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How to Become a Better Reader and Thinker

The chances are that you are not as good a reader as you should be to do well in college. If so, it's not surprising. You live in a culture where people watch an average of *over seven hours of television every day!!!* All that passive viewing does not allow much time for reading. Reading is a skill that must be actively practiced. The simple fact is that people who do not read very often are not likely to be strong readers.

- How much TV do you guess you watch on an average day? _____

Another reason besides TV for not reading much is that you may have a lot of responsibilities. You may be going to school and working at the same time, and you may have a lot of family duties as well. Given a hectic schedule, you're not going to have much time to read. When you have free time, you're exhausted, and it's easier to turn on the TV than to open up a book.

- Do you do any regular reading (for example, a daily newspaper, weekly magazines, occasional novels)? _____
- When are you most likely to do your reading? _____

A third reason for not reading is that school may have caused you to associate reading with worksheets and drills and book reports and test scores. Experts agree that many schools have not done a good job of helping students discover the pleasures and rewards of reading. If reading was an unpleasant experience in school, you may have concluded that reading in general is not for you.

- Do you think that school made you dislike reading, rather than enjoy it?
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Here are three final questions to ask yourself:

- Do you feel that perhaps you don't need a reading course, since you "already know how to read"? _____
- If you had a choice, would you be taking a reading course? (It's okay to be honest.) _____
- Do you think that a bit of speed reading may be all you need? _____

Chances are that you don't need to read *faster* as much as you need to read *smarter*. And it's a safe bet that if you don't read much, you can benefit enormously from the reading course in which you are using this book.

One goal of the book is to help you become a better reader. You will learn and practice ten key reading comprehension skills. As a result, you'll be better able to read and understand the many materials in your other college courses. The skills in this book have direct and practical value: they can help you perform better and more quickly—giving you an edge for success—in all of your college work.

The book is also concerned with helping you become a stronger thinker, a person able not just to understand what is read but to analyze and evaluate it as well. In fact, reading and thinking are closely related skills, and practice in thoughtful reading will also strengthen your ability to think clearly and logically. To find out just how the book will help you achieve these goals, read the next several pages and do the brief activities as well. The activities are easily completed and will give you a quick, helpful overview of the book.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book is organized into four main parts:

Introduction (pages 1–11)

In addition to this chapter, which will give you a good sense of the book, there is one other part to the introduction. "Learning Some Quick Study Tips" presents four hints that can make you a better student. If I had time to say just four things to incoming college students based on my thirty years of teaching experience, these are the things I would say. Turn to page 10 and write, in the space on the next page, the second of these tips:

Part I: Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills (pages 13–420)

To help you become a more effective reader and thinker, this book presents a series of ten key reading skills. They are listed in the table of contents on pages v and vi. Turn to those pages to fill in the skills missing below:

- 1 Vocabulary in Context
- 2 _____
- 3 Supporting Details
- 4 Implied Main Ideas and the Central Point
- 5 _____
- 6 Relationships II
- 7 Fact and Opinion
- 8 _____
- 9 Purpose and Tone
- 10 Argument

Each chapter is developed in the same way.

First of all, clear explanations and examples help you *understand* each skill. Practices then give you the “hands-on” experience needed to *learn* the skill.

- How many practices are there for the second chapter, “Main Ideas” (pages 49–92)? _____

Closing each chapter are four review tests. The first review test provides a check of the information presented in the chapter.

- On which page is the first review test for “Main Ideas”? _____

The second and third review tests consist of activities that help you practice the skill learned in the chapter.

- On which pages are Review Tests 2 and 3 for “Main Ideas”? _____

The fourth review test consists of a story, essay, or textbook selection that both gets you reading and gives you practice in the skill learned in the chapter as well as skills learned in previous chapters.

- What is the title of the reading selection in the “Main Ideas” chapter?
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Following each chapter are six mastery tests which gradually increase in difficulty.

- On what pages are the mastery tests for the “Main Ideas” chapter? _____
The tests are on tear-out pages and so can be easily removed and handed in to your instructor. So that you can track your progress, there is a score box at the top of each test. Your score can also be entered into the “Reading Performance Chart” on the inside back cover of the book.

Part II: Ten Reading Selections (pages 421–532)

The ten reading selections that make up Part II are followed by activities that give you practice in all of the skills studied in Part I. Each reading begins in the same way. Look, for example, at “The Professor Is a Dropout,” which starts on page 423. What are the headings of the two sections that come before the reading itself?

- _____
- _____

Note that the vocabulary words in “Words to Watch” are followed by the numbers of the paragraphs in which the words appear. Look at the first page of “The Professor Is a Dropout” and explain how each vocabulary word is marked in the reading itself.

- _____

Activities Following Each Reading Selection

After each selection, there are four kinds of activities to improve the reading and thinking skills you learned in Part I of the book.

