

HOW TO READ A BOOK

Strategies for Getting the Most out of Non-Fiction Reading

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How can you learn the most from a book when you are reading for information, rather than for pleasure?

It's very satisfying to start at the beginning and read straight through to the end. Some books, such as novels, *have* to be read this way, since a basic principle of fiction is to hold the reader in suspense. Your whole purpose in reading fiction is to follow the writer's lead, allowing him or her to spin a story bit by bit.

But many of the books you'll read during your undergraduate and graduate years, and possibly during the rest of your professional life, won't be novels. Instead, they'll be non-fiction: textbooks, manuals, histories, academic studies, and so on.

The purpose of reading books like these is to gain information. Here, finding out what happens — as quickly and easily as possible — is your main goal. So unless you're stuck in prison with nothing else to do, NEVER read a non-fiction book from beginning to end.

Instead, when you're reading for information, you should ALWAYS jump ahead, skip around, and use every available strategy to **discover**, then to **understand**, and finally to **remember** what the writer has to say. This is how you'll get the most out of a book in the smallest amount of time.

Using the methods described here, you should be able to read a 300-page book in six to eight hours. Of course, the more time you spend, the more you'll learn and the better you'll understand the book. But your time is limited.

Here are some strategies to help you do this effectively. Most of these can be applied not only to books, but also to any other kind of reading.

1) Read the whole book.

In reading to learn, your goal should *always* be to get all the way through the assignment. It's much more important to have a general grasp of the arguments, evidence, and conclusions than to understand every detail. No matter how carefully you read, you probably won't remember most of the details anyway. What you *can* do is remember the main points. And if you remember those, you know enough to find the material again if you ever do need to recall the details.

2) Decide how much time you will spend.

If you know in advance that you have only six hours to read, it'll be easier to pace yourself. Remember, you're going to read the whole book (or the whole assignment).

There's nothing wrong with setting a time limit for yourself. In fact, setting time limits and keeping to them (while accomplishing your goals) is one of the most important skills you can ever learn. The more directly you deal with your limits, the better off you are.

3) Have a purpose and a strategy.

Before you begin, figure out **why** you are reading this particular book, and **how** you are going to read it. If you don't have reasons and strategies of your own — not just those of your teacher — you won't learn as much.

As soon as you start to read, begin trying to find out four things:

- Who is the author?
- What are the book's arguments?
- What is the evidence that supports these?
- What are the book's conclusions?

Once you've got a grip on these, start trying to determine:

- What are the weaknesses of these arguments, evidence, and conclusions?
- What do you think about the arguments, evidence, and conclusions?
- How does (or how could) the author respond to these weaknesses, and to your own criticisms?

Keep coming back to these questions as you read. By the time you finish, you should be able to answer them all.

Three good ways to think about this are:

- a) Imagine that you're going to review the book for a magazine.
- b) Imagine that you're having a conversation, or a formal debate, with the author.
- c) Imagine an examination on the book. What would the questions be, and how would you answer them?

4) Read actively.

Don't wait for the author to hammer you over the head. Instead, from the very beginning, constantly generate hypotheses ("the main point of the book is that...") and questions ("How does the author know that...?") about the book.

Making notes about these can help. As you read, try to confirm your hypotheses and answer your questions. Once you finish, review these.

5) Read it three times.

You'll get the most out of the book if you read it three times — each time for a different purpose and at a different level of detail.

a) Overview: discovery

Here you read very quickly, following the principle (described below) of reading for high information content. Your goal is to discover the book: to get a quick-and-dirty, unsophisticated, general picture of the writer's purpose, methods, and conclusions.

Mark — without reading — passages that look important (you'll read these more carefully on the second round.) Generate questions to answer on your second reading: what does term X mean? Why doesn't the author cover subject Y? Who is Z? For a 300-page book, this should take no more than an hour.

b) Detail: understanding

Within your time constraints, read the book a second time. This time, your goal is understanding: to get a careful, critical, thoughtful grasp of the key points, and to evaluate the author's evidence for his/her points.

Focus especially on the beginnings and ends of chapters and major sections. Pay special attention to the passages you marked on the first round. Try to answer any questions you generated on the first round.

c) Notes: recall and note-taking

The purpose of your third and final reading is to commit to memory the most important elements of the book. This time, make brief notes about the arguments, evidence, and conclusions. Include just enough detail to let you remember the most important things. 3-5 pages of notes per 100 pages of text is a good goal to shoot for; more than that is often too much. Use a system that lets you easily find places in the book (e.g., mark page numbers beside each note).

You'll get more out of three one-hour readings than you could ever get out of one three-hour reading.

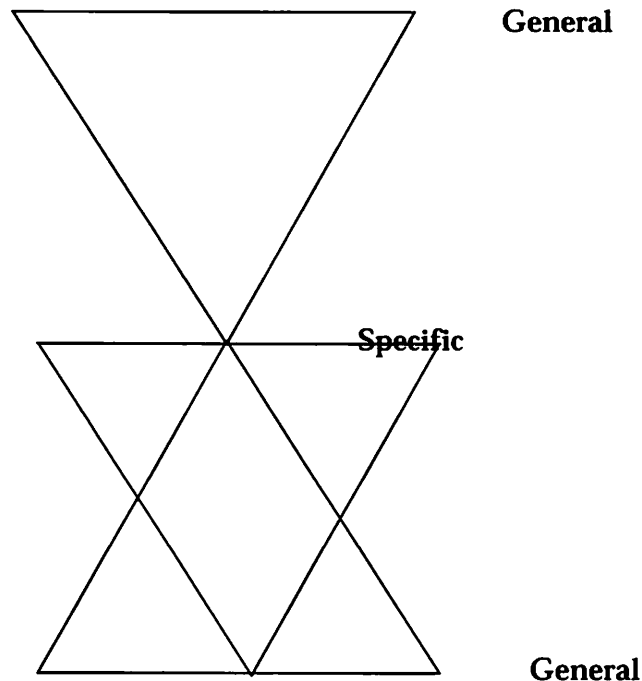
6) Focus on the parts with the highest information content.

