

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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“Marking a book is literally an experience of your differences or agreements with the author. It is the highest respect you can pay him.” —Edgar Allen Poe



HOW TO MARK A BOOK

Mortimer Adler

You know you have to read “between the lines” to get the most out of anything. I want to persuade you to do something equally important in the course of your reading. I want to persuade you to “write between the lines.” Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.

I contend, quite bluntly, that marking up a book is not an act of mutilation but of love.

You shouldn't mark up a book which isn't yours. Librarians (or your friends) who lend you books expect you to keep them clean, and you should. If you decide that I am right about the usefulness of marking books, you will have to buy them. Most of the world's great books are available today, in reprint editions, at less than a dollar.

There are two ways in which one can own a book. The first is the property right you establish by paying for it, just as you pay for clothes and furniture. But this act of purchase is only the prelude to possession. Full ownership comes only when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it is by writing in it. An illustration may make the point clear. You buy a beefsteak and transfer it from the butcher's icebox to your own. But you do not own the beefsteak in the most important sense until you consume it and get it into your bloodstream. I am arguing that books, too, must be absorbed in your bloodstream to do you any good.

Confusion about what it means to *own* a book leads people to a false reverence for paper, binding, and type—a respect for the physical thing—the craft of the printer rather than the genius of the author. They forget that it is possible for a man to acquire the idea, to possess the beauty, which a great book contains, without staking his claim by pasting his bookplate inside the cover. Having a fine library doesn't prove that its owner has a mind enriched by books; it proves nothing more than that he, his father, or his wife, was rich enough to buy them.

There are three kinds of book owners. The first has all the standard sets and best-sellers—unread, untouched. (This deluded individual owns wood-pulp and ink, not books.) The second has a great many books—a few of them read through, most of them dipped into, but all of them as clean and shiny as the day they were bought. (This person would probably like to make books his own, but is restrained by a false respect for their physical appearance.) The third has a few books or many—every one of them dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This man owns books.)

Is it false respect, you may ask, to preserve intact and unblemished a beautifully printed book, an elegantly bound edition? Of course not. I'd no more scribble all over a first edition of "Paradise Lost" than I'd give my baby a set of crayons and an original Rembrandt! I wouldn't mark up a painting or a statue. Its soul, so to speak, is inseparable from its body. And the beauty of a rare edition or of a richly manufactured volume is like that of a painting or a statue.

But the soul of a book *can* be separated from its body. A book is more like the score of a piece of music than it is like a painting. No great musician confuses a symphony with the printed sheets of music. Arturo Toscanini reveres Brahms, but Toscanini's score of the

C-minor Symphony is so thoroughly marked up that no one but the maestro himself can read it. The reason why a great conductor makes notations on his musical scores—marks them up again and again each time he returns to study them—is the reason why you should mark your books. If your respect for magnificent binding or typography gets in the way, buy yourself a cheap edition and pay your respects to the author.

Why is marking up a book indispensable to reading? First, it keeps you awake. (And I don't mean merely conscious; I mean wide awake.) In the second place, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The marked book is usually the thought-through book. Finally, writing helps you remember the thoughts you had, or the thoughts the author expressed. Let me develop these three points.

If reading is to accomplish anything more than passing time, it must be active. You can't let your eyes glide across the lines of a book and come up with an understanding of what you have read. Now an ordinary piece of light fiction, like, say, "Gone with the Wind," doesn't require the most active kind of reading. The books you read for pleasure can be read in a state of relaxation, and nothing is lost. But a great book, rich in ideas and beauty, a book that raises and tries to answer great fundamental questions, demands the most active reading of which you are capable. You don't absorb the ideas of John Dewey the way you absorb the crooning of Mr. Vallee. You have to reach for them. That you cannot do while you're asleep.

