

OFFICIAL COURSE STUDY GUIDE

How to Read the Great Books

A working system for reading classic literature with pleasure and comprehension.

LEARNING & STUDY SKILLS · INTERMEDIATE · 3 MODULES · 5 HR 49 MIN

Course by Benjamin McEvoy · Curated and published by MegaCourse

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How to Read the Great Books: The Complete Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

About This Course

Welcome to the official study guide for "How to Read the Great Books." This MegaCourse provides a working system for approaching classic literature. Many readers find great books intimidating. This course offers a clear, actionable method to engage with them.

Reading classic literature offers profound rewards. It expands your understanding of history, philosophy, and human nature. This course helps you move beyond simply reading the words. You will learn to read for deeper meaning, structure, and the author's craft.

Benjamin McEvoy teaches this curated learning path. His system focuses on pleasure and comprehension. You will develop a personal great-books reading program. This guide will support your learning throughout the 3 modules and 21 lessons. It complements the nearly six hours of video instruction.

Course Facts

FORMAT	3 modules · 21 lessons
VIDEO INSTRUCTION	About 5 hr 49 min
LEVEL	Intermediate
CATEGORY	Learning & Study Skills
INSTRUCTOR	Benjamin McEvoy
CERTIFICATE	Included with course completion on MegaCourse
COURSE HOME	megacourse.app/courses/how-to-read-the-great-books

What You Will Learn

- Approach intimidating classics with a concrete method.
- Read closely for language, structure, and meaning.
- Build a personal great-books reading program.
- Enjoy difficult literature instead of enduring it.

Who This Course Is For

This course serves anyone interested in reading classic literature. Perhaps you have started a classic and not finished it. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of great books available. This course is for you.

No prior experience with literary analysis or specific authors is necessary. The course is designed for intermediate learners who are ready to develop a systematic approach to reading challenging texts. You only need a desire to engage with important works of literature.

Before You Start

- No prior experience is required.

How to Use This Guide

This study guide is a companion to the "How to Read the Great Books" video course on megacourse.app. We recommend watching each video lesson first. Then, use the corresponding sections in this guide for review and deeper engagement. The guide includes summaries, key takeaways, and exercises to reinforce your understanding.

The course is organized into 3 modules and 21 lessons. You can pace yourself according to your schedule. Many students find it helpful to dedicate a consistent amount of time each week. This allows for steady progress and better retention.

Utilize the review questions at the end of each module to test your comprehension. The glossary provides definitions for important terms. This will help you build a strong vocabulary for literary discussion.

CHAPTER 1

Foundations of Great Books Reading

This chapter introduces fundamental principles for engaging with classic literature. We will establish practical systems for consistent reading, explore strategies for approaching diverse literary forms and traditions, and develop a deeper appreciation for poetry. The goal is to transform the act of reading great books from an intimidating task into a source of pleasure and profound understanding.

Developing a robust reading habit requires discipline and effective methods. This module provides concrete techniques to expand your reading capacity and enhance your comprehension. It also offers specific guidance on how to tackle challenging texts and genres, ensuring you build a personal great-books reading program that is both enriching and sustainable.

Cultivating a Consistent Reading Practice

Covers: How To Read More Books

Reading great books requires a consistent practice, much like any other skill. Many aspiring readers struggle not with comprehension, but with simply finding the time and motivation to read regularly. This section outlines a practical system to integrate reading into your daily life and significantly increase the number of books you complete each year.

Make Reading a Daily Habit

Consistency is more important than duration. Aim for short, focused reading sessions every day rather than long, infrequent ones. Even 15 to 20 minutes daily can lead to substantial progress over time. Identify specific times in your day when you can reliably read. This might be first thing in the morning, during a commute, or before bed. Treat these reading slots as non-negotiable appointments.

Create a Dedicated Reading Environment

Designate a specific place for reading that is free from distractions. This could be a comfortable chair, a quiet corner, or even a specific coffee shop. Ensure good lighting and minimal noise. When you enter this space, your brain will associate it with reading, making it easier to focus.

Always Carry a Book

Take a physical book or an e-reader with you wherever you go. This allows you to utilize unexpected pockets of time, such as waiting in line, during public transport, or while waiting for an appointment. These small increments add up quickly.

Read Multiple Books Concurrently

Do not feel obligated to read only one book at a time. Many readers find it beneficial to have a few books going simultaneously, perhaps one for focused study, one for pleasure, and one for a specific genre. This

allows you to switch between texts based on your mood or available time, preventing reading fatigue.

