

430 Parent Guide Curriculum Update

How to Read a Book

Week 1					
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Week 1, Day 1

How to Read a Book | Chapters 1–2; pp. 222–228

Introductory Comments

Yay! Welcome to a new year of great books and learning! This year has fabulous books, and I am excited to walk through them with you!

As a college prep course, one of the things I hope you take away from this literature class is how to read, and how to digest, a book. Right around the time I went to college, I found *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* by Clifton Fadiman and John Major, and being both a list person and a book person, I set out to read as many of the books as I could. College was a great time for that: looking back, I had more free time in college than at any other point.

But what I found, as I read the classics on my own, was that I had no framework to really process a book. I would get to the end of, say, *The Iliad*, and gasp over the beauty of the final line (with my book in storage, something like, “Thus was the end of Hector, breaker of horses”). I would read the little commentary notes in my *Lifetime Reading Plan*, and move on.

I read Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, but it seemed only like beautiful words, connected in a pleasant flow. Somehow I missed the underlying meaning. The same with *The Brothers Karamazov*: I’m embarrassed to say that I was more concerned with finding out the identity of the murderer than with understanding what Dostoevsky was trying to say.

At one point, too, I realized that I had allowed Fadiman and Major to be my literary tutors without allowing myself the courage to say, “I don’t care that ‘everyone’ thinks this book is a classic. It contains much immorality of the basest

sort, and I am not interested in filling my mind with such.” How did I somehow overlook the reality that some books would take me where I didn’t wish to go?

Which is to say that I have had my eyes run along the pages of a good many great books, so I could call myself reasonably well read. However, as for wrestling with those books, or internalizing their messages, either incorporating or rejecting what they have to say—well, I missed that. And until the flurry of the child-raising years are done, I doubt I will have much time to revisit the classics on a deeper level.

But you have the time! I am thrilled that you are about to start this course, to read not only great classics of American literature, but to practice really thinking about them, figuring out what they say and mean.

So while this book is not the most enticing (as it is devoid of plot), it may be the most important book in this course. I hope it will change the way you read, both for this course and in your future.

This book is challenging. We start the year off with it, because the other books we read will be richer for having read this one.

But please don’t take this book as indicative of either the level of delight, nor the difficulty of reading. Most of the rest of the books this year are a good bit higher on the “delight” scale, and a good bit easier to read.

So don’t be alarmed if some of these assignments might take you a bit longer than a normal English assignment might. (Perhaps you’ll have some extra homework.) Expect it! This is an intensive introduction, and the authors are writing on a high level.

And we won’t read beginning to end; after the groundwork is laid, we’ll put into practice what we’ve learned here with readings in the various types of literature: mostly fiction, but some biography, social studies, and such, too.

To Discuss After You Read

Notes: “[T]oo many facts are often as much of an obstacle to understanding as too few” (4). Interesting that over 60 years later, Malcolm Gladwell, in his fascinating book *Blink*, says the same thing. He gives multiple examples of cases where the more details are known, the more errors come. For example, one professor realized that he could analyze whether a couple was headed for divorce almost immediately. If a couple showed signs of contempt, that was a death knell for the relationship. However, looking at all the other data (how tense they appeared, how angry their voices sounded) did not aid the analysis, but covered it. More information was not helpful.

1. How is reading like a pitcher, catcher, and baseball? [chap. 1] ➔ *the reader is like a ball being thrown, but like a catcher, working in concert with the pitcher-author; both are vital to the game; the main difference is that the ball is entirely caught or missed, while in reading, the reader may catch all, part, or none of what the author intends to express*

2. Is it best to understand a book thoroughly as you read? [chap. 1] ➔ *not necessarily: you may have gained a bit of information, but not an increase in understanding*
3. How do you read for understanding? [chap. 1] ➔ *take the portion of the book you don’t understand and, using the book and your mind, you lift yourself from “a state of understanding less to understanding more” (7)*

For years, I read the Bible and relied on sermons or “experts” to help me understand what I read. To read it, instead, so that it defines itself, was revolutionary for me. How does the Bible define the kingdom of God? Righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost (as the KJV says). If a wife is a crown to her husband, how else is crown used in the Bible? You might try it: a great way to put reading for understanding into practice.

