COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED

HOW TO READ A BOOK

The CLASSIC GUIDE to INTELLIGENT READING

MORTIMER J. ADLER
& CHARLES VAN DOREN

HOW TO READ A BOOK

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

BY

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AND

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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

HOW TO READ A BOOK

PART ONE

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 communications 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 catch-

ing is the skill of catching every kind of pitch—fast balls and curves, changeups 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

* 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.

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 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 pre-

cedes 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. Nevertheless, 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 cumulative. 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 language, 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 1970's 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 1920's and 30's, 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 parents 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

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.

4

THE SECOND LEVEL OF READING: INSPECTIONAL READING

Inspectional reading is a true level of reading. It is quite distinct from the level that precedes it (elementary reading) and from the one that follows it in natural sequence (analytical reading). But, as we noted in Chapter 2, the levels of reading are cumulative. Thus, elementary reading is contained in inspectional reading, as, indeed, inspectional reading is contained in analytical reading, and analytical reading in syntopical reading.

Practically, this means that you cannot read on the inspectional level unless you can read effectively on the elementary level. You must be able to read an author's text more or less steadily, without having to stop to look up the meaning of many words, and without stumbling over the grammar and syntax. You must be able to make sense of a majority of the sentences and paragraphs, although not necessarily the best sense of all of them.

What, then, is involved in inspectional reading? How do you go about doing it?

The first thing to realize is that there are two types of inspectional reading. They are aspects of a single skill, but the beginning reader is well-advised to consider them as two different steps or activities. The experienced reader learns to

perform both steps simultaneously, but for the moment we will treat them as if they were quite distinct.

Inspectional Reading I: Systematic Skimming or Pre-reading

Let us return to the basic situation to which we have referred before. There is a book or other reading matter, and here is your mind. What is the first thing that you do?

Let us assume two further elements in the situation, elements that are quite common. First, you do not know whether you want to read the book. You do not know whether it deserves an analytical reading. But you suspect that it does, or at least that it contains both information and insights that would be valuable to you if you could dig them out.

Second, let us assume—and this is very often the case—that you have only a limited time in which to find all this out.

In this case, what you must do is *skim* the book, or, as some prefer to say, pre-read it. Skimming or pre-reading is the first sublevel of inspectional reading. Your main aim is to discover whether the book requires a more careful reading. Secondly, skimming can tell you lots of other things about the book, even if you decide not to read it again with more care.

Giving a book this kind of quick once-over is a threshing process that helps you to separate the chaff from the real kernels of nourishment. You may discover that what you get from skimming is all the book is worth to you for the time being. It may never be worth more. But you will know at least what the author's main contention is, as well as what kind of book he has written, so the time you have spent looking through the book will not have been wasted.

The habit of skimming should not take much time to acquire. Here are some suggestions about how to do it.

1. LOOK AT THE TITLE PAGE AND, IF THE BOOK HAS ONE, AT ITS PREFACE. Read each quickly. Note especially the subtitles or

other indications of the scope or aim of the book or of the author's special angle on his subject. Before completing this step you should have a good idea of the subject, and, if you wish, you may pause for a moment to place the book in the appropriate category in your mind. What pigeonhole that already contains other books does this one belong in?

2. STUDY THE TABLE OF CONTENTS to obtain a general sense of the book's structure; use it as you would a road map before taking a trip. It is astonishing how many people never even glance at a book's table of contents unless they wish to look something up in it. In fact, many authors spend a considerable amount of time in creating the table of contents, and it is sad to think their efforts are often wasted.

It used to be a common practice, especially in expository works, but sometimes even in novels and poems, to write very full tables of contents, with the chapters or parts broken down into many subtitles indicative of the topics covered. Milton, for example, wrote more or less lengthy headings, or "Arguments," as he called them, for each book of *Paradise Lost.* Gibbon published his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with an extensive analytical table of contents for each chapter. Such summaries are no longer common, although occasionally you do still come across an analytical table of contents. One reason for the decline of the practice may be that people are not so likely to read tables of contents as they once were. Also, publishers have come to feel that a less revealing table of contents is more seductive than a completely frank and open one. Readers, they feel, will be attracted to a book with more or less mysterious chapter titles—they will want to read the book to find out what the chapters are about. Even so, a table of contents can be valuable, and you should read it carefully before going on to the rest of the book.

