Three Tips For Intellectual Reading

by JP Moreland

2. Three tips for intellectual reading: Intellectual reading is an attempt to grasp the concepts, structure, and arguments that form the content of the thing being read. The goal is to learn something new, to master specific content, to develop one's intellectual categories, and to grow in one's ability to think. Space forbids me to describe this sort of reading in detail, but I will mention three tips for developing skills here.

First, the mind works from the *whole to the parts to the whole*. When you start to read a book or begin a new area of study, the first thing you should try to do is get an overview of the main issues in that book or area of thought. For example, in reading a book, you should begin with the book jacket or the introduction in order to get before your mind a statement of the book's primary thesis and the main issues to be discussed. Next, spend five minutes studying the table of contents. Use a pen and note on the page any observations about structure you can see (for example, that chapters one to three seem to go together and chapters four to five contain answers to the problems surfaced in the first three chapters).

For college students or those with easy access to a good library, if you are really going to dissect a book, obtain a few book reviews of the work prior to your own reading. In graduate school, when I bought my textbooks for the semester, I would go immediately to the library, ask the librarian for help in locating reviews of my textbooks (they are trained at doing this), and xerox and read them.

A good book review does two things: it gives you the big picture about a book's major thesis and its overall structure, and it evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the book. Both can be helpful to have in mind before you begin to read. Your purpose in all of this is to get a tentative grasp of the whole of the book and at least a small feel for how the author develops his or her thesis.

After these initial steps, you begin to read the book with pen in hand. You move from your tentative guess at the book as a whole to an examination of the book's parts. If possible, never read a serious book without something with which to write. Your goal in reading is to surface the structure of each chapter. I will address this aspect of reading shortly, but for now, I want to emphasize that once the book's parts have been read, you should reexamine your initial guess at the overall thesis and structure of the book and revise where necessary.

In approaching a new, relatively unfamiliar area of study (for example, end-of-life ethics, the role of women in the church), start with a brief introduction to the subject matter. I try to read a dictionary or encyclopedia article if possible, or an introductory textbook in the area. Often, a librarian can help you find a magazine or journal article that summarizes the main issues in the area of study. Again, your goal is to obtain an initial set of categories that can help you be more informed in noticing things you may otherwise miss when you set out to analyze more carefully a detailed text in the area of investigation.

In addition to the movement from whole to parts to whole, it is important to focus on *structure* at each step, especially when actually reading each chapter in the book. I usually write in the left-hand margin, every two to three paragraphs, a summary of the main arguments in the text. I am very careful to note in the margin any change in the structure. For example, I ask these kinds of questions: Is the author continuing to develop the same point of discussion treated in the preceding paragraphs? Has the text shifted to making a new point parallel to the one just made or are we now reading criticisms and rebuttals of the main thesis? What you are after is a chapter filled with marginal notes that form an outline of the flow of that chapter.

After I read a subsection in a chapter (usually marked off by an actual subheading in the text), I return to the page where that subsection began and write a two- or three-sentence summary of the main point of the subsection. When I have finished the entire chapter, I look at all of my subsection summaries and write a summary of the entire chapter at the top of the first page of that chapter. You want to mark up the book in such a way that if you return to it months later, you can look at your marginal notes and get a feel for the main flow of the chapter's structure and its content.

I use two notational devices to help me learn a chapter's structure. First, if an author is offering arguments for his or her thesis, I put a "+1," "+2," and so forth in the margin where each specific argument begins. If the author states three such arguments in five pages, I will be able to locate those arguments by looking at my marginal notations. I note arguments against the author's thesis with "-1," "-2," and so on. If the author offers two counterarguments against the first assault of his or her claims (which was marked with a "-1"), I note those counterarguments with "- -1" and "- -2." The goal is to keep track of the arguments and counterarguments that compose the structure of the debate in the text itself.

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JP Moreland. Navpress, 1997. 166-169

Second, if I write a marginal note that contains my own thoughts about an issue instead of representing a summary of the text itself, I put the remark in parentheses and begin it with "N.B.," which is the abbreviation for the Latin term *nota bene*, which means "take note." For example, "(N.B. Rachels fails to recognize that intention is the very essence of a moral act and this is where his argument goes wrong.)" This allows me to keep track of when I am inserting my own thoughts and when I am summarizing the text itself.

Here is a final tip for learning how to read better. Inside the front cover of the book I construct my *own index*. As I read a book, if I come upon a topic of special interest to me, I turn to the blank pages at the front of the book and write down a key term or phrase ("Darwin's view of the soul," "predestination and moral responsibility"), followed by the corresponding page number(s) in the text. Every time that topic is in view, I write those page numbers down. This gives me my own index for a book based on the things to which I want later access.

In developing the art of intellectual reading as part of personal worship, it is important to keep three things in mind. First, do not measure the value of such reading by the *immediate* practical application or spiritual enlivening that comes from an hour or two devoted to analyzing a chapter or two of a book. Often, it takes several chapters for an idea to be developed with sufficient care and depth to offer something to apply to one's life and thought. Sometimes you need to be patient and stay with a line of thought for several weeks before things get clear to you. Intellectual reading is never a quick fix, and its value is measured in the long-term maturity that comes from practicing this type of reading.

Second, get into the habit of reading books that are somewhat beyond your ability to grasp. If you spend all of your time reading material that requires little intellectual effort, you will not stretch your mind and grow appreciably in your thinking ability.

Finally, when you undertake to read a book seriously, you cannot treat that book as a novel to be read for recreation. Compared to intellectual reading, recreational reading is fairly passive, can be done quickly, and does not require a great deal of work or engagement on the part of the reader. In intellectual reading, you simply must stay alert, use a pen, make notes regularly, and remember to look for three things: Structure! Structure! Structure! If you do not walk away from an occasion of reading with a better grasp of the flow of argument in what has been read, you have not practiced intellectual reading successfully.

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