

How to read a book in five minutes

Prof. Margaret O'Mara

It's midterm season! You've got papers due, exams to take, and you seem to be falling behind on everything. And your history professor expects you to have that 250-page book with the really small print finished by the end of the week! What the heck are you going to do?

- a) Stay up until 3 a.m. reading every last word of that book, and fall asleep in class the next day because you're so exhausted.
- b) Read the first 35 pages, figuring you'll read the whole thing someday when you have time. If asked a question, figure out something really general to say.
- c) Don't even bother to open the book. If you can't read the whole thing, what's the point? Maybe the professor won't call on you.

The answer is, as you might guess, NONE OF THE ABOVE. Instead, learn some smart strategies about how to read scholarly historical monographs – and nonfiction books generally – so that you can take away the most important parts of the argument. Doing this properly will take MORE than five minutes (but that title got your attention, didn't it?), but it still will save you time. And you might just learn something.

STEP ONE - THE FIRST FIVE MINUTES

1. Judge a book by its cover
 - What is the title?
 - What is the subtitle? (the stuff that comes after the colon)
 - What photos/illustrations are on the cover?
 - What do these three pieces of data tell you about the WHO – WHAT – WHEN – WHERE of the book?
2. Turn the book over
 - Who wrote the blurbs? (the "advance praise" in quotation marks on the back) Are they professors? Are they history professors? Do their quotes give you any more clues?
 - o Remember: the content of the blurbs may not tell you the content of the book, but they tell you who is willing to attest to the author's skills and insights
 - Read the summary on the back. What does it tell you about the major THEMES of the book? What does it say about how this book is DIFFERENT from other books on the same topic?
3. Read the publication information
 - When was it first published? Was it published during or shortly after the period it discusses?
 - Who is its author and does s/he have other publications? If so, about what?
4. Read the table of contents
 - Looking at the title of each chapter, what can you tell about the historical ground covered by the book? Who are its main characters? Where does it take place?
 - Which of the chapters sound the most interesting to you?
5. Re-read your course syllabus

- How do the major themes of the class (that you glean from lecture titles, instructor's summary of the course, major themes of lectures, etc.) relate to the major themes of this book? What clue does the syllabus give about why the professor assigned this book?

STEP TWO – THE NEXT FIVE MINUTES

1. Scan the book's footnotes/endnotes.
 - What kinds of sources does the author use?
 - Are these mainly primary or secondary sources? (Hint: in the introduction and conclusion, there often tend to be more secondary sources. Concentrate on the notes for the middle chapters of the book.)
2. Flip through the book and look at the photo illustrations, tables, charts, maps, etc. Authors have to be choosy in selecting illustrations (partly because it's expensive to include a lot of them). This means that they tend to be closely related to the book's main argument(s).
 - Who are in the photos? What are they doing?
 - If there are maps, what are they illustrating? What point is the author trying to make with maps?
 - How many charts and graphs and tables are in the book? Do these reflect quantitative analysis by the author (like in an economics book, for example), or do they summarize other data in a tabular form? Do you think the author is a number-cruncher?
3. Look at the index.
 - Who and what have lots of page numbers by their entries?
 - Note the five most important and frequently-mentioned characters and events. Make sure you generally know who these are before you come to class. (For example, if you are assigned a book on the New Deal and can't identify Frances Perkins, or tell the professor why she is important, you've fallen short.¹)

STEP THREE – THE NEXT THIRTY MINUTES

1. Read the introduction. In works of history, the introduction is typically where the author tells you WHO (individuals, groups) the book is about, WHAT happened to these people, WHEN it happened, WHERE it happened, and WHY you should care. Often the author will give a brief summary of the chapters to come and how they support the main argument.
 - As you read, write up a page of brief notes to yourself answering the WHO-WHAT-WHEN-WHERE-WHY.
 - Note the main topic of each chapter, and remind yourself of the ones that sound the most interesting to you.
 - Figure out where the author stands vis-a-vis other books. How is the author engaging and debating other historians? Does the author say s/he is agreeing with other historians? Disagreeing? What is different about this book than others on the subject?

¹ Frances Perkins served as Secretary of Labor from 1933 to 1945 and was the first woman to serve in the United States Cabinet, as well as a key implementer of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's economic and public welfare programs.

STEP FOUR – THE THIRTY MINUTES AFTER THAT

1. Read a chapter. Ideally, make it Chapter One. If time doesn't permit that, go to one of the chapters you flagged earlier as an interesting topic.
 - Who are the main characters in this chapter?
 - What happened to them?
 - Why did that happen?
 - How does this part of the story support the author's thesis?
 - What questions does the chapter raise for you? How does this story relate to the broader themes of the course in which it is assigned?
 - What does the author say in the concluding paragraph of the chapter? (Hint: This is often where a summary of the chapter appears.)
2. IF, AND ONLY IF, YOU HAVE RUN OUT OF TIME TO DO ANYTHING ELSE: Skim the conclusion.
 - What new conclusions does the author add that weren't in the introduction?
 - What conclusions does the author derive from the chapters that you didn't get a chance to read?
 - How do the conclusions relate to the other things you have read, discussed, and heard in class lectures and discussion?

STEP FIVE – REALLY READ THE BOOK

If you manage your time well, you CAN have time to read the entire book. Your professor assigned it because he or she thought it was a good book that would be informative and enjoyable for students. You may choose to disagree on the "enjoyable" part, but that doesn't mean that the author doesn't have something worthwhile to say - - or that the professor won't hesitate to put something about the book on the final exam. Professors understand that college students have big workloads, and we try our best not to give you an unmanageable amount of reading. We assign the pages-per-week that we believe you reasonably can finish.

As you read, TAKE NOTES and/or FLAG THE PASSAGES THAT YOU FIND IMPORTANT OR MEMORABLE. This can be done by scribbling in the endpapers, tapping down notes on your laptop as you go, writing on a separate piece of paper, sticking Post-its on the edges of papers, or just folding over the corners of pages. Do whatever works best for you. Historical monographs and serious nonfiction books tend to be densely packed with information; note-taking as you go will save time and effort at the end.

Starting off every history-reading experience with 70 minutes of smart, strategic reading will help you get through whole books faster. It makes you better prepared to talk and write about their content and arguments. Reading quickly for comprehension is an essential skill, in college and in real life. Go forth and conquer.