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How to Become a Better Reader and Thinker

The chances are that you are not as good a reader as you should be to do well in college. If so, it's not surprising. You live in a culture where people watch an average of *over seven hours of television every day!!!* All that passive viewing does not allow much time for reading. Reading is a skill that must be actively practiced. The simple fact is that people who do not read very often are not likely to be strong readers.

- How much TV do you guess you watch on an average day?

Another reason besides TV for not reading much is that you may have a lot of responsibilities. You may be going to school and working at the same time, and you may have a lot of family duties as well. Given your hectic schedule, you're not going to have much time to read. When you have free time, you're exhausted, and it's easier to turn on the TV than to open up a book.

- Do you do any regular reading (for example, a daily newspaper, weekly magazines, occasional novels)?
- When are you most likely to do your reading?

A third reason for not reading is that school may have caused you to associate reading with worksheets and drills and book reports and test scores. Experts agree that many schools have not done a good job of helping students discover the pleasures and rewards of reading. If reading was an unpleasant experience in school, you may have concluded that reading in general is not for you.

- Do you think that school made you dislike reading, rather than enjoy it?

Here are three final questions to ask yourself:

- Do you feel that perhaps you don't need a reading course, since you "already know how to read"?

- If you had a choice, would you be taking a reading course? (It's okay to be honest.)
- Do you think that a bit of speed reading may be all you need?

Chances are that you don't need to read *faster* as much as you need to read *smarter*. And it's a safe bet that if you don't read much, you can benefit enormously from the reading course in which you are using this book.

One goal of the book is to help you become a better reader. You will learn and practice ten key reading comprehension skills. As a result, you'll be better able to read and understand the many materials in your other college courses. The skills in this book have direct and practical value: they can help you perform better and more quickly—giving you an edge for success—in all of your college work.

The book is also concerned with helping you become a stronger thinker, a person able not just to *understand* what you read but to *analyze* and *evaluate* it as well. In fact, reading and thinking are closely related skills, and practice in thoughtful reading will also strengthen your ability to think clearly and logically. To find out just how the book will help you achieve these goals, read the next several pages.

How the Book Is Organized

The book is organized into five main parts:

Introduction (pages 1–13)

In addition to this chapter, which will give you a good sense of the book, there are two other parts to the introduction. “Some Quick Study Tips” presents four hints that can make you a better student. If I had time to say just four things to incoming college students, based on my thirty years of teaching experience, these are the things I would say. The final part of the introduction, “The Power of Reading,” gives four reasons for developing the reading habit and also offers a reading challenge.

Part One: Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills (pages 15–456)

To help you become a more effective reader and thinker, this book presents a series of ten key reading skills. They are listed in the table of contents on pages v and vi. Each chapter is developed in the same way.

- First of all, clear **explanations** and **examples** help you *understand* each skill.
- **Practices** then give you the “hands-on” experience needed to *learn* the skill.
- Closing each chapter are **four review tests**. The first review test provides a check of the information presented in the chapter. The second and third review tests consist of activities that help you practice the skill learned in the chapter. The fourth review test consists of a story, essay, or textbook selection that both gets you reading and gives you practice in the skill learned in the chapter as well as skills learned in previous chapters.
- Following each chapter are **six mastery tests** which gradually increase in difficulty. The tests are on tear-out pages and so can be easily removed and handed in to your instructor. So that you can track your progress, there is a score box at the top of each test. Your score can also be entered into the “Reading Performance Chart” on the inside back cover of the book.

Part Two: Ten Reading Selections (pages 457–574)

The ten reading selections that make up Part Two are followed by activities that give you practice in all of the skills studied in Part One. Each reading begins in the same way. Look, for example, at “The Professor Is a Dropout,” which starts on page 459. You’ll see two sections that come before the reading itself. The first section, “Preview,” gives you an idea of what the reading selection is about. The second one, “Words to Watch,” lists some of the challenging words in the selection, together with their meanings.

Note that the vocabulary words in “Words to Watch” are followed by the numbers of the paragraphs in which the words appear. Look at paragraphs 16, 29, and 36 of “The Professor Is a Dropout”; you’ll see that each vocabulary word is marked with a small circle (°) in the reading itself.

Activities Following Each Reading Selection

After each selection, there are four kinds of activities that will help you to improve the reading and thinking skills you learned in Part One of the book.

- 1 The first activity consists of **basic skill questions**—questions involving vocabulary in context, main ideas (including implied main ideas and central points), supporting details, and relationships.

- 2 The second activity is made up of **advanced skill questions**—ones involving inferences, purpose and tone, argument, and critical reading.
- 3 The third activity involves **outlining, mapping, or summarizing**. Each of these activities will sharpen your ability to get to the heart of a selection and to think logically and clearly about what you read.
- 4 The fourth activity consists of four **discussion questions**. These questions provide a chance for you to deepen your understanding of each selection.

Part Three: Combined-Skills Tests (pages 575–617)

This part of the book is made up of short passages that give you practice in all the ten reading skills taught in the book. It is similar to the standardized reading tests you may have taken as entrance exams or for placement in previous courses.

