



# READ MORE BOOKS NOW

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## Lesson #5

### Learn to X-Ray

In 1940, Mortimer Adler wrote a tremendously important book, titled *How to Read a Book*. Many people dismiss it, thinking, “I already know how to read! Why would I need that book?”

But those who have read Adler’s book know how valuable it is. I first discovered it when a mentor told me, “Oh, you have to read Adler! He’s the reason I made it through grad school. If it wasn’t for his advice, I wouldn’t know which books to read or how. I’d be stuck trying to read every page, of every text, and forgetting most of what I read.”

Dr. Peter Kreeft, a long-time philosophy professor at Boston College, once observed:

“On the basis of over 40 years of full-time college teaching of almost 20,000 students at 20 different schools. . . If I were a college president, I would require every incoming freshman to read Adler’s book and pass a test on it before taking other courses.”

Why such high praise from so many people? Because Adler’s book is packed with useful, practical advice on becoming a better reader. It transforms how you read any category of text—novels, poetry, scientific papers, biographies, political treatises, and more.



But in my view, the most helpful chapter explains how to X-ray a book. Adler begins that chapter by noting, “Every book has a skeleton hidden between its covers. Your job as an analytical reader is to find it.” A book is like a person. It has bones that make up its structure, but those bones are covered with flesh, and that flesh is covered with clothes. If you want to understand the book’s core, you need to peer through its soft, outer coverings and get to its skeleton. In other words, you need to X-ray the book.

X-raying has two purposes. First, it will help you quickly understand the book’s core message. Second, with that in mind, you can determine whether the book is worth reading.

So how do you X-ray a book? Adler has some tips but here is my own personal process, which I perform on almost every new book I come across, whether in a bookstore or online.

It involves eight steps and can take anywhere from three minutes to twenty minutes per book, depending on how interested I am:

### **1. Read the summary**

You obviously need a rough idea of what the book is about, so read the description on Amazon or the summary on the back cover. That will give you the gist of it in a few seconds. Publishers spend hours carefully crafting these book descriptions. Their aim is to capture the book’s essence in a few sentences, and make you interested in it. So, use that as your first bell-weather. If the summary sounds boring, if even the best marketers in their publishing house can’t perk your interest, the book probably is not worth your time.

### **2. Read the reviews.**

If you used Amazon for the first step, this next step is easy. Just scroll down the page and read some of the reviews. Your goal here is to determine whether the book is worth reading. Find out from the people who have already read it why they consider it important (or whether they do.) If the reviews look decent, move on to the next step.

### **3. Determine the publisher and date.**

You can usually find this on a book’s Amazon page or the publisher’s website. If you’re holding a print book, you’ll find it on the copyright page up front. Who

published this book, and what other sorts of titles do they publish? As you read more books you'll develop a list of favorite, trustworthy publishers. Also ask yourself, when was this book published? What was happening in the world then? Have things changed in this area? How has this topic or genre developed since then? These are all good questions to position the book.

#### **4. Learn about the author**

Ask yourself, who wrote this book and why? Read through the author's biography, usually located on the back cover, book flap, or end pages. Ask, what makes this author specially qualified to write on this topic? Do they have the relevant credentials? Do they have experience with this topic or have they written about it before? The book may still be good even if these answers are "No." But if the author is qualified and experienced, it's far more likely you've found a valuable book.

#### **5. Examine the Table of Contents.**

This step is mostly applicable to non-fiction—not so much fiction—but here's where you first peek inside the book. I often use Amazon's free "Look Inside" feature on a book's sales page. Study the Table of Contents for a couple minutes, until you understand the book's main structure. How is it laid out? Is there a linear progression or are the chapters unrelated? Do the chapter titles or subtitles tell you anything about the main points? This is the closest thing to an actual x-ray, where you see the skeleton all at once.

#### **6. Browse the references.**

For books that have footnotes, endnotes, bibliographies, or indices, this an important step. Browse through them and note which authors and books the writer engages. Does the author book pull from many different sources? Does the author display a broad grasp of current conversation? Does the author mainly engage popular or academic sources? The references provide you a sense of where the book fits alongside other similar titles.