At this point, you might turn back to the table of contents of this book, if you have not already read it. We tried to make it as full and informative as we could. Examining it should give you a good idea of what we are trying to do.

book's general theme or idea, alert for anything that will make it clearer. Heeding the suggestions we have made will help you sustain this attitude. You will be surprised to find out how much time you will save, pleased to see how much more you will grasp, and relieved to discover how much easier it all can be than you supposed.

Inspectional Reading II: Superficial Reading

The title of this section is intentionally provocative. The word "superficial" ordinarily has a negative connotation. We are quite serious, however, in using the term.

Everyone has had the experience of struggling fruitlessly with a difficult book that was begun with high hopes of enlightenment. It is natural enough to conclude that it was a mistake to try to read it in the first place. But that was not the mistake. Rather it was in expecting too much from the first going over of a difficult book. Approached in the right way, no book intended for the general reader, no matter how difficult, need be a cause for despair.

What is the right approach? The answer lies in an important and helpful rule of reading that is generally overlooked. That rule is simply this: *In tackling a difficult book for the first time, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away.*

Pay attention to what you can understand and do not be stopped by what you cannot immediately grasp. Go right on reading past the point where you have difficulties in understanding, and you will soon come to things you do understand. Concentrate on these. Keep on in this way. Read the book through, undeterred and undismayed by the paragraphs, footnotes, comments, and references that escape you. 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 chance of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book *through* at least once.

What you understand by reading the book through to the end—even if it is only fifty percent or less—will help you when you make the additional effort later to go back to the places you passed by on your first reading. And even if you never go back, understanding half of a really tough book is much better than not understanding it at all, which will be the case if you allow yourself to be stopped by the first difficult passage you come to.

Most of us were taught to pay attention to the things we did not understand. We were told to go to a dictionary when we met an unfamiliar word. We were told to go to an encyclopedia or some other reference work when we were confronted with allusions or statements we did not comprehend. We were told to consult footnotes, scholarly commentaries, or other secondary sources to get help. But when these things are done *prematurely*, they only impede our reading, instead of helping it.

The tremendous pleasure that can come from reading Shakespeare, for instance, was spoiled for generations of high school students who were forced to go through *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, or *Hamlet*, scene by scene, looking up all the strange words in a glossary and studying all the scholarly footnotes. As a result, they never really read a Shakespearean play. By the time they reached the end, they had forgotten the beginning and lost sight of the whole. Instead of being forced to take this pedantic approach, they should have been encouraged to read the play at one sitting and discuss what they got out of that first quick reading. Only then would they have been ready to study the play carefully and closely because then they would have understood enough of it to learn more.

The rule applies with equal force to expository works. Here, indeed, the best proof of the soundness of the rule—give

a book a first superficial reading—is what happens when you do *not* follow it. Take a basic work in economics, for example, such as Adam Smith's classic *The Wealth of Nations.* (We choose this book as an example because it is more than a textbook or a work for specialists in the field. It is a book for the *general* reader.) If you insist on understanding everything on every page before you go on to the next, you will not get very far. In your effort to master the fine points, you will miss the big points that Smith makes so clearly about the factors of wages, rents, profits, and interest that enter into the cost of things, the role of the market in determining prices, the evils of monopoly, the reasons for free trade. You will miss the forest for the trees. You will not be reading well on *any* level.

On Reading Speeds

We described inspectional reading in Chapter 2 as the art of getting the most out of a book in a limited time. In describing it further in the present chapter, we have in no way changed that definition. The two steps involved in inspectional reading are both taken rapidly. The competent inspectional reader will accomplish them both quickly, no matter how long or difficult the book he is trying to read.

That working definition, however, inevitably raises the question, What about speed reading? What is the relation between the levels of reading and the many speed reading courses, both academic and commercial, that are offered at the present day?

We have already suggested that such courses are basically remedial—that is, that they provide instruction mainly, if not exclusively, in reading on the elementary level. But more needs to be said.

Let it be understood at once that we are wholly in favor of the proposition that most people ought to be *able* to read faster than they do. Too often, there are things we *have* to read

that are not really worth spending a lot of time reading; if we cannot read them quickly, it will be a terrible waste of time. It is true enough that many people read some things too slowly, and that they ought to read them faster. But many people also read some things too fast, and they ought to read those things more slowly. A good speed reading course should therefore teach you to read at many different speeds, not just one speed that is faster than anything you can manage now. It should enable you to vary your rate of reading in accordance with the nature and complexity of the material.