Part Four: For Further Study (pages 619–688)

Part Four contains additional materials that can help improve your reading.

- 1 The first section, “More about Summarizing and Outlining,” provides additional information and activities that your instructor may choose to cover, depending on the needs of the class.
- 2 The second section, “Additional Tests on Fact and Opinion,” contains four 20-item tests that you may take after you have studied Chapter 10, “Critical Reading,” in Part One.
- 3 The third section, “Four Additional Readings,” presents a series of short textbook selections that your instructor may assign for note-taking practice.
- 4 The fourth section, “Understanding Bias,” explains how to recognize a speaker’s or writer’s point of view by looking at word choices.
- 5 The fifth section, “Writing Assignments,” on pages 673–688, presents writing assignments for all twenty reading selections in the book. Reading and writing are closely connected skills, and writing practice will improve your ability to read closely and to think carefully.

Appendixes (pages 691–700)

Following Part Four are appendixes that include a pronunciation guide and a limited answer key.

Helpful Features of the Book

- 1 The book centers on *what you really need to know* to become a better reader and thinker. It presents ten key comprehension skills and explains the most important points about each one.
- 2 The book gives you *lots of practice*. We seldom learn a skill only by hearing or reading about it; we make it part of us by repeated practice. There are, then, numerous activities in the text. They are not “busywork,” but carefully designed materials that should help you truly learn each skill.

Notice that after you learn each skill in Part One, you progress to review tests and mastery tests that enable you to apply the skill. And as you move from one skill to the next, the reading selections help you practice and reinforce the skills already learned.
- 3 The selections throughout the book are *lively and appealing*. Dull and unvaried readings work against learning, so subjects have been carefully chosen for their high interest level. Almost all of the selections here are good examples of how what we read can capture our attention. For instance, start reading “The Professor Is a Dropout,” which is about the dramatic steps one woman took to educate herself and her children—and try to *stop* reading. Or read “Hard Times, a Helping Hand,” which offers a lesson for our times: the inspirational story of an anonymous benefactor who shared his wealth with hundreds of people in need during the Great Depression. Or read the textbook selection “Effects of the Automobile,” which, despite its unexciting title, is full of fascinating—and thought-provoking—details about the many ways that automobiles have changed our daily lives.
- 4 The readings include *nine selections from college textbooks*. Therefore, you will be practicing on some materials very much like the ones in your other courses. Doing so will increase your chances of transferring what you learn in your reading class to your other college courses.

How to Use the Book

- 1 A good way to proceed is to read and review the explanations and examples in a given chapter in Part One until you feel you understand the ideas presented. Then carefully work through the practices. As you finish each one, check your answers with the “Limited Answer Key” that starts on page 693.

For your own sake, *don't just copy in the answers without trying to do the practices!* The only way to learn a skill is to practice it first and then use the answer key to give yourself feedback. Also, take whatever time is needed to figure out just why you got some answers wrong. By using the answer key to help teach yourself the skills, you will prepare yourself for the review and mastery tests at the end of each chapter as well as the other reading tests in the book. Your instructor can supply you with answers to those tests.

If you have trouble catching on to a particular skill, **stick** with it. In time, you will learn each of the ten skills.

- 2 Read the selections first with the intent of simply enjoying them. There will be time afterward for rereading each selection and using it to develop your comprehension skills.
- 3 Keep track of your progress. Fill in the charts at the end of **each** chapter in Part One and each reading in Part Two. And in the “Reading Performance Chart” on the inside back cover, enter your scores for all of the review and mastery tests as well as the reading selections. These scores can give you a good view of your overall performance as you work through the book.

In summary, *Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills* has been designed to interest and benefit you as much as possible. Its format is straightforward, its explanations are clear, its readings are appealing, and its many practices will help you learn through doing. *It is a book that has been created to reward effort*, and if you provide that effort, you will make yourself a better reader and a stronger thinker. I wish you success.

John Langan

2 Some Quick Study Tips

While it's not my purpose in this book to teach study skills, I do want to give you four quick hints that can make you a better student. The hints are based on my thirty years of experience working with first-year college students and teaching reading and study skills.

TIP 1 The most important steps you can take to succeed in school are to go to every class and take a lot of notes. If you don't go to class, or you go but just sit there without taking notes, chances are you're heading for a heap of trouble.

TIP 2 Let me ask you a question: Which is more important—learning how to read a textbook or learning how to read your professor?

Write your answer here: _____

You may be surprised at the answer: What is far more important is learning how to read your professor—to understand what he or she expects you to learn in the course and to know for tests.

I remember becoming a good student in college only after I learned the truth of this statement. And I have interviewed hundreds of today's students who have said the same thing. Let me quote just one of them:

You absolutely have to be in class. Then you learn how to read the teacher and to know what he or she is going to want on tests. You could read an entire textbook, but that wouldn't be as good as being in class and writing down a teacher's understanding of ideas.

TIP 3 Many teachers base their tests mainly on the ideas they present in class. But when you have to learn a textbook chapter, do the following.

