HOW TO READ A BOOK

Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren

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Preface

How to Read a Book was first published in the early months of 1940. To my surprise and, I confess, to my delight, it immediately became a best seller and remained at the top of the nationwide best-seller list for more than a year. Since 1940, it has continued to be widely circulated in numerous printings, both hardcover and paperback, and it has been translated into other languages—French, Swedish, German, Spanish, and Italian. Why, then, attempt to recast and rewrite the book for the present generation of readers?

The reasons for doing so lie in changes that have taken place both in our society in the last thirty years and in the subject itself. Today many more of the young men and women who complete high school enter and complete four years of college; a much larger proportion of the population has become literate in spite of or even because of the popularity of radio and television. There has been a shift of interest from the reading of fiction to the reading of nonfiction. The educators of the country have acknowledged that teaching the young to read, in the most elementary sense of that word, is our paramount educational problem. A recent Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, designating the seventies as the Decade of Reading, has dedicated federal funds in support of a wide variety of efforts to improve proficiency in this basic skill, and many of those efforts have scored some success at the level at which children are initiated into the art of reading. In addition, adults in large numbers have been captivated by the glittering promises made by speed-reading courses—promises to increase their comprehension of what they read as well as their speed in reading it.

However, certain things have not changed in the last thirty years. One constant is that, to achieve all the purposes of reading, the desideratum must be the ability to read different things at different—appropriate—speeds, not everything at the greatest possible speed. As Pascal observed three hundred years ago, "When we read too fast or too slowly, we understand nothing." Since speed-reading has become a national fad, this new edition of *How to Read a Book* deals with the problem and proposes variable-speed-reading as the solution, the aim being to read better, always better, but sometimes slower, sometimes faster.

Another thing that has not changed, unfortunately, is the failure to carry instruction in reading beyond the elementary level. Most of our educational ingenuity, money, and effort is spent on reading instruction in the first six grades. Beyond that, little formal training is provided to carry students to higher and quite distinct levels of skill. That was true in 1939 when Professor James Mursell of Columbia University's Teachers College wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "The Failure of the Schools." What he said then, in two paragraphs that I am now going to quote, is still true.

> Do pupils in school learn to read their mother tongue effectively? Yes and no. Up to the fifth and sixth grade, reading, on the whole, is effectively taught and well learned. To that level we find a steady and general improvement, but beyond it the curves flatten out to a dead level. This is not because a person arrives at his natural limit of efficiency when he reaches the sixth grade, for it has been shown again and again that with special tuition much older children, and also adults, can make enormous improvement. Nor does it mean that most sixth-graders read well enough for all practical purposes. A great many pupils do poorly in high school because of sheer ineptitude in getting meaning from the printed page. They can improve; they need to improve; but they don't.
>
> The average high school graduate has done a great deal of reading, and if he goes on to college he will do a great deal more;

> but he is likely to be a poor and incompetent reader. (Note that this holds true of the average student, not the person who is a subject for special remedial treatment.) He can follow a simple piece of fiction and enjoy it. But put him up against a closely written exposition, a carefully and economically stated argument, or a passage requiring critical consideration, and he is at a loss. It has been shown, for instance, that the average high school student is amazingly inept at indicating the central thought of a passage, or the levels of emphasis and subordination in an argument or exposition. To all intents and purposes he remains a sixth-grade reader till well along in college.

If there was a need for *How to Read a Book* thirty years ago, as the reception of the first edition of the book would certainly seem to indicate, the need is much greater today. But responding to that greater need is not the only, nor, for that matter, the main motive in rewriting the book. New insights into the problems of learning how to read; a much more comprehensive and better-ordered analysis of the complex art of reading; the flexible application of the basic rules to different types of reading, in fact to every variety of reading matter; the discovery and formulation of new rules of reading; and the conception of a pyramid of books to read, broad at the bottom and tapering at the top—all these things, not treated adequately or not treated at all in the book that I wrote thirty years ago, called for exposition and demanded the thorough rewriting that has now been done and is here being published.

The year after *How to Read a Book* was published, a parody of it appeared under the title *How to Read Two Books;* and Professor I. A. Richards wrote a serious treatise entitled *How to Read a Page*. I mention both these sequels in order to point out that the problems of reading suggested by both of these titles, the jocular as well as the serious one, are fully treated in this rewriting, especially the problem of how to read a number of related books in relation to one another and read them in such a way that the complementary and conflicting things they have to say about a common subject are clearly grasped.

Among the reasons for rewriting *How to Read a Book,* I have stressed the things to be said about the art of reading and the points to be made about the need for acquiring higher levels of skill in this art, which were not touched on or developed in the original version of the book. Anyone who wishes to discover how much has been added can do so quickly by comparing the present Table of Contents with that of the original version. Of the four parts, only Part Two, expounding the rules of Analytical Reading, closely parallels the content of the original, and even that has been largely recast. The introduction in Part One of the distinction of four levels of reading—elementary, inspectional, analytical, and syntopical—is the basic and controlling change in the book's organization and content. The exposition in Part Three of the different ways to approach different kinds of reading materials—practical and theoretical books, imaginative literature (lyric poetry, epics, novels, plays), history, science and mathematics, social science, and philosophy, as well as reference books, current journalism, and even advertising—is the most extensive addition that has been made. Finally, the discussion of Syntopical Reading in Part Four is wholly new.