Know When to Abandon a Book

Not every book is for every reader, and not every book needs to be finished. If a book is not engaging you or providing value after a reasonable effort, it is acceptable to set it aside. Your reading time is valuable, and it is better spent on books that genuinely interest and challenge you in a productive way. Do not view this as failure, but as efficient curation of your reading list.

Set Realistic Reading Goals

Establish achievable goals, such as reading one book per month or completing a specific classic by year-end. Track your progress using a simple notebook or a digital app. Seeing your accomplishments can be a powerful motivator. Focus on the process of reading, not just the outcome. The pleasure of engaging with the text should be the primary reward.

Practice Tip: For the next week, identify two 20-minute slots in your daily schedule. During these times, commit to reading a physical book in a designated quiet space. Observe how this small change impacts your reading volume and focus.

Navigating Specific Literary Traditions and Forms

Covers: Where to Start with Russian Literature · Recommended Books for my Teenage Daughter · The 4 Greatest Short Story Writers · 10 Tips for How to Read Anna Karenina

The world of great books is vast and varied, encompassing diverse national literatures, genres, and individual masterpieces. Approaching these works requires specific strategies to enhance both pleasure and comprehension. This section provides guidance on how to enter different literary traditions and tackle challenging, lengthy novels.

Starting with Russian Literature

Russian literature often intimidates new readers due to its length, complex names, and historical context. However, it offers profound insights into the human condition. Begin with shorter works to acclimate yourself. Authors like Anton Chekhov are excellent entry points, with masterful short stories that capture everyday life and deep psychological insight. Alexander Pushkin's poetry and short prose, such as *The Queen of Spades*, also provide accessible introductions. When you move to longer novels by Leo Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoevsky, consider reading a reputable translation and keep a character list handy. Many editions include family trees or brief character descriptions which can be very helpful.

The Power of Short Stories

Short stories are a distinct literary form, not merely shorter novels. They excel at creating a single, powerful effect, often focusing on a specific moment, character, or theme with great economy of language. Mastering the short story form requires precision and impact. Four masters of the short story include Anton Chekhov, known for his subtle realism and psychological depth; Guy de Maupassant, celebrated for his concise plots and often cynical twists; Flannery O'Connor, whose Southern Gothic tales explore faith and morality with dark humor; and Raymond Carver, a minimalist whose stories depict the struggles of

ordinary people. Reading short stories can sharpen your close reading skills and provide immediate gratification.

Approaching *Anna Karenina* and Other Long Novels

Reading a monumental novel like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* can feel daunting. Here are ten tips to make the experience rewarding: 1. **Break it down:** Do not try to read it all at once. Set daily or weekly page goals. 2. **Understand the context:** Familiarize yourself with 19th-century Russian society, its customs, and social hierarchies. 3. **Focus on themes:** Identify the major themes early, such as love, marriage, adultery, faith, and societal hypocrisy. 4. **Use a reading guide:** Many online resources or study guides offer chapter summaries and analysis. 5. **Engage with characters:** Pay attention to their motivations and development. Keep a list of main characters and their relationships. 6. **Read actively:** Underline passages, make notes in the margins, or keep a separate reading journal. 7. **Discuss with others:** Join a book club or discuss chapters with a friend. 8. **Do not rush:** Allow yourself to savor the language and descriptions. 9. **Read the introduction last:** Many introductions contain spoilers. Read it after you finish the novel. 10. **Embrace the path:** Recognize that reading a great novel is an investment of time that yields significant returns.

Recommended Books for Specific Readers

When recommending books, consider the reader's age, interests, and current reading level. For a teenage daughter, for instance, a diverse selection can foster a lifelong love of reading. Suggestions might include classic coming-of-age stories like *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee or *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Introducing strong female protagonists, such as in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* or Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, can be impactful. Fantasy series like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* can also bridge the gap to more complex literature. The key is to offer choices that resonate personally, encouraging independent exploration rather than imposing a rigid list. Tailor recommendations to spark genuine curiosity and connection with the material.

Engaging Deeply with Poetry

Covers: Lecture on Shakespeare's Sonnets · Why does poetry move us? (my theory) · How to Possess a Poem by Memory

Poetry, with its condensed language and rhythmic qualities, offers a unique pathway to understanding human experience. To truly appreciate poetry, one must engage with it actively, paying close attention to its structure, sound, and meaning. This section explores the power of poetry, using Shakespeare's sonnets as a primary example, and provides a method for memorizing poems to deepen your connection to them.

Understanding Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets are masterpieces of English poetry, renowned for their beauty, complexity, and timeless themes. A sonnet is a 14-line poem, typically written in iambic pentameter, meaning each line has ten syllables with an alternating pattern of unstressed and stressed beats. Shakespearean sonnets follow a specific rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. This structure consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a concluding couplet (two-line stanza).

