



## How to Use Commentaries and Abstracts

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A third category of extrinsic aids to reading includes commentaries and abstracts. The thing to emphasize here is that such works should be used wisely, which is to say sparingly. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that commentators are not always right in their comments on a book. Sometimes, of course, their works are enormously useful, but this is true less often than one could wish...

The second reason for using commentaries sparingly is that, even if they are right, they may not be exhaustive. That is, you may be able to discover important meanings in a book that the author of a commentary about it has not discovered. Reading a commentary, particularly one that seems very self-assured, thus tends to, limit your understanding of a book, even if your understanding, as far as it goes, is correct.

Hence, there is one piece of advice that we want to give you about using commentaries. Indeed, this comes close to being a basic maxim of extrinsic reading. Whereas it is one of the rules of intrinsic reading that you should read an author's preface and introduction before reading his book, the rule in the case of extrinsic reading is that you should not read a commentary by someone else until after you have read the book. This applies particularly to scholarly and critical introductions. They are properly used only if you do your best to read the book first, and then and only then apply to them for answers to questions that still puzzle you. If you read them first they are likely to distort your reading of the book. You will tend to see only the points made by the scholar or critic, and fail to see other points that may be just as important.

There is considerable pleasure associated with the reading of such introductions when it is done in this way. You have read the book and understood it. The writer of the introduction has also read it, perhaps many times, and has his own understanding of it. You approach him, therefore, on essentially equal terms. If you read his introduction before reading the book, however, you are at his mercy.

Heeding this rule, that commentaries should be read after you have read the book that they expound and not before, applies also to handbooks. Such works cannot hurt you if you have already read the book and know where the handbook is wrong, if it is. But if you depend wholly on the handbook, and never read the original book, you may be in bad trouble.

And there is this further point. If you get into the habit of depending on commentaries and handbooks, you will be totally lost if you cannot find one. You may be able to understand a particular book with the help of a commentary, but in general you will be a worse reader.

The rule of extrinsic reading given here applies also to abstracts and plot digests. They are useful in two connections, but in those two only. First, they can help to jog your memory of a book's contents, if you have already read it. Ideally, you made such an abstract yourself, in reading the book analytically, but if you have not done so, an abstract or digest can be an important aid. Second, abstracts are useful when you are engaged in syntopical reading, and wish to know whether a certain work is likely to be germane to your project. An abstract can never replace the reading of a book, but it can sometimes tell you whether you want or need to read the book or not.

From How to Read a Book. Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren