

430 Student Guide Curriculum Update

How to Read a Book

Week 1					
Date:	Day 1 ¹	Day 2 ²	Day 3 ³	Day 4 ⁴	Day 5 ⁵
How to Read a Book	chaps. 1–2; pp. 222–228	chaps. 3–4	chap. 5	chap. 6	chap. 7

Week 4					
Date:	Day 1 ¹⁶	Day 2 ¹⁷	Day 3 ¹⁸	Day 4 ¹⁹	Day 5 ²⁰
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Week 7					
Date:	Day 1 ³¹	Day 2 ³²	Day 3 ³³	Day 4 ³⁴	Day 5 ³⁵
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Week 16					
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How to Read a Book	chap. 16				

Week 17					
Date:	Day 1 ⁸¹	Day 2 ⁸²	Day 3 ⁸³	Day 4 ⁸⁴	Day 5 ⁸⁵
How to Read a Book	chap. 20				chap. 21, skim Appendix A

Week 35					
Date:	Day 1 ¹⁷¹	Day 2 ¹⁷²	Day 3 ¹⁷³	Day 4 ¹⁷⁴	Day 5 ¹⁷⁵
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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] ➔
2. Is it best to understand a book thoroughly as you read? [chap. 1] ➔
3. How do you read for understanding? [chap. 1] ➔

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] ➔
5. How are medicine, agriculture, and teaching similar? [chap. 1] ➔
6. How do aided and unaided discovery differ? [chap. 1] ➔
7. The remainder of the book will flesh out the four levels of reading, but for now: what are they? [chap. 2] ➔
8. What are the rules for reading Lyric Poetry? [pp. 222–228] ➔
9. What should the reader watch for, in reading poetry? [pp. 222–228] ➔

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 ...

... stating the **perquisites** and **emoluments** of members of both branches ...

To Discuss After You Read

25. What is the second rule of analytical reading? ➔
26. The third rule? ➔
27. How is a good book like a house? ➔
28. Do most good writers seek to obscure their plan for writing? ➔
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. ➔

30. State the major parts of the parable, in outline form. ➔
31. What does it mean that writing should have unity, clarity, and coherence? ➔
32. What does it mean that expository books “can be much more autonomous” than imaginative works (91)? ➔
33. What is the fourth rule? ➔
34. What was the problem Jesus was answering in his Prodigal Son parable? ➔

Week 4, Day 1

How to Read a Book | pp. 198–218

Vocabulary

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donné* ... [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] ➔
2. What is the main difference between expository and imaginative literature? [chap. 14] ➔
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] ➔
4. What does the imaginative literature author do with ambiguities? [chap. 14] ➔
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] ➔
6. How do the structural rules play out in fiction? [chap. 14] ➔
7. How do the interpretive rules play out in fiction? [chap. 14] ➔
8. What are the critical rules for reading fiction? [chap. 14] ➔
9. What makes a work of art “fine”? [chap. 15] ➔
10. How does imaginative literature apply the question, “What of it?” [chap. 15] ➔
11. What is the ideal way to read a story? [chap. 15] ➔
12. How is a move to a new town similar to starting a new novel? [chap. 15] ➔
13. What are the great epics? [chap. 15] ➔

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? ➔
15. What is the essence of tragedy? ➔
16. Who is person-sized, and who larger than life in Greek tragedy? ➔

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? ➔
2. What are the three theories of history? ➔
3. What does it mean that “History is the story of what led up to now” (236)? ➔
4. What are two suggestions for reading history? ➔
5. What are the specific questions to ask a history text? ➔
6. What are the two forms of criticism the reader can make? ➔
7. Why is history important to read? ➔
8. What are the different varieties of biographies? ➔
9. Why does *Caveat lector* apply more to contemporary writing than works written hundreds or thousands of years ago? ➔

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? ➔

10. Once you have assembled a quantity of books for research, what should you do next? ➔

11. How does one read synoptically? ➔

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? ➔
52. What books should you want to practice your reading on? ➔
53. What are the two rewards for reading a good book? ➔
54. The authors claim there are three types of books. What are they? ➔
55. According to this chapter, how are the mind and body different? ➔

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? ➔

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? ➔
10. What is the main difficulty of reading social science? ➔ ■