Key elements to observe when reading a Shakespearean sonnet:

- **The Quatrains:** Each quatrain often develops a distinct idea or image, building towards the poem's central argument or theme.
- **The Volta (Turn):** This is a shift in thought or argument, typically occurring around line 9 (the start of the third quatrain) or in the final couplet. The volta can introduce a counter-argument, a resolution, or a new perspective.
- **The Couplet:** The final two lines often provide a summary, a twist, or a powerful concluding statement.

Themes frequently explored in Shakespeare's sonnets include love, beauty, the passage of time, mortality, and the power of poetry to grant immortality. Reading sonnets aloud helps to reveal their musicality and the rhythm of the iambic pentameter. Pay attention to word choice, imagery, and metaphors. For example, in Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?", Shakespeare explores the transient nature of summer compared to the eternal beauty preserved in his verse.

Why Poetry Moves Us

Poetry moves us because it taps into fundamental aspects of human perception and emotion. It uses language in a concentrated way, employing rhythm, sound, and imagery to evoke feelings and ideas that prose often cannot. The musicality of language, through meter, rhyme, and assonance, resonates with our innate appreciation for patterns and harmony. Poetry often deals with universal human experiences, love, loss, joy, sorrow, beauty, and mortality, in ways that feel both deeply personal and universally true. It distills complex emotions into potent, memorable phrases, allowing us to connect with profound truths in a visceral and immediate way. The ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning in poetry also invite active interpretation, making the reading experience a collaborative act between poet and reader.

Possessing a Poem by Memory

Memorizing poetry is a powerful way to deepen your understanding and appreciation of a text. It allows you to internalize the poem's rhythm, structure, and meaning, making it a permanent part of your mental field. Here is a step-by-step method:

1. **Read Aloud Repeatedly:** Read the poem aloud several times, focusing on pronunciation, rhythm, and natural phrasing. Listen to its sound.
2. **Understand the Meaning:** Ensure you comprehend the literal meaning of every word and phrase. Look up unfamiliar vocabulary or allusions.
3. **Break into Chunks:** Divide the poem into smaller, manageable sections, such as stanzas or even two-line couplets. Focus on memorizing one chunk at a time.
4. **Visualize the Imagery:** As you read, create vivid mental images for the poem's descriptions and metaphors. This helps create stronger memory associations.
5. **Write It Out:** After memorizing a chunk, write it down from memory. This active recall method reinforces learning.
6. **Recite Backwards:** Once you can recite a chunk forwards, try reciting it backwards, line by line. This forces you to focus on individual lines rather than relying on flow.

7. **Spaced Repetition:** Review the poem at increasing intervals. Recite it an hour later, then a day later, then a few days later, and so on. This strengthens long-term retention.
8. **Connect Emotionally:** Try to feel the emotions expressed in the poem as you recite it. Emotional connection aids memory.

By possessing a poem by memory, you carry its beauty and wisdom with you, ready to be accessed at any moment.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Consistent, short daily reading sessions are more effective than infrequent, long ones for building a strong reading habit.
- Do not feel obligated to finish every book you start; your reading time is valuable, so prioritize engaging and enriching texts.
- Approach new literary traditions like Russian literature by starting with shorter, more accessible works before tackling lengthy masterpieces.
- Short stories offer a unique and powerful literary experience, honing close reading skills with their conciseness and focused impact.
- Breaking down long novels into manageable sections, understanding context, and actively engaging with themes are key to successful comprehension.
- Poetry moves us through its condensed language, rhythm, imagery, and ability to distill universal emotions into potent, memorable forms.
- Memorizing poetry deepens appreciation and understanding by internalizing the text's structure, sound, and meaning through active recall and spaced repetition.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer these before moving on. Model answers are in the Answer Key at the back of this guide.

1. What is a key strategy for increasing your reading volume and consistency?
2. When approaching a long and complex novel like *Anna Karenina*, what are two practical tips you can employ?
3. What are the defining characteristics of a Shakespearean sonnet?
4. Why is memorizing poetry considered a valuable practice?
5. How can you make starting with a new national literature, such as Russian literature, less intimidating?

CHAPTER 2

Building Your Great Books Reading Program

This chapter guides you in developing a robust and enjoyable great books reading program. You will learn how to select books that align with your interests and goals, approach different literary forms, and employ strategies to deepen your comprehension and retention. The aim is to transform your reading into a consistently rewarding and enriching experience.

We cover practical methods for choosing what to read, understanding challenging texts, and engaging with literature in ways that build lasting knowledge and pleasure. This chapter provides a framework for independent study, allowing you to cultivate a lifelong habit of reading classic literature with confidence.

