How to Read a Book

Today, as we continue with the subject of learning, we shall consider how we can learn from books or in other words, reading as a form of learning. Mr. Luckman is here to ask me questions, questions of the sort that may arise in your minds as the discussion proceeds.

We have seen that all genuine learning is active, not passive. No one, not even the best teacher, can help us to learn anything unless we ourselves make the primary effort to learn it. Now, when most of us think of teachers helping us learn, we think of another person, another human being in the same room with us, talking to us, showing us something, or giving us some sort of directions. But certainly, teaching may take other forms.

All teaching involves language and symbols, some form of communication between persons. And hence the written word, in the form of book and document, may function as a means of teaching just as much as the spoken word. In fact, I think I’d say that the process of learning in the course of reading books is essentially the same as the process of learning in the course of listening to lectures. The art of reading and the art of listening are very much alike.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I think everyone can see, Dr. Adler, and I think they’ll agree too, that when one individual learns from another, communication is necessarily involved. In fact, the only kind of learning that doesn’t involve a process of communication is that which you have described and yourself have called pure learning or unaided discovery, where a man learns something entirely by himself through observation and through thought.
Well, so far so good. But one thing really isn’t clear to me. And that is that books and lectures really aren’t the only forms of communication by which one teaches or by which one learns from another, are they?

**Mortimer Adler:** No, Lloyd, they are not. There are other forms. For example, when two individuals sit down to discuss a subject in which both are very deeply interested and both have some competence, the chances are very good that they will learn something from that discussion. And what is true of that discussion, two persons with one another, is equally true, I think, maybe more true of a formal discussion in which a large group of people participate.

The problem of learning in such situations is quite different from the problem of learning from books and by reading books. Language isn’t the only means of communication; pictures also serve, sometimes more effectively than words. And the combination of pictures and words is perhaps the most effective means of communication. It is certainly the most popular means of communication today. Think of the picture magazines, the motion pictures, and television. Therefore I should like to devote the last program of this group of programs on learning to the consideration of whether and how we can learn from the combination of pictures and words, whether on the motion picture or on the television screen.

**Lloyd Luckman:** Well, it’s going to be very interesting indeed to hear what the author of *How to Read a Book* has to say about how to learn from television. I’ll bet when you wrote *How to Read a Book*, Dr. Adler, that you never dreamed you’d ever be doing this. I can remember some really unkind remarks you made about, oh, such things as going to the movies or listening to the radio in contrast to reading a really good book.

**Mortimer Adler:** You’ve got me. But that was fifteen years ago and times have changed and so have I. Remember my motto?

**Lloyd Luckman:** Never too old to learn.

**Mortimer Adler:** Times have changed and I think I have changed in some respects, but there is one thing about which I have not changed my mind. And that is the importance of reading as a form of learning. Nor have I changed my mind about how to read a book in order to learn in the process of reading books.
HOW TO LEARN BY READING

That's what I want to talk about today, the whole business of how we learn by reading. And I think perhaps the best way to begin is to consider with you the different kinds of reading, because certainly we do not do all our reading simply to learn. And many of the things we read are not all equally serviceable as means of learning. So let's consider the different kinds of learning.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, this can be pleasant too, can't it? Reading can be serious and learning can be serious but it doesn't have to be grim.

Mortimer Adler: No, but let me first deal with the kinds of reading and then let's consider whether pleasure is involved in all of them.

Lloyd Luckman: All right.

Mortimer Adler: The first division which I should like to present is a perfectly obvious one, I think, to all of us: We either read for pleasure and relaxation or we read for learning. Now there is not much that we have to say about reading for pleasure. We all do it, just as we all play games, go to the theater, listen to the radio, watch television in order to pass the time, and get some amusement or entertainment.

Sometimes learning does happen accidentally or incidentally in the course of such reading for pleasure. But precisely, because it is not intentional, we cannot consider any rules for such learning. One can't make it happen by the development of any skill.

READING FOR INFORMATION AND READING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Now the other kind of reading is where our intention is to learn something. And as Mr. Luckman indicated a moment ago, this kind of reading where our intention is to learn something may, of course, involve some fun, maybe pleasure. But I don't want to give learning a false boost by saying what some people do say, "Learning is always fun." It isn't always fun. Sometimes learning is hard work. In fact, it's quite often that. And in my own experience, it's usually the case that when the process of learning is itself some-
what painful, the end result tends to be more profitable. Now, though learning is not always fun and though reading may involve some work when reading is for the sake of learning, all reading is not equally difficult. There is an easier form of reading for learning and a harder form.

Let me make a distinction now between these two forms. The first of these is reading for the sake of information, where our aim is to acquire some knowledge of facts. We all do this kind of reading when we read newspapers or guidebooks, magazine articles, or simple historical accounts of past and current events. In fact, what in this country we mean by a literate person is a person who can do just this kind of reading. That isn’t a very high standard of literacy, but that is what we mean when we talk about the literate electorate or the literate population of the United States, people who can read at the level of reading magazines or newspapers for the sake of information.

The harder and much more profitable kind of reading, I should like to distinguish from reading for information by calling it reading for enlightenment, where our purpose is not to get to know some more facts, but to understand ideas, to increase our understanding. Now here there is a problem, and I think there is no problem about reading for information. Because this kind of reading, reading for enlightenment, is difficult to do. And not many people are able to do it, at least not very well, even among all those who would regard themselves, and would be called by others, literate persons. The reason for this is that this kind of reading, reading for enlightenment, is not taught in our schools, or at least not taught very well in our schools; though in my judgment, there is nothing more important that our schools could do if our schools have as their main function the preparation of young people to go on with a life of adult learning after they have left school.

Lloyd Luckman: You’ve touched on a very, very sore spot because I’m a teacher at the college level. And I must confess that you’re right; the students we get simply don’t know how to read, or not read well enough certainly to get enlightenment, as opposed to information, out of what they’re reading. And I’m afraid the worst of it is that there isn’t very much we do in our colleges to help these students improve their ability to read for enlightenment.

Now my guess is that the problem is that we don’t keep this distinction that you’ve just made continuously in our minds. So that
when we’ve completed the job, as we do in grade school, and teach
them to read for information, it stops right there. I would like to
hear what you have to say in a little more detail on this problem of
reading for enlightenment.

Mortimer Adler: Before I do what Mr. Luckman asks, expound
more fully what I mean by reading for enlightenment, let me com-
ment briefly on the remarks he has just made. I think he is right
that our schools think they’ve done enough when they’ve taught
children in the early grades the simple kind of reading for infor-
mation, the kind of reading that involves reading newspapers,
magazines, or even school textbooks, for these textbooks are
books written so that they are not very difficult to read, in order to
get from them the information that students have to memorize
and pass back to teachers on examination papers.

The other kind of reading, reading for enlightenment, could
not be taught in the grades where at the present time most read-
ing is taught. It would be my guess that the kind of reading I’m
now talking about, reading for enlightenment, would have to be
taught in college. It would have to be one of the main things we
learn in college. And in my judgment, colleges would do well if
they did this primarily, if our college graduates were able to
exhibit, to use the skill of reading in this way. To make this point
clear, let me do what Mr. Luckman asks and explain precisely what
I mean by reading for enlightenment.

I think the most direct way I can do that is to present you with
a series of alternatives. Let’s begin with the fact that here you are
sitting in your own room with a book in your hand. Now then, let’s
take the alternatives: either this book you have in your hand is a
book which, as you read it, you understand perfectly and immedi-
ately, with no difficulty, or you don’t understand it. Now in the first
alternative, if you understand this book perfectly and immediately
as you read it page after page, there is no problem of reading for
you. Nor, by the way, will the book help you to learn anything; for
if you can understand it that readily and quickly and perfectly, you
cannot increase your understanding by reading that book.

Let’s take the other alternative, where you don’t understand it
that way. Now here again, there are two alternative possibilities:
either you can’t understand it at all, really can’t understand it at
all, in which case there is nothing one can do, or you can under-
stand it somewhat. Let’s say that you understand it just enough to
know that you do not understand it all, that there is more there for you to try to grasp.