4. What is the difference between learning for entertainment, for instruction, and for understanding? [chap. 1] ➔ *entertainment is pleasurable, and may not have anything to teach; instruction is informative, and the end result is a greater collection of facts; when reading for understanding, the author begins with greater understanding, and the reader with less, though by the end, the reader hopes to have gained most or all of the author’s understanding; this is the most difficult, and most rewarding, of the types of reading*
5. How are medicine, agriculture, and teaching similar? [chap. 1] ➔ *in each, the practitioner helps another: the doctor helps the patient, the farmer the crops and animals, the teacher the student*
6. How do aided and unaided discovery differ? [chap. 1] ➔ **aided:** *uses teaching or instruction; unaided:* *applies to additional research, investigation, and reflection*
7. The remainder of the book will flesh out the four levels of reading, but for now: what are they? [chap. 2] ➔ *elementary, inspectional, analytical, syntopical*
8. What are the rules for reading Lyric Poetry? [pp. 222–228] ➔ *read all the way through without stopping, even if you don’t understand it, and read it aloud*
9. What should the reader watch for, in reading poetry? [pp. 222–228] ➔ *what words pop out at you, whether through rhythm or rhyme, repetition; what is the main conflict (either explicit or implicit); revisit the best poems, and don’t be too concerned about knowing much biographical information about the author*

Emphasis can certainly change the meaning of a sentence. Perhaps my favorite example of this is the sentence, “You spent what for that dress?” Emphasis on *You* means, “The price you paid really surprises me based on what I know about your normal shopping habits” (either because the dress was so expensive, or so cheap). Emphasis on *what* means, “That’s a ridiculous amount of money to pay for that dress.” Emphasis on *that* is about the dress itself:

either the dress is so far superior to its price, or so far inferior, that the speaker is shocked.

Week 1, Day 5

How to Read a Book | Chapter 7

Vocabulary

... a **variorum** edition of a Shakespeare play ... (*having notes by various editors or commentators; including variant readings from manuscripts or earlier editions*)

... stating the **perquisites** and **emoluments** of members of both branches ... (**perquisites**: *also perk; a thing regarded as a special right or privilege enjoyed as a result of one's position; emoluments*: *a salary, fee, or profit from employment or office*)

To Discuss After You Read

25. What is the second rule of analytical reading? ➔ "State the unity of the whole book in a single sentence, or at most a few sentences (a short paragraph)."
26. The third rule? ➔ "Set forth the major parts of the book, and show how these are organized into a whole, by being ordered to one another and to the unity of the whole."
27. How is a good book like a house? ➔ *it is a unity, as a house is one, but has different parts that serve different purposes, as a house has different rooms; to really know a book, you need to know both the unity and the parts*
28. Do most good writers seek to obscure their plan for writing? ➔ *no; they offer help to the reader as much as they can*
29. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) is a familiar story. Note that Jesus tells this parable in response to the Pharisees comment that, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." State the unity of this parable. ➔ *a man's younger son squanders his inheritance. When he's broke, filthy, and starving, he returns home, hoping to be a servant in his father's house. But the father runs to meet him and celebrates his lost son's return. The older son refuses to enter the celebration, but the father comes and pleads with him. (This is my summary: if yours differs somewhat, that is acceptable and expected.)*
30. State the major parts of the parable, in outline form. ➔
 - I. At home. A. The younger son asks for his inheritance. B. The father gives the boys what is theirs. II. Younger Son. A. Wealthy. 1. Wasted money on riotous living. 2. All spent. B. Impoverished. 1. Found a job tending pigs. 2. Envied the pigs their food. C. Plan for Reunion. 1. Realizes life is better in his father's house. 2. Determines to go and ask for a job. III. Reunion. A. Father's Response. 1. Father saw him and had compassion. 2. Father ran to greet him. B. Younger Son's Response: repentant speech. C. Household