Selecting Your Reading: Building a Thoughtful Program

Covers: Where to Start with Japanese Literature · Ray Bradbury's Reading Program For Writers · 8 Writers and Books I Find Extremely Difficult to Read · How to Choose What Books to Read

Choosing what to read can feel overwhelming given the vast array of classic literature available. A thoughtful reading program balances personal interest with strategic exploration. Begin by identifying your current literary curiosities. Do you have a specific historical period, a particular genre, or a geographic region that attracts you? For example, if you are drawn to Japanese literature, you might start with foundational authors like Murasaki Shikibu (*The Tale of Genji*) or Yasunari Kawabata (*Snow Country*), then explore modern writers such as Haruki Murakami or Yoko Ogawa. The key is to find an entry point that sparks your interest, then gradually broaden your scope within that tradition.

Ray Bradbury, the celebrated author, advocated for a reading program built on breadth and volume. His method suggests reading widely across various forms: poetry, essays, short stories, and novels. He recommended reading one poem, one short story, and one essay every day. This consistent, varied intake exposes you to diverse styles, ideas, and narrative structures, enriching your mental field. The goal is not to master every text, but to absorb a vast range of human expression, allowing ideas and language to percolate in your mind. This approach builds a rich internal library of references and inspirations, which is valuable for both readers and writers.

Encountering difficult books is a natural part of reading great literature. Some texts, due to their language, historical context, or philosophical complexity, present significant challenges. It is important to acknowledge this difficulty without feeling discouraged. There is no shame in finding an acclaimed work hard to read. Strategies for approaching such books include: reading companion guides or critical analyses before or during your reading, reading slowly and rereading challenging passages, or even setting a book aside if it proves too dense at the moment. Sometimes, a book becomes more accessible after you have gained more experience or knowledge. Do not force yourself through a book that brings no pleasure or comprehension; reading should ultimately be rewarding.

When choosing what books to read, consider a balanced approach. Mix books you know you will enjoy with those that offer a genuine challenge. Seek recommendations from trusted sources, such as literary critics, university syllabi, or well-read friends. Establish a system for tracking your reading, perhaps a simple list or a journal, to observe patterns in your preferences and identify areas for future exploration. Your reading program should evolve with you. It is a dynamic process of discovery, not a static list to complete. Prioritize books that genuinely engage your intellect and emotions, allowing your curiosity to guide your selections.

Approaching Imaginative Literature and Poetry

Covers: How to Read Great Imaginative Literature · The 7 Poems that Haunt Me the Most

Imaginative literature encompasses novels, short stories, plays, and poetry. These forms invite readers to engage with fictional worlds, characters, and emotions. When reading a novel, pay attention to the fundamental elements: plot (the sequence of events), character (the individuals and their development), setting (time and place), theme (the underlying ideas or messages), and style (the author's use of language). For a first reading, prioritize understanding the narrative and connecting with the characters. Allow yourself to be drawn into the story. A second reading can then focus on deeper analysis, observing literary techniques and thematic connections. Many great novels reveal new layers upon rereading, making the experience richer each time.

Reading poetry requires a slightly different approach than prose. Poems are often condensed, relying on precise language, imagery, and sound to convey meaning and emotion. Start by reading the poem aloud. This helps you appreciate its rhythm, meter, and sound devices like alliteration and assonance. Do not worry about understanding every line on the first pass. Instead, let the sounds and images wash over you. Identify key words and phrases that stand out. Look for metaphors, similes, and symbols, which poets use to create layers of meaning.

Many poems have a 'haunting' quality. They stay with you, resonating long after you have finished reading them. This often comes from a combination of powerful imagery, profound emotional truth, or a unique use of language that lodges in your memory. For example, a poem might capture a universal human experience, like loss or joy, in a way that feels intensely personal. Or it might present a striking image that you cannot forget. These are the poems that invite repeated readings and deeper contemplation. They become part of your internal field, shaping your understanding of the world.

To deepen your engagement with poetry, consider annotating. Mark lines that confuse you, words you need to look up, or images that strike you. Research the poet's background or the historical context of the poem if it aids your understanding. Discussing poems with others can also illuminate different interpretations and insights. Remember that poetry is not always about finding a single, definitive meaning. It is often about the experience of language, emotion, and the questions it provokes. Embrace the ambiguity and allow the poem to work on you over time.