In the work of updating, recasting, and rewriting this book, I have been joined by Charles Van Doren, who for many years now has been my associate at the Institute for Philosophical Research. We have worked together on other books, notably the twenty-volume *Annals of America,* published by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., in 1969. What is, perhaps, more relevant to the present cooperative venture in which we have been engaged as co-authors is that during the last eight years Charles Van Doren and I have worked closely together in conducting discussion groups on great books and in moderating executive seminars in Chicago, San Francisco, and Aspen. In the course of these experiences, we acquired many of the new insights that have gone into the rewriting of this book.

I am grateful to Mr. Van Doren for the contribution he has made to our joint effort; and he and I together wish to express our deepest gratitude for all the constructive criticism, guidance, and help that we

have received from our friend Arthur L. H. Rubin, who persuaded us to introduce many of the important changes that distinguish this book from its predecessor and make it, we hope, a better and more useful book.

MORTIMER J. ADLER
Boca Grande
March 26, 1972

PART 1

The Dimensions of Reading

1

The Activity and Art of Reading

This is a book for readers and for those who wish to become readers. Particularly, it is for readers of books. Even more particularly, it is for those whose main purpose in reading books is to gain increased understanding.

By "readers" we mean people who are still accustomed, as almost every literate and intelligent person used to be, to gain a large share of their information about and their understanding of the world from the written word. Not all of it, of course; even in the days before radio and television, a certain amount of information and understanding was acquired through spoken words and through observation. But for intelligent and curious people that was never enough. They knew that they had to read too, and they did read.

There is some feeling nowadays that reading is not as necessary as it once was. Radio and especially television have taken over many of the functions once served by print, just as photography has taken over functions once served by painting and other graphic arts. Admittedly, television serves some of these functions extremely well; the visual communication of news events, for example, has enormous impact. The ability of radio to give us information while we are engaged in doing other things—for instance, driving a car—is remarkable, and a great saving of time. But it may be seriously questioned whether the advent of modern communi-

cations media has much enhanced our understanding of the world in which we live.

Perhaps we know more about the world than we used to, and insofar as knowledge is prerequisite to understanding, that is all to the good. But knowledge is not as much a prerequisite to understanding as is commonly supposed. We do not have to *know* everything about something in order to *understand* it; too many facts are often as much of an obstacle to understanding as too few. There is a sense in which we moderns are inundated with facts to the detriment of understanding.

One of the reasons for this situation is that the very media we have mentioned are so designed as to make thinking seem unnecessary (though this is only an appearance). The packaging of intellectual positions and views is one of the most active enterprises of some of the best minds of our day. The viewer of television, the listener to radio, the reader of magazines, is presented with a whole complex of elements—all the way from ingenious rhetoric to carefully selected data and statistics—to make it easy for him to "make up his own mind" with the minimum of difficulty and effort. But the packaging is often done so effectively that the viewer, listener, or reader does not make up his own mind at all. Instead, he inserts a packaged opinion into his mind, somewhat like inserting a cassette into a cassette player. He then pushes a button and "plays back" the opinion whenever it seems appropriate to do so. He has performed acceptably without having had to think.

Active Reading

As we said at the beginning, we will be principally concerned in these pages with the development of skill in reading books; but the rules of reading that, if followed and practiced, develop such skill can be applied also to printed material in general, to any type of reading matter—to newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, articles, tracts, even advertisements.

Since reading of any sort is an activity, all reading must to some degree be active. Completely passive reading is impossible; we cannot read with our eyes immobilized and our minds asleep. Hence when we contrast active with passive reading, our purpose is, first, to call attention to the fact that reading can be *more* or *less* active, and second, to point out that the *more active* the reading the *better*. One reader is better than another in proportion as he is capable of a greater range of activity in reading and exerts more effort. He is better if he demands more of himself and of the text before him.

Though, strictly speaking, there can be no absolutely passive reading, many people think that, as compared with writing and speaking, which are obviously active undertakings, reading and listening are entirely passive. The writer or speaker must put out some effort, but no work need be done by the reader or listener. Reading and listening are thought of as *receiving* communication from someone who is actively engaged in *giving* or *sending* it. The mistake here is to suppose that receiving communication is like receiving a blow or a legacy or a judgment from the court. On the contrary, the reader or listener is much more like the catcher in a game of baseball.

Catching the ball is just as much an activity as pitching or hitting it. The pitcher or batter is the *sender* in the sense that his activity initiates the motion of the ball. The catcher or fielder is the *receiver* in the sense that his activity terminates it. Both are active, though the activities are different. If anything is passive, it is the ball. It is the inert thing that is put in motion or stopped, whereas the players are active, moving to pitch, hit, or catch. The analogy with writing and reading is almost perfect. The thing that is written and read, like the ball, is the passive object common to the two activities that begin and terminate the process.

We can take this analogy a step further. The art of catching is the skill of catching every kind of pitch—fast balls and curves, change-ups and knucklers. Similarly, the art of reading is the skill of catching every sort of communication as well as possible.

It is noteworthy that the pitcher and catcher are successful only

to the extent that they cooperate. The relation of writer and reader is similar. The writer isn't trying *not* to be caught, although it sometimes seems so. Successful communication occurs in any case where what the writer wanted to have received finds its way into the reader's possession. The writer's skill and the reader's skill converge upon a common end.

Admittedly, writers vary, just as pitchers do. Some writers have excellent "control"; they know exactly what they want to convey, and they convey it precisely and accurately. Other things being equal, they are easier to "catch" than a "wild" writer without "control."

