

A Book Report on:

"How to Read A Book"

Authors: Mortimer J. Adler & Charles Van Doren

by Paul Harris

Throughout my entire professional career I have been involved in numerous discussions about many different topics. At times I found I agreed with the speaker, at times I felt that I totally disagreed with the speaker and most of the time I was somewhere in between. On what basis was I making this decision? At what point would I know that I knew enough about the other person and where they were coming from to make the decision to agree, disagree or suspend judgment? How many times have I heard others' state, "I totally disagree!" and when asked "why" or asked to give reasons, they revert to emotions or to personal remarks.

Early this year during a year or so long dialogue on two different electronic bulletin boards, one run by Barry Cohen and Greg Kitchener and the other run by Walt Mayo, Greg Kitchener suggested I look at an old book entitled, "How to Read a Book" (HTRAB) by Adler and Van Doren. A great deal of frustration had accumulated in many of the BBS participants. No matter how hard we tried to communicate with several of the people we were not able to make any headway.

HTRAB has provided me with some very powerful communication tools to help me know how to go about obtaining a fuller understanding of what others are trying to communicate as well as helping me budget my time better, to read more efficiently, to know more of my core understandings and to have the tools to turn inside to examine the foundation of my knowledge of vision. I will attempt to share some of these with you in hopes that you will benefit as I did from the tremendous insights of Adler and Van Doren.

The first thing I found interesting was the dilemma set up by the title of the book itself. This was a book about how to read a book. Thus, to learn how to read a book one must already possess the ability to read a book. This was not a trivial exercise or a joke but a real problem. The authors stated that their assumption is that one must possess the ability to read at least at the ninth grade level for the reader to grasp the idea of the book itself. I suppose that below this level some other instructional materials would be needed.

The first thing they mentioned was that most people only know how to read by beginning at the beginning and reading until they read the end. This is called Elementary Reading. They state that most people never get off this type of reading. For books such as thrillers or whodunits this is how they should be read, at least at first. However, I was most interested in the type of reading I do when I think that an author has something to offer me in my understanding of vision and visual behavior.

The other three types of reading are Inspectional Reading, Analytical Reading and Syntopic Reading. The authors state emphatically that less than 1% of all books published are worthy of being read analytically. How then should one decide which books deserve to be read analytically and which should be given their 15 minutes never to be opened again? Inspectional reading is the process whereby one would attack their "to-be-read" stack to decide which books should be filed and which books should be read analytically. HTRAB is a "how-to" for exactly what to do to read at this level. The truth is that too much time is spent reading fluff at medium speed. Find out quickly which things are valuable enough to devote the time to and get on with things.

What I have found here is that this is what I was doing when I was in a book store. When I enter a book store I look for the section that contains books that I have already read. I then will look several shelves either side of my landmarks. I look at the title and author of the book. If it strikes my fancy I then open the book and read the blurbs on the jacket. At times this has been enough to decide to buy particularly when one of the quotations about the book in hand is by an author I know. Usually, I then look at the titles of each chapter and the subtitles in the table of contents. If my interest is still high, but I do not have enough information to know if this book is worthy of being purchased, then I begin to read the forward and the preface. I may "dip" in to a few sections here and there through the book to get a sense of the author's main objective. Alder and Van Doren's point is never spend more than 15 minutes in this phase.

Once you decide a book is really worth reading, how do you go about it? The major part of the book is concerned with analytical reading. It was rewarding to me that in many ways much of the methodology that they were suggesting was precisely what I was already doing. I have always felt that for me to understand a book I need to own the book. I need to feel free to highlight, to underline and to write in the margins.

When I read, I read fairly slowly, or rather, I should just say slowly. It's an interesting paradox that I work with people in visual training whose

goal is to read faster while maintaining high level comprehension. My personal reading speed is one of the slowest I know. I am capable of reading 900 words a minute as a result of a speed reading course I took while in optometry school. However, right now I don't devote any time to reading material that could be read this way or that should be read this way.

Much of what I read I read with my internal thinking processes turned on. To give the object concepts time to resonate and to relate one to another, I find that using vision to take in new data is just a small part of the process of reading. In HTRAB Adler and Van Doren use the Declaration of Independence as an example. They state that, "We doubt that there is anyone who can read those first two paragraphs at a rate much faster than 20 words a minute. Indeed, individual words in the famous second paragraph-words like 'inalienable,' 'rights,' 'liberty,' 'happiness,' 'consent,' 'just powers' - are worth dwelling over, puzzling about, considering at length. Properly read, for full comprehension, those first two paragraphs of the Declaration might require days, or weeks, or even year."

This helped me feel "off the hook." The feeling I got when reading the above section was as freeing as when Bernie Saltysiak told me that I didn't have to have everything perfectly clear all the time. Bernie's statement helped me know it was OK to not wear compensatory lenses for my uncompensated hyperopia. I learned that, even though I could look at the world, let go into my buffer and blur the outside world, this did not mean that I had to wear compensatory lenses all the time! Adler and Van Doren stated that not only was there nothing wrong with my reading but that I had had sense enough to slow down to work towards understanding and not just read the words at an artificial level to say I have read them.

