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Q&A#160 How to Skim Read

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Today's question: "Can you share some advice on how to skim read books? How do you know in advance which sections of a book to read for the best insight? Do you need to make a best estimated guess and then accept that you might miss something really helpful?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. It's been a while since I've produced a question and answer video. I've been preoccupied with my daily biblical reflections, and so I thought today I would take the opportunity to do one.

The question is, can you share some advice on how to skim read books? How do you know in advance which sections of a book to read for the best insight? Do you need to make a best estimated guess and then accept that you might miss something really helpful? First off, what works for me may not work for other people in the same way. What works for me is something that will probably work or at least help other people out, but some people may be better at rapid reading than I am. I'm not a rapid reader.

I'm someone who tends to skim read books, but not rapid read them in the same way as others can. Many of the books that I'm reading are a bit too dense to read with that sort of rapidity. Also, we need to think about what books welcome or invite that sort of reading.

Some books are written with a lot of signal to noise, and some books are written in a way that is designed to be read through and assimilated very quickly. Other books are written to be meditated and reflected upon. We have so many books in our world that our books tend to be written for single readings, whereas books in the ancient world were written for deep, meditative, repetitive reading.

If we're reading the Bible, you can't rapid read or skim read the Bible. It takes a lot of time to understand the text, and so you need to read texts inefficiently and slowly again and again and again to actually get the message of them. I find reading a text several times slowly and out loud often is one of the ways that I can help myself to understand it.

But if I'm reading a modern text, I will tend to skim read, because modern texts are written in a way that invites that sort of reading. We have millions of books, hundreds of millions of books, whereas in the ancient world, a big library would have maybe 200 books. So there's great difference between the sorts of ways that we are trained to read as a result of having so many texts around us.

So to start off, give yourself permission to skim read. For the majority of books, skim reading is a perfectly legitimate way to take them in. Some books are written for reflective and meditative reading and for re-reading, but most are not.

And there's no law that says you have to read every single page, every single sentence, every single paragraph of a book to work through it from cover to cover. Unless you are having to write a detailed review of a book or engage with it on some deep level within some class, you don't really need to read in that sort of depth. You pay for your books, not just in money, but also in time and opportunity cost.

There are so many important books to read and so little time in which to do so, and most books simply aren't worth that much time. Many books don't sufficiently reward the investment of a thorough, complete read, but they will greatly reward a more selective reading or skim reading. So that's what we need to learn to do, to get the most out of the books that we have, rather than feeling that we are duty-bound to read every single sentence.

One of the first things you can do, first of all, before you even buy a book, it can be good to read some reviews or summaries of the book. They will give you a sense of where the argument is going, where it stands with regard to the rest of the conversation on whatever subject it is you're reading about, and they will give you a sense of how to

enter into this book, that this book is coming from a particular vantage point, it's speaking into a particular conversation, and it's raising these particular arguments. And so I'll often start by reading a few reviews, summaries, descriptions, and recommendations of a book, and that gives me some way in which to place that book upon the map.

Then you need to be clear about what you need to know. Do I need to know what this particular person thinks? Does it matter that I know his specific arguments? Or is my concern to know more about the subject that this person is talking about? And if that's the case, then I don't need to read everything that he writes or she writes on this particular subject. I can just read on the subjects that I need to know about and not really care that much about knowing where they stand in regard to the larger conversation.

Get a sense of the things that people are bringing to the conversation and the angle of approach that they are taking. That really helps. I find if I'm looking for insight into a subject, I need to think about what authors do I turn to for counsel? What areas do I look to them for counsel? If I'm reading on a particular book of scripture, for instance, there are some people that I'll go to for the typology because I know that they have a sort of mindset or way of reading the text that will alert me to those details.

And others that I'll go to for the more technical linguistic stuff. Others that I'll go to for the social background. Have a sense of what people are bringing to the conversation and then you'll have a better sense of what to take from them, where to dip into them, where to actually tune out and say, this person isn't going to help me at this point.

This is not what I'm really looking for. If you're reading a book, open up to the table of contents. If you're familiar with the field and with a particular author and the instincts and methodology and angle of approach, there is a lot of a book that you won't need to read at all because you're familiar with what they're going to say.

You know where they stand in the conversation, the positions on certain subjects to be well rehearsed and you've read books on those subjects before. Particularly if you've read a number of books all the way through, there are many books that that frees you to skim because you know what's going to be said in particular chapters. You're familiar with the arguments and occasionally you will be wrong.

Occasionally you'll miss something that it really is valuable in those chapters. But the risk is worth taking because most of the time you will not be rewarded sufficiently for your time and there will be books that you could far better spend your time with. That's the way to think about it.

You're choosing between books and you want to make the most out of the time that you have and the books that you are giving your time to. If you are reading the introduction,

if you're reading the table of contents, you'll be able to see how the argument is roughly laid out. You'll be able to see what parts of the argument fit in different places and once you have a sense of that, you'll know where to focus your attention to a greater degree.

And once you have a good sense for the way that the author thinks as well, you'll be able to read their material quicker. You could be able to have a sense of where their mind is going in a particular argument. Read the introduction.

Most good books will lay out their argument in the introduction. So identify the parts of the argument that are of particular interest for you because they'll show you where they're going to go from the first chapter all the way through and what they're trying to end up with. And then once you've done that, you can read the conclusion.

If there's a conclusion in the book, a book will often recap their arguments and show where those arguments lead to in the conclusion. And you can have some rough assessment of the value of a book and the measure of the book by reading the introduction and the conclusion and the table of contents. Read the start and conclusion of any chapters that are of particular interest to you.

So in the start, again, as in the introduction, there will be some sort of indication of where the chapter is heading. What is the chapter trying to achieve? And then at the conclusion, you'll see a recap of the ground that's being covered. Ideally, that's the way that a book will be laid out.

You'll find some books aren't, but the majority are, and they will save you a lot of time that way. You can also get a lot from reading the first sentence of every paragraph of a chapter. Also, scan down through the page looking for key terms.

You're not just reading horizontally across, but going vertically down and seeing what jumps out to your eye. Because often paragraphs you can just miss without losing much because they're just dealing with... they're rehearsing arguments that you're familiar with or they're dealing with subject matter that is not really relevant to you or something else like that. You don't need to read everything in a sentence.

You don't need to read a complete paragraph. And so just read what you need to do to get some sense of where the argument is headed. And then if you want to know in more detail, you can zoom in.

It's a way in which you can scan over the surface and then decide where you want to zoom down and focus upon the content. Recognize what parts of the text are advancing arguments and which parts are simply supporting existing arguments. Because often what you'll find is you've already persuaded a particular position, you know the arguments for it and you don't really need any more arguments to be persuaded or to persuade others.

And so you don't need to read the parts of the text that are just supporting existing arguments. What you want to see is where that text is advancing to some greater point, where it is moving an argument forwards rather than just supporting an existing argument. So you can skip many of those parts.

And much of this is something that you'll have to practice over time. Over time, you'll get used to this and it really isn't very hard and it will save you a lot of time in the long run. It's something that take these few skills and tips and I've found that they save me many, many hours that I would be spending time in books that I didn't need to.

When I'm looking through commentaries, for instance, there are certain commentaries that I'll turn to for particular issues. If I'm looking for a deep technical treatment of the text, there are several commentaries on particular books that I know to go to and I'll spend time with them. And there are some times I know a text fairly well and I don't need to spend much time in the commentaries.

I'm already familiar with the arguments and I know how the commentators stand relative to each other. I know what, in advance, more or less the sort of thing that they're going to bring, the instincts that they'll bring to the conversation and the type of insights. And sometimes I'm thinking, I'm not seeing the insights in this particular area in the text.

And at that point, I'll turn to my panel of advisors, which are my commentaries on my shelf, and I'll pull down particular ones that I'm looking to illuminate a specific aspect of the text. It's a good habit to do this with a book more generally. Even if you're intending to read it through all the way, take the book and skim read it.

Get a sense of the reviews and get some sort of feel for what the argument of the author is and what the author is trying to achieve. Have some sense of where it fits within the wider conversation. Have some sense of the shape and structure of the argument within the book.

See which parts you need to be particularly attentive to. And then that will help you to read it. It's also worth thinking about how you can provide structures for yourself having read a book to go back over the book in the future.

So whether that's notes that you take in the margins, things that you underline. I find if I'm reading a book, I'm often thinking about how will I reread and re-assimilate this material? Because I forget things very quickly. And so what I'll often do is I'll underline key sections and I'll have lines in the margin.

I use my, as a rule, I use my bookmark to line things with pencil. And then I can read back through that book and just flick through it very quickly. And just reading the underlined sections, I can get a sense of where the argument is going.

That's a way in which I prepare myself for a future skim read of a text. And it makes it

very easy for me to pick up what I've done before. Also, I find the process of writing about a text or the process of writing using the instincts and the arguments of a particular author to advance something that the author does not write about themselves to be a very helpful way of assimilating that.

Ideally, you want a book to have that author as a sort of voice in your own head, that they can give you some insights and some ways of thinking about subjects beyond the ones that they're explicitly writing about. You need to get inside their head. And so I find that helpful.

It's one of the ways in which I, having read a book, can enable myself to take the habits of, to have skim reads again in the future and also to take those habits and enable me to assimilate material quicker in the future, to not need to read people as much on particular questions because I know how they think I've got inside their mind. Now, this is what I found helpful. You may find some different tips.

If you've found some things that are helpful that I haven't mentioned here, please mention them in the comments. Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, I'll have some more videos like this in the not too distant future.

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