There is one respect in which the analogy breaks down. The ball is a simple unit. It is either *completely* caught or not. A piece of writing, however, is a complex object. It can be received more or less completely, all the way from very little of what the writer intended to the whole of it. The amount the reader "catches" will usually depend on the amount of activity he puts into the process, as well as upon the skill with which he executes the different mental acts involved.

What does active reading entail? We will return to this question many times in this book. For the moment, it suffices to say that, given the same thing to read, one person reads it better than another, first, by reading it more actively, and second, by performing each of the acts involved more skillfully. These two things are related. Reading is a complex activity, just as writing is. It consists of a large number of separate acts, all of which must be performed in a good reading. The person who can perform more of them is better able to read.

The Goals of Reading: Reading for Information and Reading for Understanding

You have a mind. Now let us suppose that you also have a book that you want to read. The book consists of language written by someone for the sake of communicating something to you. Your success in

reading it is determined by the extent to which you receive everything the writer intended to communicate.

That, of course, is too simple. The reason is that there are two possible relations between your mind and the book, not just one. These two relations are exemplified by two different experiences that you can have in reading your book.

There is the book; and here is your mind. As you go through the pages, either you understand perfectly everything the author has to say or you do not. If you do, you may have gained information, but you could not have increased your understanding. If the book is completely intelligible to you from start to finish, then the author and you are as two minds in the same mold. The symbols on the page merely express the common understanding you had before you met.

Let us take our second alternative. You do not understand the book perfectly. Let us even assume—what unhappily is not always true—that you understand enough to know that you do not understand it all. You know the book has more to say than you understand and hence that it contains something that can increase your understanding.

What do you do then? You can take the book to someone else who, you think, can read better than you, and have him explain the parts that trouble you. ("He" may be a living person or another book—a commentary or textbook.) Or you may decide that what is over your head is not worth bothering about, that you understand enough. In either case, you are not doing the job of reading that the book requires.

That is done in only one way. Without external help of any sort, you go to work on the book. With nothing but the power of your own mind, you operate on the symbols before you in such a way that you gradually lift yourself from *a state of understanding less to one of understanding more.* Such elevation, accomplished by the mind working on a book, is highly skilled reading, the kind of reading that a book which challenges your understanding deserves.

Thus we can roughly define what we mean by the art of reading as follows: the process whereby a mind, with nothing to operate on but the symbols of the readable matter, and with no help from outside,* elevates itself by the power of its own operations. The mind passes from understanding less to understanding more. The skilled operations that cause this to happen are the various acts that constitute the art of reading.

To pass from understanding less to understanding more by your own intellectual effort in reading is something like pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. It certainly feels that way. It is a major exertion. Obviously, it is a more active kind of reading than you have done before, entailing not only more varied activity but also much more skill in the performance of the various acts required. Obviously, too, the things that are usually regarded as more difficult to read, and hence as only for the better reader, are those that are more likely to deserve and demand this kind of reading.

The distinction between reading for information and reading for understanding is deeper than this. Let us try to say more about it. We will have to consider both goals of reading because the line between what is readable in one way and what must be read in the other is often hazy. To the extent that we can keep these two goals of reading distinct, we can employ the word "reading" in two distinct senses.

The first sense is the one in which we speak of ourselves as reading newspapers, magazines, or anything else that, according to our skill and talents, is at once thoroughly intelligible to us. Such things may increase our store of information, but they cannot improve our understanding, for our understanding was equal to them before we started. Otherwise, we would have felt the shock of puzzlement and

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* There is one kind of situation in which it is appropriate to ask for outside help in reading a difficult book. This exception is discussed in Chapter 18.

perplexity that comes from getting in over our depth—that is, if we were both alert and honest.

The second sense is the one in which a person tries to read something that at first he does not completely understand. Here the thing to be read is initially better or higher than the reader. The writer is communicating something that can increase the reader's understanding. Such communication between unequals must be possible, or else one person could never learn from another, either through speech or writing. Here by "learning" is meant understanding more, not remembering more information that has the same degree of intelligibility as other information you already possess.

There is clearly no difficulty of an intellectual sort about gaining new information in the course of reading if the new facts are of the same sort as those you already know. A person who knows some of the facts of American history and understands them in a certain light can readily acquire by reading, in the first sense, more such facts and understand them in the same light. But suppose he is reading a history that seeks not merely to give him some more facts but also to throw a new and perhaps more revealing light on *all* the facts he knows. Suppose there is greater understanding available here than he possessed before he started to read. If he can manage to acquire that greater understanding, he is reading in the second sense. He has indeed elevated himself by his activity, though indirectly, of course, the elevation was made possible by the writer who had something to teach him.

What are the conditions under which this kind of reading—reading for understanding—takes place? There are two. First, there is *initial inequality in understanding*. The writer must be "superior" to the reader in understanding, and his book must convey in readable form the insights he possesses and his potential readers lack. Second, *the reader must be able to overcome this inequality in some degree,* seldom perhaps fully, but always approaching equality with the writer. To the extent that equality is approached, clarity of communication is achieved.

In short, we can learn only from our "betters." We must know who they are and how to learn from them. The person who has this sort of knowledge possesses the art of reading in the sense with which we are especially concerned in this book. Everyone who can read at all probably has some ability to read in this way. But all of us, without exception, can learn to read better and gradually gain more by our efforts through applying them to more rewarding materials.