Our point is really very simple. Many books are hardly worth even skimming; some should be read quickly; and a few should be read at a rate, usually quite slow, that allows for complete comprehension. It is wasteful to read a book slowly that deserves only a fast reading; speed reading skills can help you solve that problem. But this is only one reading problem. The obstacles that stand in the way of comprehension of a difficult book are not ordinarily, and perhaps never primarily, physiological or psychological. They arise because the reader simply does not know what to do when approaching a difficult –and rewarding–book. He does not know the rules of reading; he does not know how to marshal his intellectual resources for the task. No matter how quickly he reads, he will be no better off if, as is too often true, he does not know what he is looking for and does not know when he has found it.

With regard to rates of reading, then, the ideal is not merely to be able to read faster, but to be able to read at *different speeds*–and to know when the different speeds are appropriate. Inspectional reading is accomplished quickly, but that is not only because you read faster, although in fact you do; it is also because you read less of a book when you give it an inspectional reading, and because you read it in a different way, with different goals in mind. Analytical reading is ordinarily much slower than inspectional reading, but even when you are giving a book an analytical reading, you should not read all of it at the same rate of speed. Every book, no matter

how difficult, contains interstitial material that can be and should be read quickly; and every good book also contains matter that is difficult and should be read very slowly.

Fixations and Regressions

Speed reading courses properly make much of the discovery—we have known it for half a century or more—that most people continue to sub-vocalize for years after they are first taught to read. Films of eye movements, furthermore, show that the eyes of young or untrained readers "fixate" as many as five or six times in the course of each line that is read. (The eye is blind while it moves; it can only see when it stops.) Thus single words or at the most two-word or three-word phrases are being read at a time, in jumps across the line. Even worse than that, the eyes of incompetent readers regress as often as once every two or three lines—that is, they return to phrases or sentences previously read.

All of these habits are wasteful and obviously cut down reading speed. They are wasteful because the mind, unlike the eye, does not need to "read" only a word or short phrase at a time. The mind, that astounding instrument, can grasp a sentence or even a paragraph at a "glance"—if only the eyes will provide it with the information it needs. Thus the primary task—recognized as such by all speed reading courses—is to correct the fixations and regressions that slow so many readers down. Fortunately, this can be done quite easily. Once it is done, *the student can read as fast as his mind will let him, not* as slow as his eyes make him.

There are various devices for breaking the eye fixations, some of them complicated and expensive. Usually, however, it is not necessary to employ any device more sophisticated than your own hand, which you can train yourself to follow as it moves more and more quickly across and down the page. You can do this yourself. Place your thumb and first two fingers

Summary of Inspectional Reading

A few words in summary of this chapter. There is no single right speed at which you should read; the ability to read at various speeds and to know when each speed is appropriate is the ideal. Great speed in reading is a dubious achievement; it is of value only if what you have to read is not really worth reading. A better formula is this: *Every book should be read no more slowly than it deserves, and no more quickly than you can read it with satisfaction and comprehension.* In any event, the speed at which they read, be it fast or slow, is but a fractional part of most people's problem with reading.

Skimming or pre-reading a book is always a good idea; it is necessary when you do not know, as is often the case, whether the book you have in hand is worth reading carefully. You will find that out by skimming it. It is generally desirable to skim even a book that you intend to read carefully, to get some idea of its form and structure.

Finally, do not try to understand every word or page of a difficult book the first time through. This is the most important rule of all; it is the essence of inspectional reading. Do not be afraid to be, or to seem to be, superficial. Race through even the hardest book. You will then be prepared to read it well the second time.

We have now completed our initial discussion of the second level of reading—inspectional reading. We will return to the subject when we come to Part Four, where we will show what an important role inspectional reading plays in syntopical reading, the fourth and highest level of reading.

However, you should keep in mind during our discussion of the third level of reading—analytical reading—which is described in the second part of this book, that inspectional reading serves an important function at that level, too. The two stages of inspectional reading can both be thought of as anticipations of steps that the reader takes when he reads analyti-

cally. The first stage of inspectional reading—the stage we have called systematic skimming—serves to prepare the analytical reader to answer the questions that must be asked during the first stage of that level. Systematic skimming, in other words, anticipates the comprehension of a book's structure. And the second stage of inspectional reading—the stage we have called superficial reading—serves the reader when he comes to the second stage of reading at the analytical level. Superficial reading is the first necessary step in the interpretation of a book's contents.

