

How to Read a Book

PRAISE FOR
HOW TO READ A BOOK

“In a time when reading has fallen out of favor, Andy Naselli has done the Church (and the world) a great service by not only encouraging us to read, but also showing us how. I have long been a fan of Adler’s work on this topic, and I am grateful to Naselli for expanding on that work. This is a helpful and useful tool for anyone wanting to become a better reader. It is also an invaluable tool for those who, like me, have young people in their lives whom they wish to encourage to become lifelong readers. Please read this book! And when you’re done, you will be better equipped to read others as well.”

—VODDIE BAUCHAM JR.

*senior lecturer at African Christian University in Lusaka, Zambia,
author of Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and
Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe (Salem, 2021)*

“Andy Naselli’s *How to Read a Book* will become a cherished tome in every Christian’s library. Offering salient and comprehensive advice for reclaiming the love and skill of good reading in a world filled with distractions, *How to Read a Book* is friendly, pastoral, and inspiring. I especially appreciate Andy’s numbered lists, sober counsel about the use of social media, and loving wisdom for avid readers with dyslexia. Andy’s tips about organizing a home library put me to shame—and inspired me to make needed changes. Every

Christian will benefit from this book! This book goes straight on my required reading list for my Rhetoric Literature students!”

—ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

author of Five Lies of our Anti-Christian Age (Crossway, 2023), pastor's wife, former professor of English and women's studies at Syracuse University, high school rhetoric literature teacher in a large homeschool co-op

“This is a book that I wish someone had handed to me fifty years ago when I first began my ministry. At that time, I knew I needed to read in order to learn the truth, but I had no strategy to go about it, nor anyone to guide me in the process. Andy Naselli, at last, provides the help I needed—and still require—in knowing how to truly read a book. If leaders are readers, then this short, but excellent book is a must read. These pages hand you a key that unlocks a vast treasure of knowledge, enabling you to learn and grow in every way.”

—STEVE LAWSON

president of OnePassion Ministries, professor at The Master's Seminary, teaching fellow for Ligonier Ministries, lead preacher of Trinity Bible Church of Dallas

“Is there a more fundamental educational need in the world than instruction on reading? As someone who has already used Naselli's material in ministry to lay people and seminarians in China, I can testify to the immense value of this book, regardless of one's culture or background. The flood of information (and books!) in our age is overwhelming. Naselli helps us not only stay afloat but also sail confidently

through the ocean of literature before us. Whether or not your mother tongue is English, I highly recommend this book.”

—MARK B.

seminary president and pastor in China

“I suspect that I’m not the only one who didn’t pay attention in English class. Man, do we need this book. Sure, we know how to read in the sense that we are not illiterate. But do we know how to really read—carefully, perceptively, and enjoyably? Andy’s book is for people like me who need help with an avalanche of words that is a book. Take up and read!”

—C.J. MAHANEY

senior pastor of Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

“This book is more than meets the eye. It is like ‘the Wood between the Worlds,’ filled with pools that lead to many other places. You will learn not only how to micro-read, macro-read, and survey a book, but also how to think, how to cultivate good habits, how to avoid distraction, how to organize your thoughts, how to write, and many other skills to enrich your mind and heart. Filled with practical advice, helpful illustrations, and recommendations for further study, not only will it help you to read well, but it will help you to live well for the glory of God. Take up, and learn how to read.”

—JOE RIGNEY

*fellow of theology at New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho,
and author of Leadership and Emotional Sabotage: Resisting
the Anxiety That Will Wreck Your Family, Destroy Your
Church, and Ruin the World (Canon Press, 2024)*

HOW TO
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BOOK

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FOR
CHRISTIAN
READERS

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NASELLI

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To Don Carson,
a brilliant reader

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME WHAT I DO FOR A living, sometimes I reply, “I teach people how to read.” As a pastor, I teach people how to read the Bible well. As a professor, I train students how to read well in general. Anyone who can read can get better at it, and in this book I aim to help you take your reading to the next level.

Let’s get oriented by answering eight opening questions.

Question 1. Why Should You Read a Book on How to Read a Book?

Print books came into existence after Gutenberg invented a moveable-type printing press around 1440. So in the first stage of print books, it was possible for an individual to read every

available print book on the planet. The last person who did that may have been John Milton (1608–1674)—only 350 years ago.

Now it is physically impossible for an individual to read every book. We don't know for certain how many books exist, but based on data from Google Books, some estimate that there are about 170 million books. And about four million new books are published each year.

If you live for seventy years, your life will consist of about 600,000 hours. If you exclude one-third of that time to account for sleeping, that leaves about 400,000 waking hours. If you could read one book per hour for all of your waking hours, you'd read only 400,000 books. And that would be less than one quarter of one percent of all books.

Let's consider a more reasonable pace. If you read an average of twenty-five books a year—about one book every two weeks—for the next fifty years, you would read 1,250 books. That's like sampling one grain of sand from the California coastline.

So why should you spend your precious limited time reading this book about how to read a book? I think it's worth your time for the same reason that it's worth your time to sharpen a blunt ax for chopping wood. If you don't take time to sharpen an ax, it will cost you extra time and energy, and it may be more dangerous. As Ecclesiastes 10:10 says, "If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen its edge, then one must exert more strength" (CSB). If your metaphorical ax is your reading skill, then this book is a whetstone to sharpen your ax.

In this book I want to help you sharpen your ax by accomplishing four goals:

1. *Inform*. I aim to help you better understand reading.

2. *Advise*. I aim to give you detailed and practical advice.

That's what a "how-to book" is supposed to do.

3. *Motivate*. I aim to inspire you to read better. That may involve reading more, reading less but in a more careful way, reading better books, reading a more diverse selection of books, reading with a better mindset, or reading in a more skillful way.

4. *Encourage*. I aim to help you become a more joyful, enthusiastic, and confident reader. I don't want to discourage or dishearten you. I don't expect a busy mom to read like a research professor. I don't expect a full-time student to read for pleasure way beyond what demanding classes require. Rather than make you feel false guilt, I want to encourage you to think through how you can become a better reader as you faithfully and fruitfully do what God has called you to do at this stage in your life. And I want to inspire you to read for life.

Question 2. Who Is This Book For?

Only a certain kind of person would consider reading a book titled *How to Read a Book: Advice for Christian Readers*. So dear reader, I am guessing that one of the following three descriptions fits you:

1. You already like to read, and you want to pick up tips and inspiration from a fellow reader who shares your love for reading. This short book is for you.

2. You have a love-hate relationship with reading. You like to read, but it's intimidating. You feel discouraged that you

don't read enough—or enough of the best stuff. You think you should read more and better somehow and are looking for help. Maybe you are frustrated that you read too slowly or that you have a hard time understanding what you read. Maybe you are gifted at math and science and are already decent at reading for information, but you would like to get better at reading literature. This short book is for you.

3. You are a student, and your professor is requiring you to read this book. Perhaps you are dutifully planning to slog through it—even though your expectations may be low since it seems strange and boring (and maybe even a waste of time) to read a book on how to read a book. Hang in there. I hope you'll be pleasantly surprised how the advice in this book enhances your reading.

Sometimes my reading advice may appeal more to one of those three audiences than the other two. But as a whole, the book is relevant for all three. Every reader can get better at reading—including high school students and distinguished scholars.

I also assume that you profess to follow Christ since this is a book for *Christian* readers. Does being a Christian make a difference to how you approach reading? In one sense, *not much difference*. The basics of reading apply to Christians and non-Christians alike. But in another sense, *it makes all the difference*. Christ is Lord over everything. That includes reading. When Christ is your King, he transforms how you approach reading—*why* you read, *how* you read, *what* you read, and *when* you read.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. We must first define our terms.

Question 3. What Does *Read* Mean?

Here's what I mean by *read* and *reading*:

- The verb *read* means *see (or hear) written words and understand what they mean.*
- The noun *reading* means *seeing (or hearing) written words and understanding what they mean.*

So reading includes two components:

1. seeing and/or hearing written words
2. understanding what those written words mean

By *seeing*, I mean mainly perceiving with your eyes so that you discern visually. But I don't intend to exclude blind people who can see metaphorically by reading Braille with their fingertips.

