

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 non-fiction reading, from articles to websites.

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 or hypotheses, evidence, and conclusions than to understand every detail. In fact, no matter how carefully you read, you won't remember most of the details anyway.

What you *can* do is remember *and record* 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).

In fact, the more directly and realistically you confront your limits, the more effective you will be at practically everything. Setting time limits and keeping to them (while accomplishing your goals) is one of the most important life skills you can learn. So never start to read without planning when to stop.

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 brief 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

This is the key technique. 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 (one-tenth of total time)**

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 carefully — headings, passages, and phrases that seem important (you'll read these more carefully on the second round.) Generate questions to answer on your second reading: what does term or phrase X mean? Why doesn't the author cover subject Y? Who is Z?

b) **Detail: understanding (six-tenths of total time)**

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 (three-tenths of total time)**

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. This is not at all the same thing as text markup. 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., start each note with a page number.)

Notebooks, typed pages, handwritten sheets tucked into the book can all work. However, notes will be useless unless you can easily find them again. A very good system — the one I use — is to type notes directly into bibliography entries using software such as Endnote, Refer, or Bookends (for the Mac). This way the notes and

the citation information always remain together; over time you accumulate a library of notes you can easily consult, even when away from your paper files.

On time and timing. First, because human attention fades after about an hour, you'll get more out of three one-hour readings than you could ever get out of one three-hour reading. But be careful: to get one full hour of effective reading, you need to set aside at least one hour and fifteen minutes, since distraction is inevitable at the beginning (settling in) and end (re-arousal for your next task) of any reading period.

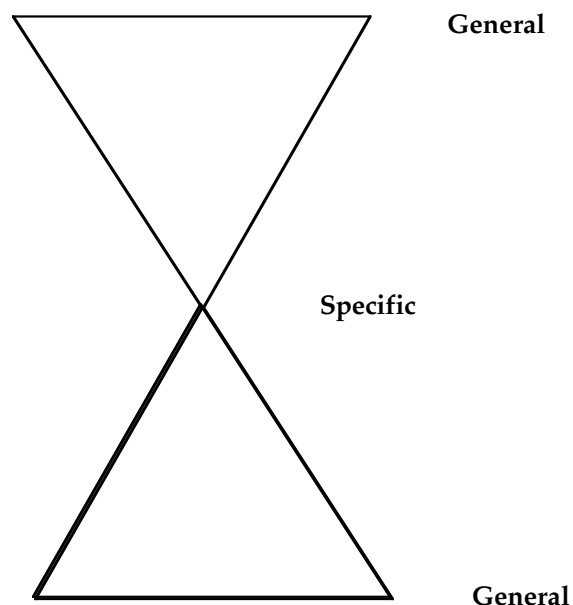
Second, make a realistic plan that includes how much time you will devote to each of the three stages. For a 250-page book, I usually spend 15-30 minutes on overview, 3-5 hours on detailed reading, and 1-1.5 hours taking notes, but these periods can be adjusted up or down depending on difficulty — and on how much time you have.

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

Non-fiction books very often 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 or article as a whole (abstract, 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:** scan this to see which are the most important terms
- **Bibliography:** tells you about the book's sources and intellectual context
- **Preface** and/or **Introduction** and/or **Abstract**
- **Conclusion**
- **Pictures, graphs, tables, figures:** images contain more information than text
- **Section headings:** help you understand the book's structure
- **Special type or formatting:** boldface, italics, numbered items, lists

7) Use PTML (personal text markup language)

Mark up your reading. 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 markup; when you consult your notes later, it will force you to re-read unimportant information. As a rule, you should average no more than two or three 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. Write words and phrases in the margins that tell you what paragraphs or sections are about. Use your own words.

8) Page vs. screen

Printed material has far higher resolution (~600 dpi) than even the best computer screens (~72 dpi). For this reason you will read more accurately, and with less fatigue, if you stick with the paper version. Still, the advantages of portability and high-volume storage mean that we inevitably read much more screen-based material now.

Using PTML on the screen: It is still quite difficult to mark up screen-based materials effectively; the extra steps involved are often distracting, as is the temptation to interrupt reading to check email or web-surf. However, if you're disciplined, the most recent versions of Adobe Acrobat, and a few shareware PDF handlers such as PDFpen, allow you to add comments and highlighting to PDFs. If you don't want to resort to printing everything, I suggest investing in the (expensive) Acrobat software.

Note-taking on the screen: A major pitfall of screen-based reading is that because you can easily cut and paste the original text, you will be tempted to do this in lieu of making your own notes. Cut-and-paste *can* sometimes be helpful, especially for things you might want to quote later. However, in general it defeats the two main purposes of note-taking: (a) learning and remembering (by rephrasing in your own terms), and (b) condensing into a very short form. The same is true of hyperlinks: though useful for keeping track of sources, linking to an item *by itself* will not help you remember or understand it, even though it may feel that way.

9) Know the author(s) and their organizations

Knowing who wrote a book helps you judge its quality and understand its full significance.

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 belong to 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 deadlines and the need to please large audiences. Because of this, their standards of quality are often directed more toward clear and engaging writing than toward unimpeachable content; their sources are usually oral rather than written.

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 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.

10) 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.

A book is almost always partly a response to other writers, so you'll understand a book much better if you can figure out what, and who, it is *answering*. Pay special attention to points where the author tells you directly that s/he is disagreeing with others: "Conventional wisdom holds that x, but I argue instead that y." (Is x really conventional wisdom? Among what group of people?) "Famous Jane Scholar says that x, but I believe that y." (Who's Famous Jane, and why do other people believe her? 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 Jane is wrong?) Equally important are the people and writings the author cites in support of his/her arguments.

11) Use your unconscious mind

An awful lot of thinking and mental 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, gets tired, especially when it's doing just one thing for many hours. Your ability to comprehend and retain what you read drops off dramatically after an hour or so. Therefore, you should read a book in several short sessions of one to two hours apiece, rather than one long marathon.

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.

12) Rehearse, and use multiple modes

Reading is exactly like martial arts, baseball, or cooking in the sense that **learning and memory depend crucially on rehearsal**. So — 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.

Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and visualizing all engage different parts of the brain. For this reason, the best forms of rehearsal use **multiple modes** of thinking and action. 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. All of this helps fix your memory and integrate your new learning into the rest of your knowledge.

Hang in there!

When I give presentations on these ideas, students often tell me a few weeks later that they "tried it a few times and just couldn't do it," so they stopped. **You will have to practice** these techniques for a considerable length of time — at least a few months — before they come to seem natural, and they will never be easier than the comfortable, passive way we've all been reading for many years.

The rewards are great. Learning to read this way is a major key to a successful career as a student, scholar, or professional in almost any field.