Before going on to explain analytical reading, we want to pause for a moment to consider again the nature of reading as an activity. There are certain actions the active or demanding reader must perform in order to read well. We will discuss them in the next chapter.

5

HOW TO BE A DEMANDING READER

The rules for reading yourself to sleep are easier to follow than are the rules for staying awake while reading. Get into bed in a comfortable position, make sure the light is inadequate enough to cause a slight eyestrain, choose a book that is either terribly difficult or terribly boring—in any event, one that you do not really care whether you read or not—and you will be asleep in a few minutes. Those who are experts in relaxing with a book do not have to wait for nightfall. A comfortable chair in the library will do any time.

Unfortunately, the rules for keeping awake do not consist in doing just the opposite. It is *possible* to keep awake while reading in a comfortable chair or even in bed, and people have been known to strain their eyes by reading late in light too dim. What kept the famous candlelight readers awake? One thing certainly—it made a difference to them, a great difference, whether or not they read the book they had in hand.

Whether you manage to keep awake or not depends in large part on your goal in reading. If your aim in reading is to profit from it—to grow somehow in mind or spirit—you have to keep awake. That means reading as actively as possible. It means making an effort—an effort for which you expect to be repaid.

Good books, fiction or nonfiction, deserve such reading.

To use a good book as a sedative is conspicuous waste. To fall asleep or, what is the same, to let your mind wander during the hours you planned to devote to reading for profit—that is, primarily for understanding—is clearly to defeat your own ends.

But the sad fact is that many people who can distinguish between profit and pleasure—between understanding, on the one hand, and entertainment or the mere satisfaction of curiosity, on the other hand—nevertheless fail to carry out their reading plans. They fail even if they know which books give which. The reason is that they do not know how to be demanding readers, how to keep their mind on what they are doing by making it do the work without which no profit can be earned.

The Essence of Active Reading: The Four Basic Questions a Reader Asks

We have already discussed active reading extensively in this book. We have said that active reading is better reading, and we have noted that inspectional reading is always active. It is an effortful, not an effortless, undertaking. But we have not yet gone to the heart of the matter by stating the one simple prescription for active reading. It is: *Ask questions while you read—questions that you yourself must try to answer in the course of reading.*

Any questions? No. The art of reading on any level above the elementary consists in the habit of asking the right questions in the right order. There are four main questions you must ask about any book.*

1. WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AS A WHOLE? You must try to discover the leading theme of the book, and how the author

* These four questions, as stated, together with the discussion of them that follows, apply mainly to expository or nonfiction works. However, the questions, when adapted, apply to fiction and poetry as well. The adaptations required are discussed in Chapters 14 and 15.

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? You cannot answer this question until you have answered the first two. You have to know what is being said before you can decide whether it is true or not. 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.

We will return to these four questions at length in the rest of this book. Stated another way, they become the basic rules of reading with which Part Two is mainly concerned. They are stated here in question form for a very good reason. Reading a book on any level beyond the elementary is essentially an effort on your part to ask it questions (and to answer them to the best of your ability). That should never be forgotten. And that is why there is all the difference in the world between the demanding and the undemanding reader. The latter asks no questions—and gets no answers.

The four questions stated above summarize the whole obligation of a reader. They apply to anything worth reading —a book or an article or even an advertisement. Inspectional reading tends to provide more accurate answers to the first two questions than to the last two, but it nevertheless helps

lines" to get the most out of anything. The rules of reading are a formal way of saying this. But we want to persuade you to "write between the lines," too. Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.

When you buy a book, you establish a property right in it, just as you do in clothes or furniture when you buy and pay for them. But the act of purchase is actually only the prelude to possession in the case of a book. Full ownership of a book only comes when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it—which comes to the same thing—is by writing in it.

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks. Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the thoughts of the author.

Reading a book should be a conversation between you and the author. Presumably he knows more about the subject than you do; if not, you probably should not be bothering with his book. But understanding is a two-way operation; the learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to be willing to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. Marking a book is literally an expression of your differences or your agreements with the author. It is the highest respect you can pay him.

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully. Here are some devices that can be used:

1. UNDERLINING—of major points; of important or forceful statements.

2. VERTICAL LINES AT THE MARGIN—to emphasize a statement already underlined or to point to a passage too long to be underlined.

