

A CiRCE Guide to
Reading

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The key to reading well is to treat books like people.

Don't try to introduce yourself to everybody; make some good friends and true.

Enjoy them, don't make them your servants.

Spend time with them because you want to.

Let them teach you whatever they know and thank them for it.

Don't wring truths out of them they don't want to tell you.

Don't demand everything in a moment and don't force them to be efficient.

Don't throw them away when they don't do things your way.

Enjoy them for what they draw out of you, reveal about you to yourself, and help you see in others.

Work on important projects together.

Go to school together if you have to, but save your best times for at home, under or up the tree, by the river, in the fields, on a walk, riding the bus, going for a drive, or wherever you most like to be.

Introduce them to other people you love.

Think about them when they aren't around.

Remember them fondly and even boast about their glories to others.

Let them change you because you love them.

Read them humbly and don't try too hard to tell them what they mean.

- *Andrew Kern*

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Preface

Every story has a point or an idea that guides the author in each artistic decision he makes—what to include, how to arrange it, or how to express it. Sometimes he knows rather precisely what that idea is from the beginning, and on rare occasions he may even be able to express it in a single sentence—like the moral of a fable or the thesis of an essay. More often, it is the act of telling the story that helps him figure out its point. Or on some occasions he may tell a whole story and never figure out or comprehend the idea the story reveals. But there always is a point, whether it is easy to express or not!

Consider the story Nathan told David when he had to confront him for taking another man's wife and then ensuring the man would be killed in battle. Nathan did not tell a story about a man stealing another man's wife. Nor did Nathan tell a story about a man killing another man. Instead, he told King

David a story about two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had his own herds with many lambs, but the poor man had only one precious ewe lamb which was like a daughter to him. One day when the rich man welcomed a traveler, the rich man took the poor man's lamb to serve to the guest.

After Nathan told this story, King David was furious at the rich man. Then Nathan revealed that he, King David, was that rich man. The point he was trying to make guided Nathan each time he had a decision to make about what to include.

This is not as deep or odd an idea as it might seem at first. If you have ever begun to say something, paused, hesitated, reconsidered, maybe even said, "No, that's not it..." or, "Wait, let me think..." you have experienced in a sentence what a story-teller wrestles with throughout a whole story.

Ask yourself: When you say, "That's not what I wanted to say," how do you know? It seems evident that something precedes your words—a goal, a desired means of expression, an idea that was guiding you to choose the right words to form a sentence that would carry the idea from your own mind into the mind of another through the little sound-pictures we call words. If you were able to say what you meant and if the listener was able to understand, you communicated successfully.

Happily, all of us follow a similar pattern when we try to communicate. It's an amazingly flexible pattern, too, applying to every sentence anybody has ever spoken, and enabling friendships to grow, covenants and agreements to be settled, decisions to be made, and people and events to be remembered. The more skillfully we can use it, the more ef-

fectively we can take the ideas that flit around in our minds like ghosts and shadows and give them bodies with wings that can fly from mind to mind. The technical term for this pattern is Grammar and its virtue is that it enables us to effectively send ideas between our minds.

In the classical world, the Greeks had a word for this: the point or truth that the author or speaker tries to express in a sentence, a story, or a text (in fact, in any work of art). The word is *logos*, and it is the key to all understanding and art and wisdom. *Logos* is a word with vast meaning, including “word,” “reason,” or even “study.” But the main notion seems to be that of a unifying principle, like the sun that holds together the solar system.

One of the benefits a logos offers an author or artist is that it serves as a principle to help him know what to include and where to include it. His goal is to embody that logos in every detail of his sentence or artifact (i.e. work of art).

When you hesitated over that sentence we talked about earlier, it was probably because you weren’t confident that the words or phrases you were using effectively expressed your logos. But notice: The logos was there before you tried to express or embody it. Yet, you could not communicate it until you embodied it.

When the logos guides the artist, it holds the work of art (or sentence) together; it serves as a unifying or harmonizing principle. Imagine for a moment that right now I started to write about whether Joe Montana or Tom Brady is better. It would break the unity of this little essay. It would not cohere, and would demonstrate that I have forgotten my logos. What makes a good writer a good writer is the ability to express his logos in every detail of his writing without losing it

at any point. Every detail reveals the logos a little more.

What on earth does all this have to do with reading?

Simply this: Reading and writing are acts of communication, analogous to listening and speaking. If the goal of writing is to express a logos, the goal of reading is to perceive it. If we forget this, we will approach reading in ways that produce unskilled readers, thinkers, communicators, and decision-makers.

This reading guide provides teachers and readers with tools that equip readers to think about, play with, wrestle with, maybe even do battle with, a text. It begins with the recognition that reading is an act of communication—of listening—in which the most important thing is to receive the logos that has been communicated by the writer.

In particular, story-telling is a sort of game that the story-teller plays with the reader or listener. The reader gets better by playing and by watching others play who are better at it.

