Excerpt from “How to Mark a Book” by Mortimer J. Adler

Not only do effective readers read “between the lines,” they must also “write between the lines.” This is the most efficient way to read. Of course, students should not mark up books which are not theirs, but once a book belongs to a student, there is an effective way that the student can really be in possession of reading material.

There are two ways you can own a book. The first is the property right a student has by simply paying for a book. However, full ownership only comes when students have made the reading a part of themselves, and the best way to make them a part of it is by writing in it. Just like food that you buy in the supermarket, books, too, must be absorbed into the body to do you any good. It is not enough just to buy the food and store it away in the refrigerator. Likewise, the information in a book must be taken in or absorbed by the reader.

Adler notes:

“Confusion about what it means to own a book leads people to a false reverence for paper, binding and type—a respect for the physical thing—the craft of the print rather that the genius of the author. They forget that it is possible for a man to acquire the idea, to possess the beauty, which a great book contains, without staking his claim by pasting his bookplate inside the cover. Having a fine library doesn’t prove that its owner has a mind enriched by books; it proves nothing more that that he, his father, or his wife, was rich enough to buy them.

A true book owner has a few or many books, but each of them is, as Adler describes: “dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This person owns books.)”

Adler explains why marking up a book is indispensable to reading. He says, “First, it keeps you awake.” Second, he notes that if reading is active, then a person is thinking. If a person is thinking, then the thoughts themselves tend to be expressed in words either spoken or written. Finally, he notes that writing helps you to remember the thoughts you had, or the thoughts the author expressed.

If reading is to accomplish more than just passing time, then it must be active. Books of light fiction do not require the most active kind of reading, can be read just for pleasure, and nothing is lost. But as Adler says, “a great book, rich is ideas and beauty, a book that raises and tries to answer great fundamental questions, demands the most active reading of which you are capable.”

You know you have read actively when the pages of a book are filled with your notes. Active readers invariably read with a pencil in hand. When their notes turn into doodles, then they know that they are too tired to read, and it is time to stop.

Adler explains why writing is necessary. He notes that the “physical act of writing, with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves
them better in your memory. To set down your reaction to important words and sentences you have read, and the questions they have raised in your mind, is to preserve those reactions and sharpen those questions.”

Even if you were to throw away your notes after reading, your grasp of the material would be surer than if you had not taken the notes. But, rather than write on a piece of paper that might get lost or thrown away, why not use the margins (top and bottom, as well as side), the end-papers, the very space between the lines, which are all available. In this way, Adler says, “your notes and marks become an integral part of the book and stay there forever. You can pick up the book the following week or year, and there are all your points of agreement, disagreement, doubt and inquiry. It’s like resuming an interrupted conversation with the advantage of being able to pick up where you left off.”

Adler emphasizes that that “is exactly what reading a book should be: a conversation between you and the author.” He reminds us that “understanding is a two-way operation; learning doesn’t consist of being an empty receptacle. The learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. And marking a book is literally an expression of your differences, or agreements of opinion, with the author.”

You might argue that marking books is going to slow up your reading. But that is one of the reasons for doing it. Many of us equate speed of reading as a measure of intelligence. However, there is no right speed for intelligent reading. Adler reminds us that “the sign of intelligence in reading is the ability to read different things differently according to their worth. In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through you—how many you can make your own.” It is better to have a few friends than a thousand acquaintances; thus you should not be impatient if it takes more time and effort to read a great book than it does a newspaper.

Some devices for marking a book.

1. **Underlining**: of major points, or important or forceful statements
2. **Vertical lines at the margins**: to emphasize a statement already underlined
3. **Stars, asterisks or other doo-dads at the margin**: to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or twenty most important statements in the book
4. **Numbers in the margin**: to indicate the sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument
5. **Numbers of other pages in the margins**: to indicate where else in the book the author made points relevant to the point marked; to tie up ideas in a book, which, thought they may be separated by many pages, belong together
6. **Circling of key words or phrases**
7. **Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page**: to records 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. Adler uses 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.