Response: robe, ring, shoes, food, party. IV. Older Son's Response. A. Angry, bitter words with father. B. Father entreats him. C. Open ended: no resolution

31. What does it mean that writing should have unity, clarity, and coherence? ➔ **unity**: *forming a complex whole; clarity*: *clear; coherence*: *logical and consistent; in the parable, it was a single story (unity), the reader should not be confused at any of the events (clarity), and the story is easy to imagine, easy to see people behave as each of the three men do (coherence)*
32. What does it mean that expository books "can be much more autonomous" than imaginative works (91)? ➔ *an expository work may have sections that can be analyzed independently, while an imaginative work needs to be seen as a whole, since the author's purpose runs through the whole thing; if you took the Prodigal Son parable and stopped it when the son returns home and the father rejoices, that's a very different story than adding the older son's disapproval*
33. What is the fourth rule? ➔ "Find out what the author's problems were."
34. What was the problem Jesus was answering in his Prodigal Son parable? ➔ *as stated, "Why do you eat with sinners?"*

Week 4, Day 1

How to Read a Book | pp. 198–218

Vocabulary

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his **donné** ... (*the set of assumptions on which a work of fiction or drama proceeds*) [chap. 14]

To Discuss After You Read

1. "Imaginative literature primarily pleases rather than teaches. It is much easier to be pleased than taught, but much harder to know why one is pleased. Beauty is harder to analyze than truth" (199). Do you agree? [chap. 14] ➔ *I certainly agree that it is easier to be pleased than taught! If I'm understanding correctly, I also don't think that it is hard to know why one is pleased (well, I'm not convinced it's harder to know than truth). I like The Westing Game because there is character growth for some, funny interactions throughout, word plays in abundance (and they delight me), a mystery to solve, and so on. But perhaps that level is too facile. Why do I like word plays? Because they're clever. Why do I like clever banter? Because it shows intelligence. Why do I like intelligence? Because intelligence is better than being stupid. Why? Because Proverbs says so*
2. What is the main difference between expository and imaginative literature? [chap. 14] ➔ *expository: tries*

to teach, or “convey knowledge,” and so appeals to the intellect; imaginative shares an actual experience, and so appeals to the imagination

3. “Don’t try to resist the effect that a work of imaginative literature has on you” (200). How might you do this? [chap. 14] ➔ *read without passion or caring, refuse to enter in to the author’s world*
4. What does the imaginative literature author do with ambiguities? [chap. 14] ➔ *embrace them, (expository authors seek to avoid them); thus, “Don’t look for terms, propositions, and arguments in imaginative literature”: these are too precise*
5. “Don’t criticize fiction by the standards of truth and consistency that properly apply to communication of knowledge” (202). Is the parable of the Prodigal Son of less power because it is invented, and not literally, really true? [chap. 14] ➔ *of course not: fiction can be true, even if not factual; in this case, the truth of God’s response to repentant sinners, and the Jewish leaders’ response to Jesus*
6. How do the structural rules play out in fiction? [chap. 14] ➔ *classify the fiction according to type (lyric, play, novel); express the unity by telling the plot in a sentence or two (this stands for the experience the reader is supposed to have); also be able to chart a plot line, to give the details of the plot*
7. How do the interpretive rules play out in fiction? [chap. 14] ➔ *become acquainted with the details of episodes and characters in the story; be at home in the total scene, the backdrop; follow the characters as they act out their story*
8. What are the critical rules for reading fiction? [chap. 14] ➔ *“don’t criticize imaginative writing until you fully appreciate what the author has tried to make you experience”; you either like it or don’t, and should be able to say what you like or dislike, as well as what is good or bad about the book*
9. What makes a work of art “fine”? [chap. 15] ➔ *not that it is refined or finished, but that it is an end in itself (finis in Latin)*
10. How does imaginative literature apply the question, “What of it?” [chap. 15] ➔ *there is no need to apply this question; the reading is enough*
11. What is the ideal way to read a story? [chap. 15] ➔ *quickly, with total immersion, in one sitting*
12. How is a move to a new town similar to starting a new novel? [chap. 15] ➔ *both involve temporary confusion about names and persons, though these become sorted out over time*
13. What are the great epics? [chap. 15] ➔ *Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid, Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost*