Retaining and Engaging with Your Reading

Covers: How To Retain Your Reading · About the Anna Karenina Book Club Lecture Series

Retaining what you read is crucial for building lasting knowledge and making your reading efforts worthwhile. Passive reading, where you simply let your eyes pass over the words, often leads to poor recall. Active reading techniques significantly improve retention. One effective method is annotation. As you read, underline key sentences, circle unfamiliar words, and write notes or questions in the margins. These marginalia serve as a dialogue with the text and create a personalized summary for later review. Summarizing chapters or sections in your own words immediately after reading also solidifies your understanding and memory. You can do this in a reading journal or a commonplace book, which is a collection of notes, quotes, and reflections.

Another powerful retention strategy involves discussing what you read. Articulating your thoughts about a book to others forces you to organize your ideas, identify areas of confusion, and consider different perspectives. This process deepens your comprehension and helps embed the material in your long-term memory. Writing about your reading, whether in a formal essay, a book review, or informal journal entries, serves a similar purpose. The act of writing requires you to synthesize information, analyze themes, and formulate arguments, all of which enhance retention.

Book clubs offer a structured and communal way to engage deeply with literature and improve retention. Participating in a book club provides accountability; you are more likely to finish a challenging book when you know you will discuss it with others. The collective interpretation of a text can reveal nuances you might have missed on your own. For instance, a book club focused on a complex novel like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* can benefit immensely from a lecture series. Such a series might provide historical context, explain cultural references, analyze character motivations, or discuss the novel's philosophical underpinnings. Expert guidance in a group setting allows readers to navigate difficult passages, understand complex themes, and appreciate the literary artistry more fully. This kind of guided discussion transforms reading from a solitary act into a shared learning experience, making the material more memorable and meaningful.

To further aid retention, revisit your notes and summaries periodically. This spaced repetition technique reinforces learning over time. Instead of trying to remember everything at once, review your key takeaways at increasing intervals. This practice, combined with active reading and discussion, ensures that the insights and pleasures gained from reading great books endure.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Build a reading program that balances personal interest with diverse literary exploration across genres and forms.
- Approach difficult books with patience and strategic tools, such as companion guides or rereading, and know when to set a book aside.
- Read imaginative literature by first engaging with the story, then analyzing its deeper elements like theme and style on subsequent readings.
- Engage with poetry by reading aloud, focusing on sound and imagery, and accepting that full understanding may emerge over multiple readings.
- Improve reading retention through active annotation, summarizing, and discussing books with others.
- Participate in book clubs or guided lecture series to deepen understanding of complex works and benefit from diverse perspectives and expert insights.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer these before moving on. Model answers are in the Answer Key at the back of this guide.

1. What are two key strategies for choosing books to include in your reading program?
2. How can you effectively approach a book that you find particularly difficult to read?
3. Describe two specific techniques for reading poetry more effectively.
4. Explain how active reading contributes to better retention of material.
5. What is the benefit of participating in a book club or lecture series for reading great books?

CHAPTER 3

Engaging with Great Books

This chapter guides you through deepening your engagement with classic literature. It moves beyond basic comprehension to fostering a personal connection with challenging texts. You will learn practical strategies for active reading, effective note-taking, and building a sustainable reading and writing practice. The goal is to transform your reading experience from an endurance test into a source of pleasure and insight.

Finding Personal Resonance in Literature

Covers: Why Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* Is My Favourite Novel · My Favourite Shakespeare Sonnet

Reading classic literature offers more than just intellectual exercise. It provides an opportunity for deep personal connection. When you find a text that resonates with your own experiences, thoughts, or emotions, the work becomes profoundly memorable and enjoyable. This connection is not about finding a single, universally agreed-upon meaning. Instead, it involves how the text interacts with your individual perspective.

Consider a novel like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Many readers are drawn to its exploration of love, betrayal, societal expectations, and the search for meaning. A specific character's struggle might mirror your own, or a particular philosophical question raised in the narrative could challenge your worldview. For example, the depiction of Anna's internal conflict between passion and duty speaks to universal human dilemmas. The novel's intricate portrayal of Russian society and its moral complexities invites readers to reflect on similar structures in their own lives. Your favorite passages might be those that articulate a feeling you have experienced, or describe a situation with striking accuracy.

Similarly, a Shakespearean sonnet, though brief, can evoke powerful emotions and ideas. Sonnet 18, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?', is famous for its celebration of eternal beauty through poetry. However, another sonnet, perhaps one exploring themes of time's destructive power or the complexities of love, might speak more directly to you. Your personal connection might stem from a single, perfectly crafted line, a vivid image, or the sonnet's overall emotional arc. The precise language and rhythm of Shakespeare can create a powerful aesthetic experience, even if the initial meaning is challenging.

To cultivate this personal resonance, approach texts with an open mind. Ask yourself:

- What emotions does this passage evoke in me?
- Do any characters or situations remind me of people or events in my own life?
- What questions does this text raise about human nature, society, or morality?
- Are there any specific phrases or images that stand out?