We do not want to give the impression that facts, leading to increased information, and insights, leading to increased understanding, are always easy to distinguish. And we would admit that sometimes a mere recital of facts can itself lead to greater understanding. The point we want to emphasize here is that this book is about the art of reading for the sake of increased understanding. Fortunately, if you learn to do that, reading for information will usually take care of itself.

Of course, there is still another goal of reading, besides gaining information and understanding, and that is entertainment. However, this book will not be much concerned with reading for entertainment. It is the least demanding kind of reading, and it requires the least amount of effort. Furthermore, there are no rules for it. Everyone who knows how to read at all can read for entertainment if he wants to.

In fact, any book that can be read for understanding or information can probably be read for entertainment as well, just as a book that is capable of increasing our understanding can also be read purely for the information it contains. (This proposition cannot be reversed: it is *not* true that *every* book that can be read for entertainment can also be read for understanding.) Nor do we wish to urge you never to read a good book for entertainment. The point is, if you wish to read a good book for understanding, we believe we can help you. Our subject, then, is the art of reading good books when understanding is the aim you have in view.

Reading as Learning: The Difference Between Learning by Instruction and Learning by Discovery

Getting more information is learning, and so is coming to understand what you did not understand before. But there is an important difference between these two kinds of learning.

To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is the same, in what respects it is different, and so forth.

This distinction is familiar in terms of the differences between being able to remember something and being able to explain it. If you remember what an author says, you have learned something from reading him. If what he says is true, you have even learned something about the world. But whether it is a fact about the book or a fact about the world that you have learned, you have gained nothing but information if you have exercised only your memory. You have not been enlightened. Enlightenment is achieved only when, in addition to knowing what an author says, you know what he means and why he says it.

It is true, of course, that you should be able to remember what the author said as well as know what he meant. Being informed is prerequisite to being enlightened. The point, however, is not to stop at being informed.

Montaigne speaks of "an abecedarian ignorance that precedes knowledge, and a doctoral ignorance that comes after it." The first is the ignorance of those who, not knowing their ABC's, cannot read at all. The second is the ignorance of those who have misread many books. They are, as Alexander Pope rightly calls them, bookful blockheads, ignorantly read. There have always been literate ignoramuses who have read too widely and not well. The Greeks had a name for such a mixture of learning and folly which might be applied to the bookish but poorly read of all ages. They are all *sophomores*.

To avoid this error—the error of assuming that to be widely read

and to be well-read are the same thing—we must consider a certain distinction in types of learning. This distinction has a significant bearing on the whole business of reading and its relation to education generally.

In the history of education, men have often distinguished between learning by instruction and learning by discovery. Instruction occurs when one person teaches another through speech or writing. We can, however, gain knowledge without being taught. If this were not the case, and every teacher had to be taught what he in turn teaches others, there would be no beginning in the acquisition of knowledge. Hence, there must be discovery—the process of learning something by research, by investigation, or by reflection, without being taught.

Discovery stands to instruction as learning without a teacher stands to learning through the help of one. In both cases, the activity of learning goes on in the one who learns. It would be a mistake to suppose that discovery is active learning and instruction passive. There is no inactive learning, just as there is no inactive reading.

This is so true, in fact, that a better way to make the distinction clear is to call instruction "aided discovery." Without going into learning theory as psychologists conceive it, it is obvious that teaching is a very special art, sharing with only two other arts—agriculture and medicine—an exceptionally important characteristic. A doctor may do many things for his patient, but in the final analysis it is the patient himself who must get well—grow in health. The farmer does many things for his plants or animals, but in the final analysis it is they that must grow in size and excellence. Similarly, although the teacher may help his student in many ways, it is the student himself who must do the learning. Knowledge must grow in his mind if learning is to take place.

The difference between learning by instruction and learning by discovery—or, as we would prefer to say, between aided and unaided discovery—is primarily a difference in the materials on which the learner works. When he is being instructed—discovering with the

help of a teacher—the learner acts on something communicated to him. He performs operations on discourse, written or oral. He learns by acts of reading or listening. Note here the close relation between reading and listening. If we ignore the minor differences between these two ways of receiving communication, we can say that reading and listening are the same art—the art of being taught. When, however, the learner proceeds without the help of any sort of teacher, the operations of learning are performed on nature or the world rather than on discourse. The rules of such learning constitute the art of unaided discovery. If we use the word "reading" loosely, we can say that discovery—strictly, unaided discovery—is the art of reading nature or the world, as instruction (being taught, or aided discovery) is the art of reading books or, to include listening, of learning from discourse.

What about thinking? If by "thinking" we mean the use of our minds to gain knowledge or understanding, and if learning by discovery and learning by instruction exhaust the ways of gaining knowledge, then thinking must take place during both of these two activities. We must think in the course of reading and listening, just as we must think in the course of research. Naturally, the kinds of thinking are different—as different as the two ways of learning are.

The reason why many people regard thinking as more closely associated with research and unaided discovery than with being taught is that they suppose reading and listening to be relatively effortless. It is probably true that one does less thinking when one reads for information or entertainment than when one is undertaking to discover something. Those are the less active sorts of reading. But it is not true of the more active reading—the effort to understand. No one who has done this sort of reading would say it can be done thoughtlessly.