Week 7, Day 3

How to Read a Book | pp. 218–222

To Discuss After You Read

14. What is the main addition you need to make when reading a play instead of reading a book? ➔ *the reader needs to come up with stage directions, to pretend to direct the action*
15. What is the essence of tragedy? ➔ *lack of time: if there had been enough time, the problems could have been resolved, but without time, and with fallible characters, the decisions are wrong*
16. Who is person-sized, and who larger than life in Greek tragedy? ➔ *the Chorus, offering commentary, is normal-sized; the protagonists, though, were larger than life*

Week 16, Day 1

How to Read a Book | Chapter 16

To Discuss After You Read

1. Why is history closer to fiction than to science? ➔ *it is difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what happened in the past; thus, to write about it requires some filling in the blanks*
2. What are the three theories of history? ➔ *one: fit history to a general theory or philosophy, such that Providence rules human affairs; two: attempt to report “real” events that occurred, with causes for events and motivations for actions; three: no pattern to history at all, because human actions are too complex to easily define*
3. What does it mean that “History is the story of what led up to now” (236)? ➔ *even as Thucydides wrote an account of the Peloponnesian War and it affected future actions, so history is both the account of what happened, and a record of how the past has affected the present*
4. What are two suggestions for reading history? ➔ *read more than one account, if you can; read to learn how men act at all times and places, especially now*
5. What are the specific questions to ask a history text? ➔ *What is the particular and limited subject the author has set: what will, and will not, be covered? How does the author divide the work?*
6. What are the two forms of criticism the reader can make? ➔ *perhaps the work lacks truth, as in, people don’t behave as the author claims; perhaps the historian isn’t accurate and informed*
7. Why is history important to read? ➔ *because it shows what is possible, both good and bad, helping the reader know what to pursue or avoid; practical, political action results*

8. What are the different varieties of biographies? ➔ *a definitive biography, written some years after the death of the subject, is a scholarly, exhaustive work on a person; an authorized biography is one commissioned by the subject or a sympathetic party, which may make light of errors and sins; an authorized biography is less trust-worthy than a definitive biography; ordinary biographies simply tell the story of a person's life: we hope they are accurate; didactic biographies try to persuade a person to act in a moral way; autobiographies tell of the author's life, and those will gloss over some things, or exaggerate some*
9. Why does *Caveat lector* apply more to contemporary writing than works written hundreds or thousands of years ago? ➔ *"Let the reader beware": a contemporary author wants to influence your understanding: know the bias and take it into account as you read; presumably, the biases of Shakespeare's day no longer apply (different monarch, different political parties), and, hence, those writings are less likely to influence you without your knowledge*

Week 17, Day 2

How to Read a Book | Chapter 20

To Discuss After You Read

Note: I value the comments in this chapter as they relate to research. However, I find it hard to imagine that I would ever undertake an exhaustive study of various topics as they relate to, say, "Angels" (one of the *Syntopicon* ideas). Perhaps that's a sign of an incurious mind; at the very least, my mind is not curious the way Adler and Van Doren are curious. I suppose for a topic like "angels," I don't much care what famous folks through history have discussed. I believe the Bible, and can get an idea of angels from there, but I don't need to know more than what the Bible says.