If, when you've finished reading a book, the pages are filled with your notes, you know that you read actively. The most famous *active* reader of great books I know is President Hutchins, of the University of Chicago. He also has the hardest schedule of business activities of any man I know. He invariably reads with a pencil, and sometimes, when he picks up a book and pencil in the evening, he finds himself, instead of making intelligent notes, drawing what he calls "caviar factories" on the margins. When that happens, he puts the book down. He knows he's too tired to read, and he's just wasting time.

But, you may ask, why is writing necessary? Well, the physical act of writing, with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves them better in your memory. To set down your reaction to important words and sentences you have read, and the questions they have raised in your mind, is to preserve those reactions and sharpen those questions.

Even if you wrote on a scratch pad, and threw the paper away when you had finished writing, your grasp of the book would be surer. But you don't have to throw the paper away. The margins (top and bottom, as well as side), the end-papers, the very space between the lines, are all available. They aren't sacred. And, best of all, your marks and notes become an integral part of the book and stay there forever. You can pick up the book the following week or year, and there are all your points of agreement, disagreement, doubt, and inquiry. It's like resuming an interrupted conversation with the advantage of being able to pick up where you left off.

And that is exactly what reading a book should be: a conversation between you and the author. Presumably he knows more about the subject than you do; naturally, you'll have the proper humility as you approach him. But don't let anybody tell you that a reader is supposed to be solely on the receiving end. Understanding is a two-way operation; learning doesn't consist in being an empty receptacle. The learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. And marking a book is literally an expression of your differences, or agreements of opinion, with the author.

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully. Here's the way I do it:

1. *Underlining*: of major points, of important or forceful statements.
2. *Vertical lines at the margin*: to emphasize a statement already underlined.
3. *Star, asterisk, or other doo-dad at the margin*: to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or twenty most important statements in the book. (You may want to fold the bottom corner of each page on which you use such marks. It won't hurt the sturdy paper on which most modern books are printed, and you will be able to take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it at the folded-corner page, refresh your recollection of the book.)
4. *Numbers in the margin*: to indicate the sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument.

5. *Numbers of other pages in the margin*: to indicate where else in the book the author made points relevant to the point marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together.

6. *Circling of key words or phrases*.

7. *Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page, for the sake of*: recording questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raised in your mind; reducing a complicated discussion to a simple statement; recording the sequence of major points right through the books. I use the end-papers at the back of the book to make a personal index of the author's points in the order of their appearance.

The front end-papers are, to me, the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. I reserve them for fancy thinking. After I have finished reading the book and making my personal index on the back end-papers, I turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page, or point by point (I've already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic unity and an order of parts. This outline is, to me, the measure of my understanding of the work.

If you're a die-hard anti-book-marker, you may object that the margins, the space between the lines, and the end-papers don't give you room enough. All right. How about using a scratch pad slightly smaller than the page-size of the book—so that the edges of the sheets won't protrude? Make your index, outlines, and even your notes on the pad, and then insert these sheets permanently inside the front and back covers of the book.

Or, you may say that this business of marking books is going to slow up your reading. It probably will. That's one of the reasons for doing it. Most of us have been taken in by the notion that speed of reading is a measure of our intelligence. There is no such thing as the right speed for intelligent reading. Some things should be read quickly and effortlessly, and some should be read slowly and even laboriously. The sign of intelligence in reading is the ability to read different things differently according to their worth. In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through you—how many you can make your own. A few friends are better than a thousand acquaintances. If this be your aim, as it should be, you will not be impatient if it takes more time and effort to read a great book than it does a newspaper.

You may have one final objection to marking books. You can't lend them to your friends because nobody else can read them without being distracted by your notes. Furthermore, you won't want to lend them because a marked copy is a kind of intellectual diary, and lending it is almost like giving your mind away.

If your friend wishes to read your *Plutarch's Lives*, *Shakespeare*, or *The Federalist Papers*, tell him gently but firmly, to buy a copy. You will lend him your car or your coat—but your books are as much a part of you as your head or your heart. 📖



THE LAST WORD

Katharine Byrne

If 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 yellowed, 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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