



---

## *YOU CAN'T READ*

**Mortimer J. Adler**

1 of 2

### **I**

**I**n the past five years I have had the experience of giving a lecture on the art of reading to many audiences of various sorts: to large popular forums, to schoolteachers assembled in convention, to high school students, college students, law students, and even to faculty groups. In every case it has been necessary to put the audience in a receptive frame of mind by saying “you can’t read.” I say it with equal justice to every group in the population which supposes itself to be literate—including the professional book reviewers. In every case, the first reaction was shocked incredulity—that look which tells a lecture the audience thinks he’s crazy. But in every case the look changed to one which pleaded guilty to the charge, and expressed anxiety to do something about it. Many times college seniors or graduates or teachers came up, both plaintively and angrily, to ask why school and college had so plainly failed them. I agreed that it had, but I could give them little solace for, in most cases, it was too late in their educational life to make amends.

Learning to read is the heart of basic education. It is first and foremost of the three arts, the mastery of which admits one to literacy and bachelorhood in the liberal arts. Of our college graduates, businessman who have to employ them and professional schools which have to prepare them for careers, generally complain that they can't write or speak well. While this seems to be acknowledged on all sides—even of late by educators themselves who are beginning to wonder about progressive education—much less frequently does one hear a complaint about reading. Yet the failure in reading is more serious; first, because it is a prime impediment to the progress of education itself; second, because it is responsible for incompetence in writing and speaking.

I am aware that opposed views of education are involved in what I am saying. On one view, education consists in acquiring scientific knowledge or information about the contemporary world or even the proper attitudes toward it. In this view, an education is a burden one acquires in college and tries to carry around for the rest of life, though the baggage becomes heavier as it progressively proves less useful. On the other view, education consists in becoming disciplined so that after college one has the vital technique of learning, of educating oneself through all the media the environment affords. In fact, college educates only if it enables one to continue learning for ever after. Since a basic channel of learning is the speech and writing of other men, the art of receiving communication is an indispensable discipline.

If schools taught their *pupils* to read well, it—and perforce to listen well—they would make *students* of them, and students they would be out of school and after it as well. That is what an A.B. should mean, if nothing else; but if it meant that it would mean more. Literacy—ability to read well and being well read—is a necessary, though not the sufficient, condition of an education. One of the shallowest misunderstandings of President Hutchins' program is to mistake his insistence upon literacy as indispensable to liberal or general education, for an exclusion of everything else. But nothing else comes first. Some have gone even further and insisted, with Carlyle, that "all that a university or final highest school can do for us is still what the first school began to teach us to read." Professor Tenney of Cornell, who has just published a book on *Intelligent Reading*, adds: "it has placed in his (the pupil's) hands the primary instance of a instrument of all higher education. Thereafter, the student, if he so wills, can educate himself."

Since I must say to you, gentle reader, that you too probably can't

read, I had better begin to explain, lest you cease even to be gentle the word “read” is grossly ambiguous. Of course, you can read, in some sense of the word. We all can read: the newspapers, magazines, this season’s best sellers, textbooks, primers, manuals, and every sort of book which tries to retail for the illiterate what other books contain. But we can’t read these other books, the great, the primary books, books which are neither extensions of journalism, on the one hand, nor extensions of pedagogy, on the other. By a great or primary book I mean simply any book, ancient, mediaeval or modern, which has something important to say, right or wrong, that is not said in any other book. There aren’t many such books in the whole history of Western culture, but they are the books which, in large part, constitute the culture.

Reading, in the sense of studying can be readily distinguished from reading in other senses. Here is your mind and there is a book. The printed symbols are there to convey something from another mind. Now, as you go through the pages, either you understand perfectly everything the author has to say, or you don’t. If you do, you may have gained information but you could not have increased your understanding, for if a book upon effortless inspection is completely intelligible to you, then the author and you are as two minds in the same pod, and the symbols on the page merely expressed a common understanding which you had before you met. Let us take the second alternative: you don’t understand the book *perfectly at once*. Let us assume—what unhappily is not generally true—that you understand enough to know that you don’t understand all, that this book contains something which would increase your understanding, if you could get it. What do you do then? If you are in school yet, you may go to a teacher and get him to elucidate, or to recommend a textbook or commentary which will make it all plain; if you are out of school, you probably give up after a little frustration and confess with a smile that it is over your head. In neither case do you do the job of reading which the book obviously requires. That is done only in one way: without extrinsic aids, you take the book into your study and work on it. 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 for mistake of understanding less to want of understanding more. Such elevation, accomplished by the mind working on a book, is reading. Only those who can read in this way can educate themselves. Can you?

You can test yourself simply, by asking how many techniques you possess for performing the operations upon a book better than yourself whereby you gradually elevate yourself to its level. Do you know what different things to do to make sense out of passag-

es that, at first glance, seems senseless? I shall soon mention a number of the things you must do in order to read a book, and that may help you to measure your ability. But right here I can provide another test. Reading involves intense mental activity. Far from being passive and relaxing, it is one of the most active and arduous processes the mind can undertake. It is extremely tiring. Have you experienced this fatigue? Furthermore, mental activity usually expresses itself in some form. Do you do pencil and paper work while reading? Do you mark a book, or make notes and diagrams or schematic outlines well reading? If I examine my own conscience in this matter I would have to admit that I read very few books, but then I like to say with Thomas Hobbes that “if I read as many books as most men do, I should be as dull-witted as they are.” Reading many books, quickly, easily, passively, does not feed a mind. It makes blotting-paper of it.

