

# HOW TO READ A PARAGRAPH

SECOND EDITION

*The Art of Close Reading*

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

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# 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.

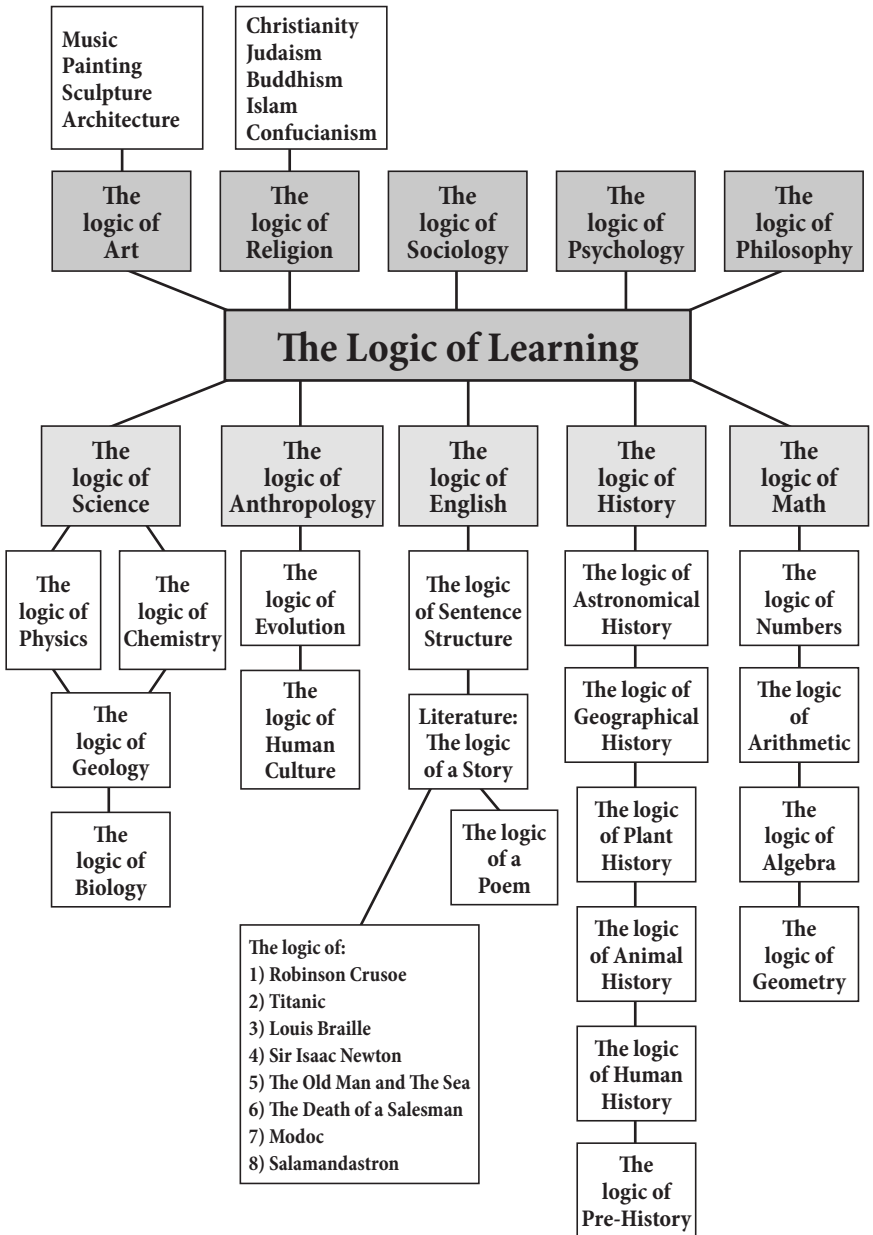
To read productively, your purpose in reading must take into account the author's purpose in writing. For example, if you read a historical novel to learn history, you would do well to read further in history books and primary sources before you conclude that what you read in the historical novel was 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.

