

How to Ransack a Book

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Often students become overwhelmed with reading assignments simply because they have not yet learned how to choose the kind of reading required by a book or article they have been assigned.

Students with technical backgrounds especially find it difficult to “ransack” or “skim” a book. They have been trained to read each word very carefully lest they miss some important concept that may make a great deal of difference in the conclusion to which the author comes.

This kind of reading is important in the case of technical books. But to treat all reading matter in this way is to limit yourself to reading very few books in your lifetime.

Reading or “accessing?”

What do we mean by “accessing?” We do not mean careful reading, but rather to skim or “ransack” the article or book in such a way as to make the information you need—or might later need—available to you at quick notice.

As a student, it is important that you learn these skills. You will not have time to read everything equally well. Moreover, to even try to do so will make it impossible for you to evaluate what is of greater importance, a skill you must learn in order to do your reflection questions.

By learning to skim or to ransack a piece of literature, not only will you be enabled to learn more rapidly, but this new skill will prepare you throughout your life to rapidly assimilate all sorts of information which it would be helpful for you to know. A too-careful, or

plodding, reading where it is not necessary not only slows you down and keeps you from acquiring the information you might need, it also hinders you in integrating that information.

To read in the same way every type of magazine or book (or every page of any kind) is like driving the same speed on every kind of road. It may be compared to a person plodding through a deep forest. He could easily see all the trees without seeing the forest. He will not understand the relationship of where he is to the general configuration of the terrain until he comes out of the forest. On the other hand, it is possible, if you know how, to glance over the entire countryside without ever walking every part of it. We not only want you to have this skill; we feel that it is urgent, especially for a graduate student.

So what do you do?

You learn how to choose the style of reading which you will pursue at any given moment depending upon the type of literature being read and its importance to your purposes for reading it.

The schedule given in each day’s assignment will indicate the kind of reading you will need to do. Sometimes it will say for you to skim or ransack from pages x to y. Other times it will ask you to read a certain section very carefully.

Before you begin your reading for the day, it is very important that you look closely at the reflection questions you will need to answer. By so doing, you will recognize important sections as you read. You may

Written for this volume.

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want to look again at your reflection questions and perhaps reread these sections so as to be better able to integrate what it says with what you will read later on.

We do not claim that you can know everything a book says without reading every line. You can't. But as you grow older and gain more knowledge, more and more often you already know part of what a book is saying, or you are not interested in everything it says.

Here is an example: You go to a library to find a particular book. There it is, perhaps right in the middle of a shelf. That is the book you want. You are not interested in all the other books on the shelf. You do not feel you need to start reading at the beginning of the shelf until you get to what you want.

The same is true for a book. You can find from the contents or the index what it is you are after. Or you can page through an entire book in ten or twenty minutes. You can stop where you find what you want. You may not need to read chapters 1-5 if chapter 6 takes up what it is you are seeking. Thus, "reading" must be replaced by "accessing." Some books you will scrutinize line by line, others page by page, others chapter by chapter.

How do you know whether a piece of literature requires detailed reading?

1. Decide what kind of literature it is: comics, a novel, the newspaper, a textbook, the Bible, etc.
2. Recognize your purpose in reading that material:
 - a. To relax.
 - b. To gain general information that you will not have to repeat to someone else.
 - c. For spiritual uplift, devotion or insight.
 - d. To prepare to give a sermon or a speech.
 - e. To prepare for an exam.
 - f. To find important information for a thesis or dissertation, etc.
 - g. To track down a certain subject in which you are interested.

Often a book will have a few pages that are highly important to your purposes, but only a few. How do you find those particular pages very quickly?

1. Decide on a distinctive key word that will lead you to that section, even as you would choose a key concept to find an entire book on a certain subject in the public library.
2. Look first of all in the table of contents. Is there a chapter on that concept, or something related to it?
3. Check the index, if there is one.
4. Browse through the book at those particular sections, looking for related concepts that you might like to pursue in the same manner—through the table of contents and the index.
5. You might also find some helpful leads by skimming the preface. The foreword is generally a promotional section written by someone other than the author, and even though it might be interesting, usually it is not crucial. Often, however, a well-known person has been asked to write the foreword. You might, then, ask yourself, "Why did he feel this book deserved the time he took to write the foreword?" Such a question might give you clues to what words or ideas you need to hunt for in the index or table of contents.

Before you started, you probably noticed the name of the author and perhaps even read the back cover or the book jacket to find out a bit about him, and thus be able to guess at his prejudices. All of this is important in accessing a book.

As you begin your reading assignment, you may be asked to skim a chapter or a few pages of one of your texts. A quick way to do that is to read the first and last sentences of each paragraph. Usually the first sentence will give you a clue to what that paragraph is about. Likewise, the last sentence may give you a conclusion reached by the author. If you are afraid that you might be missing something important, simply glance at the center of each line or the paragraph itself to see if there is anything that catches your eye there. If not, go onto the next paragraph. You will be amazed at how much of the content of that chapter you can pick up in this manner.

Note, however, that this will only give you a feel for what subjects are treated. This kind of skimming will not necessarily tell you what the author thinks about those subjects, unless you stop where you are interested and look very closely.

Thus, if you run into anything anywhere that is important to you, stop and read that material more carefully. If the book belongs to you and you are very impressed by something mentioned and would like to be able to find that place again, simply note the page number on one of the blank pages at the front or back of the book with a simple two-word note, telling you

what that is about. (Note: if you are reading for dissertation or thesis research, follow the rules given for dissertation or thesis note-taking. In such cases, you need to be much more formal.)

Whatever you do, learn to enjoy reading. Only as you learn to enjoy it will you read!