This process of active reflection transforms reading from passive consumption into an engaging dialogue. It allows you to discover why certain works endure and why they might become your own favorite pieces

of literature. The goal is to move beyond simply understanding the plot or surface meaning. Seek out the deeper currents that connect the author's world to your own.

Mastering Annotation for Deeper Comprehension

Covers: How to Annotate Your Books for Effective Note-Taking

Effective annotation is a cornerstone of reading great books with comprehension and retention. It transforms passive reading into an active, analytical process. When you annotate, you engage directly with the text, marking important passages, questioning ideas, and recording your thoughts. This practice significantly improves your ability to recall details, understand complex arguments, and formulate your own interpretations.

Tools and Techniques

Start with the right tools. A pencil is often preferred for its erasability, allowing you to revise your notes. Fine-point pens are also suitable if you prefer permanence. Develop a consistent system of marks and symbols to make your annotations clear and useful.

Here are key annotation techniques:

1. **Underlining or Highlighting:** Mark sentences or phrases that seem important, insightful, or particularly well-written. Do not underline entire paragraphs. Focus on key ideas, striking metaphors, or significant character actions. Be selective to avoid over-marking.
2. **Marginalia:** Use the margins to record your thoughts, questions, and observations. This is where you engage in a dialogue with the author and the text. Write down:
 - **Summaries:** Brief restatements of a paragraph's main idea.
 - **Questions:** Points of confusion, things you want to research, or questions about character motivation.
 - **Connections:** Links to other parts of the book, other books you have read, or your own experiences.
 - **Definitions:** Look up unfamiliar words and write their meanings in the margin.
 - **Reactions:** Your emotional responses or agreements/disagreements with the text.
 - **Literary Devices:** Identify metaphors, similes, irony, symbolism, and note their effect.
3. **Symbols:** Create a personal shorthand. For example:
 - ? for questions or confusing passages.
 - ! for important points or strong agreement.
 - * for particularly beautiful or significant language.
 - -> to indicate a connection to another page or idea.
4. **Cross-Referencing:** When a theme or idea appears multiple times, note the page numbers where it also occurs. This helps you track the development of ideas and motifs throughout the work.

What to Look For

When annotating, focus on elements that contribute to the text's meaning and structure:

- **Themes and Motifs:** Recurring ideas, images, or symbols.
- **Character Development:** Changes in a character's personality, beliefs, or circumstances.
- **Plot Points:** Key events, turning points, or conflicts.
- **Author's Style:** Unique sentence structures, vocabulary, or rhetorical choices.
- **Arguments:** The main points an author is trying to make, especially in non-fiction.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- **Over-annotating:** Marking too much makes everything seem important, defeating the purpose. Be selective.
- **Passive highlighting:** Highlighting without thinking or adding marginal notes is less effective.
- **Not reviewing notes:** Annotations are most useful when you revisit them. Use them to prepare for discussions, write essays, or simply deepen your understanding after finishing the book.

Annotation is a skill that improves with practice. The more you engage with your books in this active way, the more profound your reading experience will become.

Cultivating Your Reading and Writing Practice

Covers: Reviewing My 7 Book Reading Goals for 2020 · How to Improve Your Writing with Copywork

Developing a consistent and productive reading life requires deliberate practice, much like any other skill. This involves setting clear goals and actively working to improve your writing alongside your reading. The two activities are deeply interconnected; strong readers often become strong writers, and vice versa.

Setting and Reviewing Reading Goals

Setting reading goals provides direction and motivation. Without goals, your reading can become sporadic or unfocused. When establishing your goals, consider the SMART framework:

- **Specific:** Clearly define what you want to achieve. Instead of 'read more books,' try 'read 12 classic novels this year.'
- **Measurable:** How will you track progress? 'Read one classic novel per month' is measurable.
- **Achievable:** Set realistic goals. Do not aim to read 100 dense philosophical texts if you are new to the genre.
- **Relevant:** Ensure your goals align with your broader learning objectives for reading great books.
- **Time-bound:** Give yourself a deadline. 'By December 31st' adds accountability.

For example, a goal might be: 'By the end of the year, I will read all of Shakespeare's major tragedies, annotating each one thoroughly.' Regularly review your goals. This means checking in weekly or monthly to see if you are on track. If you are falling behind, understand why. Adjust your strategy or even your

goals if necessary. Do not view setbacks as failures, but as opportunities to refine your approach. A review process helps you stay accountable and adapt your plan to real-world constraints.