Non-fiction books usually have an "hourglass" structure that is repeated at several levels of organization. More general (broader) information is presented at the beginnings and ends of:

- the book as a whole (introduction, conclusion)
- each chapter
- each section within a chapter

- each paragraph

More specific (narrow) information (supporting evidence, details, etc.) is presented in the middle:



The "Hourglass" Information Structure

To make this structure work for you, focus on the following elements, in more or less the following order:

- **Cover**
- **Table of contents**
- **Index**
- **Bibliography**
Tells you about the book's sources and intellectual context.
- **Preface and/or Introduction.**
- **Conclusion**
- **Pictures, graphs, tables, figures.**
Images usually contain much more information than straight text.
- **Section headings.**
These help you understand the book's structure.
- **Special type or formatting:** boldface, italics, numbered items, lists.

7) Mark the book.

Underlining and making notes in the margins is a very important part of active reading.

Do this from the very beginning — even on your first, overview reading. When you come back to the book later, your marks reduce the amount you have to look at and help you see what's most significant.

Don't mark too much. This defeats the purpose of marking and forces you to re-read unimportant information. As a rule, you should average no more than one or two short marks per page. Rather than underline whole sentences, underline words or short phrases that capture what you most need to remember. The whole point of this exercise is to distill, reduce, eliminate the unnecessary.

8) Know the author(s) and their organizations.

Knowing who wrote a book helps you judge about the book's quality.

Authors are people. Like anyone else, their views are shaped by their educations, their jobs, their early lives, and the rest of their experiences. Also like anyone else, they have prejudices, blind spots, desperate moments, failings, and desires — as well as insights, brilliance, objectivity, and successes. Notice all of it.

Most authors are also part of organizations: universities, corporations, governments, newspapers, magazines. These organizations each have cultures, hierarchies of power, and social norms. Organizations shape both *how* a work is written and the content of what it says. For example, university professors are expected to write books and/or journal articles in order to get tenure. These pieces of writing must meet certain standards of quality, defined chiefly by other professors; for them, content usually matters more than good writing. Journalists, by contrast, are often driven by the mass markets served by their magazines or newspapers. Because of this, their standards of quality are often directed more toward clear, engaging writing than toward unimpeachable content.

The more you know about the author and his/her organization, the better you will be able to evaluate what you read. Try to answer questions like these: What factors shaped the author's intellectual perspective? What is his or her profession? Is the author an academic, a journalist, a professional (doctor, lawyer, industrial scientist, etc.)? Expertise? Other books and articles? Intellectual network(s)? Gender? Race? Class? Political affiliation? Why did the author decide to write this book? When? For what audience(s)? Who paid for the research work (private foundations, government grant agencies, industrial sponsors, etc.)? Who wrote "jacket blurbs" in support of the book?

You can often (though not always) learn about much of this from the acknowledgments, the bibliography, and the author's biographical statement.

9) Know the intellectual context.

Knowing the author and his/her organization also helps you understand the book's intellectual context. This includes the academic discipline(s) from which it draws, schools

of thought within that discipline, and others who agree with or oppose the author's viewpoint.

You'll understand a book much better if you can figure out what, and who, it is answering — since a book is almost always partly one writer's response to other writers. Pay special attention to points where the author tells you directly that s/he is disagreeing with other writers: "Conventional wisdom holds that *x*, but I argue instead that *y*." (Is *x* really conventional wisdom? Among what group of people?) "Famous Joe Scholar says that *x*, but I believe that *y*." (Who's Famous Joe, and why do other people believe him? How plausible are *x* and *y*? Is the author straining to find something original to say, or has s/he genuinely convinced you that Famous Joe is wrong?)

Equally important are the people and writings the author cites in support of his/her arguments.

10) Use your unconscious mind.

An awful lot of thinking and processing goes on when you're not aware of it. Just as with writing or any other creative thought process, full understanding of a book takes time to develop. The mind, like the body, can also get tired, especially when doing just one thing for many hours. Your ability to comprehend and retain what you read drops off dramatically after a couple of hours.

Therefore, you should read a book in several short sessions of one to two hours apiece, rather than one long marathon. If you follow the method given here, you'll go through the entire book at each session. In between, your unconscious mind will process some of what you've read.

When you come back for the next session, start by asking yourself what you remember from your previous reading, what you think of it so far, and what you still need to learn.

11) Rehearse, and use multiple modes.

After you've read the book, rehearse what you've learned. Quiz yourself on its contents. Argue with the author. Imagine how you would defend the author's position in your own writing.

The best forms of rehearsal use multiple modes of thinking. Don't just contemplate privately. Instead, talk about the book with others. Bring it up in classes. Write about it. Visualize anything that can be visualized about its contents.

Using different modes of thought helps fix your memory and integrate it into the rest of your knowledge.