Thinking is only one part of the activity of learning. One must also use one's senses and imagination. One must observe, and remember, and construct imaginatively what cannot be observed. There is, again, a tendency to stress the role of these activities in the

process of unaided discovery and to forget or minimize their place in the process of being taught through reading or listening. For example, many people assume that though a poet must use his imagination in writing a poem, they do not have to use their imagination in reading it. The art of reading, in short, includes all of the same skills that are involved in the art of unaided discovery: keenness of observation, readily available memory, range of imagination, and, of course, an intellect trained in analysis and reflection. The reason for this is that reading in this sense is discovery, too—although with help instead of without it.

Present and Absent Teachers

We have been proceeding as if reading and listening could both be treated as learning from teachers. To some extent that is true. Both are ways of being instructed, and for both one must be skilled in the art of being taught. Listening to a course of lectures, for example, is in many respects like reading a book; and listening to a poem is like reading it. Many of the rules to be formulated in this book apply to such experiences. Yet there is good reason to place primary emphasis on reading, and let listening become a secondary concern. The reason is that listening is learning from a teacher who is present—a living teacher—while reading is learning from one who is absent.

If you ask a living teacher a question, he will probably answer you. If you are puzzled by what he says, you can save yourself the trouble of thinking by asking him what he means. If, however, you ask a book a question, *you must answer it yourself*. In this respect a book is like nature or the world. When you question it, it answers you only to the extent that you do the work of thinking and analysis yourself.

This does not mean, of course, that if the living teacher answers your question, you have no further work. That is so only if the question is simply one of fact. But if you are seeking an explanation, you have to understand it or nothing has been explained to you. Nev-

ertheless, with the living teacher available to you, you are given a lift in the direction of understanding him, as you are not when the teacher's words in a book are all you have to go by.

Students in school often read difficult books with the help and guidance of teachers. But for those of us who are not in school, and indeed also for those of us who are when we try to read books that are not required or assigned, our continuing education depends mainly on books alone, read without a teacher's help. Therefore if we are disposed to go on learning and discovering, we must know how to make books teach us well. That, indeed, is the primary goal of this book.

2

The Levels of Reading

In the preceding chapter, we made some distinctions that will be important in what follows. The goal a reader seeks—be it entertainment, information or understanding—determines the way he reads. The effectiveness with which he reads is determined by the amount of effort and skill he puts into his reading. In general, the rule is: the more effort the better, at least in the case of books that are initially beyond our powers as readers and are therefore capable of raising us from a condition of understanding less to one of understanding more. Finally, the distinction between instruction and discovery (or between aided and unaided discovery) is important because most of us, most of the time, have to read without anyone to help us. Reading, like unaided discovery, is learning from an absent teacher. We can only do that successfully if we know how.

But important as these distinctions are, they are relatively insignificant compared to the points we are going to make in this chapter. These all have to do with the levels of reading. The differences between the levels must be understood before any effective improvement in reading skills can occur.

There are four levels of reading. They are here called levels rather than kinds because kinds, strictly speaking, are distinct from one another, whereas it is characteristic of levels that higher ones include lower ones. So it is with the levels of reading, which are cu-

mulative. The first level is not lost in the second, the second in the third, the third in the fourth. In fact, the fourth and highest level of reading includes all the others. It simply goes beyond them.

The first level of reading we will call Elementary Reading. Other names might be rudimentary reading, basic reading or initial reading; any one of these terms serves to suggest that as one masters this level one passes from nonliteracy to at least beginning literacy. In mastering this level, one learns the rudiments of the art of reading, receives basic training in reading, and acquires initial reading skills. We prefer the name elementary reading, however, because this level of reading is ordinarily learned in elementary school.

The child's first encounter with reading is at this level. His problem then (and ours when we began to read) is to recognize the individual words on the page. The child sees a collection of black marks on a white ground (or perhaps white marks on a black ground, if he is reading from a blackboard); what the marks say is, "The cat sat on the hat." The first grader is not really concerned at this point with whether cats do sit on hats, or with what this implies about cats, hats, and the world. He is merely concerned with language as it is employed by the writer.

At this level of reading, the question asked of the reader is "What does the sentence say?" That could be conceived as a complex and difficult question, of course. We mean it here, however, in its simplest sense.

The attainment of the skills of elementary reading occurred some time ago for almost all who read this book. Nevertheless, we continue to experience the problems of this level of reading, no matter how capable we may be as readers. This happens, for example, whenever we come upon something we want to read that is written in a foreign language that we do not know very well. Then our first effort must be to identify the actual words. Only after recognizing them individually can we begin to try to understand them, to struggle with perceiving what they mean.

Even when they are reading material written in their own lan-

guage, many readers continue to have various kinds of difficulties at this level of reading. Most of these difficulties are mechanical, and some of them can be traced back to early instruction in reading. Overcoming these difficulties usually allows us to read faster; hence, most speed reading courses concentrate on this level. We will have more to say about elementary reading in the next chapter; and in Chapter 4, we will discuss speed reading.

The second level of reading we will call Inspectional Reading. It is characterized by its special emphasis on time. When reading at this level, the student is allowed a set time to complete an assigned amount of reading. He might be allowed fifteen minutes to read this book, for instance—or even a book twice as long.

Hence, another way to describe this level of reading is to say that its aim is to get the most out of a book within a given time—usually a relatively short time, and always (by definition) too short a time to get out of the book everything that can be gotten.

Still another name for this level might be skimming or pre-reading. However, we do not mean the kind of skimming that is characterized by casual or random browsing through a book. Inspectional reading is the art of *skimming systematically*.