Improving Writing with Copywork

Copywork is a time-tested method for improving writing skills by imitating the masters. It involves physically copying passages from well-written texts. This practice is not about plagiarism. It is about internalizing good writing habits, sentence structures, vocabulary, and rhetorical flair.

Here is how to practice copywork effectively:

1. **Select a Text:** Choose passages from authors whose style you admire. Look for variety in sentence structure, vivid descriptions, or clear exposition. Great books provide an endless source of excellent material.
2. **Copy by Hand:** Use a pen and paper. The physical act of writing slows you down, forcing you to pay close attention to each word, punctuation mark, and sentence construction. Typing can be too fast and less engaging for this specific purpose.
3. **Focus on Detail:** As you copy, observe:
 - **Sentence Structure:** How do authors vary sentence length? How do they construct complex sentences?
 - **Vocabulary:** Note precise word choices and how they contribute to meaning and tone.
 - **Punctuation:** Pay attention to the use of commas, semicolons, and colons.
 - **Rhythm and Flow:** Read the passage aloud before and after copying to appreciate its cadence.
4. **Analyze and Reflect:** After copying, take a moment to reflect on what you have learned. What stylistic choices did the author make? How did they achieve a particular effect? Try to articulate these observations.
5. **Integrate:** The ultimate goal is to internalize these patterns. Over time, elements of the styles you have copied will naturally begin to appear in your own writing. This practice strengthens your writing muscles and expands your repertoire of expression. Copywork is not a quick fix, but a consistent practice that yields significant long-term benefits for your writing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Personal connection to literature enhances enjoyment and comprehension, moving beyond mere understanding to deep resonance.
- Active annotation transforms passive reading into an analytical process, improving recall and critical thinking.
- Develop a consistent annotation system using underlining, marginalia, and symbols to engage directly with the text.
- Setting SMART reading goals provides clear direction and motivation for building a sustainable reading practice.
- Regularly reviewing your reading goals helps you stay on track, adapt to challenges, and refine your approach.
- Copywork, the practice of handwriting passages from master authors, improves writing skills by internalizing effective style and structure.
- Both reading and writing practices are interconnected; strengthening one naturally supports the development of the other.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer these before moving on. Model answers are in the Answer Key at the back of this guide.

1. Why is finding personal resonance important when reading classic literature?
2. What are three effective techniques for annotating a book?
3. When setting reading goals, what does the 'SMART' acronym stand for?
4. How does copywork contribute to improving your writing skills?
5. What is a common mistake to avoid when annotating, and why?

REFERENCE

Glossary

Annotation

The practice of writing notes, underlining, or highlighting directly in a text to engage actively with the material and aid comprehension.

Close reading

The careful, detailed analysis of a text, focusing on specific words, phrases, and literary devices to uncover deeper meanings.

Commonplace book

A personal collection of notes, quotes, observations, and reflections gathered from reading and experience, used for personal reference and thought development.

Copywork

A writing practice involving the physical copying of passages from well-written texts to internalize good writing habits, sentence structures, and vocabulary.

Iambic pentameter

A common metrical line in poetry consisting of five pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables, totaling ten syllables per line.

Imaginative literature

Literary works that create fictional worlds, characters, and narratives, including novels, short stories, plays, and poetry.

Marginalia

Notes or drawings made in the margins of a book or document.

Motif

A recurring element, idea, image, or theme that appears throughout a literary work, often contributing to its overall meaning.

Personal resonance

The experience of a text deeply connecting with a reader's individual experiences, emotions, or thoughts, making the work personally significant.

Ray bradbury's program

A reading method advocating for broad and consistent daily reading across various literary forms, such as one poem, one short story, and one essay per day, to build a rich internal knowledge base.

Short story

A brief work of prose fiction, usually focused on a single event or character, designed to create a specific effect or mood.

Smart goals

A framework for setting objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound, used to create effective plans.

Sonnet

A 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter, typically with a specific rhyme scheme. Shakespearean sonnets follow an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme pattern.

Spaced repetition

A learning technique that involves reviewing material at increasing intervals over time to improve long-term retention and recall.

Volta

The 'turn' or shift in thought or argument in a sonnet, often occurring around the ninth line or in the concluding couplet.

REFERENCE

Answer Key

Chapter 1: Foundations of Great Books Reading

1. What is a key strategy for increasing your reading volume and consistency?

A key strategy is to make reading a daily habit, even if for short periods like 15 to 20 minutes.

Consistency is more important than the length of individual reading sessions. Always carrying a book and having a dedicated reading space also significantly help.