I include *hearing* in the definition because I'm a big fan of reading aloud—including listening to audiobooks. When my wife reads a classic book aloud to our daughters, or when I listen to an audiobook, I think that counts as reading.

I include *understanding* in the definition because otherwise I could see (or hear) written words in a language I don't understand (such as Russian) and call that reading. There's a gray area here, because it's possible to read words in a language you *do* understand, yet still misunderstand what the author intended to communicate. If you do that, does that mean you didn't *read* the words? No, you read them, but you may not

have read them *carefully*, or maybe the author didn't write them *clearly*. Reading is a skill (like driving a car) that can be done at various levels of ability.

Question 4. How Does This Book Differ from Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book*?

This book shares a title with Mortimer Adler's best-selling *How to Read a Book*.¹ (And in case you're wondering, book titles are not copyrighted.) I am indebted to Adler for his influential book, but my book differs with Adler's in seven ways:

1. This book is *written by a Christian*. Adler did not write as a Christian but as a pagan philosopher.² I am Protestant. More specifically, I am a theologically conservative confessional evangelical Christian. I am a pastor and theology professor who affirms and celebrates a detailed doctrinal statement.³
2. This book is *specifically for Christians*. Adler did not write for Christians. The subtitle of my book is *Advice*

1. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, 2nd ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1972).

2. Adler (1902–2001) considered himself to be a pagan in line with the subtitle of this book: Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think about God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan* (New York: Macmillan, 1980). On the title page, he defines *pagan* as “one who does not worship the God of Christians, Jews, or Muslims; irreligious persons.” Later he was baptized as an Episcopalian (1984) and received into the Catholic Church (1999).

3. "Affirmation of Faith," Bethlehem College and Seminary, <https://bcsmn.edu/about/affirmation-of-faith>.

for Christian Readers. I wrote this book for my fellow church members; for Christian students in high school, college, and graduate school; for Christian dads and moms who are discipling their children; for Christians who are inundated with social media and want to honor the Lord in how they read. I wrote this book to help Christians read to the glory of God (see 1 Cor. 10:31).

3. This book is *broader in scope* than Adler's book. Adler says that his book "is about the art of reading for the sake of increased understanding" and that his book is not "much concerned with reading for entertainment."⁴ In contrast, my book is not about reading only to increase understanding; it is also about reading for pleasure.
4. This book is *more accessible* than Adler's book. The subtitle of Adler's book is *The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. That gives you a sense of Adler's target audience and how he writes to them. He writes with a bit of disdain for those who do not share his finer tastes for high culture, and he doesn't put the cookies on a lower shelf.
5. This book is *more concise* than Adler's book. Adler's book is 426 pages long! Adler includes nearly 120 pages on how to read specific styles of literature, such as "How to Read Science and Mathematics," "How to Read Philosophy," and "How to Read Social Science." My book does not concentrate in detail on subject areas like that. It is succinct.

4. Adler and Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 10.

6. This book is more *personal* than Adler's book. There's a formal academic style in which an author avoids saying "I" or "me" and attempts to give the impression that he is detached and coolly objective. Adler is not that extreme, but he does sound like an old-school professor (which is not a bad thing). My style in this book is more personal. In this how-to book about reading, I use lots of anecdotes as I give advice.

7. This book is *more relevant* than Adler's book. Adler's book first released in 1940, and he updated it with Charles Van Doren in 1972—over fifty years ago. That was thirty-five years before the first iPhone released in 2007. Technology has changed significantly, so readers today have some new challenges and questions. This book attempts to address them.

Question 5. Is This Book Only about How to Read a Book—Not about How to Read Articles and Other Forms of Writing?

No, the principles that apply to reading *books* for the most part apply to *other forms of writing*. I am arguing from the greater to the lesser. If you can carry a one-hundred-pound hay bale (the greater), then you can carry a piece of string (the lesser). If you become more skillful at reading a book, then you will also become more skillful at reading an article or email or post on X or text message. That's why this book focuses on how to read a book.

Question 6. Why Does This Book Mention C.S. Lewis, D.A. Carson, and John Piper So Much?

