The Thinker's Guide to

How to Read a Paragraph

and beyond

The Art of Close Reading

How to Read a Text Worth Reading and Take Ownership of Its Important Ideas

By Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder

Based on *Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools*

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

Contents

The Theory

The Premise of This Guide

If you can read a paragraph well, you can read a chapter well, because a chapter is nothing more than a collection of paragraphs. If you can read a chapter well, you can read a book well, because a book is nothing more than a collection of chapters.

Reading For a Purpose

Skilled readers do not read blindly, but purposely. They have an agenda, goal, or objective. Their purpose, together with the nature of what they are reading, determines how they read. They read in different ways in different situations for different purposes. Of course, reading has a nearly universal purpose: to figure out what an author has to say on a given subject.

When we read, we translate words into meanings. The author has previously translated ideas and experiences into words. We must take those same words and re-translate them into the author's original meaning using our own ideas and experiences as aids. Accurately translating words into intended meanings is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. Unfortunately, few people are skilled at translation. Few are able to accurately mirror the meaning the author intended. They project their own meanings into a text. They unintentionally distort or violate the original meaning of authors they read. As Horace Mann put it in 1838:

> I have devoted especial pains to learn, with some degree of numerical accuracy, how far the reading, in our schools, is an exercise of the mind in thinking and feeling and how far it is a barren action of the organs of speech upon the atmosphere. My information is derived principally from the written statements of the school committees of the respective towns — gentlemen who are certainly exempt from all temptation to disparage the schools they superintend. The result is that more than 11/12ths of all the children in the reading classes do not understand the meanings of the words they read; and that the ideas and feelings intended by the author to be conveyed to and excited in, the reader's mind, still rest in the author's intention, never having yet reached the place of their destination. (Second Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, 1838)

In general, then, we read to figure out what authors mean. Our reading is further influenced by our purpose for reading and by the nature of the text itself. For example, if we are reading for pure pleasure and personal amusement, it may not matter if we do not fully understand the text. We may simply enjoy the ideas that the text stimulates in us. This is fine as long

as we know that we do not deeply understand the text. Some of the various purposes for reading include:

1. *Sheer pleasure*: requires no particular skill level.
2. *To figure out a simple idea*: which may require skimming the text.
3. *To gain specific technical information*: skimming skills required.
4. *To enter, understand, and appreciate a new world view*: requires close reading skills in working through a challenging series of tasks that stretch our minds.
5. *To learn a new subject*: requires close reading skills in internalizing and taking ownership of an organized system of meanings.

How you read should be determined in part by *what* you read. Reflective readers read a textbook, for example, using a different mindset than they use when reading an article in a newspaper. Furthermore, reflective readers read a textbook in biology differently from the way they read a textbook in history.

Having recognized this variability, we should also recognize that there are core reading tools and skills for reading any substantive text. These tools and skills are the focus of this guide.

Considering the Author's Purpose

In addition to being clear about our own purpose in *reading*, we must also be clear about the author's purpose in *writing*. Both are relevant. Consider the following agendas. Think about what adjustments you would make in your reading given the differing purposes of these writers:

- politicians and their media advisors developing political campaign literature;
- newspaper editors deciding which stories their readers would be most interested in and how to tell the story to maintain that interest;
- advertisers working with media consultants while writing copy for advertisements (to sell a product or service);
- a chemist writing a laboratory report;
- a novelist writing a novel;
- a poet writing a poem;
- a student writing a research report.

To read productively, your purpose in reading must take into account the author's purpose in writing. For example, if you read a historical novel to learn history, you would do well to read further in history books and primary sources before you conclude that what you read in the historical novel was accurate. Where fact and imagination are blended to achieve a novelist's purpose, fact and imagination must be separated to achieve the reader's pursuit of historical fact.

