

## Introduction

New seminary students are often surprised by the rigors of graduate level reading requirements. They must simultaneously read efficiently and for deep understanding. The purpose of this paper is to introduce students to a comprehensive reading strategy.<sup>1</sup>

## Inspectional Reading

Inspectional reading or “pre-reading” is the first step towards reading for depth of understanding. The two major skills are “skimming” and “superficial reading.”<sup>2</sup>

**Skimming.** The basic steps include:

1. Read the title page and preface quickly.<sup>3</sup>
2. Study the table of contents to obtain a general sense of the book’s structure.
3. If the book has an index, estimate the range of topics covered in a book.
4. If the book has a dust jacket, read the publisher’s blurb.
5. From your general knowledge of the book’s contents, turn to the chapters that seem most pivotal to its argument and read the introductory and closing paragraphs.
6. If the book has an epilogue or conclusion, read it quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> The following is based on *How to Read a Book*. This book focuses on four levels of reading: (1) elementary, (2) inspectional, (3) analytical, and (4) syntopical. This paper will focus on inspectional and analytical reading. For more information, see Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted, and often quoted, from Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 32-36.

**Superficial Reading.** Adler and Van Doren explain, “If you let yourself get stalled, if you allow yourself to be tripped up by any one of these stumbling blocks, you are lost. In most cases, you will not be able to puzzle the thing out by sticking to it. You will have a much better change of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book the book through at least once.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, this skill is to simply read without getting bogged down, even if you do not feel you completely understand the information. This skill also assumes that you will read the book more than once. While this may not always be feasible, re-reading is especially important in seminary with shorter reading assignments, such as articles.

### **Analytical Reading**

Analytical reading is the second step toward depth of understanding. The five skills including “pigeonholing,” “x-raying,” “coming to terms with an author,” “determining an author’s message,” and “criticizing a book fairly.”

**Pigeonholing.** What kind of book are you reading? The primary categories are theoretical and practical.<sup>5</sup> For example, are you reading a theological work (theoretical) or an introduction to preaching (practical)? If the book is theoretical, is it a church history book that involves narratives, or is it a grammar textbook that reviews the parts of speech? The first skill in deeply understanding a book is knowing what kind of book you are reading.

**X-raying.** This skill is used to determine the structure of a book. At the end of this step, you should be able to “set forth the major parts of the book, and show how these are organized into a whole, by being ordered to one another and to the unity of the whole.”<sup>6</sup> You should begin by

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<sup>4</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 76.

stating with the utmost brevity what the book is about.<sup>7</sup> Then, you should draft your own outline of the book showing (1) how the primary topic of the book relates to the parts and (2) how the parts relate to the topic. It may be helpful to remember that many of the books you will read in seminary are arguments. At the end of this step, you should be able to summarize the argument and outline how each part supports the argument.

**Coming to Terms with an Author.** What are the most important terms in the book? Are you defining the key terms of the book in the same way as the author? You will not be able to interpret the book unless you understand how the author defines these terms. This skill includes two steps: (1) Find the important words and (2) Understand what the author means with these words.<sup>8</sup>

In the first step, you should note terms that are particularly important to the author. Does the author have a specific meaning of “covenant” in mind? Does the author use “faith” in a specific way? You should also try to define any terms that confuse you.<sup>9</sup> Remember that the more technical the work, the more the author will assume that you as the reader are aware of current debates in the field.

In the second step, you will define these terms according to how the author uses them. If the author does not offer a definition of a term, you will have to look at several uses in context. You may also have to read other works to understand how a term is used in a specific field or within a specific sect. This is an arduous process, but “you will find that your comprehension of any book will be enormously increased if you only for the trouble of finding its important words, identifying their shifting meanings, and coming to terms.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 113.

**Determining an Author's Message.** Remember that authors write to persuade. You can begin to understand the author's message by finding the propositions. A proposition is “a declaration of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> This process usually consists of finding the author's key sentences. Often, the author will lay out the main argument for the book near the end of the introduction. Then, look for key sentences in the opening one to two paragraphs of each chapter. After identifying these sentences, you will usually have the key propositions.

**Criticizing a Book Fairly.** Before criticizing a book, you should ensure that you accurately understand the argument. One rule of thumb is to explain the argument in your words. If you have trouble explaining the argument, then you should review the skills above and continue refining your understanding of the topic, structure, terms, and argument. For a more complete overview of criticizing, see the Writing Center resource named “[How to Critically Engage with a Source.](#)”

### **A Note About Articles**

While the information presented here focuses on reading entire books, it also applies to reading articles. For example, instead of skimming the table of contents, you could just as easily skim an article's headings and sub-headings. You may have to adapt some of the steps, but the general process outlined above remains the same.

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<sup>11</sup> Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 114.