

What does it mean to be able to read? The answer depends on what level of reading we're talking about. There are three levels that are remarkably different from one another:

- Read for speaking
- Read for comprehension
- Read for telling

Read for Speaking

You can read for speaking if you can read out loud. All you need is the skill to convert visible letters to spoken sounds. You don't need to know what you're speaking about or even what the words mean. This is nothing new to people who grew up in the Catholic Church up to the early 1960s. Mass was in Latin. Altar boys didn't know Latin, but they still recited the Latin responses to lines said by the priest. (I have since learned that many priests didn't understand many of the words *they* were saying!)



Sometimes, however, we are quite capable of understanding the meaning of words, but we just read the words with a focus on pronunciation without adverting to their meaning. This is often evident in weddings. Did you ever hear a judge or minister read the official text without any apparent understanding of its meaning? Did you ever hear family members read from Scripture without any of the inflections, pauses, and eye-contact that come naturally when their meaning has sunk in?

In these cases, the reader is literate, but only for making the sounds represented by letters. A computer could do about as well.

Read for Comprehension

Comprehending

To read for comprehension means to *understand* what you're reading. And to *understand* is not just seeing what's really out there. It is not being able to describe something. To understand is to have an *insight* into the why or how or what-for of something. It is by understanding that we are able to explain things. Because most literature on literacy refers to

understanding and/or insight as *comprehension*, I will use all three terms here.

To read for comprehension means to understand what you're reading. Understanding a text can be *direct* or *inverse*. In the direct way, you understand what author means. In the indirect way, you don't understand what the author means, but you at least understand that you don't understand. The text raises a question in your mind. You realize that you are puzzled. You comprehend that you don't comprehend this text.

Both kinds of comprehension are successful. In both, you learn something. The direct way results from an insight; it gives you understanding. The indirect way gives you a question that moves you toward understanding/insight. And no understanding will occur without a prior question.



So to read *without* comprehension means (a) you don't understand what the author means *and* (b) you don't notice that you don't understand. This happens more often than most people realize. Unless you notice when you *don't* comprehend, your eyes may see every word in the text, but your mind won't back up when something makes no sense. Many educated adults have only a feeble grasp of how important this habit is. They read along, hoping that of the words flowing by will stick, as if our eyes convert black marks on white paper into thoughts printed on the brain.

They never learned that learning is nothing at all like stamping a brain with thoughts. Learning is the activity of a mind asking and answering questions about experience. Whenever we don't comprehend something, then silently, softly, our curiosity raises the question, "What does this mean?" To read for comprehension, it is absolutely essential that we learn to:

Develop the habit of noticing that we don't comprehend.

Without this habit of noticing this silent question, we keep on reading without comprehending. And it doesn't occur to us that we don't comprehend.

Functional Illiteracy

The less skilled we are at reading for comprehension, the more *functionally illiterate* we are. Even when we understand all the words and most of the sentences, we can still miss key ideas, illuminating explanations, and our own bothersome questions about the topic.

Among many definitions of "functionally illiterate," consider this one:

Functional illiteracy is the ability to read and write, but not enough to function fully as a member of society and a contributor to the social order. It shows in an inability to fill out job applications, read maps, understand bus schedules, and study newspaper articles.

I took this definition from a 2007 study aimed to compare literacy rates among adults in different societies.¹ Using this definition, here's what the study found:

The national rate of functional illiteracy in the U.S. and Great Britain is 21 percent.

In Washington DC, it is 36 percent.

No doubt these are alarming findings. But are you alarmed enough? What might be the statistics of people who are functionally literate only sometimes? I'm thinking of people who intend to understand what they read but fail to notice many places where they didn't understand.

The point here is that you may be functionally illiterate more often than you realize. The action step here is to develop the habit of *noticing where you don't comprehend*.

An Exercise

For an exercise in noticing where you don't comprehend, let us define a "Functional Reading Literacy Quotient." Your FRLQ will be the ratio of what you actually understood to what you might have understood. It will be new insights and questions you actually gain divided by the new insights and questions you could have gained.

For example, suppose my niece's triplets read a business article on the meaning of "market share":

Chris noticed every time he gained an insight and experienced a question. (FRLQ=100)

Clare overlooked 1 insight or question out of 10. (FRLQ = 90)

Colin overlooked 2 insights or questions out of 10. (FRLQ = 80)

Here, then, is the exercise: Select a moderately challenging text you recently read—such as a newspaper editorial, a magazine article on the rise of graffiti in cities, or an Explanation of Benefits form from your insurance company. In the margin, put an "I" where you gained a new insight, and a "Q" where new question occurred to you. Now go back and put an X in front of the I's and Q's that *you didn't notice on your first reading*. These will show as XIs and XOs. Your FRLQ for that text will be

¹ Source:

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/183792/more_than_onethird_of_washington_dc.html

the ratio of how many actual insights and questions occurred to you divided by how many might have occurred. If, say, your I's and Q's add up to 12, and your XI's and XQ's add up to 4, then your FRLQ for this text would be $12/(12+4)$ or 75 percent.

Now the main point of this little exercise is not to know your FRLQ. That would require averaging dozens of readings. It is much more practical. It is to become alarmed at how often you don't comprehend something *but don't notice that you don't comprehend*. Realizing this is the first step toward developing the habit of *effectively* reading for comprehension.

Read for Telling

The Telling Evidence

When we successfully read for comprehension, we understand both what the author meant and our own questions about a topic. However, this does not mean we have actually learned something about the topic itself. We may have learned what the *author* thinks, but it's still up to us to decide whether the author's thoughts and opinions are valid enough to make our own. It is up to us to formulate for ourselves our own questions about the topic.



The incontrovertible evidence that we have made our own something we read is that we can *tell someone what we comprehend as a result of our reading*.

Suppose Jack and Jill read an article about whales and tell their mother about it:

Jack: "I really enjoyed that article about whales. I couldn't put it down! It was fascinating reading. You'd love it!"

Jill: "Wow. I never realized that whales make about 40 different squeaks, and each squeak tells nearby whales something different. Sometime it's about food or danger, but often it's even about just sadness or contentment!"

Notice that Jack mashes together the feeling of fascination with the experience of comprehending something new. He lacks the skill of recognizing in himself the difference between feeling fascinated and comprehending.

If I can't give you an explanation about the topic of my reading, I didn't learn it. If I read mainly to talk, skimming over parts I don't comprehend, then I'll be talking about things I don't comprehend. Or I might have learned something about the author and the book but nothing about the

topic. Or I might admire an author's clever metaphors; I might recognize that a certain book would be helpful for someone else; I might be impressed with the amount of research that went into an article; I might have learned something about the author's attitudes and biases. But unless I learn something about the topic itself, and unless I can tell someone what I learned, I learned nothing about the topic of my reading.

What We Can Learn

Answers about a topic come in different forms. We can learn *facts*; we can learn *explanations*; we can learn *opinions*; and we can learn *relevant questions*. Since each form of learning requires a different way to tell others what we learned, let's look more closely at each type.

1. Facts

Twice as many African-Americans are unemployed as white Americans. They comprise 12.5 percent of the general population and 40 percent of the prison population.

Dag Hammarskjöld was Secretary General of the United Nations.

According to the Institute for Supply Management, manufacturing grew in November 2009 for a fourth straight month.

Facts like these are statements that can be verified as true or false. But some facts are direct, while others are indirect. The first two above are direct; they state that X is so. The third is indirect; it states that Y says that X is so.

Why is it important to see this distinction? The basic fact in the third statement is not that manufacturing grew; it's that the Institute for Supply Management says so. Very often, when we tell others something we learned, they want to know, "Say's who?" Manufacturing may not have grown like the Institute said it did. *As a matter of fact*, all we learned from our reading is that this Institute said so. It's important to recognize this while we're reading. Otherwise, if we present something as a fact we learned rather than as someone's belief about a fact, people will regard us, accurately, as naïve.

Why bother remembering facts? The main reasonable purpose is to support our understanding by the evidence of facts: "Many African-Americans would not be imprisoned if they were employed." So, when committing a fact to memory, be mindful of how it might help others understand a puzzling situation or issue. In contrast, the major *unreasonable* purpose is to show off. If that's what you imagine yourself doing as you commit facts to memory, keep in mind that, on average, half the population is smarter than you are and will see through your pretense.