9. To read synoptically, you need to know that more than one book is relevant to a topic. What is the second requirement? ➔ *knowing what books should be read*
10. Once you have assembled a quantity of books for research, what should you do next? ➔ *inspect them: go over the table of contents and indexes, and skim the chapters to determine which titles are actually appropriate for your topic and which says something important about the subject; read some books faster than others, so you don't waste time on those less important*
11. How does one read synoptically? ➔ *do not treat each book as an individual (as you would analytically); instead, find the relevant passages to your topic, establish your own terms (for example, "food" in the broadest sense means something you eat, but if you read books by a vegetarian, a fast food company, an organic farmer, an Inuit ("Eskimo"), a Hawaiian, and a rancher, these would not all be speaking of the same thing; as a writer, what definition will you use for "food"?), determine what questions to ask*

(for example, "what should a person eat?"), define the issues (some of the sides of the question of meat consumption: all meat is harmful to health, all meat is good for health, only meat that's grass-fed or raised on soy-free feed is good for health, only a small quantity of meat is good for health, different bodies need different amounts of meat for health), and analyze the discussion (what is my position on the various opinions about meat-eating?)

Notes: "It would be dogmatic, not dialectal, if, on any of the important issues that it identified and analyzed, it asserted or tried to prove the truth or falsity of any view" (315). Basically, the authors want logical discussion of ideas and opinions (how thoroughly modern! how almost incomprehensible to me, living in a post-modern world!). The authors shy away from any truth statements, as they mention, when they claim that they are not looking for final answers. Personally, I like final answers to some things.

The authors suggest that a reader should look at all sides and take no sides, to be as objective as possible. Here, too, I personally disagree. I go to the Bible first, believing that Jesus has the words of eternal life, believing that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. If the Bible says something about progress ("There is nothing new under the sun," perhaps?), I go to that first, and use that as my foundation.

The *Syntopicon*, now out of print, was a decade-long project undertaken by Adler for the Encyclopedia Britannica. It required 400,000 man hours to compile and cost over \$2 million dollars. Adler hoped it would be as transformative to culture as the dictionary (hence, its inclusion in this book). Clearly, it wasn't as useful, nor as popular.

Week 17, Day 5

How to Read a Book | Chapter 21, skim Appendix A

To Discuss After You Read

51. Does informational reading stretch your mind? ➔ *when finished, your brain is more full of facts than it was before, but your mind itself has not been challenged or improved; you have more knowledge, but not more wisdom*
52. What books should you want to practice your reading on? ➔ *books that make demands on the reader*
53. What are the two rewards for reading a good book? ➔ *first, improvement in reading skill; second, wisdom about the world and a better understanding of yourself*
54. The authors claim there are three types of books. What are they? ➔ **first:** informational or entertainment: most books are these; **second:** good books, that teach how to read and how to live, but that are grasped on the first reading, so a return to the book is disappointing; **third:** great books, that satisfy the first time reading, and on a return, satisfy again, on a deeper level, as if they have grown with you

55. According to this chapter, how are the mind and body different? ➔ *the body develops to a certain point, then stops, while the mind has the possibility of expanding until senescence; the threat, though, is that the mind can atrophy if not exercised*

Appendix A

To Discuss After You Read

56. “There is nothing here that is so recondite as to be esoteric” (338). Do you know what this means? ➔ *none of the books listed are so difficult to understand that they are intended for only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest; basically, all of the books should be readable by a person of reasonable intelligence*

Note: Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the books included in this list of great books. Perhaps, as you read, you’ll find it a book you hope to return to throughout your life; perhaps you’ll read it once and feel you have conquered it sufficiently. I appreciate the authors’ insistence that the great books vary somewhat from person to person. I agree. I hope you will find those great books that you will eagerly return to.

Week 35, Day 2

How to Read a Book | Chapter 19

To Discuss After You Read

9. What is social science? ➔ *anthropology, economics, politics, sociology; also much of the writing in law, education, and public administration, as well as business and social service and psychology*
10. What is the main difficulty of reading social science? ➔ *it is imprecise; “much social science is a mixture of science, philosophy, and history, often with some fiction thrown in for good measure” (295); ask “what kind of book is this?” and the answer won’t be obvious; “if he is able to say what strands go to make up the book he is reading, he will have moved a good way toward understanding it” (296) ■*