

HOW TO READ A BOOK

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Begin at the beginning. What's the title? Remember that people choose titles; they think hard about them, and usually they mean something. Who is the author? Do you already know anything about her/him? What kind of things can you easily find out -- by looking at the back cover, or the lists of other books the author has written? Proceed to the date of publication. What was going on when the book was written? What has gone on since the book was written? (You can't fault Tom Paine for not know about Marx. Likewise, you can't fault a historian who wrote in 1962 for not knowing about the scholarship that has gone on since.) Who published the book? (That one may mean nothing to you at this stage, but eventually you start to realize that certain publishers specialize in books of certain ideological bents, just as they might specialize in books on certain topics.)

NEVER skip any of the pages at the beginning -- acknowledgements and introductions. Acknowledgements in academic books often talk about where the author was trained, and sometimes make a point of distinguishing between the ideas of the authors and those of the professors who taught them. They talk about who the author's friends are. Again, at this stage all those names might seem meaningless, but it gets easier in any given discipline once you've read a lot of stuff and begin to recognize names. You will start to see networks of people who talk to one another, and will begin to understand why the author thinks what she/he thinks. It's like the backs of record albums where they list all the folks who play on each other's albums: we begin to understand that there is a reason why they all make similar sounds -- these folks are all doing and talking about music together. Acknowledgements are also fun because you get to see how hip the men are on the woman question by what they say about their wives.

Introductions are crucial in a more direct way. It took me years to understand their function. A good introduction will state the problem, often making reference to work that has been done in the field previously. It will demonstrate the importance of the problem and indicate where work needs to be done and how this particular books fits in. It will lay out the questions to be explored and the assumptions on which the book is based. And, probably most important, it is the single most likely place to find a direct and concise statement of the thesis of the book -- that one sentence which any book is ultimately designed to demonstrate.

STOP! THINK!!!! Here is the first point at which you need to ask all of the questions which you will carry through reading the rest of the book. Why was the book written? What is it about? Does it seem like a worthwhile effort -- did the author convince you that the topic needs further exploration? What are the assumptions that the author is working on? Did you find a thesis? What is it? Does it seem workable? What questions does the book ask in order to get at the topic? Are they the central questions to be asked to the material? If it is a history book, what is the notion of change which is implied in the formulation of the questions and of the thesis? What are the implications of

that theory of change for the present and the future? And, if all that the author promises in the introduction would turn out to be well done, where will you be then? (This last one involves both your own purposes in reading the book and thinking about the material, and how well the author has convinced you of the critical nature of his/her work.) Unfortunately, some people don't write good introductions and you won't be able to answer all of this at this point.

Go on to the table of contents and examine it. Think about whether the organization there is a reasonable way to go about answering the author's questions and demonstrating the thesis of the book. Also look carefully to try to figure out what will be the most important chapters or sections in the book -- both from the point of view of answering the questions you are most interested in finding out about, and from the standpoint of the author's own task.

STOP AGAIN! If you haven't been able to do all this at this point, now is the time to find a way to do it -- to figure out the thesis, and major questions, the assumptions, the point of view. **DO THIS BEFORE GOING ON TO THE BODY OF THE BOOK.** You may have to reread the introduction. You may go straight to the last chapter to see what the author claims to have demonstrated. Or you may want to do a quick skim of the whole book. Whatever way you choose, it is important -- and it will save you time in the long run. It just isn't worth your time to go through the painful process of sifting through the author's evidence when you don't know what it is evidence of. If you have a really solid idea of what the book is trying to do, you will find that the actual time you have to spend on the text is drastically reduced. Otherwise, it will be like travelling unfamiliar back roads without a map -- every now and then you might come upon a sign, but you won't know how to interpret it. That sense of being lost in a book is very common, but unfortunately what most of us tend to do is to panic, shut the book, or just go on and ignore it when we feel that way. This brings me to an essential rule of the game: when you are confused about something, **PAY ATTENTION.** You may have found a difficult point which is worth spending the time to figure out, or it may mean that you need to go back to the beginning and refigure what the book is about.

Assuming you have done all this map-making -- and you should have made notes on all this stuff -- go on to the text of the book. Basically, your task here is to determine whether the author has done a sound and convincing job of demonstrating the thesis and answering the questions.

What kinds of sources does the author use? To answer this question you will have to look at footnotes. They are a drag, they do interrupt your reading, but they fulfill an absolutely essential function. You might want to make a general practice of looking at them all before and after reading a chapter rather than stopping every time you see a number, but you must keep the possibility of stopping open at all times. In other words, when something seems particularly interesting -- or particularly fishy-- the best way to follow it up may be to ask where the author got that idea or fact. The footnote will tell you -- and it makes a difference, for example, whether it was from a primary source or a secondary one. Ultimately, in doing extensive research on a particular topic the footnotes will start to demonstrate the record album syndrome -- people will be quoting people you've heard of. Are the sources primary or secondary? Are they reasonable places to go to answer the questions that the author is asking?

Back in the text, how does the author use her/his sources? Are they simply brought out as artillery, as examples for a point that the author wanted to make, or does she/he seem to have examined them with sensitivity to find what was really there? Do quotations or statistics actually demonstrate the point that the author claims they demonstrate, or can you draw different conclusions from them? And, if you can, does the author deal with such paradoxes? Are the promises made in the introduction, or implied in the table of contents, actually fulfilled? In other words, do the questions get answered to your satisfaction?

Read the last chapter, conclusion, or afterword as carefully as you did the introduction, even if you already did it when you were mapping out your approach to the book. Ask ALL of those questions again -- your job is not done when you reach the last page. If the author did not accomplish what she/he set out to do, what did get accomplished? What have you learned about methods as well as content?

Good luck. It's hard work, but it's a whole lot less confusing and a whole lot less boring -- than swimming around in a book that you never understand.