously not all equally important. In fact, most are not important at all, because the author uses them in an ordinary way, as most men do, or according to the common usage of his place in time. But there will always be, in an original or primary book, a small number of words which constitute the author's special vocabulary, the words which he has made his own for the purposes at hand, which are his analytical idiom. Finding such words or phrases will lead you to the terms, if you perform a second grammatical act. These special words are likely to be ambiguous, to have many related meanings. They are highly complex repositories of significance because the author will usually use them in many senses, shading his meanings up and down the scale. Bad writers use words equivocally, but even the best must use words with systematic ambiguity because there are not enough words in the language to make all the necessary distinctions.

A term is a word used unambiguously. By discriminating the several meanings with which the author uses the words of his special vocabulary, you will come to terms with him. Good authors are sometimes helpful, indicating explicitly by verbal qualifications that a word is now being used in one sense, now in another; but even the best authors frequently depend upon the context to provide such qualifications and require the reader to do the work. In this connection you must observe two things: first, that a single word or phrase may be, through ambivalent usage, the expression of many terms; and second, that through equivalent usage, different words or phrases may be the expression of the same term. No writer can avoid the use of synonyms or equivalent expressions.

The practice of this first rule is difficult enough in reading one book. It is much more difficult in reading two, since different authors will frequently use the same word for quite different terms, and also use different words to express the same terms, and so each may be helpful to the reader with regard to his own text, he is seldom helpful with regard to the writings of others. I would be almost be willing to say that you cannot read one book well unless

you can read two,—in the same field, of course,—and know whether they are saying the same or different things. But I shall not complicate matters further by mentioning grammatical distinctions concerning types of words and phrases, and logical distinctions concerning other terms, knowledge of which would increase a reader's penetration at this point.

The first step in the second reading underlies all the rest. Terms are the elements of propositions and they in turn are put together in arguments. But more than that, coming to terms with an author is absolutely indispensable to receiving communication from him. For unless they come to terms, reader and author are not using words in the same sense at the same time, and hence communication fails, for there is no community, no understanding common to two minds through the difficult and imperfect medium of language. For the transmission of knowledge, there must be communication (common understanding of words) parentheses by one, and arrived at by the other, establish such communication.


2. Having discovered the terms, you must next construe the basic propositions of the text, again by a grammatical discernment of the crucial sentences. Or, in other words you must find out what it is that the author is affirming and denying, what his ultimate judgments are. Here as before, most of the sentences the book contains are not crucial ones; only a few are. You must discriminate these leading sentences from all the interstitial, tangential and the digressive ones. Furthermore, these sentences may not only have ambiguous words, but they may be complex in structure even when ambiguity has been removed. They may express several related propositions. Grammatical skill is required to construe propositions out of sentences, the kind of skill which used to be taught in the grade school in the form of diagramming and which includes higher reaches of logical syntax. And logical skill is needed to recognize propositions which are the author's conclusions from those which are his premises, his principles or postulates, his statements of definition or verbal usage.

It is not enough to spot the important sentences. You must know their meanings, for otherwise you can't determine their propositional content. If you have done a good job at the level of words and terms, you will be greatly helped here in your effort to detect ambiguities of statement, and to match equivalent statements of the same proposition in different words, taken from different parts of the book. There are two simple self tests of whether you know the meaning of the sentences, whether you understand the propositions in them. The first is to translate: can

you say precisely what the author is saying but in other words, preferably your own. The second is to exemplify: can you refer to concrete experiences or operations which illustrate the meaning, are cases or instances of what is being said.

3. Next you come to paragraphs, and here the rule is to find the ultimate paragraphic units which express the basic arguments. An argument is a sequence of propositions, having a beginning in principles and an end in conclusions. It may be simple or complex, having simple arguments as parts.

The difficulties of reading are here the greatest, because the relation of paragraphs, on the grammatical side, to arguments, on the logical side, is least apparent. Most authors, even the best, do not always write their arguments in single paragraphs. (Euclid is an outstanding exception.) Sometimes they do, in the form of the summary; but more frequently the basic paragraphs are in the text implicitly, and must be uncovered by the reader, or constructed by him through taking a sentence from here, and one from there, and making a sequence out of them. Though acquaintance with the author's terms in propositions is indispensable, it is not enough. Further grammatical sophistication is required for finding the real paragraphs which often lie under a misleading typographical format, which is dictated by mechanical considerations in bookmaking rather than intellectual ones; and for distinguishing paragraphs of various sorts. Correlatively, a high degree of logical skill is needed for the construction of different types of argument, conjunctions, inferential series, direct and indirect proofs, analytical sequences, and so forth.

4. Finally, there is there is a step which connects the second reading with the first. Which problems do the authors solve? You must not only be able to answer this question, but you must also know of those which the author failed to solve, and which he failed on knowingly, and which unknowingly? (One mark of a great writer is that he knows when and where he fails to execute his intention.) And you may even be expected to decide whether the solution of certain problems by the author raise new ones, known to the author, or unknown to him. If you can do these things, you can bring your analytic and synthetic readings into relationship, and thus ultimately when good habits get formed you may be able to do the two cooperatively. 

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