

Guidance on Reading

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Many people do not properly understand what they read. Reading has its own principles and disciplines, and unless the reader observes them, he may lose his way in understanding the text before him.

One of the simplest of these principles is to read calmly and attentively. Hasty reading leaves little room for proper comprehension, for grasping the content, reflecting upon it, analyzing it, and arriving at the understanding intended by the author.

Likewise, neglecting punctuation marks—such as periods, commas, quotation marks, and the like—and failing to pause where necessary can lead the reader to conclusions never intended by the writer. Meanings become confused and intermixed. Such reading often produces mistaken results and may even end up contradicting what the author actually wished to say. Consequently, the reader burdens the text with meanings it does not contain and attributes to the writer thoughts that never crossed his mind—sometimes even the exact opposite of his point of view.

Avoid reading from a preconceived position, as when you prepare yourself to attack what you assume to be the author's stance because it differs from your own. In such a case, you read merely to argue and dispute, without paying attention to what the text itself is saying. You project onto it your own prior ideas and convictions, understanding the text according to your own preferences, or in a partial or distorted manner. This kind of reading is deeply flawed because it prevents you from seeking the truth.

Your prior attitude toward the author also plays a negative and often unconscious role in your understanding of the text. You reject or classify it beforehand simply because it comes from a certain person whom you dislike, disagree with, or oppose.

Such an attitude cuts you off from truly understanding the other person as he presents and defines himself. You remain enclosed within your own fortress,

hurling accusations at those whom you reject personally or reject because of their ideas and positions. In this way, you harden within your intellectual shell, die in your isolation, and contribute nothing positive to society.

Sound reading is based on trying to understand the text as it truly is, without imposing upon it what you merely imagine to be there—when in reality those assumptions reside within yourself, whether because of bias, intention, or closed-mindedness. Once you understand the author’s perspective, you are then free to critique, reject, discuss, respond to, or debate it.

A story is not read in the same way as poetry. Likewise, a scientific book is not read in the same manner as a religious one. Every field has its own literary style and terminology, whose meanings differ from one discipline to another. It is both useful and necessary to know the characteristics of different literary forms, and this is acquired through the practice of reading itself. The reading of any text—and especially a religious text—also requires a purified intellectual approach; that is, you approach reading with a spirit that seeks truth, not with a spirit of criticism and attack. You first read in order to understand what the text wishes to say, and only afterward may you evaluate it intellectually according to your own position and the ideology you embrace.

Do not focus only on certain paragraphs while neglecting others. Read the entire text, and mark the sentences that draw your attention so that you may preserve or remember them. Selective reading of any text leads to false and distorted understandings.

Reading is a purifying act, because it obliges you to listen to what you read or hear, to become acquainted with the views of others, and to enter their world.

Reading helps you accept the other as he is and enter an understanding of him, even though you are not required to adopt his views. It also enriches you, through engagement with the ideas of others, by allowing you to benefit from what they have attained.

Reading is an inexhaustible mine of knowledge, and the path of reading leads to continual maturity.

Remember the words of the Apostle Paul to his disciple Timothy (first epistle), and you will find great benefit in them:

“Devote yourself to reading (4:13)... Avoid profane and old wives’ tales (4:7)... Avoid the obsession with arguments and quarrels, from which come envy, strife, insults, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people whose minds are corrupted and who have been deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain (6:4-5).”