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## HOW TO KEEP AWAKE WHILE READING

MORTIMER J. ADLER

**T**he rules for reading yourself to sleep are much easier to follow than are the rules for keeping awake while reading. Just get into bed in a comfortable position, see that the light is inadequate enough to cause a slight eyestrain, choose something you don't care whether or not you read, and unless you have insomnia, you will be nodding soon enough. Those who are expert in relaxing with a

book don't have to wait for nightfall or for bed. A comfortable chair in the library will do at 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 readers by candlelight awake? One thing certainly—that it made a difference to them, a great difference, whether or not they read the book they had in hand.

Whether you read actively or passively, whether you try to keep awake or not, depends in large part on your purpose in reading. There are many kinds of reading and many sorts of things to read. You may be seeking the same effortless pleasures of relaxation that the movies and radio so readily afford, or you may be making the effort to profit by your reading. Let me roughly divide books into those which compete with the movies and those with which the movies cannot compete. The latter are the books that can elevate or instruct. If they are fine works of fiction, they can deepen your appreciation of human life. If they are serious works of nonfiction, they can inform or enlighten you.

Everyone admits that if your aim in reading is to profit—to grow somehow in mind or spirit—you have to keep awake. That means reading as actively as possible. That means making an effort—an effort for which you expect to be repaid.

Everyone admits that 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 is clearly to defeat your own ends.

But the sad fact is that many people who can distinguish between pleasure and profit (and who know which books give which) nevertheless fail to carry out their reading plans. The reason is that they do not know how to read actively, how to keep their mind on what they are reading by making it do the work without which no profit can be earned.

I have one simple rule for keeping awake while reading. It underlies every other rule for successful reading. *You must ask questions while you read—questions which you yourself must try to answer in*

*the course of reading.* Asking and answering questions is what pays the dividends in reading.

*Any questions?* No. The art of reading consists in the habit of asking the right questions in the right order. Let me illustrate this by giving you the four main questions you must ask about any book or, to make it more concrete, about any nonfiction book.

*What is the book as a whole about?* Here 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 topics.

*What in detail is being said, and how?* Here you must try to underline for yourself—with a pencil, perhaps, or mentally if the book is borrowed—the main ideas, assertions, and arguments that constitute the author's particular message.

*Is it 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—and to do that you must know *how* it is being said, for you must be able to penetrate through the author's language to his mind—before you can sit in judgment and decide whether you agree or disagree. When you do understand a point, however, you are obligated, if you are reading seriously, to make up your own mind. Knowing the author's is not enough.

*What of it?* If the book has given you information, and especially if it is true, you must certainly ask about its significance. Why does the author think it is important to know these facts? If the book has not only informed you, but also enlightened you, it is still necessary to seek further enlightenment by asking what follows next, what is further implied or suggested.

These four questions summarize all the obligations of a reader. They apply to anything worth reading—a book or an article or even an advertisement for something you may be interested in buying. Knowing these questions is, of course, not enough. You must remember to ask them as you read. The habit of doing that is the first mark of an active reader. But more than that, you must be able to answer them precisely and accurately. The trained ability to do just that is the art of reading.


This ability most of our college graduates lack today, for the art of reading is no longer taught in our “overprogressive” schools. But,

college graduate or not, you can learn to read for profit, and profitably, if you will only try. It is necessary, of course, to know more than these four questions, because skill in answering them can be acquired only through following all the rules of the art of reading.

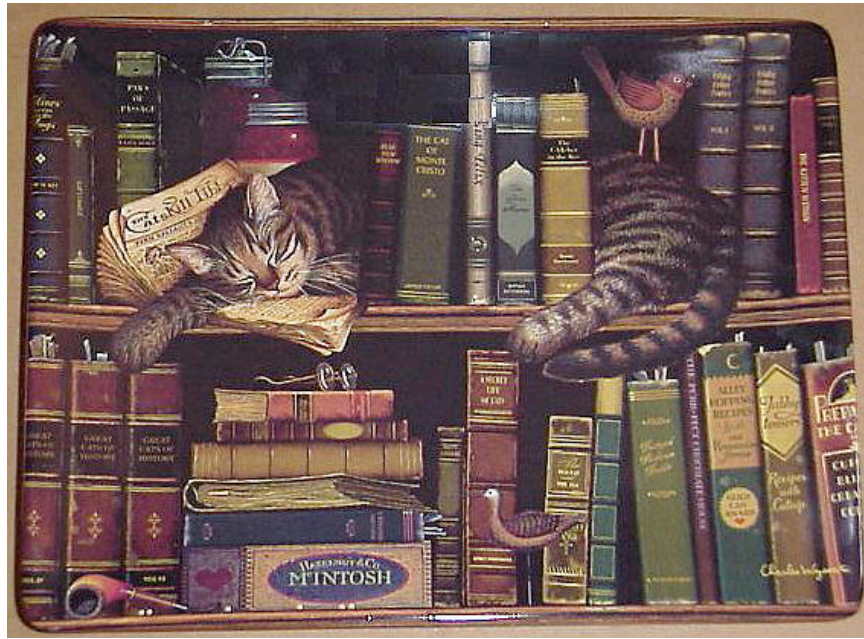
To answer the first question, for instance, you must follow the rules for reading a book analytically. A book is a complex structure, a whole having many parts, which you must know how to take apart. To answer the second question, you must follow the rules for reading a book *interpretatively*. To reach the author's mind, you must know how to see through his language, and this means weighing his words, turning over his sentences, and tying up his paragraphs. And to answer the last two questions, you must follow the rules of *critical* reading, which tell you how to make a fair and dispassionate judgment of the true and the false before you decide to agree or disagree with the book's message.

