HOW TO READ A BOOK

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Begin at the beginning. What's the **title**? Although publishers sometimes insist on control over titles for marketing reasons, authors *choose* titles; they think hard about them, and usually they mean something. Who is the **author**? Do you already know anything about her/him? What can you find out by looking at the back cover, or the list of other books the author has written? **When** was the book published? What was going on when the book was written? What has gone on *since* the book was written? (You can't fault Thomas Jefferson for not knowing about Freud. Likewise, you can't fault books written in 1987 for not considering more recent scholarship.) Who **published** the book? Most publishers specialize in books on particular topics, or in books written from similar points of view. Is the publisher a university press or a commercial publisher, and what does that tell you about the intended audience?

NEVER skip *any* of the pages at the beginning: **acknowledgments, prefaces, and introductions**. Acknowledgments in academic books often reveal where the author was trained; sometimes they make a point of distinguishing between the ideas of the authors and those of their professors. You can learn here who the author's friends are. Once you've begun to read widely in a given field, you will begin to recognize names. You will start to see networks of people who talk to one another, and can begin to understand why the author thinks as she or he does. (It's like the inserts in CDs that list all the people who play on each other's albums: these folks make similar sounds because they are all making and talking about music together, in a variety of contexts.) An added bonus from reading acknowledgments: you may learn something about authors' personal lives.

Introductions are crucial in a more direct way. A *good* introduction will state the problem to be considered, often referring to work that has been done in the field previously. It will demonstrate the importance of the problem and indicate where work needs to be done and how this particular book fits in. It will lay out the questions to be explored and the assumptions on which the book is based. And, probably most important, it is the single most likely place to find a direct and concise statement of the ***thesis*** of the book--that one sentence which the book is ultimately designed to demonstrate.

STOP!!
THINK!!!!

Now you should make your first attempt to ask all the questions you will keep in mind while reading the rest of the book. Why was the book written? What is it about? Does

the book's project seem worthwhile--did the author convince you that the topic needs further exploration? Did you find a thesis? What is it? What are the author's assumptions--about the topic, about the audience, about the meaning of life and the essential nature of human beings? What questions does the book ask in order to get at the topic? Are they the central questions to be asked of the material? If it is a history book, what implicit ideas about change over time underlie the questions, the assumptions, and the thesis? What does that theory of change imply for the present and the future? And, if all the author promises in the introduction turns out to be done well, where will you be then? (This last question involves both your own purposes in reading the book and how well the author has convinced you of the implications and critical nature of his or her work.)

Examine the **table of contents**. Think about whether the organization expressed there seems like a reasonable way to go about answering the author's questions and demonstrating the thesis. Also try to figure out what will be the most important chapters or sections in the book--both from the standpoint of the author's goals and from your own point of view.

STOP AGAIN!

If all this has been hard, you may not be at fault. Unfortunately, some books don't have good introductions. Still, this is the time to figure out another way to determine the thesis, the major questions, the assumptions, the point of view. You might reread the introduction. You might go straight to the last chapter to see what the author claims to have demonstrated. You may want to do a quick skim of the whole book. Whatever way you choose, DO AS MUCH OF THIS AS YOU CAN BEFORE GOING ON TO THE BODY OF THE BOOK.

It will save you time in the long run. It simply isn't worth your time to sift through the author's argument and evidence when you don't know what it is evidence *of*, or what it is an argument *about*. If you have a really solid idea of what the book is trying to do, you will find that the actual time you have to spend on the text is dramatically reduced. Otherwise, it will be like traveling unfamiliar back roads without a map: every now and then you may come upon a sign, but you won't know how to interpret it. Many readers panic when they get lost in a book; they shut the book, or just try to ignore it and muddle through. Instead, when you are confused about something, PAY ATTENTION. You may have found a difficult point that is worth spending some time to work through, or you may need to go back to the beginning and try again to figure out what the book is about.

Assuming you have done all this map-making--and you should have made notes on all of this--go on to the **text** of the book. In addition to learning something about the topic, your task here is to determine whether the author has done a sound and convincing job of demonstrating the thesis and answering the questions.

What kinds of sources does the author use? To answer this question you will have to look at the **bibliography** and **footnotes**. Although footnotes do interrupt your reading, they fulfill an essential function. You might want to make a general practice of looking at all of them before or after reading a chapter rather than stopping every time you see a number, but you must keep open the *possibility* of stopping. In other words, when something seems particularly interesting--or particularly fishy--the best way to follow it up may be to ask where the author got that idea or fact. Is the footnote to a primary or a secondary source, and do you know anything about that source? Did the author go to reasonable sources in order to answer his or her questions? Eventually, in doing extensive research on a particular topic, the bibliography and footnotes will start to indicate that you are becoming familiar with the major works and sources; people will be using and citing books and authors you've heard of, or read.

Back in the **text**, how does the author *use* sources? Are they simply brought out as artillery, as examples for a point that the author wanted to make, or does she or he seem to have examined them with sensitivity to find what was really there? Do quotations and statistics actually demonstrate the point that the author claims they demonstrate, or can you draw different conclusions from them? And, if you can, does the author deal with these paradoxes? Are the promises made in the introduction, or implied in the table of contents, actually fulfilled? Are the author's original questions answered to your satisfaction? How does the author use illustrations? Do they support the points being made in the text? Do they make additional points? Do the captions give you the information you need to understand the image?

Read the **last chapter, conclusion, or afterword** as carefully as you did the introduction, even if you already did it when you were mapping out your approach to the book. Ask ALL of those questions again. Your job is not done when you reach the last page! If the author did not accomplish what she or he set out to do, what *did* get accomplished? What have you learned about methods as well as about content?

Good luck. This kind of reading is hard work, but it's a lot less confusing and boring than swimming around in a book that you never quite understand.