

Reflections on Reading

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Recommended Citation

Naval War College, The U.S. () "Reflections on Reading," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 1, Article 24.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss1/24>

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

Professor John E. Jackson of the Naval War College is the Program Manager for the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program.

The Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program (CNO-PRP) motto is “Read well to lead well.” The program encourages sailors at all levels to read books of consequence. It is a *professional* reading program, which sets it apart from a simple list of books intended to be read for relaxation and entertainment. The techniques a reader should use with books in the CNO-PRP differ from those for the casual reader. Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren’s highly regarded *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* provides some suggestions on how readers can get the most out of their time.

Television, radio, and all the sources of amusement and information that surround us in our daily lives are also artificial props. They can give us the impression that our minds are active, because we are required to react to stimuli from outside. But the power of those external stimuli to keep us going is limited. They are like drugs. We grow used to them, and we continuously need more and more of them. Eventually, they have little or no effect. Then, if we lack resources within ourselves, we cease to grow intellectually, morally, and spiritually. And when we cease to grow, we begin to die.

Reading well, which means reading actively, is thus not only a good in itself, nor is it merely a means to advancement in our work or career. It also serves to keep our minds alive and growing. (p. 346)

The authors further write the following:

A good book does reward you for trying to read it. The best books reward you most of all. The reward, of course, is of two kinds. First, there is the improvement in your reading skill that occurs when you successfully tackle a good, difficult work. Second—and this in the long run is much more important—a good book can teach you about the world and about yourself. You learn more than how to read better; you also learn more about life. You become wiser. Not just more knowledgeable—books that provide nothing but information can produce that result. But wiser, in the sense that you are more deeply aware of the great and enduring truths of human life. (pp. 340–41)

The authors advocate the technique they identify as *analytical reading*.

The analytical reader must ask many, and organized, questions of what he is reading. . . . 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. (p. 19)

Adler and Van Doren recommend that readers ask themselves the following four primary questions as they read:

1. What is the book about as a whole? You must try to discover the leading theme of the book, and how the author develops this theme in an orderly way by subdividing it into its essential subordinate themes or topics.
2. What is being said in detail, and how? You must try to discover the main ideas, assertions, and arguments that constitute the author’s particular message.
3. Is the book true, in whole or part? . . . When you understand a book, however, you are obligated, if you are reading seriously, to make up your own mind. Knowing the author’s mind is not enough.
4. What of it? If the book has given you information, you must ask about its significance. Why does the author think it is important to know these things? Is it important to you to know them? And if the book has not only informed you, but also enlightened you, it is necessary to seek further enlightenment by asking what else follows, what is further implied or suggested. (pp. 46–47)

The authors go to the heart of what I believe it means to “Read well to lead well” when they note, “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” (p. 31).

JOHN E. JACKSON

(All quotations are from Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* [New York: Touchstone Books / Simon & Schuster, 1972].)

(Note: This is a revised version of a column originally published in the Naval War College Review 67, no. 1 [Winter 2014].)