When reading at this level, your aim is to examine the surface of the book, to learn everything that the surface alone can teach you. That is often a good deal.

Whereas the question that is asked at the first level is "What does the sentence say?" the question typically asked at this level is "What is the book about?" That is a surface question; others of a similar nature are "What is the structure of the book?" or "What are its parts?"

Upon completing an inspectional reading of a book, no matter how short the time you had to do it in, you should also be able to answer the question, "What kind of book is it—a novel, a history, a scientific treatise?"

Chapter 4 is devoted to an account of this level of reading, so we will not discuss it further here. We do want to stress, however, that

most people, even many quite good readers, are unaware of the value of inspectional reading. They start a book on page one and plow steadily through it, without even reading the table of contents. They are thus faced with the task of achieving a superficial knowledge of the book *at the same time that they are trying to understand it.* That compounds the difficulty.

The third level of reading we will call Analytical Reading. It is both a more complex and a more systematic activity than either of the two levels of reading discussed so far. Depending on the difficulty of the text to be read, it makes more or less heavy demands on the reader.

Analytical reading is thorough reading, complete reading, or good reading—the best reading you can do. If inspectional reading is the best and most complete reading that is possible given a limited time, then analytical reading is the best and most complete reading that is possible given unlimited time.

The analytical reader must ask many, and organized, questions of what he is reading. We do not want to state these questions here, since this book is mainly about reading at this level: Part Two gives its rules and tells you how to do it. We do want to emphasize here that analytical reading is always intensely active. On this level of reading, the reader grasps a book—the metaphor is apt—and works at it until the book becomes his own. Francis Bacon once remarked that "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Reading a book analytically is chewing and digesting it.

We also want to stress that analytical reading is hardly ever necessary if your goal in reading is simply information or entertainment. *Analytical reading is preeminently for the sake of understanding.* Conversely, bringing your mind with the aid of a book from a condition of understanding less to one of understanding more is almost impossible unless you have at least some skill in analytical reading.

The fourth and highest level of reading we will call Syntopical Reading. It is the most complex and systematic type of reading of all.

It makes very heavy demands on the reader, even if the materials he is reading are themselves relatively easy and unsophisticated.

Another name for this level might be comparative reading. When reading syntopically, the reader reads many books, not just one, and places them in relation to one another and to a subject about which they all revolve. But mere comparison of texts is not enough. Syntopical reading involves more. With the help of the books read, the syntopical reader is able to construct an analysis of the subject that *may not be in any of the books*. It is obvious, therefore, that syntopical reading is the most active and effortful kind of reading.

We will discuss syntopical reading in Part Four. Let it suffice for the moment to say that syntopical reading is not an easy art, and that the rules for it are not widely known. Nevertheless, syntopical reading is probably the most rewarding of all reading activities. The benefits are so great that it is well worth the trouble of learning how to do it.

3

The First Level of Reading: Elementary Reading

Ours is a time of great interest in and concern about reading. Public officials have declared that the 1970s will be "the decade of reading." Best-selling books tell us why Johnny can or can't read. Research and experimentation in all fields of initial reading instruction proceed at an ever-increasing pace.

Three historical trends or movements have converged upon our time to produce this ferment. The first is the continuing effort of the United States to educate all of its citizens, which means, of course, at a minimum, to make them all literate. This effort, which Americans have supported almost from the beginning of the national existence and which is one of the cornerstones of our democratic way of life, has had remarkable results. Near-universal literacy was obtained in the United States earlier than anywhere else, and this in turn has helped us to become the highly developed industrial society that we are at the present day. But there have been enormous problems, too. They can be summed up in the observation that teaching a small percentage of highly motivated children, most of them the children of literate parents, to read—as was the case a century ago—is a far cry from teaching every child to read, no matter how little motivated he may be, or how deprived his background.

The second historical trend is in the teaching of reading itself. As

late as 1870, reading instruction was little changed from what it had been in Greek and Roman schools. In America, at least, the so-called ABC method was dominant throughout most of the nineteenth century. Children were taught to sound out the letters of the alphabet individually—hence the name of this method—and to combine them in syllables, first two letters at a time and then three and four, whether the syllables so constructed were meaningful or not. Thus, syllables such as *ab, ac, ad, ib, ic* were practiced for the sake of mastery of the language. When a child could name all of a determined number of combinations, he was said to know his ABC's.

This synthetic method of teaching reading came under heavy criticism around the middle of the last century, and two alternatives to it were proposed. One was a variant on the synthetic ABC method, known as the phonic method. Here the word was recognized by its sounds rather than by its letter-names. Complicated and ingenious systems of printing were evolved for the purpose of representing the different sounds made by a single letter, especially the vowels. If you are fifty or over, it is probable that you learned to read using some variant of the phonic method.

A wholly different approach, analytical rather than synthetic, originated in Germany and was advocated by Horace Mann and other educators after about 1840. This involved teaching the *visual* recognition of whole words before giving any attention to letter-names or letter-sounds. This so-called sight method was later extended so that whole sentences, representing units of thought, were introduced first, with the pupils only later learning to recognize the constituent words and then, finally, the constituent letters. This method was especially popular during the 1920s and 30s, which period was also characterized by the shift in emphasis from oral reading to silent reading. It was found that ability to read orally did not necessarily mean ability to read silently and that instruction in oral reading was not always adequate if silent reading was the goal. Thus, an almost exclusive emphasis on rapid, comprehensive silent reading was a feature of the years from about 1920 to 1925. More recently, however,

the pendulum has swung back again toward phonics, which indeed had never entirely left the curriculum.

