The Four Levels of Reading:

Ways to read well

Prefatory Note: This resource is based on *How to Read a Book: The classic guide to intelligent reading* by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren (Touchstone, 2014).

Level 1: Elementary Reading

Elementary reading is concerned with vocabulary: understanding the words or phrases on the page as pieces of individual meaning. When students first begin to read, they must start at this level – of recognizing words, determining their meaning, and figuring out what the sentence is trying to say based on the words of which it is made up. This level of reading may seem so trivial (or, elementary) that it is not worth talking about. In fact, the act of deciphering words and determining their meaning within the text never ceases to be important for the reader. No matter how long you've been reading, any new words or words used in a new way demand your attention.

Here are three suggestions for building your vocabulary:

Try to figure out the meaning of a word in context. Do not immediately reach for a dictionary when you stumble on a new word; try to understand it in the context it was written.

Be aware of a word's contextual definition. For instance, in common parlance "reference" can refer to someone who can vouch for you in a job application, or an allusion to a book or movie; in the field of Library Science, it refers to a specific function of a library. When you are reading, especially in the literature of a technical field, be attentive to when a word may be referring to something more specific than that word's general use.

Research words. If you are dealing with a text that uses more than a few unfamiliar or context-specific words, take the time to look them up, and perhaps write a succinct definition in the margins of your text. Refer to the definition regularly as you encounter the word to build it into your vocabulary.

These suggestions refer to building your vocabulary as you read. As you have time, you can also expand your vocabulary through reading widely (i.e. outside of what is assigned, either by reading supplemental readings in your field of study or just reading books for their own sake). You can also partake of specific vocabulary building tools online, or by scanning through discipline-specific dictionaries (or, if you're a particularly brave soul, a general dictionary). I would, however, caution you against thesauruses. Words with related means often carry specific connotations. Be mindful of these shades of meaning; look up a synonym before using it in your paper.

Level 2: Inspectional Reading

Inspectional reading is related to elementary reading; as the first level is about deciphering words in a sentence, the second level is about deciphering propositions in an argument. "Argument" here doesn't refer to a specific argument necessarily, but the overall argument of the text. Every text has an argument, whether it's a short essay, academic book, or a poem – although the level of the argument's complexity expands with the kind of text being written. But in another sense, inspectional reading is the opposite of elementary reading because the goal is to only get the general meaning of the text rather than understanding it in all its specificity.

In other words, inspectional reading is about skimming the text for its meaning. This kind of reading can be accomplished in two ways:

Pre-Reading: Pre-reading is, in essence, the reading that comes before the reading. There are many elements of a book, article, or other resource that hint at its contents before we begin at page 1. Most books provide us with clues on the cover: a title, subtitle, description, and blurbs from outside reviewers or endorsers. And just inside the text you might find a preface or introduction from the author or another authority on the subject, or a short description on the inside of the dust cover. Most articles begin with an abstract. While these elements may feel exterior to the text, they can provide us with enough information to begin understanding the text's argument.

Two other more organized tools for pre-reading are the table of contents and the index. If written correctly, a table of contents will tell you exactly what propositions the book will make and the order of its argument in a succinct format. And if you wish to know more about the contents, the index will tell you all the people, places, texts, and subjects mentioned at any length in the book (and the amount of page numbers beside each entry will tell you how heavily each item is treated). If you need more explanation about a particular chapter or index item's contents, read passages from the correlated pages to figure it out.

Superficial Reading: The word "superficial" may make you uncomfortable – but understand that superficiality in this instance means reading the text looking only for the highest levels of organization rather than attending to the details. There are two techniques to accomplish superficial reading. One is to read only the headings and topic sentences (each paragraph's first sentence) of a text. If written well, those elements will hold the entire argument of the text in its superficial form. The second technique is to read the text as quickly as possible. Without stopping to look up any word, write anything down, or even try to mentally process a difficult sentence, take in the whole text. What you will have by the end is only the most basic understanding of what the text is asserting. And for this level of reading, that is all you need.

Level 3: Analytical Reading

Analytical reading is the kind of reading you are most likely to think of when you hear the word "reading," and is also the kind your professors are most likely to want you to accomplish with an assigned text (they will normally clearly tell you if they want you to perform an inspectional or syntopical reading). Analysis moves beyond inspection by evaluating the arguments found in the text. Evaluation demands an analysis of the argument's details, evidence, and form; thus analytical reading demands a full reading of a given text so that the analysis can be considered complete. These steps, drawn directly from *How to Read a Book*, are briefly outlined below.

Step 1: Find the organization and goals.

Categorize the text. Figure out the genre or category of the text; it will determine how the text is organized and how it proceeds. Also figure out if the book is theoretical or practical. In other words, is the book asking you to change your thinking concerning a given idea, or is it telling you how to do something, or even calling you to act upon its recommendations?

State the unity of the text. Figure out what the text is about at the most basic level. Perhaps the simplest way to figure this out is to derive it from the title; you should, however, attempt to state the text's big idea in your own words. What is the one thing the one topic or idea you would say the text is about if someone asked you?