Developing a "Map" of Knowledge

All knowledge exists in "systems" of meanings, with interrelated primary ideas, secondary ideas, and peripheral ideas. Imagine a series of circles beginning with a small core circle of primary ideas, surrounded by concentric circles of secondary ideas, moving outward to an outer circle of peripheral ideas. The primary ideas, at the core, explain the secondary and peripheral ideas. Whenever we read to acquire knowledge, we should take ownership, first, of the primary ideas, for they are a key to understanding all of the other ideas. Moreover, when we gain an initial understanding of the primary ideas, we can begin to think within the system as a whole. The sooner we begin to think within a system, the sooner the system becomes meaningful to us.
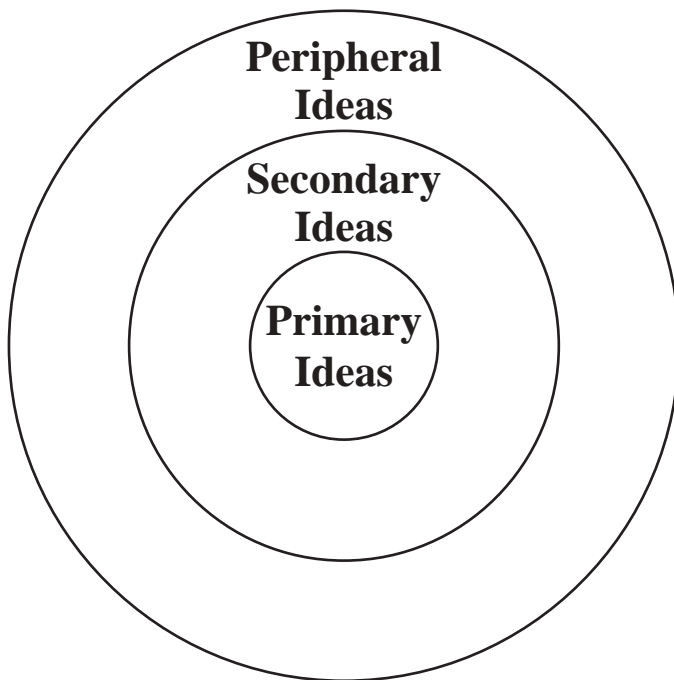
Essential Idea: Closely reading about primary and secondary ideas in a discipline is a key to understanding the discipline.

Thus, when we understand core historical ideas, we can begin to think historically. When we understand core scientific ideas, we can begin to think scientifically. Core or primary ideas are the key to every system of knowledge. They are the key to truly learning any subject. They are the key to retaining what we learn for lifelong use.

readers, we can learn the essential meanings of an unlimited number of teachers whose teachings live on, ever available, in the books they have written. When we take the core ideas of those teachings into our minds through careful reading, we can productively use them in our lives.
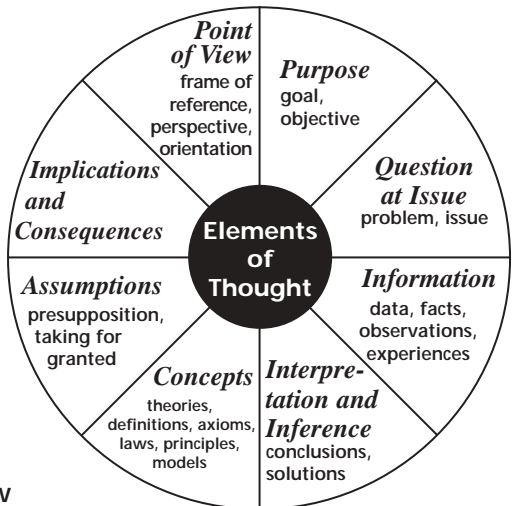
Reading Minds

You have a mind. But do you know how your mind operates? Are you aware of your prejudices and preconceptions? Are you aware of the extent to which your thinking mirrors the thinking of those around you? Are you aware of the extent to which your thinking has been influenced by the thinking of the culture in which you have been raised and conditioned? To what extent can you step outside your day-to-day mindset and into the mindset of those who think differently from you? Are you able to imagine being "wrong" in some of your beliefs? What criteria would you use to evaluate your personal beliefs? Are you aware of how to upgrade the quality of your own beliefs?

In reading the work of others, you enter their minds. In coming to terms with the mind of another, you can come to better discover your own mind — both its strengths and its weaknesses. To read your own mind, you must learn how to do second-order thinking — how to think about your thinking while you are thinking from *outside* your thinking. But how do you get outside your thinking?

To do this, you must recognize that there are eight basic structures in all thinking. Whenever we think, we think for a purpose within a point of view based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. We use concepts, ideas and theories to interpret data, facts, and experiences in order to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues.

Thinking:

- has a purpose

- raises questions

- uses information

- utilizes concepts

- makes inferences

- is based on assumptions

- generates implications

- embodies a point of view

Point of View frame of reference, perspective, orientation

Purpose goal, objective

Question at Issue problem, issue

Implications and Consequences

Elements of Thought

Information data, facts, observations, experiences

Assumptions presupposition, taking for granted

Concepts theories, definitions, axioms, laws, principles, models

Interpretation and Inference conclusions, solutions

When we come to understand these eight basic elements, we have powerful intellectual tools that enable us to think better. We understand that whenever we reason about anything whatsoever, these parts of thinking are inherent in our mind's operations.