The reader's goal is to grasp the writer's logos. There are rules that govern the way the game is played and techniques and skills that help the reader succeed. If the reader "wins," he finds that the joy of it is, in a way, similar to figuring out a math problem or laughing at a joke: "I got it!" he says.

Got what? The logos—the idea—the point!

This guide helps the reader play the game and master the skills that enable him to perceive the logos—in short to become a master reader. Its ultimate goal is not to help students perform better on homework and test-taking (though it will be remarkably helpful even for these purposes), but to help him experi-

ence the deep pleasures, riches, and comforts to be found in literature and to grow in wisdom and virtue.

Introduction

You hold in your hands a guide to reading that is drawn from experience supplemented by the literature on reading and suggestions gathered over years of teaching and discussing books. If you are acquainted with books on reading, you may recognize tools and approaches like SQ3R, speed reading, normative reading, inspectional reading, etc.

However, this guide is not driven by techniques, but by purpose: Its goal is to enable readers to better participate in a dialogue with a written text, and the purpose of that dialogue is communication. Therefore, techniques are useful when they help the reader better listen and respond to the writer.

The approach we take is drawn from the nature of reading which is complex, like any conversation. But underlying the complexity, there are questions common to every reader

about any text. When readers learn to answer these common questions, the more particular questions about a given text or specific to a reader become much easier to answer.

When goals are appropriate, sound techniques, methods, and tools follow. This guide shows you skills and tools such as layered reading, highlighting in multiple colors, and margin notes. As a flexible system, it will help any reader read more closely and attentively. Mastery of these tools both increases the reader's pleasure and fortifies his study skills.

The guide is written in a way that enables you to use it by yourself or to lead a discussion about it. Each chapter is divided into six sections that teach you a tool, reveal its purpose, and allow you to practice using it.

These sections are:

Contemplate: Prepare for the lesson by reflecting on questions related to the logos of the lesson.

Consider: Analogies and examples of the logos.

Compare: Questions that help you compare the examples and analogies with each other.

Describe: You describe how to do what you have learned in that lesson.

Practice: An activity to put what you learned into action.

Stretch: An activity to exercise what you've learned in a book of your choice.

Why layered reading?

Katerina Kern once prepared a class of sophomores to learn the tools in this book. She engaged her students in a simple process to prepare them for what followed. First, she instructed a student to read aloud a page from a class text. Then she asked him to close the book and asked the class what they remembered. Students restated some names and places, while they wondered when the events of the book occurred. She wrote these notes on the board.

Then she asked a volunteer to read the same passage aloud again. After instructing the reader to close the book, she asked her students what they could recall this time. They mentioned actions performed by characters, sometimes in an orderly sequence and sometimes not. Students began to wonder both why the actions were performed and what would result.

For the third time, Katerina asked a volunteer to read the same page aloud. Afterward, she asked them again to tell her what they recalled. This time they recalled more details, made causal connections, and answered their own questions.

Then she repeated the same three steps with a second text and had similar results.

Afterward, Katerina asked her students to compare what they remembered after the first reading and discussed what sorts of things tended to come up. They restated mostly proper nouns, names, and places. They also noticed (and were bothered) that they couldn't remember when the events were taking place.

Next, she asked them to look at the items they recalled after the second time they read the text and to express what those items have in common. After a second read, the students noticed the actions of the characters.

Finally, she asked them to compare what they recalled after the third reading. Students noticed ideas, made comparisons, and answered their own questions.

This exercise helped her students realize that the human mind asks questions in layers. It tends to seek a certain kind of information first, another kind second, and yet another third. The first layer of information is “who,” “where,” and “when.” Next, the mind seeks to know what the “who” is doing (at that time, in that place). The third layer the mind attends to is how things compare, how they are related, what is most important, and other more abstract questions.

I (Andrea) tried the same exercise with a seventh grader and had a similar experience. And when I tried it again with a group of teachers, the same pattern played out. I concluded that the best way to read is in layers so our minds can seek answers in the pattern that seems most natural.

Because the higher level questions depend on the lower, readers find it most effective to answer the lower or more basic questions first. Happily, with a little practice they can often do it in a matter of seconds, as you will see in Part One, scanning. Then in Part Two, reading, you will see how the foundations laid in part one lead to much closer, more insightful reading. Following that, in part three, you will learn ways to hold on to what you have learned, absorb it, and share it with others.

To prepare yourself and your students to read attentively, actively, and purposefully, guide your students through Katerina’s lesson described above.

Read Aloud and Respond

1. Depending on their ability to think abstractly, ask

your students, “What does your mind do when you read? What do you need to know to be able to read?” Discuss what they suggest.

2. Read aloud a short, unfamiliar passage, above the students’ independent reading level. For example, read a paragraph or two from the beginning of a chapter in Plutarch’s *Lives* or a Jane Austen novel.

