

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

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## HARD READING MADE EASY

**Mortimer Adler**

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

More often than not, however, this urge soon dries up. People find that the book which they open with high hopes of enlightenment turns out to be beyond their grasp. They think that the subject must require more background than they have, and they quit.

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.

Most of us were taught in school to go to a dictionary when we met an unfamiliar word. We were told to consult an encyclopedia, scholarly commentaries or other secondary sources to get help with statements we couldn't understand. The rule to follow on tackling a difficult book 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 to climb further. The amount you understand by a quick reading—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.

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 new words and to study all the scholarly footnotes. As a result, they never really *read* the play. By the time they got to the end 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. Then they would have been ready to study the play carefully, for they would have understood enough of it to be able to learn more.

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 role of the market in determining prices, the evils of monopoly, the reasons for free trade.

What is true of *The Wealth of Nations* in the field of economics is equally true of J. S. Mill's *Representative Government* in the field of political theory. 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; 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 the skimming is all the book is worth to you for the time being. It may never be worth more. But you will then at least know what the author's leading contention is, so the time you spent with the book will not have been wasted.

For skimming or reading, 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 subtitle—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 road map 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 key to the author's approach.

Now you are ready to read the book or skim through it, as you choose. 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've been over? That cannot happen if you have a system for following a general thread.

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, understanding it and enjoying 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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### MORTIMER ADLER, SILVER MEDAL, CLASS 3



*In 1914, 12 year old Mortimer Adler took a Silver Medal in Class 3 of an essay contest about Napoleon. His essay appeared in "The Sun" on Sunday June 7, 1914. His picture is above and his essay below.*

Napoleon! This name itself at one time suggested fear throughout Europe. He was the greatest man of modern times, and I think I might easily say he was one of the greatest men the world has ever known.

There are many questions which we have to debate in our minds before coming to a decision. He was a great soldier and statesman, because he was naturally made to command and because he had that spirit that carries men to success. When Napoleon made up his mind to do a thing he did it. I think determination is a very good habit for men who have to lead others.

He, like other, great men, had many faults, the greatest of which was vanity. The loss of the battle of Waterloo was due to his vanity, for not until the last few days of the battle did he appear upon the field in person. Don't you think this was a great fault?


One of his achievements was to gain the love of his soldiers. This helped him in many a hard fought battle. When his soldiers thought all was lost Napoleon stood up in his stirrups and at the very sight of him the soldiers inspired by his great form, took courage and turned defeat into victory. He must have been a great man, for the soldiers loved him like a father.

Another thing that helped him along the path to success was the fact that he had under him some of the best generals in Europe at that period. Some of his favorite generals were Ney, Grouchy, Junot, Murat, and Lannes.

Another instance of his greatness was shown by the rapidity with which he advanced himself in public offices. In the year 1785 he became a Second Lieutenant of artillery. He was soon advanced as Lieutenant, then to Captain and so on up the ranks of officers of the Imperial Army of France, till in the year 1796, eleven years after the date of his appointment as a Second Lieutenant he became commander in chief of the French forces in Italy. Napoleon was then only 26 years of age. Could an ordinary civilian advance with such alacrity?

On the 18th of May, 1804, Napoleon and Josephine were crowned Emperor and Empress of France. He was at the head of Europe: he had placed his brothers on thrones various countries. Did any other man ever have control of Europe? He was now at the summit of his climb; he remained there for a certain period, and then he began to descend as rapidly as he has ascended.

Like other great men of his type he had an end of isolation. So let it be with Napoleon! After the fatal retreat from Moscow, the battle of a Waterloo and the triumphant entry of the allied armies of England and Prussia into Paris, Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena, where in the year 1821, on the 5th of May, at half past 5 o'clock he passed away.

To sum up this question in as few words as possible, I think no man on earth went through or saw more than he did. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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