

excerpt from *How to Read a Book* (1940)

## How to Mark a Book

by Mortimer J. Adler

(adapted & edited by Roy Speed)

You know you have to read "between the lines" to get the most out of anything. I want to persuade you to do something equally important in the course of your reading. I want to persuade you to *write* between the lines. — Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most effective kind of reading.

Marking up a book is not an act of mutilation but of love. Of course you shouldn't mark up a book which isn't yours. Anyone who lends you a book expects you to keep it clean, and you should. So if you agree with me about the usefulness of marking books, you must buy them.

### "Owning" books

There are two ways you can own a book. The first is the property right you establish by paying for it, just as you pay for clothes and furniture. But this act of purchase is only the prelude to real possession. Full ownership comes only when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it is by writing in it. You may buy a beefsteak and put it in your freezer, but you do not own it in any important sense until you consume it and get it into your bloodstream. Books, too, must be absorbed into your bloodstream.

Confusion about what it means to "own" a book leads people to a false reverence for paper, binding, and type — the physical thing. But this is respect for the craft of the printer rather than the genius of the author. Having a fine library doesn't prove that its owner has a mind enriched by books; it proves only that he was rich enough to buy them.

There are three kinds of book owners. The first has all the standard sets and best sellers — unread, untouched. (This deluded individual owns woodpulp and ink, not books.) The second has a great many books — a few of them read through, most of them dipped into, but all of them as clean and shiny as the day they were bought. (This person would probably like to make books his own, but is restrained by a false respect for their physical appearance.) The third has a few books or many — every one of them dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This man owns books.)

Is it false respect, you may ask, to preserve intact and unblemished a beautifully printed book, an elegantly bound edition? Of course not; I'd no more scribble all over a first edition of *Paradise Lost* than give my baby an original Rembrandt and a set of crayons. There's no point in marking up a painting or a statue; its soul is inseparable from its body. And the beauty of a rare edition or of a richly manufactured volume is like that of a painting or a statue.

But the soul of a book can be separate from its body: a book is more like a musical score than a painting. Arturo Toscanini reveres Brahms, but Toscanini's score of the G minor Symphony is so thoroughly marked up that no one but the maestro himself can read it.

Here's why you should mark your books:

- **It keeps you awake** — and I don't mean merely conscious; I mean *awake*.
- **Reading, if it is active, is *thinking*** — and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The *marked* book is the *thought-through* book.
- **Writing helps you remember** — remember the thoughts you had, or the thoughts the author expressed.

### A closer look

If reading is to accomplish anything more than passing time, it must be active. You can't let your eyes glide across the lines of a book and come up with an understanding of what you have read. Now an ordinary piece of light fiction, like, say, *Gone With the Wind*, doesn't require the most active kind of reading. The books you read for pleasure can be read in a state of relaxation, and nothing is lost. But a great book, rich in ideas and beauty, a book that raises and tries to answer great fundamental questions, demands the most active reading of which you are capable.

If, when you finish reading a book, the pages are filled with your notes, you know that you read actively. The most famous "active" reader of great books I know is the University of Chicago's President Hutchins. He has the hardest schedule of business activities of any man I know, but when he reads, he invariably does so with a pencil.

And why is writing necessary? — Because the physical act of writing, with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves them better in your memory. To set down your reactions to what you have read and the questions raised in your mind is to *preserve* those reactions and *sharpen* those questions.

Even if you wrote on a scratch pad, and threw the paper away when you had finished writing, your grasp of the book would be surer. But you don't have to throw the paper away. The margins (top and bottom, as well as the side margins), even the end-papers, the very space between the lines, are all available. *They aren't sacred*. Best of all, your marks and notes become an integral part of the book and stay there forever: you can pick up the book the following week or year, and there are all your points of agreement, disagreement, doubt, and inquiry. It's like resuming an interrupted conversation; you pick up right where you left off.

When you're reading to acquire information and understanding, note in the margins your *understanding* of the points being made or the topics being covered. Capture in just a few words the essential idea. Upon a return visit, you can flip through the book and, by skimming your notes, quickly review the book's substance, quickly locate a particular point or topic. And don't let anybody tell you that a reader is supposed to be a passive recipient: your job is to *seize* the information, savor it, digest it the same way you would that juicy steak. At the same time, you must question yourself and question the writer — even argue with the writer, once he understands what he or she is saying. And marking a book is literally an expression of your understanding, your agreement with, or your differences with the author.

### Useful marking devices

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully. Here's how I do it:

- **Underlining, circling, or highlighting key words or phrases** — for major points or important or forceful statements.

- **Vertical lines at the margin** — to emphasize an important passage.
- **Star, asterisk, or other doo-dad at the margin** — to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or twenty most important statements in the book. You may want to fold the bottom or top corner of every page on which you use such marks.
- **Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page** — for summarizing key points or recording questions a passage raises in your mind; reducing a complicated discussion to a simple statement; recording the sequence of major points right through the books. I use the end-papers at the back of the book to make a personal index of the author's points in the order of their appearance.
- **Numbers in the margin or within the text** — to indicate a sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument.
- **Numbers of other pages in the margin** — to indicate where else in the book the author made points relevant to the point marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together.

The front end-papers are to me the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. I reserve them for fancy thinking. After I have finished reading the book and making my personal index on the back end-papers, I turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page or point by point (I've already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic unity and an order of parts. This outline is, to me, the measure of my understanding of the work.

You may say that this business of marking books is going to slow up your reading. Yes, exactly — that's one of the reasons for doing it. Most of us have been taken in by the notion that speed of reading is a measure of our intelligence. But for intelligent reading, there is no such thing as the right speed. Some things should be read quickly and effortlessly; some should be read slowly, even laboriously. The sign of intelligence in reading is the ability to read different things differently according to their worth. In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather *how many can get through you* -- how many you can make your own.

With books, a few friends are better than a thousand acquaintances.