Thus when you read, you are reasoning through the text; you are reading for a *purpose*, using *concepts* or ideas and *assumptions* of your own, making *inferences*, thinking within a personal *point of view*. At the same time, the text you are reading is the product of someone else's reasoning. You therefore recognize that embedded in the text is the author's *purpose*, the author's *question, assumptions, concepts* and so forth. The better you are at understanding your own reasoning within your own perspective, the better you can understand the reasoning of others. The better you understand someone else's logic, the better you understand your own.

When you can effectively move back and forth between what you are reading and what you are thinking, you bring what you think to bear upon what you read and what you read to bear upon what you think. You are able to change your thinking when the logic of what you read is an improvement on what you think. And you are able to withhold accepting new ideas when you cannot reconcile them with your own. You realize that you may be wrong in some of your beliefs.

The Work of Reading

Reading is a form of intellectual work. And intellectual work requires willingness to persevere through difficulties. But perhaps even more important, intellectual work requires understanding what such work entails. This is where most students fall short. Consider the challenge of analyzing, evaluating, and repairing an automobile engine. The biggest challenge is in knowing how to do what needs to be done: how to use the tools of auto mechanics in taking the engine apart and how to run tests on specific systems in it. And learning this requires learning how an automobile engine functions, the internal combustion system it represents.

No one would expect to know how to repair an automobile engine without training, involving both theory and practice. If you learn to "read" without understanding what good reading involves, you learn to read poorly. That is why reading is a fundamentally passive activity for many students. It is as if their theory of reading was something like this: "You let your eye move from left to right, scanning one line at a time, until somehow, in some inexplicable way, meaning automatically and effortlessly happens in the mind."

Five Levels of Close Reading

To get beyond this unproductive view of reading, we must recognize that the work of close reading consists in mindfully extracting and internalizing the important meanings implicit in a text. It is a highly constructive activity. The reflective mind *works* its way into the mind of an author through intellectual discipline. The foundation for this discipline is close reading.

conclusions; for assumptions; for implications and consequences; and for points of view. The ability to read in these disciplined ways gives power and command to your reading. You do not simply read; you construct systems of thought as you read.

Reading Within Disciplines

To read within disciplines, you must recognize that all disciplines (subjects that can be studied) are, in fact, *systems* of thought. Indeed, often they are *systems of systems*. Thus, scientific thinking forms a large-scale system of thought (which contrasts with other systems, such as ethical thinking). But science as a large-scale system also contains sub-systems within it (physics, chemistry, biology, physiology, and so forth). Science, therefore, is a system of systems.

But, unlike science, in which there is agreement on the most basic principles guiding scientific thinking, some systems within a given discipline are in conflict with each other. For example, philosophy, psychology, and economics contain multiple conflicting schools of thought.

To be an effective reader within disciplines, you must learn to identify, for any given subject, whether it is best understood as a system of supporting systems (such as math and science) or a system of conflicting systems (such as philosophy, psychology, and economics). If you are within a system-harmonious field, your task is to master the systems and come to see how they support each other. If you are within a system-conflicting field, your task is to master the systems by exploring how they conflict with each other. Of course, in seeing how conflicting systems exclude each other, you would also discover how they overlap. Conflict between systems of thought is rarely, if ever, total and absolute. You will find conflicting systems in all disciplines in which there are competing schools of thought.

The Art of Close Reading

The remaining part of this *Guide* consists in excerpts from a series of important texts. All of the texts contain ideas well worth a careful reading. We will exemplify only the first four levels of reading. The fifth level, role-playing, involves an oral performance. To model role-playing, we would have to construct an imaginary dialogue between the author of one or more of the featured texts and a hypothetical questioner. We leave this possibility to you as the reader.

We do not provide samples of the first four levels of close reading for every excerpt. What we do provide in all cases is the foundation of close reading — namely, a *first reading*. A first reading begins with your translation of an author's wording into your own alternative wording. In other words, you put the words and thoughts of the author into your words. Your paraphrase is successful only if your words capture the essential meaning of the original. A *first reading* is successful if the reformulation of the text it represents opens up, or at least *begins* to open up, the meaning of the original.