

How to Get the Classical Education You Never Had

by Susan Wise Bauer

What if your mind is hungry, but not particularly literate? “Acquaint yourself with your own ignorance,” Isaac Watts advised his readers, in his self-education treatise *Improvement of the Mind* (published in 1741). “Impress your mind with a deep and painful sense of the low and imperfect degrees of your present knowledge.” Today, as in Watts’ time, intelligent and ambitious adults feel unprepared to tackle any course of serious reading. They struggle to overcome an indifferent education that didn’t teach the basic skills needed for serious reading and writing. But Watts’ admonition is still true: No matter how incomplete your education, you can learn how to read seriously, think about your reading, and talk about what you’ve discovered.

Sustained, serious reading is at the center of the self-education project. Observation, reading, conversation and attendance at lectures are all educational pursuits, as Isaac Watts goes on to tell us. But he concludes that reading is the most important method of self-improvement. Observation limits our learning to our immediate surroundings; conversation and attendance at lectures are valuable, but only expose us to the views of a few nearby persons. Only reading allows us to reach out beyond the restrictions of time and space, to take part in what Mortimer Adler has called the “Great Conversation” of ideas that began in ancient times and has continued unbroken to the present. Reading makes us part of this Great Conversation, no matter where and when we pursue it.

But sustained and serious reading has always been a difficult project – even before the advent of television. Much has been written about our present move away from texts, towards an image-based, visual culture: Schools no longer teach reading and writing properly. Television, movies and now the Web have decreased the importance of the written word. We are moving into a post-literate age. Print culture is doomed. Alas.

I dislike these sorts of apocalyptic reflections. Television may be pernicious, but reading is no harder (nor easier) than it has ever been. “Our post-revolutionary youth,” complained Thomas Jefferson in an 1814 letter to John Adams, “are born under happier stars than you and I were. They acquire all learning in their mother’s womb, and bring it into the world ready made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all knowledge which is not innate, is in contempt, or neglect at least.” Jefferson’s moan over the state of modern intellectual culture laments the rise of a philosophy that exalts self-expression over serious reading. Even before the advent of television, serious reading was a difficult and neglected activity.

In fact, serious reading is a discipline: like running regularly, or meditating, or taking voice lessons. Any able adult can run across the backyard, but this ability to put one foot in front of another shouldn’t make him think that he can tackle a marathon without serious, time-consuming training. Yet because we can read the newspaper or *Time* or Stephen King without difficulty, we tend to think that we should be able to go directly into Homer or Henry James. And when we stumble, we take this as proof of our mental inadequacy: We’ll never be able to read the Great Books.

The truth is that the study of literature requires different *skills* than reading for pleasure. The inability to tackle, unaided, a list of Great Books and stick to the project doesn’t demonstrate mental inadequacy – just a lack of preparation. As Richard Foster eloquently argues in *A Celebration of Discipline*, we tend to think (erroneously) that anyone who can read ought to be able to study ideas. “To convince people that they must learn to study is the major obstacle,” Foster writes. “Most

people assume that because they know how to read words they know how to study.” But the opposite is true.

Studying a book is an extremely complex matter, especially for the novice. As with tennis or typing, when we are first learning it seems that there are a thousand details to master and we wonder how on earth we will keep everything in mind at the same time. Once we reach proficiency, however, the mechanics become second nature, and we are able to concentrate on the game or the material to be typed. The same is true with studying a book. Study is an exacting art involving a labyrinth of details.

Secondary schools don't typically train us to read seriously, how to *study* – their task is to produce students who are reading on the so-called “tenth-grade level,” which allows readers to absorb newspapers and Stephen King with ease. A university education ought to follow up by teaching how to read seriously, but many college seniors aren't much further along than their high school counterparts. Often, they graduate with a nagging sense of their own deficiencies; as adults, they come back to the task of serious reading and discover that it has not magically become simpler. Homer is still longwinded, Plato impenetrable, Stoppard bewilderingly random. Too often, these readers give up, convinced that serious books are beyond them.

But all that's missing is training in the art of reading. If you didn't learn how to read properly in school, you can do it now. The methods of classical education are at your disposal.

The classical schoolmaster divides learning into three stages, generally known as the Trivium. The first stage of education is called the *grammar stage*. Here, memorization and repetition are the primary methods of teaching. Critical thinking comes into play during the second stage of education, the *logic stage*. The final years of education focus on elegant, articulate expression of opinion in speech and writing – *the study of rhetoric*.

Francis Bacon, a 16th century philosopher, put it this way: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” Bacon was suggesting that not every book is worthy of serious attention. But the three levels of understanding he describes – tasting, swallowing, and digesting – reflect his familiarity with classical education. In the classical school, learning is three-part process: First, taste. Gain basic knowledge of your subject. Second, swallow – take the knowledge into your own understanding by evaluating it. Is it valid? Is it true? Why? Third, digest. Fold the subject into your own understanding. Let it change the way you think – or reject it as unworthy. Taste, swallow, digest; find out the facts, evaluate them, form your own opinion.

These are general guidelines, of course, and assume that you are able to devote a little time to disciplined reading. The mastery of grammar, writing, logic, analysis, and argumentation all depend on the single uncomplicated act of carving out a space within which they can exist.

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