To expound and explain all these rules in a helpful way cannot be done here. What I have said, however, makes the two main points. Unless you want to keep awake while reading, there is no need to develop skill or art in reading. But if you do want to, you must do more than keep your eyes open and your mind off cooking and the children. You must keep your mind on the book—as actively as possible. To learn to do that, you must keep asking questions and keep trying to answer them.

One word more. People go to sleep over good books not because they are unwilling to make the effort, but because they don't know how to make it. Good books are over your head. They wouldn't be good for you if they weren't. And books that are over your head weary you unless you reach up to them and pull yourself up to their level. It isn't stretching that tires you, but stretching. unsuccessfully because you lack the skill. To keep on reading actively, you must have not only the will to do so, but the skill—the art that enables you to elevate yourself by mastering what at first sight seems to be over your head.

The more you keep awake while reading, by sustaining the activity of asking and answering questions, the more exciting you will find the process. Don't be afraid that it will become too exciting. Intellectual insomnia is still quite a long way off. 

*Published in Good Housekeeping, June 1940, p. 62.*



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## THE LAST WORD

Katharine Byrne

### **I**f you love a book, Abuse it

A rare, serious housecleaning effort recently required that I move through the house, taking all the books off the shelves where many of them have stood moldering for years, encouraging me to think about each one. I found loving inscriptions from persons gone and not forgotten. Historical documents: letters and cards used as bookmarks. End papers written on, margins covered with comments and arguments. Ostensibly all of these were my books, but in an important way only those I had written in really belonged to me.

This in spite of repeated admonitions, “Never write in a book, nor dog-ear a page, nor set a book face-down on its open pages.” You must not deface a book. What a word! Deface: To mar; spoil the appearance of; disfigure. Not really. To write in a book can be an act of love or at very least, an effort to understand it.

In *Ex Libris*, Anne Fadiman notes that there are two ways to love a book. Reading as a reverential act, a fond feeling that holds its object in highest esteem, but at a Platonic distance. The other way

Fadiman calls “carnal,” because it is deep, intimate, personal, sometimes turning into a wrestling match between reader and author.

Mortimer Adler, in *How to Read a Book*, says that a book is not really yours until you have responded to it with questioning, argument, contradiction; or assent and applause. Adler believed that if writing in books offends the rule you learned in third grade, you should buy a copy to keep as a piece of furniture and another copy to read.

The books I have really read are interlined and margin-filled with comments. The end papers and the insides of the covers are covered with quotations that I didn’t want to lose.



I pick up a falling-apart paperback of Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, a book about loss. I first read it at a time when I was overwhelmed by a loss that seemed insurmountable, blotting out any possibility that I might ever move on from it. A grieving woman in *Housekeeping* knows that moving on requires that she must “perform the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith.” And reminds herself that “what has perished need not be lost, for when do we know anything more utterly than when we have lost it?” Having written these lines inside the cover almost twenty years ago, I remember them. Nor can I forget the grandmother’s imagining heaven as “a reunion at the other side of a lake, all those you had ever lost gathered there to meet you.”

This copy of *Middlemarch* has seen hard use. I read it one long winter when all of our children were very young and I was helping to write a doctoral thesis not my own. Did I identify with the hapless Dorothea who, “while she longed to do work of her own which would be directly beneficent, like the sunshine and the rain,” confined herself to a more noble goal: “to help someone who did great works, so that his burden would be lighter”?


Howard’s End is all about connections and the difficulty and necessity of establishing them, but here inside the back cover is an ambitious recipe for dying. “One ought to die neither as a victim nor as a fanatic, but as the seafarer who can greet with an equal eye the deep that he is entering and the shore that he must leave.”

Another book I have clearly wanted to hold onto is Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*. My own comments fight for some open space even at the ends of chapters. Impossible to choose just one, except, perhaps, these rueful lines, cherished in my old age: “The heart’s memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and thanks to the charitable deceptions of nostalgia, we manage to endure the burden of the past.”



Pushed into a far corner of a bottom shelf is a five-volume set of Dickens. Someone has observed that you should read Dickens when you are very young. No subtleties of characterization here; everybody wearing a placard around his neck. “Good guy.” “Bad guy.” “Fair-haired child.” “Mean old man.” In *Hard Times* the first page lines up the principals and defines each one unequivocally. “Mrs. Blackpool: a dissolute, drunken woman.” “Stephen Blackpool: an honest, hard- working power-loom weaver.” “Thomas Gradgrind: a selfish, ill-natured whelp.”

Years later a character turns up as a friend or an enemy. When I was ten, the Chicago Daily News offered five volumes of Dickens free to anyone who bought a subscription. My father gave this precious premium to me. That whole hot summer I measured my own life and hard times against those of David Copperfield. Mr. Micawber, Little Nell, Mr. McChoakumchild, Aunt Betsy Trotwood, Miss Havisham: I can see them still because of Dickens’s skillful depictions and because these were my books and I could write in them if I wanted to. Here they are now, shabby and yel-

lowed, my pale-penciled notations barely readable. (It says here inside the cover of *David Copperfield*: “Uriah Heep and his mother are discusting creeps and hipacrits!”) My first excursion into literary criticism. 

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