

Effective Reading

We read for some purpose: to laugh, to explore, to learn, to wonder. To read effectively means to fulfill whatever our purpose may be. But often we read and discover that the text made no difference to us. We weren't amused, or curious, or enlightened, or in awe. We wasted our time. Our reading wasn't *effective*.

There are at least five reasons why reading is not effective. No surprises here, but when we find comprehending difficult, it helps greatly to identify the exact reason. So I've put these reasons as quotations of what you might tell yourself.

1 "This author is unclear."

Yes, there are some bad writers out there. Just because you don't understand what you read, doesn't mean you're stupid. The writer may write badly.

2 "This field is strange to me."

You're reading about evolution and you see "genus" and "species," but you don't know the difference. So you're losing your way in the text. But remember what we said about ignorance. If you don't know the meaning of terms, you're just ignorant; your intelligence tells you to look up the meanings of terms. So, when you're reading in a new field, don't be discouraged by your ignorance. You're showing your intelligence by plunging into that field in the first place.

3 "My mind is tired."

It happens to everyone. Generally, it's a good idea to push a little on your tired mind, but not too much. Good athletes do the same with strenuous training: they push against their limits but avoid unnecessary strains and sprains. Stand up. Read out loud. Take a break.

4 "I'm distracted."

Sometimes we're distracted by our surroundings—children underfoot, a TV program, a strange sound outside. It's a good idea to make decisions about these. Either give up the reading or ignore the distraction.

Other times we're distracted by our internal concerns—a worry about a project we haven't finished or an obsession with an

annoying neighbor. Here too, aim to make a decision. Your personal problems will be there when you finish reading. Tell yourself that you are quite capable of dealing with personal issues and that you'll get to them in due course. For unfinished projects, keep your planner or a note pad handy to jot down what you will return to later.

5 "I'm not interested."

This is one of the main reasons why reading is not effective. Moreover—and you may find this surprising—*many people don't know when they're not interested*. They read because it's homework, or because of pure habit (say, reading the paper every morning), or because a friend raved about this great book. Except for required reading, if you realize you are not interested, then stop reading.

Now sometimes people say, "This stuff is boring!" They may say this because of reasons 1-4 above. In any case, to be accurate, it is better to say "*I'm bored*." Often this means "I'm not interested." To say the reading itself is boring implies that anyone in their right mind would be bored. Not only is this seldom true, if you say it to open-minded people, they may quietly conclude that you are functionally illiterate.

Being Interested = Being Aware of Our Questions

There's nothing wrong in not being interested. But to be interested *effectively*, we need to be as aware as possible of our questions. As a general rule, the more clearly we formulate our questions, the more effective our reading. So your first question should be, "What do I want from this reading?"

Being aware of your questions is important before you begin reading. But it is also noticing new questions that occur to you *while* you read.

With fiction, the more clearly you formulate your questions about the characters, the more active your mind is while you watch their behavior for clues about what motivates them or what might happen next.

With non-fiction, the more clearly you formulate your questions, the more strategically you will read. Believe it or not, with reading assignments in school, you don't have to read everything. The mind is not a scanner that gathers words and stores them in a brain. The mind is a question-raising energy that sometimes uses reading to figure out answers.

With homework reading, some reading seems easy because we understand all the words and most of the sentences. The analysis and the tips are "logical." But clear words and logical presentation can often mask real questions—questions like, "Do I actually do what the author is talking about?" "Is there something I need to attend to here?" "What was going on in this author's mind?" It's the difference between a Bill who wants to get his homework out of the way of his real life and a Betty who wants to get something about her real life out of her homework.



When I say "formulate" your question, I mean mentally posing the question in words. Here, it is important to notice that we can feel intellectually bothered but not be able to formulate a question. Something just feels wrong about what an author says, but we can't put our finger on what that is. **To read intelligently it is essential to take this intellectual discomfort seriously.** Intellectual discomfort is the initial and ordinary way that any question arises. Just as our feelings are only *initial* indications of what might be the better thing to do, so our intellectual discomfort is an *initial* indication that we may have a relevant question. In many cases, it helps to try *writing* your questions in the margin. Or, if you're having trouble putting it into words, at least write, "What???" or "I don't follow." In short, we can "experience" curiosity and confusion, but it's only when we try to formulate our questions that we really move forward toward reaching answers.

Reading to Talk = Sharing the Search

Why do we read?

We read stories for the pleasure of it. We read poetry to deepen our appreciation of life. We read the paper to keep abreast of current events, weather forecasts, and shopping opportunities.

But sometimes we read to talk. That is, we read to prepare ourselves to discuss what we have read. But reading to talk can occur in two completely different manners. For example, consider two students, David and Eva, who just finished reading a section in their textbook on how to relate to teachers and are now talking about it:

David: "That section was really interesting. I think I learned a lot about how to talk to my teachers. It gives you a lot of tips on how to deal with their different personalities. Actually, it even suggests

leaving the class if you don't like your instructor! You should take a look at this section."

Eva: "That section was great. The main thing I learned is that the quality of my education is up to me more than up to my instructors. I also learned not to jump to conclusions, either about how good or bad a teacher is. Instead, it says to talk to my teachers, get to know them, and give them the chance to get to know me a little. I think this will actually help me get some benefit out of the negative comments teachers make on my papers.

What is David doing here? He's just *informing* us of some facts: *That* the text is about talking to teachers; *that* the text presents a number of tips; *that* the text says to consider leaving a bad class.

And what is Eva doing? She's talking about *how* to relate to teachers and *how* to get more benefit from criticism.

The difference between David and Eva reveals two quite different ways of being a student. David is being knowledgeable. He's focused on *knowing facts*; he knows *what* the textbook treated; he thinks learning is exercising his memory. He expects that schools give you information that you can use after you graduate and return to real life. But if you asked him for advice on *how* to deal with teachers more effectively, he'd be at a loss for words.

In contrast, Eva is being intelligent. She's focused on *understanding reality*; she wants to know *how* to relate to teachers more effectively; she thinks learning is exercising her intelligence. She thinks of school as an opportunity to exercise her mind, to understand life more deeply, to engage her teachers and fellow students about life issues. So when Eva reads, she does the work necessary to formulate her opinions clearly because she wants to bounce them off others. The above quotation of her remarks is not something she just blurted out; she made a direct effort to tell herself exactly what she learned about talking to teachers.

Also, notice where their minds are: David's is on the textbook, while Eva's is on her relationships to her teachers. David is focused on the ideas of other people, while Eva is focused on being smart about her life. So David might often drop names of big-time people ("Well, according to Marx, the layoffs at Ford are natural in a capitalist system."), while Eva will give her own opinions ("I think those layoffs at Ford were a long time coming, because the foreign cars just worked better.")

In short, "reading to talk" means thinking of one another as seeking to understand life more deeply. It means avoiding conversations between the knowledgeable show-offs and seeking people who, like yourself, have genuine questions about life.