All of these different methods of teaching elementary reading were successful for some pupils, unsuccessful for others. In the last two or three decades, it has perhaps been the failures that have attracted the most attention. And here the third historical trend comes into play. It is traditional in America to criticize the schools; for more than a century, parents, self-styled experts, and educators themselves have attacked and indicted the educational system. No aspect of schooling has been more severely criticized than reading instruction. The current books have a long ancestry, and every innovation carries in its train a posse of suspicious and, one feels, unpersuadable observers.

The critics may or may not be right, but in any event the problems have taken on a new urgency as the continuing effort to educate all citizens has entered a new phase, resulting in ever-growing high school and college populations. A young man or woman who cannot read very well is hindered in his pursuit of the American dream, but that remains largely a personal matter if he is not in school. If he remains in school or goes to college, however, it is a matter of concern for his teachers as well, and for his fellow students.

Hence, researchers are very active at the present time, and their work has resulted in numerous new approaches to reading instruction. Among the more important new programs are the so-called eclectic approach, the individualized reading approach, the language-experience approach, the various approaches based on linguistic principles, and others based more or less closely on some kind of programmed instruction. In addition, new mediums such as the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) have been employed, and sometimes these involve new methods as well. Still other devices and programs are the "total immersion method," the "foreign-language-school method," and the method known variously as the "see-say," "look-say," "look-and-say," or "word method." Doubtless experiments are now being undertaken in methods and approaches that

differ from all of these. It is perhaps too early to tell whether any of these is the long-sought panacea for all reading ills.

Stages of Learning to Read

One useful finding of recent research is the analysis of stages in learning to read. It is now widely accepted that there are at least four more or less clearly distinguishable stages in the child's progress toward what is called mature reading ability. The first stage is known by the term "reading readiness." This begins, it has been pointed out, at birth, and continues normally until the age of about six or seven.

Reading readiness includes several different kinds of preparation for learning to read. Physical readiness involves good vision and hearing. Intellectual readiness involves a minimum level of visual perception such that the child can take in and remember an entire word and the letters that combine to form it. Language readiness involves the ability to speak clearly and to use several sentences in correct order. Personal readiness involves the ability to work with other children, to sustain attention, to follow directions, and the like.

General reading readiness is assessed by tests and is also estimated by teachers who are often skillful at discerning just when a pupil is ready to learn to read. The important thing to remember is that jumping the gun is usually self-defeating. The child who is not yet ready to read is frustrated if attempts are made to teach him, and he may carry over his dislike for the experience into his later school career and even into adult life. Delaying the beginning of reading instruction beyond the reading readiness stage is not nearly so serious, despite the feelings of parents who may fear that their child is "backward" or is not "keeping up" with his peers.

In the second stage, children learn to read very simple materials. They usually begin, at least in the United States, by learning a few sight words, and typically manage to master perhaps three hundred to four hundred words by the end of the first year. Basic skills are introduced at this time, such as the use of context or meaning clues

and the beginning sounds of words. By the end of this period pupils are expected to be reading simple books independently and with enthusiasm.

It is incidentally worth observing that something quite mysterious, almost magical, occurs during this stage. At one moment in the course of his development the child, when faced with a series of symbols on a page, finds them quite meaningless. Not much later—perhaps only two or three weeks later—he has discovered meaning in them; he knows that they say "The cat sat on the hat." How this happens no one really knows, despite the efforts of philosophers and psychologists over two and a half millennia to study the phenomenon. Where does meaning come from? How is it that a French child would find the same meaning in the symbols "*Le chat s'asseyait sur le chapeau*"? Indeed, this discovery of meaning in symbols may be the most astounding intellectual feat that any human being ever performs—and most humans perform it before they are seven years old!

The third stage is characterized by rapid progress in vocabulary building and by increasing skill in "unlocking" the meaning of unfamiliar words through context clues. In addition, children at this stage learn to read for different purposes and in different areas of content, such as science, social studies, language arts, and the like. They learn that reading, besides being something one does at school, is also something one can do on one's own, for fun, to satisfy curiosity, or even to "expand one's horizons."

Finally, the fourth stage is characterized by the refinement and enhancement of the skills previously acquired. Above all, the student begins to be able to assimilate his reading experiences—that is, to carry over concepts from one piece of writing to another, and to compare the views of different writers on the same subject. This, the mature stage of reading, should be reached by young persons in their early teens. Ideally, they should continue to build on it for the rest of their lives.

That they often do not even reach it is apparent to many par-

ents and to most educators. The reasons for the failure are many, ranging all the way from various kinds of deprivations in the home environment—economic, social, and/or intellectual (including parental illiteracy)—to personal problems of all kinds (including total revolt against "the system"). But one cause of the failure is not often noted. The very emphasis on reading readiness and on the methods employed to teach children the rudiments of reading has meant that the other, the higher, levels of reading have tended to be slighted. This is quite understandable, considering the urgency and extent of the problems found on this first level. Nevertheless, effective remedies for the overall reading deficiencies of Americans cannot be found unless efforts are made on *all* levels of reading.

Stages and Levels

We have described four levels of reading, and we have also outlined four stages of learning to read in an elementary fashion. What is the relation between these stages and levels?