How many times do we see our patients who do the work, who do the reading, who can honestly say, "I read the assignment," having no understanding whatsoever of what they have read. They did mechanically read. They pushed their eyes over the words but no object concepts were triggered off. No relations were made. No understanding was communicated. Through visual training we provide them the opportunity to get the whole system into the act with less effort and energy. The irony is that at some level their reading may slow down and do so dramatically. However, for the first time they are in direct contact with the author's message!

The most important section, to me, was the rules about how to formally carry on a conversation with the author. This begins with coming

to terms with the author. By this they mean that a reader or a listener has certain guidelines that must be followed before one is able to say, "I disagree." The steps are critical in setting the stage for normal flow of ideas and concepts and gives one a method for being critical. For a few years at this meeting, Bob Kraskin and Paul Lewis would have each presenter give his or her definition of vision before they gave their paper as a way of helping the audience come to terms with the presenter. HTRAB has taught me that this is an ongoing process of coming to terms with an author or a presenter.

The authors explain the difference between a term and a word. A word is exactly that -- a word such as "vision" or "sight." The term *vision* is triggered or associated with the word vision and with many other words. The term *vision* as used by behavioral optometry has not been fully and adequately shared with many people, including many optometrists. They know the word vision but associate it with their own concepts, ideas or notions about *vision*! We may use other words to describe our term *vision* and that is to be expected. Many of our problems arise with the fact that we do not have a one-to-one correspondence between words and terms. I can recall numerous conversations with Greg Kitchener about how does an author or presenter ever know how much to include in the hopes that the full understanding is conveyed. Adler and Van Doren put much of the onus on the reader and listener.

The result of reading a book, or listening to a presentation will have one of 3 outcomes if done correctly. One can read or listen, come to understanding, and state "I agree." One can read or listen, come to understanding and state "I disagree" or one can listen or read and say, "So what!" Adler and Van Doren state the rules for doing any of the 3 above in a format that highly encourages staying involved with the content of the discussion and moving away from posturing, egos and dealing with emotions related to the content.

The authors quote Sir Frances Bacon, "Read not to contradict and confute: nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider." They also state that the reader must be actively involved in working towards meaning. They state that, "teachability is an extremely active virtue. No one is really teachable who does not freely exercise his power of independent judgment." In addition, they state, "Wonder is the beginning of wisdom in learning from books as well as from nature." When I pick up a new book I am hoping that this book will help me answer some of the things that I am wondering about at that moment.

How do you know if you have come to terms with the author? A simple guideline would be the following. If you can state the authors point wholly in your own words without parroting back the author's exact words, then you have it. If you have to resort to restating exactly what the author says in the author's own words, then you probably haven't come to terms with the author. They state, "If you cannot get away at all from the author's words, it shows that *only words* have passed from him to you, *not thought or knowledge*. You know his words, not his mind. He was trying to communicate knowledge, and all you received was words."

In the section entitled, "Criticizing a Book Fairly," they state, "Do not begin to talk back until you have listened carefully and are sure you understand." They continue with a rule that they stated in all capital letters that goes, "YOU MUST BE ABLE TO SAY, WITH REASONABLE CERTAINTY, 'I UNDERSTAND,' BEFORE YOU CAN SAY ANY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING THINGS: 'I AGREE' OR 'I DISAGREE' OR 'I SUSPEND JUDGMENT.'"

They spend much time laying out the groundwork for how to disagree and, if you are a presenter or author, how to deal with those who disagree. Their rule number ten is "When you disagree, do so reasonably, and not disputatiously or contentiously." They mention that one must view disagreements as all potentially being resolved. If you cannot view them as being resolvable they will not get resolved!

They stated that "Opinion is unsupported judgment." I took this to mean that if I am about to say, "In my opinion..." it may mean that I do not have a firm footing on which to proceed and I ought to do a bit more research and reading and work. "Agreement about the use of words is the indispensable condition for genuine agreement or disagreement about the facts being discussed." "Good controversy should not be a quarrel about assumptions."

Finally for me, the crown jewel of the book were the rules whereby one is allowed to disagree. One can only say, "I understand but I disagree" on four grounds: 1. The author is uninformed and you are prepared to demonstrate it. 2. The author is misinformed and you can demonstrate it. 3. The author's arguments are illogical and you can point out the break down in logical steps. 4. The author's analysis is incomplete. Unless you understand and you can show the deficiency, Adler and Van Doren state we must agree with the author. If we "feel" we disagree its not OK. We must agree if we cannot demonstrate any of the 4 above.

We do have the option of saying "so what!" However, they state that we owe it to ourselves and to the authors that if we have invested a great deal of time in coming to terms that we should take it to some real outcome. The appropriate times to suspend judgment or say "so what" are when you began the book thinking it was about topic "A" that you cared about and found out once you got into it that it was really about topic "D" that has little or no bearing on the matter at hand. You decide to leave the topic and move on to another book or presentation.

The last type of reading they discuss is called syntopic reading. This is the kind of reading we do in our field when we look at many books on a single subject and synthesize something more grand than any of the authors alone dealt with. Although they present this more in the concept of how one would go about writing a thesis, I feel that it is what we do with some modification. We perform syntopic reading only over our entire career rather than for a single project. My topic is vision and life and this book has greatly helped me know how to go about obtaining more knowledge and understanding so that I can do a better job clinically and in my teaching.

Thank you Greg Kitchener for recommending this book.