

Devouring the Book: Analysis on "How to Mark a Book"

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### Abstract

As a student of Brigham Young University – Idaho, KennaLee Martin analyzes an essay written on the reason for marking up books as well as the proper way in which to do so. She explores Mortimer Adler’s “How to Mark a Book” for the effect used to sway the audience and finds that Adler uses mostly logos as well as some pathos. KennaLee then dissects each section to ascertain whether his argument was persuasive or not. First she discusses the use of Adler’s personal testimony and description of the different levels of book owners. Then she dissects Adler’s use of President Hutchings, a colleague, and Arturo Toscanini as examples for marking up literature or music. Finally she looks at Adler’s metaphor of spoiled foods.

## Devouring the Book: Analysis on "How to Mark a Book"

While reading a lengthy text the mind tends to wander, not always but eventually. Attention slowly slips to another topic and away from the reading making the hour of study worthless. The meaning of the text is lost and non-applicable to discussions, quizzes and/or tests. While in school this becomes particularly frustrating. The hours in the day had been separated accordingly only to end up with nothing to show for it. However, there is a remedy. Mortimer Adler annotates and notates the work while reading. This solidifies the information in the mind for future use. More time is required for such an endeavor yet there are no rewards without work. Scholarly men testify to this same concept. Even a man not of scholarly pursuits but of the arts demonstrates the importance of marking down thoughts in personal works. Logos supports the fundamental truth of notation while pathos appeals to the reader on a personal level. While seeking to gain from reading literary works such as essays, novels, and even the art of music steps, suggestions and examples help the reader begin.

In the essay "How to Mark a Book", Mortimer Adler, the founder and father of the Great Books Program and editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica, discusses the benefits discovered not only during dedicated reading but also the annotation and notation of a piece of literature. Adler begins highlighting the practical reasons for marking a text as an appeal to logos. The reasons range from keeping the reader awake to solidifying the information in the reader's mind. He stresses that real ownership comes with the examining of a text for its intellectual nourishment just as a purchased beefsteak is nothing more than an object in the icebox until cooked and devoured. Books must be "absorbed into the bloodstream" (1) in order for it to do any good. With the example of Toscanini and his illegible symphony score he emphasizes making the text personal. Reading an author's work reflects having a personal conversation, Adler stresses the

importance of not letting such an opportunity pass. Thusly, Adler places all novel owners within three categories depending upon the level of attention they take towards the literature; the shelf decorator, the partial owner and the dog-eared, margin-marking enthusiast. Adler clearly and logically writes to convince the reader to adopt habits that will benefit their lives as they comprehend information more deeply.

Adler uses many techniques in order to explain his beliefs, such as; stating his opinion in both a logical and emotional manner, giving examples of two modern day men, and illustrating a metaphor of spoiled food. Adler understands that each mind will understand differently, people have gone through diverse experiences and uses this to his advantage. By delivering the same message through varying mediums he increases the number of readers by reaching that many more groups of people. Once in front of them he builds an argument most would agree with.

Logically Adler argues that there are many practical reasons for marking up a text. Doing so not only assures the reader remains conscious but also that their comprehension of the text skyrockets. The act of writing imprints the idea on the mind, preserving entire sentences in some cases. It's as if repeating a sentence again but this time in your own words. This suggestion appeals to the reader's logos, the logical part of the mind that admits such a statement as factual. During a precursory reading one might be able to ascertain the main topic, even a notable quote here and there but will they be able to expound on the idea themselves? Probably not. Possibly Adler noticed the phenomenon during his time as a student at Columbia University. While studying for his classes he could have easily noticed his comprehension levels heightening as his attention to annotating and notating text strengthened. Thus his suggestions on how to properly mark, given as an entire list of proper ways to notate a text, are taken

seriously because of his personal experience. The simple tools he delivers to the reader have quality and warrant experimentation.

To clarify this idea Adler presents a story about the three levels of ownership. On the first level lives the man who owns countless best-selling novels but after placing them neatly on the shelves, leaves them there to gather dust. They are nothing but decorations; "this deluded individual owns wood-pulp and ink, not books" (2). The second man reads the novels but views the books as a relic of the past that must not bear markings. His attention remains on the words themselves and not the idea beneath them. Caught up in the mentality that books decorate shelves, this man hasn't 'conversed' with the author about the novel. He misses more than he knows by skimming the surface of the text and not diving deep into the ink and paper. Lastly, comes the man that truly owns his novels and he carries them around dog-eared, highlighted and margins filled with chaotic scribbles. Mortimer Adler believes this shows true understanding of the piece. The author is an expert in their field. While Adler cautions blind faith in their words, he stresses that one should not only read the words but absorb the information. Logos convinces the reader of his argument because he appeals to the more logical and discerning part of the mind. This makes the suggestions more easily adoptable.

