

## Read Like You Mean It

Thoughts compiled by Anne Bean 7/24/23

*“In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you.” ~Mortimer J. Adler*

After my fifth child was born, I spent hours each day sitting in a rocking chair feeding her. While I sat, I read *Les Misérables*, a stunningly-written novel by Victor Hugo. It is nearly 1,500 pages long and is a true classic, moving and poignant. At the time I thought I would never forget the ways it influenced my thinking and softened my heart. But a few months ago, after I recommended the book to my fifteen-year-old daughter, she asked me what I loved about the book and I was hard-pressed to say. I remember *having loved it*, but I had no particulars I could call to mind, no passages I could turn to in order to refresh my memory or give her a taste. Although I told her, “It really made me think,” I had not recorded a single thought I had had when I read the book. Instead of being prepared to engage in a great discussion when she read the book herself, I found myself wishing I could devote dozens of hours to re-reading the book first. Why? How could I have forgotten so quickly what I thought had moved me so much?

I have always loved reading, but I have spent most of my reading years - including all of my years in school - letting much of what I read go in and right back out again without leaving me changed for the better. I was a surface-level reader, and it was only when I started to implement the tools that I have outlined below that I unlocked more of the tremendous power of reading. “Easy come, easy go” as they say. With a little extra intentionality on my part, my experiences reading have become quite different.

The concepts below are simple, but they are very effective. Any one of them will improve your reading. Implement many of them and you will be a changed reader.

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*“I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in.” - Robert Louis Stevenson*

## Before You Start a Book

1. Find out the year the book was published and a bit about the author. Consider reading a plot summary. Definitely read the introduction if it is written from the author to the reader.
  2. Write down some questions you have about your life. If you are about to read a classic, you are about to come face to face with truth, and truth is all connected. You will find answers and applications in unexpected places.
    - a. e.g., How can I become a better sister/brother? What should my focus be on in my life right now? How is truth discovered?
  3. If you can get a paper copy of the book that you can write in, that can be a gamechanger!
    - a. Your own notes in the book will add to its value for your future self immensely. When you pick it up again later, you will instantly be able to find your favorite spots and you will have an intriguing and instructive view of your earlier self.
  4. Grab a notebook, preferably one you like the look of and is a comfortable size to write in. Grab some good non-smear pens and/or a nice sharp pencil.
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*“Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting.” - Edmund Burke*

## Don't Just Read... Write!

1. If you can mark in the book, do it. Use the margins and the pages at the front and back of the book. Underline, circle, highlight text in the book itself. Add symbols: ? ! \* [ ] +; use color... fold corners, use post-it notes; anything to help you to be able to quickly find the stand-out parts later.

All of the following can be written in a notebook instead, if needed or desired:

2. Define any vocabulary words that are unfamiliar to you, or seem to have a different meaning in this specific context. Looking up words will, of course, broaden your understanding and increase your own power of expression, but simply writing it down will do those things more effectively and save you time next time you read the book.
  3. Ask questions that come up for you as you read.
    - a) “I wonder....?”
  4. Make comments on things that stand out to you.
    - a) “I notice...”
  5. Make connections with other things you have read or seen in your life.
    - a) “This reminds me of...”
  6. Agree or disagree with the author in the margins.
    - a) It is critical that we each learn to discern truth from error. If the author says something significant that you do or do not agree with, mark it, and spend the time teasing out what, exactly, you see as wrong with it. Do you actually have a stance? If so, what are the origins of that stance?
    - b) Consider whether your current actions agree with the truth you find in the book.
  7. Write the passages and quotes that stand out to you in your notebook.
  8. Make note of the answers that come to the questions you asked, and keep your mind open to answers/epiphanies to questions and problems you have not encountered yet. Capture them now for when you need them down the road.
  9. Write a skeleton outline or summary of a book as you read it. This is a very powerful tool for challenging books, in particular, because to be able to summarize well, you have to truly understand what is being said. This practice forces attention.
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*“The failure to read good books both enfeebles the vision and strengthens our most fatal tendency -- the belief that the here and now is all there is.” - Allan Bloom*

## Keep Reading

1. It is natural to gravitate towards a few genres of books, but it is valuable to intentionally read broadly. Seek out books in other genres and look for connections between them. Remember that truth is truth.
  2. Start now to keep a personal booklist. Add books recommended by people you respect and note when you read (or re-read) each one.
  3. Have several different books (and audiobooks!) going at once.
    - a. The chances of your being in the mood to read are much higher if you have several books to choose from. You will likely read more often and your reading will be more effective.
    - b. There is a time and a place to “push through” and read a book that is challenging to get into, but being able to jump from that book into a more comfortable read and back again is helpful. Sometimes a change is as good as a rest.
      - i. Sometimes it is the right call to drop a book and come back to it later. If you find yourself avoiding a book, ask yourself why and ask a mentor for advice if you are unsure.
  4. When to re-read
    - a. Ask yourself if you are the same person that you were when you last read the book? If you or your circumstance have changed, and the book is a classic, a re-read will very likely yield great fruit.
    - b. Similar to re-watching a movie when you see the foreshadowing and plot-development more clearly, re-reading a great book can yield a richer and more nuanced experience.
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*“Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.”*  
- John Locke

## One Example

This is from my own annotation of “A Place to Stand,” a book I read in preparation for Quest 1. The example applies no matter the book that you’re reading.



Notice:

- I circled a page number because it was one of my favorite descriptions of Martin Luther’s character and approach.
- I called out in the margin something that made me laugh.
- I asked a question of the text as to which ideological difference was more important - unity in doctrine or unity in worship?
- I referenced a scripture that came to mind.
- I underlined key tenets of different sects of Christianity along with a key document for Lutheranism. I have a glossary (short list) of these in the back pages of the book for my own reference, because I would like to be comfortable with my understanding of the differences between Christian sects.

It took hardly any additional time to interact with the text in this way, but I can now flip back and re-read or discuss my favorite bits easily.

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*“...a good book can teach you about the world and about yourself. You learn more than how to read better; you also learn more about life. You become wiser. Not just more knowledgeable - books that provide nothing but information can produce that result. But wiser, in the sense that you are more deeply aware of the great and enduring truths of human life.” -Mortimer Adler*

## All Education is Self-Education

I recently read a simple middle-grade reader entitled *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh*. Although its story and writing were simplistic compared to *Les Misérables*, because I read it with my pencil in hand and questions in my mind, I believe it had a more profound impact on me than did that other, wonderful, classic. *What* we read matters, but *how* we read might even matter more in terms of who we become.

Remember that you are ultimately responsible for what you take away from any book you read. If you are going to put in the time and attention to find and read a good book, read like you mean it!