This book is full of personal anecdotes and advice about reading, and three men have strongly influenced how I read.

1. *C.S. Lewis* (1898–1963) has both *instructed* me about how to read and *delighted* me with his writings. He has instructed me and delighted me more than any other writer. Lewis was a master reader and a master writer. When it comes to reading and writing (as with many skills), few people are expert practitioners; few are expert analysts; most are neither; very few are both. Lewis is both. That’s why I quote Lewis more than any other individual throughout this book. (The Lewis quotes are so good!)

2. *Don Carson* (b. 1946) models masterful systematic reading—at least, what that looks like for a New Testament scholar and theologian with a pastor’s heart. It was my privilege to serve as his research manager for about nine years during a busy and productive season of his life (2006–2014). It was like a young lawyer getting to clerk for a Supreme Court Justice. While I was an apprentice under Dr. Carson, he read about five hundred books a year. When I first learned that, I was astonished. I thought, “How is that even possible?” He showed me how, and I’ve been doing something like it ever since (I don’t keep count of how many books I read per year). That’s why I’m dedicating this book to Dr. Carson, a brilliant reader.

3. *John Piper* (b. 1946) is self-effacing about reading, mainly because he reads slowly and thus doesn’t get through a lot of books compared to scholars like Don Carson. But he is an exceptionally skilled reader, and I don’t know how to calculate

all the ways he has influenced me to read better—more carefully, vigorously, and joyfully.

Question 7. Why Does This Book Include So Many Numbered Lists?

Peter Kreeft begins his logic textbook with “13 good reasons why you should study logic.” I love his first footnote:

Making *numbered lists* like this is the first and simplest way we learn to order “the buzzing, blooming confusion” that is our world. Children, “primitive” peoples, and David Letterman love to make lists. Thus we find “twelve-step programs,” “the Ten Commandments,” “the Seven Wonders of the World,” “the Five Pillars of Islam,” “the Four Noble Truths,” and “the Three Things More Miserable Than a Wet Chicken.” To make a list is to classify many things under one general category, and at the same time to distinguish these things by assigning them different numbers.⁵

Jesus teaches, “As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:31). That is why I include numbered lists throughout this book. When I read a book, I manually number items if the author does not because that helps me trace the argument. I love it when authors like C. S. Lewis and

5. Peter Kreeft, *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions, and Aristotelian Principles*, ed. Trent Dougherty, edition 3.1 (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s, 2014), 1 (italics original).

D.A. Carson place numbers at the beginning of paragraphs as they unpack an argument. I find such writing easier and more enjoyable to read. That's why I have tried to write this book in a way that makes it easier to X-ray—to understand its skeletal structure. (It should also make it easier for audiobook listeners to follow.)

Question 8. How Will We Explore How to Read a Book?

I plan for us to explore how to read a book by answering four questions, which serve as the four chapter titles:

1. *Why should you read?* I start here because it's pointless to talk about the other aspects of reading if you're not convinced it's worth doing. Or you may want to read but could benefit from better understanding why you should. I'll show you why reading is so important.
2. *How should you read?* This is where we often get stuck. We learn the basics of reading but don't learn how to take it to the next level. I'll show you how.
3. *What should you read?* Of the amount of reading material available, you can read only a tiny sliver of it. I don't mean *tiny* in the sense of one penny out of one dollar. More like one penny out of *trillions* of dollars. There's that much writing out there. I'll show you how to wisely choose what to read.
4. *When should you read?* I'll help you plan how to prioritize quality reading.

It may sound like chapter 2 (How Should You Read?) is the only chapter consistent with the book's title (*How to Read a Book*). But the book's title is broader than chapter 2. The title *How to Read a Book* includes four how-tos:

1. how to think about the purpose of reading (*Why* should you read?)
2. how to read more skillfully (*How* should you read?)
3. how to choose reading material (*What* should you read?)
4. how to facilitate quality reading (*When* should you read?)

My burden throughout the book is simple: *Don't waste your reading.*⁶ Read for life; read the right way; read the right stuff; and keep reading.



Let's begin with the first question: *Why* should you read?

6. Hat tip to another book you should read: John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).