

Teaching Scholarly Reading at Nova Classical Academy

Based on *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren

“A reader uncovers what the author tries to cover” (90)

At Nova we believe that reading is the primary method of acquiring knowledge. We read books, stories, poems, histories, pamphlets, historical documents, biographies, and any other credible source to help us to garner knowledge about our past and ourselves.

As with any skill, there are levels of fluency and competence. At Nova, we strive to help students to become superior academic readers, not just competent readers of popular works. As such, we divide reading instruction into phases (like all classical instruction) to focus our attention on developing reading skills at the appropriate time.

The Four Basic Questions of Reading

What is the work about as a whole?

What is being said in detail, and how?

Is the work true, in whole or in part?

What of it?

The Three Stages of Reading

1. Elementary
2. Inspectional
3. Analytical

Elementary Reading

In this stage we want our students to read **simple materials** which help them to progress in **vocabulary-building** and develop the skill of **context reading**.

Goals: Identify actual words
Answer: what does the sentence say?

Skills: Reading simple materials
Building vocabulary
Context-reading

“Reading Readiness”

We want our students at this level to get to “Reading Readiness” (24). This readiness includes physical-, intellectual-, language-, and personal readiness.

- Physical readiness – personal comfort, enough space and light to read
- Intellectual readiness – concentrating on the task at hand, reading an appropriately challenging work, and a work on the correct topic
- Language readiness – reading a work targeted to your lexicon, having resources at hand to augment your lexicon (dictionary, internet, encyclopedia, etc.)
- Personal readiness – time commitment to read, belief in the value of the activity of reading

Inspectional Reading

In this stage we want our students to read more **complex materials** and to learn how to get the most information from the least amount of work. We also want them to master the skill of **skimming** and begin to **categorize** their thoughts.

Goals: Identify crucial words
 Become a fluent, superficial reader
 Develop a declarative knowledge of the work

Skills: Reading complex materials
 Skimming or pre-reading
 Categorizing thoughts

Systemic skimming or pre-reading (32)

1. Discern crucial words and ideas

- a. Separate the chaff from the real kernels of nourishment (32)
- b. Decide where to focus, or not to go farther into reading it

2. Gather contextual data

- a. Quickly read the title page and preface
- b. Catalogue the table of contents (33)
- c. Check the index (34)
 - i. look up crucial terms based on judgment and previous steps
- d. Read jacket blurb

3. Delve deeper into important parts

- a. Look at pivotal chapters
 - i. Read summaries and opening/closing
- b. Leaf through pages
- c. Do some random deep dives
- d. Read a paragraph or two, or several pages (never more!)

Superficial Reading (36)

1. Read through without ever stopping to look up or ponder
2. Always move forward only with what you do understand
 - a. Stopping to reference prematurely will impede our reading
 - b. We believe that there is much to be gained by what we do know and context; this level of reading can create a sense of purpose and summary for children, even without specific details

N.B. Continue to have students read aloud in class; this is a skill which tends to diminish over time due to lack of practice. Like all skills, it can wane without practice!

Analytical Reading

In this stage we want our students to read **any complex materials**, to **organize the author's argument**, and to **analyze the argument** for its truth, strengths, and weaknesses.

Goals: Understand an author's argument
Outline the thinking leading to an author's argument

Skills: Reading complex materials
Organizing an argument

Steps to Analytical Reading

1. **Read the selection.** Whether this is a page, a chapter, or an entire book, one should read through a chunk of the material, not stopping every time an unknown word or concept is encountered.
2. **Annotate.** Indicate points of interest or concern.
 - a. Underline/circle words or phrases
 - b. Vertical lines in margin (ex. "... fall of Rome" ||)
 - c. Asterisk (or some sort of doodad) in margin
 - d. Asking/posing questions in margin/post-in notes in books
 - e. Text notes in notebook
3. **Pigeonhole the work (57)**
 - a. know what type of book (subject/genre)
 - b. know what type of knowledge it is trying to deliver
 - c. read/analyze the title (61)
 - d. practical or theoretical? (65)
4. **X-ray the work (75)**
 - a. see the structure of a book
 - b. "state the unity of the whole work as a single sentence" (75-6)
 - i. Odyssey example (78-9)
 - c. "set forth the major parts of the book" and show how they fit together to make the argument (76)
 - i. difference between a "heap of bricks" and the "house they constitute" (77)
5. **Outline (84)**
 - a. Find the important words in the work and figure out how the author is using them (98)
 - Words used differently than normal conversation
 - Words which give the reader trouble
 - Words which the author defines
 - b. Discover the meaning of the important words through context
 - study aids, in-class notes, conversations with others

- c. Create an outline of the work
 - author accomplished his task in X major parts: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, x
 - the first part (1) is divided into 3 sections; the first about M, the second about N...
 - in part 1 of 1, he makes 3 points: a, b, c...
 - d. Mark the most important sentences in a book and find the propositions they contain (120)
 - Locate because they require an “effort of interpretation” (121)
 - Relate to the main argument of the book (123)
 - Find propositions by locating key words and understanding the grammar of the sentences (126)
 - e. No book deserves a perfect outline; be approximate
6. **Find the arguments** (131)
 - a. Find the argument paragraphs, or construct them from propositions
 - b. Create a summary (95)
 7. **Discover the author’s solutions** (135)
 - a. How does he answer his questions?
 - b. Does he know which problems have not been solved?
 8. **What does the author believe and why?** (114)
 - a. Propositions are opinions supported by reasons (115)
 - b. Sentences/paragraphs are units of language; propositions and arguments are units of logic/knowledge (117)
 - c. Which propositions answer the author’s questions? (117)

Tips and tricks to successful implementation:

- Provide photocopies of primary sources for on-page annotations
- Only answer questions which have been written down; it forces students to follow the process
- Break into smaller reading exercises and practice the different skills over and over again
- Continue to intermix oral and written work
- When reading aloud, insist on inflection, tone, and appropriate expression