#### **7. Read the Introduction and Conclusion.**

Most people like to skip over the Introduction (or the Preface/Foreword) and get right into the book. And I do recommend that for fiction, especially for the classics. Don't let some deconstructionist literary critic spoil a piece of literature for you before you even start. But for most non-fiction books, if your goal is to quickly and efficiently understand what it's about, the Introduction is arguably the *most* important part of the book. Read it carefully. The same holds for the Conclusion. This is where the

author ties together all his points and sums them up. In many cases, *just* reading the Introduction and Conclusion will give you a strong understanding of the book. You'll pull 80%% of the book's value just from the Intro and Conclusion.

### **8. Scan the first and last paragraphs in each chapter.**

Again, this is mainly for non-fiction, and it's not necessary for all books. For most books, you can X-Ray them using only the previous steps. But if you need to go a little deeper, the first and last paragraph of each chapter will provide a bit more insight—that will take you from 80% to 90% of the book's value. Much like the Introduction and Conclusion, these paragraphs typically explain what the chapter will cover and then summarize it at the end.

Now, as I mentioned above, this X-raying process usually takes anywhere from three minutes to twenty minutes, depending on the book and how deep you want to go. You know you're finished X-raying the book when you can describe what it's about in one or two sentences. If you can't articulate that, clearly and succinctly, then the book needs more X-raying. You're also done X-raying when you can determine whether the book is worth a deeper read. Should you spend more time with it or not? That's the key question.

Now, let me anticipate a few objections you might be thinking. **First, you might be worried about "spoiling" the reading experience.** If you choose to X-ray a book, instead of reading it cover cover, won't you ruin the joy of discovery?

Well, that's certainly an issue for books like novels or detective stories, where the element of surprise is integral to the experience. And for those books, I usually recommend *not* X-raying them too deeply (especially if they're written by a trusted author or publisher.) Just pick it up and start reading, but don't be afraid to put it down if it stops bringing you joy.

But this isn't true for other types of books, especially non-fiction. In fact, most of the time, you'll *benefit* by understanding the main points ahead of time. Spoiling is a good thing. Ryan Holiday, a bestselling writer who reads around 200 books per year, explains:

"When I start a book, I almost always go straight to Wikipedia (or Amazon or a friend) and ruin the ending. Who cares? Your aim as a reader is to understand *why* something happened, the what is secondary. You ought to ruin the

ending, or find out the basic assertions of the book, because it frees you up to focus on your two most important tasks: 1) What does it mean? 2) Do you agree with it? The first 50 pages of the book shouldn't be a discovery process for you; you shouldn't be wasting your time figuring out what the author is trying to say with the book. Instead, your energy needs to be spent on figuring out if he's right and how you can benefit from it. Plus if you already know what happens, you can identify all the foreshadowing and the clues the first read through."

A second objection to X-raying is that all the time you spend X-raying books is time you can't use to "finish" more books, cover to cover. And that's true. But see this as a benefit, not a problem. Remember from the last lesson that you shouldn't be slaves to your books, thinking you *have* to read them cover-to-cover in order to check an invisible box that says "Finished" or "Read."

This isn't school; this is life. To "read" a book means to understand its main points, to grasp what the author intends to share. More often than not, that can happen just as effectively through X-raying as it can through straight, linear reading.

So, in the end, think of X-raying more like an investment. You spend 5, 10, or 20 minutes reviewing a book, determining what it's about and whether it's worth reading, and in return you receive huge benefits. First, you save countless hours wasted on bad books, books you otherwise would have plodded through cover to cover.

Second, X-raying makes you a much wider reader. You'll have explored 10 times more books than people who only read books in their entirety, one at a time. Imagine being able to confidently discuss dozens of books each year, or reference or quote different ideas. That's what happens when you become familiar with a vast number of books.

Third, for those rare books that *do* deserve a deep reading, X-raying helps you read faster and better. By X-raying it first, you learn the book's general structure and concepts ahead of time, so you can breeze through the fluff during your deeper reading. You don't have to waste time determining what matters and what doesn't. You already know and can therefore give each section only the time it deserves. On that note, you'll also *remember more* during your deeper reading since you're not encountering ideas and concepts for the first time.

The more books you X-ray, the better you get at the process. For me, I'm able to X-ray about 5-10 books per week, which means I absorb between 250-500 new books each year. I become familiar with their main ideas and themes. You can do that, too.

So next time you pick up a book, turn on the X-ray and focus on the skeleton. It's the bones you're interested in, not the skin or the clothes.

In the next lesson, we'll learn a simple tactic to help you when you get bogged down in a long, difficult book, but one you don't want to give up. See you there!