

Notes on Inspectional Reading

Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* (New York: revised and updated, Simon & Schuster, 1972), pp. 32-36.

[Inspectional reading breaks down into two parts: systematic skimming or pre-reading, and superficial reading. In our cosmopolis-L inspectional reading, we are concerned with the former rather than the latter, for the latter involves reading the entire book through from cover to cover without stopping to look up words or ponder on the things you do not understand. RCB]

Skimming or pre-reading

Do you want to do a more systematic analytical reading of the book? Does it contain useful insights worth digging out?

In this case, what you must do is *skim* the book, or, as some prefer to say, pre-read it. Skimming or pre-reading is the first sublevel of inspectional reading. Your main aim is to discover whether the book requires a more careful reading. Secondly, skimming can tell you lots of other things about the book, even if you decide not to read it again with more care.

Giving a book this kind of quick once-over is a threshing process that helps you to separate the chaff from the real kernels of nourishment. You may discover that what you get from skimming is all the book is worth to you for the time being. It may never be worth more. But you will know at least what the author's main contention is, as well as what kind of book he has written, so the time you have spent looking through the book will not have been wasted.

The habit of skimming should not take much time to acquire. Here are some suggestions about how to do it.

1. LOOK AT THE TITLE PAGE AND, IF THE BOOK HAS ONE, AT ITS PREFACE. Note especially the subtitles or other indications of the scope or aim of the book or of the author's special angle on his subject. Before completing this step you should have a good idea of the subject, and, if you wish, you may pause for a moment to place the book in the appropriate category in your mind. What pigeonhole that already contains other books does this one belong?
2. STUDY THE TABLE OF CONTENTS to obtain a general sense of the book's structure; use it as you would a road map before taking a trip. . . . [M]any authors spend a considerable amount of time in creating the table of contents, and it is sad to think their efforts are often wasted.
3. CHECK THE INDEX if the book has one—most expository works do. Make a quick estimate of the range of topics covered and of the kinds of books and authors referred to. When you see terms listed that seem crucial, look up at least some of the passages cited. . . . Passages you read may contain the crux—the point on which the book hinges—or the new departure which is the key to the author's approach and attitude.

[The latter is not possible for us, as the main body of the work will not be Xeroxed for distribution. RCB]

4. If the book is a new one with a dust jacket, READ THE PUBLISHER'S BLURB. . . . It is not uncommon for authors to try to summarize as accurately as they can the main points in their book. These efforts should not go unnoticed. Of course, if the blurb is nothing but a puff for the book, you will ordinarily be able to discover this at a glance. But that in itself can tell you something about the work.

Upon completing these first four steps you may already have enough information about the book to know that you want to read it more carefully, or that you do not want or need to read it at all. In either case, you may put it aside for the moment. If you do not do so, you are now ready to skim the book, properly speaking. [What follows is more for people who are interested in taking a deeper look at the book; for that you will need your own copy. RCB]

5. From your general and still rather vague knowledge of the book's contents, LOOK NOW AT THE CHAPTERS THAT SEEM TO BE PIVOTAL TO ITS ARGUMENT. If these chapters have summary statements in their opening or closing pages, as they often do, read these statements carefully.
6. Finally, TURN THE PAGES, DIPPING IN HERE AND THERE, READING A PARAGRAPH OR TWO, SOMETIMES SEVERAL PAGES IN SEQUENCE, NEVER MORE THAN THAT. Thumb through the book in this way, always looking for signs of the main contention, listening for the basic pulse beat of the matter. Above all, do not fail to read the last two or three pages, or, if these are an epilogue, the last few pages of the main part of the book. Few authors are able to resist the temptation to sum up what they think is now and important about their work in these pages. You do not want to miss this, even though, as sometimes happens, the author himself may be wrong in his judgment.

RCB