State the major elements of the text. As you are attempting to state the big idea, you should be identifying the important sections or movements of the book. What are the major topics the author writes about to get at his big idea? What elements of the text, if omitted, would render the text incomplete or inconclusive?

State the problems the author is attempting to solve. The big idea is normally an attempt to address a problem in the author's mind, normally based on a tension or problem in the field they are writing for. What is that problem? How does the author perceive the problem?

Step 2: Interpret the author's meaning and conclusions.

Understand the terms of the text. Authors choose their words carefully. The terms may come from the standard vocabulary of the field of study, or from the author's own research and attempt to circumscribe their argument. In any case, pay careful attention to the words that form the essence of the author's argument.

Understand the important propositions of the text. A text is made up of individual propositions that work together to form the author's big idea. Which ones are most pertinent to the topic at hand? Which sentences (that is, the author's words, not your own) make up the most important propositions in the text?

Understand the arguments of the text. The propositions, when strung together, constitute arguments. A single proposition does not necessarily make an argument – you must follow the order of propositions to find the novel assertions an author is making. These multi-step assertions are the author's arguments.

Find the author's solutions. After you have identified the propositions and the way they work together to form arguments, you can point towards the author's thesis, the solution to the problem you determined at the end of Step 1. You should try, as with the propositions and arguments above, to find the author's solution *in their own words.* Once you find the solutions, you can move on to Step 3.

Step 3: Critique the text.

As your reading skill rises, you will be able to accomplish the first two steps simultaneously. The third step, however, must be accomplished after the first two.

Step 3A: Employ intellectual etiquette.

- Understand what the writer is saying before you agree, disagree, or suspend judgement. That is, fully accomplish the first two steps.
- Disagree with reasonableness, not contention. Seek the truth, not the author's harm.
- Give reasons for any judgements made on the work.

Step 3B: Employ proper criteria for criticism.

The author is uninformed. This criticism asserts that the author is missing major facts, data, or knowledge that has malformed their assertions and conclusions. If you can show that something is substantively missing from the author's argument that should be there, you can validly make this criticism.

The author is misinformed. This criticism asserts that the author has used incorrect facts, data, or knowledge that has falsified their assertions and conclusions. If you can show that something is verifiably false in the author's argument, you can validly make this criticism.

The author is illogical or incoherent. Unlike the first two, this is not a criticism of the content of the author's argument but of its form. This criticism asserts that the author has argued outside the rules of logic, making assertions and conclusions that do not logically follow or that are not properly structured. If you can show a disconnection in logical steps or misuse of logical structure in the author's argument, you can validly make this criticism.

The author's analysis is incomplete. This criticism asserts that the author has not reached a proper conclusion based on the scope of their argument. The logic has not been followed to a conclusion, or the content has not all been fully considered in the assertions or conclusions. Unlike all the above, this criticism does not mean that the author is wrong. It only means that you must suspend judgment until a complete argument is made.

Level 4: Syntopical Reading

Syntopical reading is at the fourth level because during the process of syntopical reading you will employee elementary, inspectional, and analytical reading techniques. The name comes from *The Syntopicon*, a collection of the most important ideas and readings in Western Literature, also created by Mortimer Adler. But don't let Adler's reference limit what this level of reading means. The essence of syntopical reading is bringing together a collection of texts on a topic in order to evaluate the tensions and agreements of those texts. If analytical reading is evaluating a single text's arguments, syntopical reading is evaluating many arguments into one over-arching argument about an idea.

The important skill unique to this level of reading is comparison. Comparison is not the opposite of contrast; it *includes* contrast. To compare texts is to find what is similar or different about them and contradictory or complimentary between them. Before this can be done, however, you must create a bibliography. That is, you must employ inspectional reading on many texts to find the ones you will read syntopically. Once completed, identify the passages in each text that are most relevant to your topic. During your inspectional reading, you should create questions that will guide your research. As you begin to find contradictions and correlations between passages, questions will be answered and new questions will form. Find the questions that will allow you make conclusions.

Accomplishing syntopical reading will require at least two considerations. First, you must bring your author to terms, both literally and figuratively. Literally, you must find the words important to each author's arguments and make sure that you understand how they relate. You cannot discuss multiple authors until you bring them to terms. Figuratively, you must find how authors' arguments agree with each other even when they say things in different ways, use different terms or make different arguments. What is most commonly perceived as true amongst writers may be the most revealing aspect of your analysis. Second, you must define the issues of disagreement. This consideration is the opposite of the first. You must be able to describe how terminology sets authors at odds with one another and show how their arguments and evidence lead to opposing conclusions.

Having employed elementary and inspectional reading to get at the core of each author and to map out the topography of the topic, you can begin to analyze the array of arguments. To be clear, syntopical reading can end before analysis; sometimes all you are instructed to do is be able to explain the field of literature surrounding a given topic. But when analysis is expected, it must be preceded by the first two steps. I will not reexplain analysis since it discussed at length in Level 3, but I will only point out that a single text has been replaced with the bibliography of texts – the consolidation of relevant passages – that must be read with careful attention to the contradictory and complimentary viewpoints it holds.