

Adler, Mortimer J. and Charles Van Doren. *How To Read A Book*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.

Mortimer Adler (1902-2001) wrote and popularized philosophy and defended Aristotelian virtue ethics. Charles Van Doren (1926-____), Adler's co-author, was perhaps best known, infamously, as a co-conspirator in the television game show rigging of *Twenty-One* in 1959. Van Doren later edited for *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and co-authored *How To Read A Book* with Adler.

Reading is the process by which the mind operates on written symbols without help from the outside, and moves from less understanding to understanding more. The best reading is maximally active reading. Active reading converses with the text, questioning it and searching for answers within it. Learn to read a few books well, rather than many books badly. Francis Bacon said, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

Reading has four levels: 1) *elementary*, 2) *inspectional*, 3) *analytical*, and 4) *syntopical*. Elementary reading consists in recognizing the symbols and words in a text and proceeding from beginning to end sequentially. Inspectional reading is scanning a text differentially to acquire a sense of the author's purpose and argument. Analytic reading dissects a text critically and deeply, seeking to place the text in its context historically and intellectually. In the most complex level of reading, syntopical reading, a reader compares the thought of multiple authors on a topic or series of topics. The syntopical reader builds a dialogue among disparate authors by the following steps: a) make a tentative bibliography, review/skim the bibliography books and edit the bibliography list, 3) find the most relevant passages by topic, 4) construct a neutral terminology, 5) frame questions that the authors are asking, 6) define the issues and categorize the author's response to the issues, 7) impose some order on the author's "discussion," and 8) maintain objectivity throughout.

One must select good books for this level of reading. Good books are beyond one. They reward one's struggle to understand them. A bad book does not. There is nothing in a bad book to understand. Good books teach you about the world and yourself. Good books make you wise in the sense they make you more aware of the great truths of human life. Most books are not worth reading. A few thousand should or could be read once. A hundred or so are great books. They have more to offer than you will ever grasp, and so can be read over and over.

The authors proffer their list of great authors and books.