3. Ask the students what they recall. Write this on a board.

4. Read aloud the same passage again.

5. Ask the students to share what they remember. Write this on the board in a separate group.

6. Read aloud the same passage for the final time.

7. Ask the students what they recall. Write this on the board in a separate group.

Repeat

Repeat the above sequence with a second passage.

Compare

1. Ask the students how the responses after the first reading were similar and different.

2. Ask the students how the responses after the second reading were similar and different.

3. Ask the students how the responses after the third reading were similar and different.

Describe

Ask your students to describe the sorts of thing they remember after each reading. Do you see the same sort of pattern that Katerina and Andrea saw? Most groups will, but if they don't, don't dwell on it. Just help them understand that they look for information in layers and that they remember some things because their minds were asking for that information.

Reading is a question-driven dialogue and those questions are asked in more or less the same order each time.

Practice

By strengthening your reading skills through the exercises and tools taught in this guide, you develop your imagination and attend to what David Hicks calls normative ends in *Norms and Nobility*: the contemplation of truth, goodness, and beauty. Continue to Part One to learn about scanning in more detail.

Nota Bene

The tools you learn in this Reading Guide are meant to assist you, not to be your master. As you master them you will decide when to use them and how. At first, you will almost certainly use them badly, because that is how we learn anything. Your skills will improve with practice. But always remember, the tools are for you to use for your own purposes.

Part One

Scanning

Chapter One
A Question-guided Dialogue

.....
*“You have been given questions to which you cannot
be given answers. You will have to live them out—
perhaps a little at a time.”*

Wendell Berry,
Jayber Crow

Before you read a book closely, you will scan it a few times. Like preparing the soil, this can seem distracting or pointless, but how well you perform these actions will profoundly impact how well you read.

Contemplate

- Why do you read books?
- What is order? What is harmony?
- How many questions can you answer at one time?

Consider

Early one evening a family prepared their dinner and discussed the day. The children moved in and out of the kitchen as well as in and out of the discussion. Suddenly the children rushed up to their father and bombarded him with questions. Overwhelmed, he stopped them by holding up his index finger and saying, “one at a time. You are first.” The children relaxed as he patiently gave his attention to each child in turn.

When we read, a number of questions crowd our minds, demanding our attention like the children in the anecdote. Our minds want to know super practical things, like, “How long is this book? How long will it take to read it?” Plot elements like, “Who is the hero? When does it take place? Where does it take place” Genre questions, like, “Is it a mystery? A history? A fantasy?” Moral questions like, “Will the characters do anything foolish? Should I root for the hero? Who are the good guys?” And even very personal questions, like, “Do I like this writer? Would my sister like this book?”

We cannot answer these questions at the same time, yet they all

crowd around, waiting for an answer. Over the years, we learn to ignore them, but that only makes them a little sulkier and more unhelpful. But if we would answer them, they would help us read better.

Like the children who confidently knew the dad would answer each question, so our mind needs to know that its questions will be respected and answered. When they know that they will be answered in time, they are able to relax and wait their turns.

Like the father who stopped the children and let them ask their questions one at a time, so a skillful and wise reader attends to the questions in his head in an orderly way.

Happily, most of these questions are easy enough to answer and only take a few seconds. Furthermore, most of them are common questions that every reader asks, though some may not realize it.

To help the reader respond in an orderly way, this guide teaches “layered reading.” It introduces three broad stages to reading: scanning, reading, and reviewing. Part One demonstrates scanning. Part Two explains reading. And Part Three introduces skills useful for review. Scanning involves multiple layers, reading proper is laid on top of the scanning layers, and then review looks back at the whole image constructed through the layers.

Layered reading offers a way of preparing your mind to become acquainted with a particular book.

Compare

- How is answering the questions asked by a roomful of children like reading a book? How is it different?

- How is scanning different from reading proper? How is reading in layers like any other activity that involves multiple steps? How is it different? Choose any activity with which you are familiar.
- How is layered reading different from a single read?

Describe

Describe layered reading in your own words.

Practice

Continue to Chapter Two on scanning to implement what you have learned in this chapter.

Stretch

Choose another book that you will read while you complete this reading guide. Keep it nearby for future exercises. We will refer to this book from now on as your “companion book.”

You may choose your companion book for many reasons: a teacher assigned it for a class, you assigned the book for a class, you have already read the whole book once, or you just purchased a new book. If possible, try to complete the “stretch” exercise in each chapter with a book you have already read once. Use a book that is challenging but not so difficult as to discourage you. *C. S. Lewis’ Abolition of Man*, *The Chronicles of Narnia Series*, and *Hannah Coulter* by Wendell Berry are good places to begin, depending on your previous reading.

Nota Bene

Be sure to read and practice the Introduction. Try the exercise on your unsuspecting spouse, friend, or students. Teachers must establish in students the need for these reading skills, and the skills will create the affection for a book. The Introduction explains the steps to create this need, or awareness, in students. The remaining chapters present the scanning, reading, and reviewing skills.