2. When approaching a long and complex novel like *Anna Karenina*, what are two practical tips you can employ?

Two practical tips are to break the novel down into smaller, manageable sections with daily or weekly page goals, and to familiarize yourself with the historical and cultural context of the work. Using a character list and reading actively by taking notes also aids comprehension.

3. What are the defining characteristics of a Shakespearean sonnet?

A Shakespearean sonnet is a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter. It follows a specific rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, consisting of three quatrains and a concluding couplet. It often features a 'volta' or turn in thought.

4. Why is memorizing poetry considered a valuable practice?

Memorizing poetry is valuable because it allows for a deeper, more intimate understanding and appreciation of the text. It internalizes the poem's rhythm, structure, and meaning, making it a permanent part of one's mental field and enhancing personal connection to the art form.

5. How can you make starting with a new national literature, such as Russian literature, less intimidating?

To make starting with a new national literature less intimidating, begin with shorter, more accessible works by authors like Anton Chekhov or Alexander Pushkin. This allows you to acclimate to the style and cultural context before moving on to longer, more complex novels by authors like Tolstoy or Dostoevsky.

Chapter 2: Building Your Great Books Reading Program

1. What are two key strategies for choosing books to include in your reading program?

Two key strategies are to follow your personal interests and to seek recommendations from trusted sources. Balancing books you anticipate enjoying with those offering a genuine challenge helps create a well-rounded program. Your program should also evolve as your interests and knowledge grow.

2. How can you effectively approach a book that you find particularly difficult to read?

When facing a difficult book, try reading companion guides or critical analyses to gain context.

Reading slowly, rereading challenging passages, and taking notes can also help. It is also acceptable to set a book aside and return to it later when your experience or knowledge base has expanded.

3. Describe two specific techniques for reading poetry more effectively.

One effective technique is to read the poem aloud to appreciate its rhythm, sound, and meter. Another technique is to focus initially on the imagery and emotional impact, rather than seeking immediate full comprehension. Annotating lines and researching context can further deepen understanding.

4. Explain how active reading contributes to better retention of material.

Active reading, through techniques like annotation, underlining, and writing marginal notes, forces engagement with the text. This process of interacting with the material helps to process information more deeply. Summarizing sections in your own words immediately after reading also reinforces memory and comprehension.

5. What is the benefit of participating in a book club or lecture series for reading great books?

Participating in a book club or lecture series provides structured discussion and diverse interpretations of a text. This communal engagement can reveal nuances and insights you might miss on your own. Expert guidance, as in a lecture series, can also provide valuable historical context and critical analysis, deepening your overall understanding and retention.

Chapter 3: Engaging with Great Books**1. Why is finding personal resonance important when reading classic literature?**

Finding personal resonance transforms reading from a purely intellectual exercise into a deeply enjoyable and memorable experience. It allows the reader to connect with universal human themes and ideas on an individual level, making the text more meaningful and impactful. This personal connection helps to sustain interest in challenging works.

2. What are three effective techniques for annotating a book?

Three effective annotation techniques include underlining or highlighting key sentences, writing marginalia to record thoughts and questions, and using a system of symbols for quick identification of important points or confusing passages. Cross-referencing related ideas across pages also enhances comprehension and recall.

3. When setting reading goals, what does the 'SMART' acronym stand for?

The 'SMART' acronym for goal setting stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. This framework helps create clear, actionable, and trackable goals, providing structure and motivation for your reading practice.

4. How does copywork contribute to improving your writing skills?

Copywork improves writing skills by allowing you to internalize the sentence structures, vocabulary, punctuation, and rhetorical styles of master authors. The physical act of copying forces close attention to detail, which gradually strengthens your own writing muscles and expands your repertoire of expression. It helps develop an intuitive sense of good writing.

5. What is a common mistake to avoid when annotating, and why?

A common mistake to avoid is over-annotating, which means marking too much of the text. When everything is highlighted or noted, nothing stands out as particularly important, defeating the purpose

of selective engagement. Effective annotation requires careful thought and discrimination to identify truly significant passages.

CLOSING

Where to Go Next

Completing "How to Read the Great Books" is a significant achievement. To consolidate your new skills, apply the system immediately to other books on your reading list. Consider re-reading a classic you previously found challenging. Notice how your new approach changes your experience.

Practice is key to mastery. Join a local book club or start one with friends. Discussing books with others can deepen your insights and expose you to new perspectives. Writing short reflections or journal entries about your reading also helps solidify your understanding.

After this course, you might explore specific literary periods, genres, or authors in more detail. You could also pursue courses on literary criticism, the history of ideas, or advanced writing about literature. The skills you have gained here will serve as a strong foundation for a lifetime of rewarding reading.



MEGACOURSE

Learn Anything. Achieve Everything.

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