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.

# Student-Generated Map of Knowledge



## **Engaging a Text**

The reflective mind interacts with the author's thinking. In this interaction, the reader's mind reconstructs the author's thinking. It does this through a process of inner dialogue with the sentences of the text, assessing each sentence for its intelligibility and questioning in a disciplined way:

- Can I summarize the meaning of this text in my own words?
- Can I give examples from my own experience of what the text is saying?
- Can I generate metaphors and diagrams to illustrate what the text is saying?
- What is clear to me and what do I need clarified?
- Can I connect the core ideas in this text to other core ideas I understand?

## **Books Are Teachers**

Every book we read is a potential teacher. Reading is a systematic process for learning the essential meanings of that teacher. When we become good 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.

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

## **Second Level: The Thesis of *Civil Disobedience***

### **Statement of Thesis**

People need to behave more in accordance with their conscience than in accordance with the law. If a law requires you to behave in an unjust way toward another, you are ethically obligated to break the law.

### **Elaboration of Thesis**

Some laws might be considered necessary evils, because to change such laws would lead only to greater injustices than the original law. But if the only way to change a truly unjust law is to refuse to abide by the law, a person of conscience will refuse. People should be willing to sacrifice themselves to reduce injustice caused by unfair laws.

### **Exemplification of Thesis**

For example, in the U.S. during the 1800s, after slaves in the north were freed, many people helped slaves in the south escape to the north. Though they risked imprisonment for helping free slaves on southern plantations, many people were willing to do this rather than abide by an unjust law.

### **Illustration of Thesis**

Think of how we teach children to behave with respect to their peer group. Often a peer group will expect everyone in the group to accept an unjust act. For example, it is common for bullying to be practiced toward outsiders of children's peer groups. Bullying, then, becomes the accepted practice. Those in the group who object to bullying are usually subjected to penalties from the group — for example, they may be ridiculed. Nevertheless, we have taught children well only when they are ready to rebel against the authority of the peer group. So too should adults rebel when dealing with unjust laws passed by their government.

## Corn-Pone Opinions

**Background Information:** This excerpt, written by the distinguished novelist and social critic Mark Twain, is found in *The Portable Mark Twain*. By “corn-pone opinions” Twain meant the tendency of people to abandon any view or belief “which might interfere with their bread and butter. . . . In matters of large moment, like politics and religion, he must think and feel with the bulk of his neighbors or suffer damage in his social standing and in his business prosperity.”

I am persuaded that a coldly-thought-out and independent verdict upon a fashion in clothes, or manners, or literature, or politics, or religion, or any other matter . . . is a most rare thing — if it has indeed ever existed. . . . Mohammedans are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among that sect, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians, why Baptists are Baptists, why Mormons are Mormons, why thieves are thieves, why monarchists are monarchists, why Republicans are Republicans and Democrats, Democrats. . . . Men think they think upon great political questions, and they do; but they think with their party, not independently; they read its literature but not that of the other side; they arrive at convictions but they are drawn from a partial view of the matter in hand and are of no particular value. . . . We all do no end of feeling and we mistake it for thinking. And out of it we get an aggregation which we consider a boon. Its name is Public Opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it the Voice of God.

For this and all remaining passages we provide a first reading only.

### First Level: Paraphrasing

*I am persuaded that a coldly-thought-out and independent verdict upon a fashion in clothes, or manners, or literature, or politics, or religion, or any other matter... is a most rare thing — if it has indeed ever existed...*

PARAPHRASE:

*Mohammedans are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among that sect, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians, why Baptists are Baptists, why Mormons are Mormons, why thieves are thieves, why monarchists are monarchists, why Republicans are Republicans and Democrats, Democrats...*

PARAPHRASE:

*Men think they think upon great political questions, and they do; but they think with their party, not independently; they read its literature but not that of the other side; they arrive at convictions but they are drawn from a partial view of the matter in hand and are of no particular value...*

PARAPHRASE: