

“How to Mark a Book” by Mortimer J. Adler, Ph.D.

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

- **Underlining (or highlighting):** of major points, of important or forceful statements.
- **Vertical lines at the margin:** to emphasize a statement already underlined.
- **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 corner of each page on which you use such marks. It won't hurt the sturdy paper on which most modern books are printed, and you will be able to take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it at the folded-corner page, refresh your recollection of the book.)
- **Numbers in the margin:** to indicate the 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.
- **Circling or highlighting of key words or phrases.**
- **Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page, for the sake of:** recording questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raised 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. *[THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. THIS IS A KEY PLACE WHERE I FIND OUT HOW WELL YOU UNDERSTOOD WHAT YOU READ AND WHAT KIND OF GRADE YOU DESERVE]*

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. of the work.

Actively prepare to answer questions similar to these about setting, characters, conflict, plot, theme, literary devices, and context. Index the answers to these questions in your end papers.

- What is the setting?
 - Where does this story happen?
 - Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area?
 - What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens?
 - Do you long to climb into the pages of the book to live in its world, or does it repel you? Why?
 - Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live?
 - Is there anything symbolic or allegorical?
- Questions About Characters
 - Who is the story about?
 - Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. Do the character's priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse?
 - Is the character a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way?
 - Is there a single character (or a group of characters) that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? What actions does he take to oppose the protagonist?
- Questions About Conflict
 - What does the protagonist want?
 - Fill in the blank: This story is about the protagonist trying to _____.
 - Are there larger issues (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story (a war setting, for example, as in Dickens' Tale of Two Cities or Tolstoy's War and Peace)?
- Questions About Plot
 - What happens in the story? a. What major events take place in the story as a result of the conflict
 - How does the story end?
 - How are the "loose ends" tied up?
 - Were all of your questions answered?
 - Were you satisfied with the resolution? If not, why not?
 - Does the ending or resolution of the story make any kind of judgments?
 - Does the resolution offer any particular perspective or understanding of the story's themes?
- Questions About Theme
 - What does the protagonist learn?
 - What do the other characters learn?
 - Are other people in the story ennobled, changed, saved, improved or otherwise affected by the story's events?
 - Do they look at themselves differently at the end of the story?
 - Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme like the ones listed in this syllabus?
 - How does the story answer the problem associated with that theme?
 - Does the story merely call the reader to observe a theme or human condition without providing any kind of resolution or solution?
 - What answer does the story seem to suggest for the question, "What is a good life?" How does the story present life, death, and love?
- Questions About Literary Devices
 - Does the author use the sounds of our language to create interest in his story? Onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, alliteration, rhyme, understatement, oxymorons, hyperbole, cliché, metaphors, similes, etc?
- Questions About Context
 - Who is the author?
 - How old was the author when he wrote the story?
 - Was the author happy or unhappy? Friendly or reclusive?
 - What kinds of relationships did the author have?
 - Where did the author live?
 - Did the author live in poverty, or comfort?
 - Do the answers to these questions make themselves apparent in the author's story?
 - When did the author live?
 - What events took place in the world during the author's lifetime?
 - What did the author believe?
 - Was the author a member of a certain political party or other organization?
 - Was the author associated with a particular social cause or movement?
 - Was the author associated with a particular intellectual school or mode of literature? (examples include Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Existentialism, Naturalism, Realism, Postmodernism, etc.)
 - Was the author's worldview in any way threatened by new philosophies, scientific discoveries, or personal circumstances? Was this conflict reflected in his stories?