3. STAR, ASTERISK, OR OTHER DOODAD AT THE MARGIN—to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or dozen most important statements or passages in the book. You may want to fold a corner of each page on which you make such marks or place a slip of paper between the pages. In either case, you will be able to take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it to the indicated page, refresh your recollection.

4. NUMBERS IN THE MARGIN—to indicate a sequence of points made by the author in developing an argument.

5. NUMBERS OF OTHER PAGES IN THE MARGIN—to indicate where else in the book the author makes the same points, or points relevant to or in contradiction of those here marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together. Many readers use the symbol "Cf" to indicate the other page numbers; it means "compare" or "refer to."

6. CIRCLING OF KEY WORDS OR PHRASES—This serves much the same function as underlining.

7. WRITING IN THE MARGIN, OR AT THE TOP OR BOTTOM OF THE PAGE—to record questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raises in your mind; to reduce a complicated discussion to a simple statement; to record the sequence of major points right through the book. The endpapers at the back of the book can be used to make a personal index of the author's points in the order of their appearance.

To inveterate book-markers, the front endpapers are often the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. But that expresses only their financial ownership of the book. The front endpapers are better reserved for a record of your thinking. After finishing the book and making your personal index on the back endpapers, turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page or point by point

(you have already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic outline and an order of parts. That outline will be the measure of your understanding of the work; unlike a bookplate, it will express your intellectual ownership of the book.

The Three Kinds of Note-making

There are three quite different kinds of notes that you will make in your books as well as about them. Which kind you make depends upon the level at which you are reading.

When you give a book an inspectional reading, you may not have much time to make notes in it; inspectional reading, as we have observed, is always limited as to time. Nevertheless, you are asking important questions about a book when you read it at this level, and it would be desirable, even if it is not always possible, to record your answers when they are fresh in your mind.

The questions answered by inspectional reading are: first, what kind of book is it? second, what is it about as a whole? and third, what is the structural order of the work whereby the author develops his conception or understanding of that general subject matter? You may and probably should make notes concerning your answers to these questions, especially if you know that it may be days or months before you will be able to return to the book to give it an analytical reading. The best place to make such notes is on the contents page, or perhaps on the title page, which are otherwise unused in the scheme we have outlined above.

The point to recognize is that these notes primarily concern the structure of the book, and not its substance—at least not in detail. *We therefore call this kind of note-making structural.*

In the course of an inspectional reading, especially of a long and difficult book, you may attain some insights into the

The Importance of Classifying Books

The first rule of analytical reading can be expressed as follows: RULE 1. YOU MUST KNOW WHAT KIND OF BOOK YOU ARE READING, AND YOU SHOULD KNOW THIS AS EARLY IN THE PROCESS AS POSSIBLE, PREFERABLY BEFORE YOU BEGIN TO READ.

You must know, for instance, whether you are reading fiction—a novel, a play, an epic, a lyric—or whether it is an expository work of some sort. Almost every reader knows a work of fiction when he sees it. Or so it seems—and yet this is not always easy. Is *Portnoy's Complaint* a novel or a psychoanalytical study? Is *Naked Lunch* a fiction or a tract against drug abuse, similar to the books that used to recount the horrors of alcohol for the betterment of readers? Is *Gone with the Wind* a romance or a history of the South before and during the Civil War? Do *Main Street* and *The Grapes of Wrath* belong in the category of belles-lettres or are both of them sociological studies, the one concentrating on urban experiences, the other on agrarian life?

All of these, of course, are novels; all of them appeared on the fiction side of the best-seller lists. Yet the questions are not absurd. Just by their titles, it would be hard to tell in the case of *Main Street* and *Middletown* which was fiction and which was social science. There is so much social science in some contemporary novels, and so much fiction in much of sociology, that it is hard to keep them apart. But there is another kind of science, too—physics and chemistry, for instance—in books like *The Andromeda Strain* or the novels of Robert Heinlein or Arthur C. Clarke. And a book like *The Universe and Dr. Einstein,* while clearly not fiction, is almost as "readable" as a novel, and probably more readable than some of the novels of, say, William Faulkner.

An expository book is one that conveys knowledge primarily, "knowledge" being construed broadly. Any book that consists primarily of opinions, theories, hypotheses, or speculations, for which the claim is made more or less explicitly that