



READ MORE BOOKS NOW

Lesson #9

Engage the Author

Authors are experts. At least that's what most of us believe, right? And why wouldn't we? When someone writes a book, they typically spend months researching, preparing, and writing the text. They consider their points carefully and, if they're a pro, they anticipate all the top objections. By the time they finish, they know their topic better than almost everyone else.

Yet we shouldn't stretch that expertise too far. Authors aren't infallible. They're not immune from criticism or engagement.

As all good reads know, to read a book well means to chew and wrestle with its content, to engage the author. And good authors welcome that. They appreciate it when their book sparks discussion and debate. Most even welcome disagreement, when it's well-informed and offered charitably.

So, it's critical that we not just *skim* through books to actually engage the author. This engagement keeps you focused, and help you finish books faster, since you avoid the dreaded "zombie reading." It also helps you remember a book's key points. The more you engage the main points, the more likely you'll remember them. Therefore, engagement is a major key to reading more, and remembering what you read.



But how do we do this? How do we engage the author? Well, there are four major steps.

The first step is not to be afraid. No book, and no author, is off-limits. No text is immune to examination and critique. The truly great books are conversation starters, not conversation enders. Even books considered “definitive” should not be the last word. They might be a definitive launching point, a platform from which all serious conversations leap, but to read a definitive book is to merely to gain entry to the great discussion.

Once you realize you’re welcome to engage any book—and even encouraged!—**the second step is to understand what the author is saying.** Not what you *wish* the author would have said, not what people like the author *typically* say, but what this particular author is actually saying.

Mortimer Adler writes, “The first thing a reader can say is that he understands, or that he does not. In fact, he must say he understands, in order to say more. If he does not understand, he should keep his peace and go back to work on the book.”

His point is that you can’t engage a book you don’t understand. You must first see it clearly and understand it.

Now, this may seem obvious, but you’d be surprised at how many people miss this step. They have no problem judging or critiquing a book even before they understand it, and sometimes before they even read it!

One measure of whether you understand a book is whether you have come to terms with the author. Imagine you entered a conversation with a stranger who spoke only Yupik, a language found in Alaska and Siberia. Your first question would be, “What in the world is he saying?” It would be nearly impossible to share a fruitful dialogue because you’re each using different words, words that neither of you share.

The same happens while reading. Many times, you’ll discover an author using terms you don’t understand, or terms you don’t understand in the same way he does. Until you understand his terms—not just his words, but the specific way he uses those words—you’re not prepared for engagement.

This is why marking up your books is so important. By drawing boxes around key words, or underlining important definitions, you identify the terms worth studying. You also make it easy to find them when you need to flip back and refresh.

The third step to engaging the author is to ask questions. Socrates affirmed that, “Wisdom begins in wonder.” That’s true of books as well as nature. If you never ask questions about the world, or about your books, you’ll never gain new insights.

After grasping the author’s key terms, we can ask, “Is what he says true? Is it good or beautiful? If so, how will it affect my life?” You can ask questions like this of any book, fiction or non-fiction.

The reason you ask questions, though, is to prepare you for the final step of engagement—**choosing your position.** Almost all non-fiction books demand a choice: do you agree or disagree?

Many people skip ahead to this step too quickly. They breeze through a book and immediately conclude “I like that book” or “I didn’t like it.” But they don’t actually agree or disagree with author, and that’s a key difference. Liking a book depends on your feelings; agreeing with a book depends on your mind, your reason.

Good readers—those who read lots of books and remember what they read—read with their emotions *and* their mind, their feelings *and* their reason. They do note their visceral response to a book, how it makes them feel, but also lean on their intellect.

There are many ways to agree with a book. You might recognize the author’s good points, or you might appreciate his beautiful prose. But according to Mortimer Adler, there are only four possible ways of *disagreeing* with an author. You must either conclude:

First, he is **uninformed.** The author doesn’t know what he’s talking about because he hasn’t studied his subject enough. Second, he is **misinformed.** The author *thinks* he knows what he’s talking about, but he’s got his facts wrong. Third, he is **illogical.** The author make some true statements, but his conclusions don’t follow. Or fourth, his analysis is **incomplete.** He’s right about some things, but he hasn’t considered the whole picture.

Again, just to recap, to disagree with a book, you need to show how that the author's points are either uninformed, misinformed, illogical, or incomplete. If you can't do that, you're not equipped to disagree. A reader can't make any of these four judgements unless he first understands the book. Your disagreement must have substance.

Now, just a warning: one of the worst things you can do as a reader is to skip ahead to this final step—choosing your position—with seriously engaging the book. It's unhelpful for readers, and worse for authors.

A few months after my first book came out, I clicked over to Amazon.com to check out the reviews. I found several five-star reviews, a few four-star reviews, and then I spotted a dreaded one-star review. It was only three sentences long:

"I got this book for a web class. It had a few useful resources. It's not a book I would choose."

No further explanation. No detailed criticism of how the book came up short. No sign of Adler's "four ways of disagreeing." Just a one-star review with a three sentence dismissal.

Now, if you've ever produced a book, a painting, a story, or song, you know how that feels. When someone dismisses your work so flippantly, with a speedy drive-by review, it's like a sucker-punch to the gut. It's as if the reviewer says, "I'm not even going to seriously read this book before denouncing it; it's not worth my attention."

Good readers don't do that. Now, to be sure, they don't offer empty five-star reviews either, or say nice things just so they don't hurt an author's feelings. But they refuse to judge a book before understanding it. They read fairly and humbly. When they don't understand a particular passage, they're first inclined to think, "Maybe I'm missing something here" before concluding, "This writer has no idea what he's talking about." Criticism is their last resort, not the first.

In the end, engaging with the author and his points, whether you agree or disagree, is the highest compliment you can pay him. It means you care. Authors don't want zombie readers. They want readers who aren't afraid to engage, who come to terms with their thinking, who seriously question their points, who offer a serious response to their book—whether it be positive or negative.

Elbert Hubbard had it right: "I do not read a book: I hold a conversation with the author."

Good readers know that reading is a dialogue. You don't just read a book; you hold a conversation with the author.

Well, we have one video left in this course, and it's an important one, because you'll learn the best ways to actually remember what you read, and store it in your brain. So look forward to that, and I'll see you there!