It's in this last case that we have a problem. And there are just three things that you can do in this condition. The first one is to give up, just to give up, either because you do not want to make the effort of reading that you will be called upon to make or because you do not know how to make that effort. The second thing you can do is almost as bad as that. You can go to someone else and ask them to explain the book to you. Now it is my guess that this can't be done very well because if you could understand their explanation, you could understand the book to you. And if they did succeed in explaining the book to you, you wouldn't have learned to read. What is the third thing you can do? The third possibility is that sitting with this book, a book that's somewhat over your head, you lift yourself up from a state of understanding less to a state of understanding more.

That, it seems to me, is the definition of reading for enlightenment. And with that definition I can give you a simple test by which you can determine how much skill of this sort you have. Learning, the kind of learning that is most important for an adult to do, consists mainly in acquiring insights and increasing or deepening one's understanding. And this can be done by reading, if with a book that is "over your head," you can lift yourself up from a state of understanding less to a state of understanding more. But remember those books that are over your head don't lift you up, as it were, by capillary attraction. You can't sit back and just expect to be uplifted by a book that is over your head simply by gazing at it. You have to work, you have to exert some skill, you have to climb up, hand-over-hand, as it were, on the ropes of learning.

THE ART OF READING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Here then is the test. Here's a good sign by which you can tell whether you have this skill. When you are faced by the challenge of a book that is over your head, which you know that you do not understand well enough and try to understand more, what can you do to solve the problem? How many things do you know how to do that will succeed in making that book clearer and more intelligible to you?
Lloyd Luckman: Are you going to give us the answer to that question?

Mortimer Adler: Yes, at this very moment, at this very moment. The answer to that question, of course, consists in a statement of the basic rules of reading, of the art of reading. Before I state the rules themselves, let me remind you of one thing, preliminary to all the rules: the most important thing about reading as about learning generally is that it must be active, not passive.

This shouldn’t be too hard to understand, for most people tend to think that writing is active or that talking is active and that reading and listening are passive. But just think of a baseball game for a moment. Is catching the ball any less active than pitching it? Well, if catching is no less active than pitching, then neither is reading or listening any less active than writing or talking.

What do I mean by active reading? By doing active reading I mean simply this, that you stay awake while reading. And when I say stay awake, I don’t mean simply keep your eyes open while your mind goes to sleep. How do you keep awake while reading? The answer in a nutshell is by asking questions, by asking yourself questions about the book and asking the book questions for the author to answer.

The difference between active and passive reading is unmistakable. The signs would not let you ever make a mistake as to which you were doing, active or passive reading. For one thing, when you read actively, you really have some fatigue. Work is involved. When work is involved as opposed to play, you suffer fatigue. Yet if after reading a book for an hour or two you aren’t at all tired, then you are not reading actively in this sense. And there is another sign of reading actively. Pencil and paperwork, making notes, marking the book, marking the margin, underlining passages on the page.

This is my best test of whether I’m reading actively or not. And I think I can show you this. I have on the shelf here some books that I read a long time ago. And I think if I took one off the shelf, I would be able to see at once that many years ago I read that book actively. Let me see if I can find one. Here is one. Here is a book that I read in college, William James’s Pragmatism. It is torn a little bit and yellow to the ears and here in the front of the book are notes that I made while reading the book. The pages are torn and yellow. It was at least twenty-five years ago, but these notes indicate
that as I was reading the book, I read it awake, not asleep. And now as I look through the book itself, I find pages in which I have marked in the margins and written on the margins as well, writings that indicate I was thinking and asking questions as I read the book. I don’t remember reading it, but I do know from these signs that when I did read it, I read it quite actively.

The Three Questions and the Three Sets of Rules

Now let me come back again. I said that to read actively, you must read by asking questions. What questions? Well, the answer to that I think is not too hard. There are just three main questions one can ask, though they can be broken down into subordinate forms. Let me show you what they are. I have them here in this chart. The three main questions are: What is the whole book about and how are its parts related to that whole? What, in detail, does the book say and what does the author mean by what he says? And the third question is, Is it true, and what of it?

Lloyd Luckman: Well, in How to Read a Book, didn’t you give three sets of rules for reading a book three times or at least three different ways? Are those sets of rules related to these three main questions that the reader should ask in order to keep himself awake while reading?

Mortimer Adler: They are. The three sets of rules are directions for answering the three main questions I have just mentioned.

Let’s talk about these three sets of rules. First, the four rules that tell you how to find out what the whole book is about and how its parts are related. The first rule is to classify the book according to the kind of book it is and the kind of subject matter it has. The second rule is to summarize the whole book as briefly as possible in your own words. The third is to see its major parts in their order and relation to one another. And the fourth is to define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.

Let’s consider that first and second of those four rules for a moment and let me see if I can illustrate how they operate. In the first place, in order to tell what kind of book it is, you must be able to use certain signs in the book, the title of the book, the subtitle,
the table of contents, often the author’s preface, often the opening sentences of the book tell you the kind of book it is and what it is about. But you must also have in your mind a number of basic categories. You must know the distinction between poetry and history, the different kinds of history, the different kinds of poetry, and how these differ from science and philosophy, how politics and economics differ; so that as you read the book, the general categories of subject matter become significant for you in understanding what the book is about.

As for summarizing a large and difficult book, it can be done. Many people think that it’s too difficult to do, but it really isn’t. And sometimes the author does it for you. As here, for example, Herodotus, who wrote the great history of the war between the Greeks and the Persians, in his very opening sentence summarizes the whole book. He says, “These are the histories of Herodotus, in order that the actions of men may not be effaced by time, nor the great and wondrous deeds displayed by Greeks and Barbarians be deprived of their renown, and for the rest for what cause they waged the war upon one another.”

Well, let me give you another example. Aristotle’s *Ethics* is a difficult and elaborate book. And here, briefly, in my own words, is a summary of what that whole book is about, which grasps what the whole is. It’s “an inquiry into the nature of human happiness and an analysis of the conditions under which happiness may be gained or lost, with an indication of what men must do in their conduct and thinking in order to become happy or to avoid unhappiness, the principal emphasis being placed on the cultivation of the virtues, moral and intellectual, although other necessary goods are also recognized, such as wealth, health, friends, and a just society in which to live.”

Now let me go on to the second set of rules. These are rules about the interpretation of a book’s content. And here you must first come to terms with the author by interpreting his basic words. Secondly, you must discover the sentences that state his major propositions. Third, you must find the argument by which he tries to support these propositions. And finally, you must determine which of his problems the author solves and which he did not solve.

These rules of reading would be unnecessary if language were a perfect medium of communication, if language brought your mind into immediate contact with the thought of the author. But
unfortunately, languages are a far from perfect medium of communication. Language is much more like a mountain barrier between author and reader, a barrier which both of them must tunnel through if they are going to meet and have some coming to terms or meeting of minds. It won’t do just to have the author do the tunneling toward you; you must know how to tunnel toward him. And all these rules are rules which guide you in tunneling toward the author and your understanding of what he means.

I’m not going to discuss the third set of rules now because the third set of rules that deal with talking back to the author and criticizing the book for its truth and significance are really rules for discussion between the reader and the author and I shall treat these rules next time when we consider how one learns by discussion. This third set of rules will be useful for us as we consider the whole problem of learning by discussion.

Now in the time that’s left, I should like to add two further comments on all these rules of reading for enlightenment. The first is that it is much easier to read a good book than a bad one, because the author of a good book is himself a man who knows how to read well and therefore writes his books in a manner that makes it readable according to these basic rules. The second point is that there are not a large number of books worth reading this way. But the whole point of reading for enlightenment is not the number of books you read but how well you read them.

Abraham Lincoln read only a few books but he read them very well. And the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, said, “If I read as many books as most men do, I would be as dull-witted as they are.”

The only books to read in this way are the books that are over your head. And that, by the way, is the definition of a great book. The great books are the books that are worth everybody’s reading because they are over everybody’s head all of the time.

**Lloyd Luckman:** Doesn’t the average person though need some help in reading these great books?

**Mortimer Adler:** Yes, the average person does need some help. And one of the greatest aids in reading these books is discussion, the discussion of the book between you and other persons who have read the same book. But this is something we shall deal with next time when we deal with how we learn by and from discussion.