It is of paramount importance to recognize that the four stages outlined here are all stages of the first level of reading, as outlined in the previous chapter. They are stages, that is, of elementary reading, which thus can be usefully divided somewhat in the manner of the elementary school curriculum. The first stage of elementary reading—reading readiness—corresponds to pre-school and kindergarten experiences. The second stage—word mastery—corresponds to the first grade experience of the typical child (although many quite normal children are not "typical" in this sense), with the result that the child attains what we can call second-stage reading skills, or first grade ability in reading or first grade literacy. The third stage of elementary reading—vocabulary growth and the utilization of context—is typically (but not universally, even for normal children) acquired at about the end of the fourth grade of elementary school, and results in what is variously called fourth grade, or functional, literacy—the ability, according to one common definition, to read

traffic signs or picture captions fairly easily, to fill out the simpler government forms, and the like. The fourth and final stage of elementary reading is attained at about the time the pupil leaves or graduates from elementary school or junior high school. It is sometimes called eighth grade, ninth grade, or tenth grade literacy. The child is a "mature" reader in the sense that he is now capable of reading almost anything, but still in a relatively unsophisticated manner. In the simplest terms, he is mature enough to do high school work.

However, he is not yet a "mature" reader in the sense in which we want to employ the term in this book. He has mastered the first level of reading, that is all; he can read on his own and is prepared to learn more about reading. *But he does not yet know how to read beyond the elementary level.*

We mention all this because it is highly germane to the message of this book. We assume—we must assume—that you, our reader, have attained ninth grade literacy, that you have mastered the elementary level of reading, which means that you have passed successfully through the four stages described. If you think about it, you realize that we could not assume less. No one can learn from a how-to-do-it book until he can read it; and it is particularly true of a book purporting to teach one to read that its readers must be able to read in some sense of the term.

The difference between aided and unaided discovery comes into play here. Typically, the four stages of elementary reading are attained with the help of living teachers. Children differ in their abilities, of course; some need more help than others. But a teacher is usually present to answer questions and smooth over difficulties that arise during the elementary school years. Only when he has mastered all of the four stages of elementary reading is the child prepared to move on to the higher levels of reading. Only then can he read independently and learn on his own. Only then can he begin to become a really good reader.

Higher Levels of Reading and Higher Education

Traditionally, the high schools of America have provided little reading instruction for their students, and the colleges have provided none. That situation has changed in recent years. Two generations ago, when high school enrollments increased greatly within a relatively short period, educators began to realize that it could no longer be assumed that entering students could read effectively. Remedial reading instruction was therefore provided, sometimes for as many as 75% or more students. Within the last decade, the same situation has occurred at the college level. Thus, of approximately 40,000 freshmen entering the City University of New York in the fall of 1971, upwards of half, or more than 20,000 young people, had to be given some kind of remedial training in reading.

That does not mean, however, that *reading instruction beyond the elementary level* is offered in many U.S. colleges to this day. In fact, it is offered in almost none of them. Remedial reading instruction is not instruction in the higher levels of reading. It serves only to bring students up to a level of maturity in reading that they should have attained by the time they graduated from elementary school. To this day, most institutions of higher learning either do not know how to instruct students in reading beyond the elementary level, or lack the facilities and personnel to do so.

We say this despite the fact that a number of four-year and community colleges have recently instituted courses in speed reading, or in "effective" reading, or "competence" in reading. On the whole (though there are exceptions), these courses are remedial. They are designed to overcome various kinds of failures of the lower schools. They are not designed to take the student beyond the first level or to introduce him to the kinds and levels of reading that are the main subject of this book.

This, of course, should not be the case. A good liberal arts high school, if it does nothing else, ought to produce graduates who are competent analytical readers. A good college, if it does nothing else,

ought to produce competent syntopical readers. A college degree ought to represent general competence in reading such that a graduate could read any kind of material for general readers and be able to undertake independent research on almost any subject (for that is what syntopical reading, among other things, enables you to do). Often, however, three or four years of graduate study are required before students attain this level of reading ability, and they do not always attain it even then.

One should not have to spend four years in graduate school in order to learn how to read. Four years of graduate school, in addition to twelve years of preparatory education and four years of college—that adds up to twenty full years of schooling. It should not take that long to learn to read. Something is very wrong if it does.

What is wrong can be corrected. Courses could be instituted in many high schools and colleges that are based on the program described in this book. There is nothing arcane or even really new about what we have to propose. It is largely common sense.

Reading and the Democratic Ideal of Education

We do not want to seem to be mere carping critics. We know that the thunder of thousands of freshmen feet upon the stairs makes it hard to hear, no matter how reasonable the message. And as long as a large proportion, even a majority, of these new students cannot read effectively at the elementary level, we are aware that the first task to be faced must be to teach them to read in the lowest, the largest common-denominator, sense of the term.

Nor, for the moment, would we want it any other way. We are on record as holding that unlimited educational opportunity—or, speaking practically, educational opportunity that is limited only by individual desire, ability, and need—is the most valuable service that society can provide for its members. That we do not yet know how to provide that kind of opportunity is no reason to give up the attempt.

But we must also realize—students, teachers, and laymen alike—that even when we have accomplished the task that lies before us, we will not have accomplished the whole task. We must be more than a nation of functional literates. We must become a nation of truly competent readers, recognizing all that the word *competent* implies. Nothing less will satisfy the needs of the world that is coming.