Continuing to use logos to argue his case Adler brings in two examples; a musician, and a scholar. Through these two men he shows that similar behavior can be found from different backgrounds. First off, Adler presents Toscanini, a fantastic example of a conductor marking up his score "so thoroughly...that no one but [him could] read it" (2). This speaks clearer to a musically trained mind than to an individual without the same experiences. They understand from a personal perspective what Adler attempts to convey as the idea of Toscanini marking up the score brings to mind memories of doing just the same with sheets of music. Yet, not all

readers contain a gift for the musical arts; therefore, not all that study this section will fully understand the example given through Toscanini. They may comprehend on a shallow level failing to delve into the metaphor as completely as possible. They resemble the second man that reads but doesn't comprehend. Adler's report of Toscanini marking up the C-minor Symphony doesn't reach full impact. If he had dove into the topic more, explaining that musicians mark up their music for multiple reasons, then this example might have gained credibility. However, this being only one of many examples Adler doesn't need to supply all the logical and emotional appeal. By stating, "The reason why a great conductor makes notations on his musical scores...is the same reason why you should mark your books," he bridges the gap of understanding. Those that may not have understood that metaphor on a personal level at least understand on a superficial one. A conductor marks up his score with his thoughts, just as the writer does when 'conversing' with the author. Using pathos to communicate with the musicians and logos to those without classical training Adler clearly shows what he means.

To once again appeal with the logical mindset Adler presents a real life example of a man's daily routine, reading habits, and statement. President Hutchins, of the University of Chicago, has a difficult, full workload. Still Adler's opinion remains that Hutchins is the "most famous active reader of great books" of his acquaintance. For a man that has such a busy schedule this is quite impressive. Hutchins describes that when he reads he makes sure to have a pencil but when he realizes he is only drawing 'caviar factories' that he stops. He puts down the reading with the knowledge he cannot give due attention to the author at this time. Adler stands behind Hutchins statement. The fact that these men are friends can be taken at face value yet Adler's opinion of President Hutchins cannot. He claims that Hutchins holds the title of the "most avid reader" which is subjective because there may be other individuals who read greater

amounts. A list of Hutchins' literary studies does not dot the page, nor does Adler report another colleague agreeing to his statement. Here Adler covers his steps well. By using the phrase "I know" twice while speaking of his friend, President Hutchins, he acknowledges his limited perspective on the subject. "The most active reader of great books *I know*...the hardest schedule of business activities of any man *I know*." (2) Yes, there may be many others that deserve the title more but Adler chose to single out this one man. Not to mention that President Hutchins comes with his own resume to impress the crowd. The simple fact that this man is the President of the University of Columbia places credit to Adler's statement, which was in point of fact only an opinion. This leaves the reader with a decision on whether to mark this section as a fortifying example, and Hutchins as a man to be listened to, or the ramblings of a fired-up scholar bent on convincing his readers to emulate his friend's behavior. Most opt to agree as the testimony from the scholarly man makes sense. So Adler holds this example up to the light of logos and finds it to be a concrete example.

Finally, his use of the spoiled food metaphor appeals to a typically of evidence. Each reader, at one point or another, has purchased food. Adler uses that indisputable fact to draw on the reader's attention then expands his metaphor. When purchasing a beefsteak the buyer doesn't intend to let it waste away in the freezer. The intention is to eat it. Once the credit card has been scanned the beefsteak is packed, carried home, and placed in the freezer. Legally the consumer owns the beefsteak but not fully. No, the owner doesn't consider the affair complete until they have cooked and devoured said steak. To leave it in the freezer until it is nonedible would be a shame so then why decorate shelves with novels and not open their pages? The first type of book owner would essentially have an entire herd slaughtered for sport just as he leaves good books on the shelf unread.

The second man would splurge on expensive steaks but leave them in the freezer because he fears he lacks the culinary proficiency to cook them correctly. Yes, he may fail the first time notating a book. Maybe he should have started on a less expensive specimen but his intent was pure. Real ownership comes with the examining of the text, cooking the beefsteak, smelling the aromas, exploring what the novel has to say between the lines. Adler states, "Full ownership comes only when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it is by writing in it" (1), by absorbing the literary nutrients into the bloodstream. The novel won't do any good on the shelf until the owner steps into the realm of the dog-eared, margin-marking enthusiast. The third man understands this. He not only purchases steaks and cooks them but also invites the author to dinner for a debate over the novel's meaning and opinion.

However, Adler does digress. There is a line to how far a reader should go with the marking of their text. Humorously using the illustration of marking up an original "*Paradise Lost*" to letting a child with crayons near a Rembrandt Adler explains that some pieces may remain untouched and for good reason. Better to have left the cow to graze in the pasture than burn the steak.

Throughout his entire argument Adler stresses on appealing to the logical mind of the audience through his personal opinions, the example of the two modern men and the metaphor of spoiled food. The testimony of President Hutchins and the documentation on Toscanini show the similar habits even while working in different fields. The beefsteak analogy and hierarchy of book owners speaks to everyone on an individual level. Each man or woman has the choice to what sort of reader they will become. Will they place their thoughts on the shelves or dust them off and apply them? Adler adamantly believes marking a text will benefit far more than it could possibly hurt and works wonders on convincing his audience the same.



### Resources

Adler, M. (2012) "How to Mark a Book" Pages 1-4, *The Way of Wisdom*.