It should be clear now why reading, in this primary sense of the word, requires primary books, great books or, shall I say, books which can elevate us because they are our betters. Only through working on such books can one learn to read. When I state the rules of reading it may even become clear that only good books can be read well. Until recently it was generally accepted that education was the elevation of one mind by another, that an education was given by giving youth contact with great minds. Since it was always obvious that most teachers are not great minds—nor are the textbooks or manuals they write great books—European education, for almost 2,000 years, had recourse to the tradition of primary writings, the medium through which contact with great minds is made. In education so conceived, the role of the teacher is secondary. His job is to help the young learn to read and help them read. When the teachers themselves can’t read, they turned to giving lectures and writing textbooks. It is significant that manuals and popularizations flourish in every period of European history when education is on the decline.

When I complained to the principle of a progressive high school that the pupils he sent us couldn’t read, he admitted that they did nothing about teaching them to read. He couldn’t, he said, until the school of education had finished their experimental studies of reading. Since reading is the performance of all basic intellectual operations which are disciplined by the liberal arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric, I wondered what could be found out about it in a laboratory. I soon learned. They were investigating eye movements with different types, page sizes, under different illuminations, and so forth. The experimental researches on reading, which our schools of education have turned out by the ton, consist mainly of

such stuff: measurements of the mechanics of reading. It is all about as relevant to reading as an intellectual process, as research on muscular tensions of the arm in legible penmanship would be to the discipline of writing for the sake of intelligible communication.

Learning to read is becoming a liberal artist. Not only are reading and listening prior to writing and speaking—the latter being more complicated operations—but learning to read is learning to think. It is doubtful if we do much thinking apart from reading and listening, writing and speaking. When logic, for instance, is taught and is as an art of thinking in a vacuum, and hence apart from grammar and rhetoric, it is badly taught and justly falls into disrepute. The true discipline of the mind is accomplished by the liberal arts only when they function together to make good readers and writers. It is the possession of such discipline which should be certified by the bachelor's degree. It is hardly a joke that our bachelors, and even our masters, of arts are not only not masters, but totally uncultivated by the arts which give their names to these degrees.

To know the rules of art is not to possess the art as a discipline. That is had only by those who can operate in a disciplined way, and it comes only through forming habits by operating according to rules. It is not a novel educational insight that one learns to do by doing. In the case of manual arts, one can form the habits under direction without understanding the rules, without having the knowledge which underlies the rules and shows them to be right; thus, one can learn to drive an auto well without knowing automotive mechanics. But in the case of liberal or intellectual arts, such as the arts of reading and writing, the habits cannot be intelligently formed unless the rules are themselves intelligible to the practitioner. He must know something of the sciences of grammar, logic and rhetoric in order to understand the rules of reading and, through habituation under their guidance, to become a good reader. The brief exposition of such rules, which is to follow indicates how much there is to know if good habits of reading are to be well formed.

It is no exaggeration to say that it would take fully four years of school time to learn how to read and write. That should not be shocking to those who can still remember that basic education was once devoted to the three R's. I am not concerned here with whether the four years should be those of high school or college or some combination of the two. I am only concerned that the bachelor's degree should not be given until the candidate is able to read and write, and further that no one suppose this can be accomplished in an offhand way, as extracurricular activity or in a couple

of English courses. To do the job would be a major four-year undertaking at least. And the simple fact is that apart from a little College in Annapolis, Maryland—St. John's—there isn't an educational institution in the country which is making the attempt, and few educators that are even concerned about seeing it made. One is compelled to ask how education is conceived when it is generally supposed that it can be given to those who cannot read by those who also cannot.

You cannot learn to read by consulting books which discuss the art. Whatever the merits and defects of Professor Tenney's book, and of a recent book by Mr. I. A. Richards, called *Interpretation in Teaching*, I hope their authors did not intend them as a shortcut to four years of basic education. That certainly is not the intention of this article, which, because of its brevity, would be even more preposterous if it offered itself as a remedy for the profound defects of the school system. By trying to say what reading is, and by formulating a few of the primary rules, I aim only to convince you that there is justification for saying "you can't read" to the so-called educated public which comes from and still supports our educational institutions. I may even hope that they will be stirred to do something about it. An examination of the books by Tenney and Richards may help my case if for no other reason than that they reveal some of the intricacies of the liberal arts. But, I repeat, don't expect to learn how to read from books or articles of this sort.

With this warning, I proceed now to an exposition of the rules. The rules fall into three groups because to read a book well one must read it at least three times or, shall I say, in three ways. These three ways are analytically distinct, though when one has learned the art of reading they may be coalesced by habit. Yet their analytical distinction is important, even when they are not actually separated, because the three stages of reading stand in a fixed order to one another. The first reading, as you will see, is necessarily the first, and the last, even when the fully developed have a habit of reading allows them to be more or less concurrent in time. In learning to read, however, it will be necessary to go through the three procedures in actual separation. This is true of any complicated habit which consists of many partial operations which must be ordered to one another to constitute the dynamic whole. To form the habit one must practice each partial operation by itself and only gradually is one able to connect the parts and make their cooperation habitual. At the beginning there is a bewildering complexity of things to do, and we are dismayed by our inability to do them all together in good order even when we have attained some confidence in the parts. And if instead of practicing the parts, first singly and then

together, one merely read an itemized list of rules, the dismay would be greater. I mention this to prevent that hopeless feeling when you look at these rules of reading. Don't take a book in one hand, and a list of rules in another, and tried to perform as if you possess the habit. That would be as dangerous to your mental health, as getting into an auto for the first time with the wheel in one hand and a driving manual and the other, would be to your physical well-being. In both cases, an operation which is at first clumsy, disconnected, tedious and painful becomes graceful and smooth, facile and pleasant, only through many hours of practice, and usually with the help of a patient tutor.

## 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.

*[We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.](#)*

---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

### CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.