First, read the first and last few paragraphs of the chapter; they may give you a good overview of what the chapter is about.

Second, as you read the chapter, look for and mark off definitions of key terms and examples of those definitions.

Third, as you read the chapter, number any lists of items; if there is a series of items and you number the items *1, 2, 3*, and so on, it will be easier to understand and remember them.

Fourth, after you've read the chapter, take notes on the most important material and test yourself on those notes until you can say them to yourself without looking at them.



TIP 4 Here's another question: Are you an organized person? Do you get out of bed on time, do you get to places on time, do you keep up with school work, do you allow time to study for tests and write papers?

If you are *not* an organized person, you're going to have trouble in school. Here are three steps to take to control your time:

First, pay close attention to the course outline, or *syllabus*, your instructors will probably pass out at the start of a semester. Chances are that the syllabus will give you the dates of exams and tell you when papers or reports are due.

Second, move all those dates onto a *large monthly calendar*—a calendar that has a good-sized block of white space for each date. Hang the calendar in a place where you'll be sure to see it every day—perhaps above your desk **or** on a bedroom wall.

Third, buy a small notebook and write down every day a "*to do*" list of things that need to get done that day. Decide which items are most important, and focus on them first. (If you have classes that day, going to those classes will be "A" priority items.) Carry your list with you during the day, referring to it every so often and checking off items as you complete them.

Questions

1. Of the four hints listed above, which is the most important one for you? Why?
2. Which hint is the second most important for you, and why?
3. You may not realize just how quickly new information can be forgotten. For example, how much class material do you think most people forget in just two weeks? Check (✓) the answer you think is correct.

___ 20 percent is forgotten within two weeks

___ 40 percent is forgotten within two weeks

___ 60 percent is forgotten within two weeks

___ 80 percent is forgotten within two weeks

The truth is that within two weeks most people forget almost 80% of what they have heard! Given that fact, what should you be sure to do in all your classes? _____

3

The Power of Reading

You will become a stronger reader as you practice the comprehension skills presented in this book. But you should take another step as well, and that is to develop the habit of regular reading. Here are four specific reasons why you should develop the reading habit:

Reason 1: Language Power. Research has shown beyond any question that reading and writing are closely connected skills. The more you do of one, the better you'll become at the other. In fact, frequent reading will not only strengthen your grammar and writing style; it will also improve your vocabulary, spelling, and reading speed and comprehension. Once you become a regular reader, all your language and thinking abilities will develop almost automatically!

Reason 2: Entertainment Power. Too many students have done too little reading for pleasure in their lives. You may be one of these students—an unpracticed reader who has never discovered how enjoyable the right kind of reading can be. Perhaps you grew up in a home like mine where a television set dominated the household. Or maybe you were eager to learn about reading when you began school, but then you lost interest. If you were given dull and irrelevant material to read in school, you may have decided (mistakenly) that reading cannot be rewarding for you.

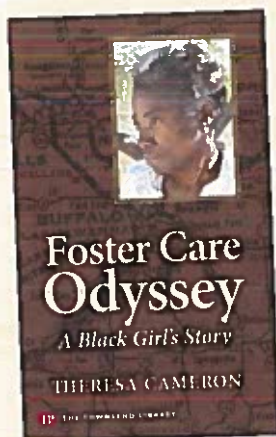
The truth is that reading can open the door to a lifetime of pleasure and adventure. Thrilling stories, unforgettable characters, and powerful life lessons all lie on the other side of the door. If you take the time to walk through that door, chances are you will learn that one of the great experiences of life is the joy of reading for its own sake.

Reason 3: Job Power. Regular reading will increase your chances for job success. In today's world more than ever before, jobs involve the processing of information, with words being the tools of the trade. Studies have found that the better your command of words, the more success you are likely to have. Nothing will give you a command of words as effectively as regular reading.

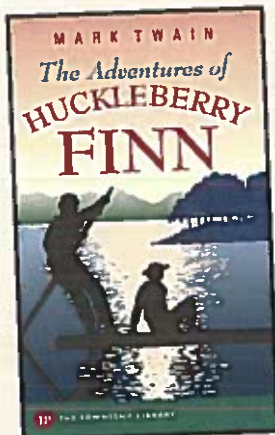
Reason 4: Human Power. Reading enlarges the mind and the heart. It frees us from the narrow confines of our own experience. Knowing how other people view important matters helps us decide what we ourselves think and feel. Reading also helps us connect with others and realize our shared humanity. The famous novelist C.S. Lewis wrote, "We read in order to know that we are not alone." We become less isolated as we share the common experiences, emotions, and thoughts that make us human. We grow more sympathetic and understanding because we realize that others are like us.

A Reading Challenge

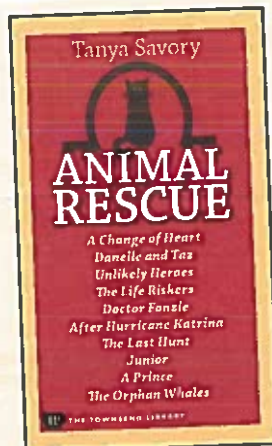
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