- 1 The first activity consists of **basic skill questions**—questions involving vocabulary in context, main ideas (including implied main ideas and the central point), supporting details, and relationships.
 - Look at the basic skill questions for “The Professor Is a Dropout” on pages 431–433. Note that the questions are labeled so you know what skill you are practicing in each case. How many questions deal with understanding vocabulary in context? _____
- 2 The second activity is made up of **advanced skill questions**—ones involving fact and opinion, inferences, purpose and tone, and argument.
 - Look at the advanced skill questions on pages 433–435. How many questions deal with making inferences? _____

3 The third activity involves **outlining, mapping, or summarizing**. Each of these activities will sharpen your ability to get to the heart of a piece and to think logically and clearly about what you read.

- What kind of activity is provided for “The Professor Is a Dropout” on page 435? _____
- What kind of activity is provided for the reading titled “Taming the Anger Monster” on page 445? _____

Note that a **map**, or diagram, is a highly visual way of organizing material. Like an outline, it shows at a glance the main parts of a selection.

4 The fourth activity consists of **discussion questions**. These questions provide a chance for you to deepen your understanding of each selection.

- How many discussion questions are there for “The Professor Is a Dropout” (page 436)—and indeed for every other reading? _____

Part III: For Further Study (pages 533–639)

This part of the book contains additional materials that can help improve your reading.

1 The first section, “Combined-Skills Tests,” on pages 535–566, is made up of short passages that give you practice in all ten of the skills in the book.

- How many such tests are there in all? _____

2 The second section, “More About Summarizing and Outlining,” provides additional information and activities that your instructor may choose to cover, depending on the needs of the class.

- How many practices are in this section? _____

3 The third section, “Five Additional Readings,” presents a series of short textbook selections that your instructor may assign for note-taking practice.

- What is the topic of the first selection (pages 592–593)? _____

4 The fourth section, “More About Argument: Errors in Reasoning,” explains a number of logical fallacies.

- How many fallacies are treated on pages 603–611? _____

- 5 The fifth section, “Bias,” on pages 615–624, describes how to recognize a speaker’s or writer’s point of view.
 - What is another name for biased language? _____
- 6 The sixth section, “Writing Assignments,” presents writing assignments for all twenty of the reading selections in the book. Reading and writing are closely connected skills, and writing practice will improve your ability to read closely and to think carefully.
 - How many assignments are offered for each reading? _____

HELPFUL FEATURES OF THE BOOK

- 1 The book centers on *what you really need to know* to become a better reader and thinker. It presents ten key comprehension skills and explains the most important points about each one.
- 2 The book gives you *lots of practice*. We seldom learn a skill only by hearing or reading about it; we make it part of us by repeated practice. There are, then, numerous activities in the text. They are not “busywork” but carefully designed materials that should help you truly learn each skill.

Notice that after you learn each skill in Part I, you progress to review tests and mastery tests that enable you to apply the skill. And as you move from one skill to the next, the reading selections help you practice and reinforce the skills already learned.
- 3 The selections throughout the book are *lively and appealing*. Dull and unvaried readings work against learning, so subjects have been carefully chosen for their high interest level. Almost all of the selections here are good examples of how what we read can capture our attention. For instance, begin “The Professor Is a Dropout,” which is about the dramatic steps one woman took to educate herself and her children—and try to stop reading. Or look at the textbook selection on pages 499–503, which identifies and discusses the warning signs that mark different types of bad managers. Or read the textbook selection “The Life of the Urban Working Class,” which, despite its unexciting title, is full of fascinating—and frightening—details about the lives of workers in the nineteenth century.
- 4 The readings include *twelve selections from college textbooks*. Therefore, you will be practicing on materials very much like those in your other courses. Doing so will increase your chances of transferring what you learn in your reading class to your other college courses.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

- 1 A good way to proceed is to read and review the explanations and examples in a given chapter in Part I until you feel you understand the ideas presented. Then carefully work through the practices. As you finish each one, check your answers with the “Limited Answer Key” that starts on page 645.

For your own sake, *don't just copy in the answers without trying to do the practices!* The only way to learn a skill is to practice it first and then use the answer key to give yourself feedback. Also, take whatever time is needed to figure out just why you got some answers wrong. By using the answer key to help teach yourself the skills, you will prepare yourself for the review and mastery tests at the end of each chapter as well as the other reading tests in the book. Your instructor can supply you with answers to those tests.

If you have trouble catching on to a particular skill, stick with it. In time, you will learn each of the ten skills.

- 2 Read the selections first with the intent of simply enjoying them. There will be time afterward for rereading each selection and using it to develop your comprehension skills.
- 3 Keep track of your progress. Fill in the charts at the end of each chapter in Part I and each reading in Part II. And in the “Reading Performance Chart” on the inside back cover, enter your scores for all of the review and mastery tests as well as the reading selections. These scores can give you a good view of your overall performance as you work through the book.

In summary, *Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills* has been designed to interest and benefit you as much as possible. Its format is straightforward, its explanations are clear, its readings are appealing, and its many practices will help you learn through doing. *It is a book that has been created to reward effort*, and if you provide that effort, you will make yourself a better reader and a stronger thinker. I wish you success.

John Langan