

ONE OVERLOOKED RULE FOR READING

Mortimer J. Adler

Traveling around the country I find that more and more people have an urge to pry into such difficult subjects as science, philosophy and religion, political and economic theory, and the philosophy of history. One clear sign of this is the widespread circulation of the serious books that are now found everywhere in paperback editions—in airports, railroad stations, and drugstores. Decidedly, people now want to go farther and deeper in their thinking about many things which we used to feel were the monopoly of specialists and scholars.

But I have the feeling that, more often than not, this urge and curiosity soon dries up. People find that the book they open with high hopes of enlightenment turns out to be beyond their grasp. They think they need more background than they have to make sense out of what they are reading. They conclude that it was a mistake to have tried reading it in the first place. They quit, in short, because they think the book is just too tough.

Actually, any book intended for the general reader can be understood if you approach it in the right way. What is the right approach? The answer lies in one important—and paradoxical—rule of reading. ***You should read a book through superficially before you try to master it.***

The tremendous pleasure that comes from reading Shakespeare was spoiled for generations of high school students who were forced to go through *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* scene by scene, to look up all the words new to them and to study all the scholarly footnotes. As a result, they never really read the play. By the time they got to the end of it, they had forgotten the beginning and lost sight of the whole. Instead of being forced to take this pedantic approach, they should have been encouraged to read the play in one sitting and discuss what they got out of that first quick reading. Only then would they have been ready to study the play carefully, and closely, because they would have understood enough of it to be able to learn more.

Most of us were taught in school to go to a dictionary when we met with an unfamiliar word, to go to an encyclopedia or some other reference work when we were confronted with statements we couldn't understand. We were told to consult scholarly commentaries or other secondary sources to get help. The rule to follow on tackling a difficult book for the first time calls for exactly the opposite procedure.

Look first for the things you *can* understand, and refuse to get bogged down in the difficult passages. Read right on past paragraphs, footnotes, arguments and references that escape you. There will be enough material which you can immediately grasp, and soon it will add up to a substantial foothold from which you can climb further. What you understand by reading a difficult book through quickly—even if it is only 50 percent or less—will help you to carry some light back to the places which left you in the dark.

By following this rule you can get something out of such classics of science as the works of Galileo, Newton and Faraday. You will also find a host of contemporary works quite readable—Albert Einstein's *Sidelights on Relativity* and a collection of his *Essays in Science*, Max Planck's *Survey of Physics*, Fred Hoyle's *Nature of the Universe*, A. E. Eddington's *The Expanding Universe*, J. B. Conant's *Modern Science and Modern Man*.

Most of the great scientists wrote for laymen as well as for special-

ists. They hoped in this way to reach the minds of all their fellow men. Darwin is an example. This year is the hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Origin of Species* and to celebrate that event articles about its significance are appearing on all sides. But a better way to celebrate it is to read the book itself. Darwin wrote it for the general reader, not just for his fellow-scientists. By reading it yourself you get his theory first-hand instead of taking someone else's word for it.

The best proof of the soundness of this rule—give a book a first superficial reading—is what happens when you *don't* follow it. Take a basic work in economics, such as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. If you insist on understanding everything on one page before you go on to the next you won't get very far. In your effort to master the fine points, you will miss the big points that Smith so clearly makes about the factors of wages, rents, profits and interest that enter into the cost of things, the role of the market in determining prices, the evils of monopoly, the reasons for free trade.

What is true of *The Wealth of Nation*, in the field of economics is equally true of J. S. Mill's *Representative Government* in the field of political theory. Just as these books are open to the layman if he approaches them in the right way, so also are a host of other books. In religion, the writings of Martin Buber, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich; in philosophy and psychology, the writings of William James, Sigmund Freud, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead and Jacques Maritain; if his search for wisdom on the abiding problems about man and nature leads him to look into recent developments in science, the works of Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein. The writings of such specialists are probably not completely understandable by the layman, nor need they be. It is a considerable achievement if we can grasp the essential part of what these great men are saying about their principles, their methods and their aims.

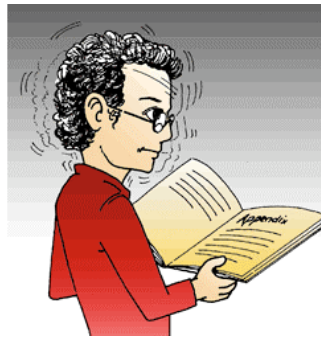
In addition, it is well to remember that books can be not only good friends, but also passing acquaintances. Some of them can tell us what we want to know—or all they have to tell—from a brief chat, if we use them properly.

A variation on the method of giving a book a first superficial reading is the technique of skimming. You will never get from skimming what reading and study can give you, but it is a very practical way of dealing with the mass of books available to you. By skimming you can get, often with surprising accuracy, a general sense

of the contents of a book. This enables you to file the book away in your mental index so that, should occasion arise in the future, you can go back to it, dig it up and dig deeper.

Giving a book a quick once-over is also a threshing process that allows you to separate the chaff from the real kernels of nourishment. You may discover that what you get from skimming is all the book is worth to you for the time being. It may never be worth more. But you will then know at least what the author's leading contention is, so the time you spent looking through the book will not have been wasted.

The habit of skimming doesn't take much time to acquire. But whether you want to skim a book or read it, the following steps are a good way to begin giving a book the once-over.




- (1) Look at the title page and preface, and note especially the subtitles or other indications of the scope and aim of the book or the author's special angle,
- (2) Study the table of contents to get a general sense of the book's structure; use it as you would a roadmap before taking a trip.
- (3) Check the index for the range of subjects covered or the kinds of authors quoted. When you see terms listed that seem crucial, look up the passage. You may find the crux, the turning point, or the new departure the key to the author's approach.

Now you are ready to read the book or skim through it, as you decide. If you vote to skim it, look at the chapters which contain pivotal passages or summary statements in their opening or closing pages. Then dip into a page here and there, reading a paragraph or two, sometimes several pages in sequence. Thumb through the book in this way, always looking for the basic pulse-beat of the matter.

All this will add to your alertness while you read. How many times have you daydreamed through pages only to wake up to find that you have no idea of the ground you have been over? That cannot happen if you have a system for following a general thread.

Think of yourself as a detective looking for clues to a book's basic idea and alert for anything that will make it clearer. The rule I have stressed here will help you sustain this attitude. You will be surprised to find how much time you will save, pleased to find how much more you will grasp, and relieved to discover how much easier it all can be.

One word of warning: if you use this approach and start to skim through a book, you may end up discovering that you aren't skimming it at all. You are reading it, and understanding it. When you put the book down it will be with the realization that the subject wasn't such a tough one after all! 

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