2. Explanations

To use the Zen method for opening a tight jar lid, place the whole palm of your right hand on the lid for one, quiet, meditative minute. Then, grasping the lid more firmly with your fingers, slowly use your left hand to twist the jar clockwise underneath.

The main reason for compulsive shopping is a *shaky self-image*.

A wood handle of a hammer feels warmer than the steel head not because of a difference in temperature but because of a difference in *conductivity*.

Notice that explanations are not facts. They are neither true nor false. But they are more or less plausible, depending on how completely they explain our experience. To convince others of an explanation, make it clear that it's just an explanation.

Furthermore, to be convincing when telling your explanation to others, it is better to give examples from experience than just to quote experts. Since all explanations are more or less plausible, be prepared to hear a counter example that doesn't fit your explanation. It cannot be verified as true or false, but it can be challenged as more or less plausible. This is because to really *learn* an explanation, we learn something that remains open to question. So when we read a plausible explanation about some practical how-to, or sociological trend, or physical property, it is important to register it in our minds as something to talk about as just that—a better explanation than any we've heard so far.

3. Opinions

Capital punishment is a barbaric practice.

In writing, prefer the active voice to the passive.

Good fences make good neighbors.

Here, notice that opinions are neither facts nor explanations. Opinions concern better and worse. They express values, priorities, moral perspectives. But, like explanations, they too are more or less plausible. True, nobody questions that some behaviors are wrong—murder, rape, pure revenge—but in most cases, values vary because they are held by people with different experiences and with more or less developed consciences.

Moreover, to tell someone our opinion about priorities can be indirect or direct.

Indirect: "Wang Fu believes Confucianism can help resolve most international conflicts."

Direct: "I believe Confucianism can help resolve most international conflicts."

The indirect way has merit, of course, but notice that this is not an opinion but a fact. We learned for a fact what Wan Fu believes. But it often happens that what we read changes us. We take someone's opinion as our own. We appreciate some value in a way that changes how we live. If we come to appreciate Confucianism as capable of resolving most international conflicts, then it won't take much prompting for us to tell others.

To convince others of our opinions about better and worse, it is quite effective to give examples of actions *we* are prepared to take as a result. To just declare what we think everybody else ought to do is using the "fact" tone of voice for an opinion; most people aren't fooled. But to give examples of specific actions we intend to take shows a commitment of our entire selves—heart, mind and body. It can serve as an invitation to others to examine their own priorities. At the same time, our specific examples leave open the door for counter-examples that may prove enlightening to us.

4. *Relevant Questions*

Nobody seems to have an answer to why Detroit collapsed.

In college courses, what's the difference between finance and economics?

I've tried off and on to like jazz. But I don't like jazz, and I don't know why.

Each one of these could serve to introduce a paper. True, grammatically speaking, only the second example has a question mark. But the other two function as questions because they evoke answers. This is important to remember when writing an introduction to a paper. To capture the reader's interest, you can plant questions with or without a question mark.

The above three examples actually required some reflection to put into clear words. This is because learning is not only finding answers to questions. It is also finding the best wording for questions. We saw earlier how learning is a three-step movement from curiosity to questions to answers:

1. We notice something that puzzles our mind, or disturbs our conscience.
2. We try to formulate what bothers us in a clear question (or statement of our puzzlement).

3. We reach an answer that satisfies our mind or conscience.

Recall how there's work going on between steps 1 and 2. It's silent work, and easily overlooked. But to notice it, recall the times when you were thinking some matter through and discovered that you had the wrong question. This is learning. It is not the direct insight by which you understand something. It is the inverse insight by which you realize that your question won't lead to understanding. It's a halfway house between (1.) a vague puzzlement or disturbance and (3.) clear understanding. This applies not just to reading, of course, but to anything that bothers our minds and hearts.

Your intellectual discomfort too is worthy of expressing to others. You are not sharing facts or explanations or opinions. You are sharing your genuine puzzlement about some fact, explanation, or opinion. This is a valuable contribution to any discussion. Talking about what actually puzzles us is a more powerful way of communicating than just telling people what we know. Humans everywhere, it seems, are more eager to help others find answers than to listen to even the finest of answers to questions that hadn't occurred to them.