Hacking the Academy

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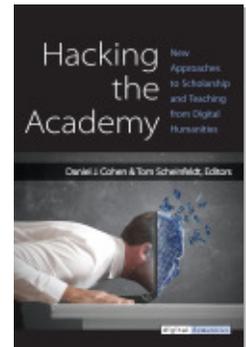Published by University of Michigan Press

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How to Read a Book in One Hour
Larry Cebula

As children, we are taught that reading is always linear: you start on page one and end on page three-hundred-and-sixty-seven, and skipping pages is cheating. That is the way you read all through school, and the way most people read their whole lives. Once you get to graduate school, however, it is time to leave that childhood illusion behind.

You are no longer reading books for the stories contained inside. You are reading them for other reasons—to understand the authors' arguments, to see how they handle evidence, to examine how they structure their arguments, and to analyze their work as a whole. Perhaps above all, you need to understand how any given book fits into the theoretical landscape, how it speaks to other works on the subject, and its strengths and weaknesses. Plodding through a book one page at a time is not the best way to do this.

You need to devour books—to fall on them like a hungry weasel on a fat chicken. You break their spines, rummage about in their innards for the tasty bits, and make your way to the next chicken coop. Here is how to do it.

1. Create a clean space—a table, the book, paper, a writing utensil, and nothing else.
2. Read two academic reviews of the book, photocopied beforehand. Don't skip this step: these will tell you the book's perceived strengths and weakness. Allow five minutes for this.
3. Carefully read the introduction. A good introduction will give you the book's thesis, clues on the methods and sources, and thumbnail synopses of each chapter. Work quickly, but take good notes—with a bibliographic citation at the top of the page. Allow twenty minutes here.
4. Turn directly to the conclusion and read that. The conclusion will reinforce the thesis and have some more quotable material. In your

notes, write down one or two direct quotes suitable for using in a review or literature review, should you later be assigned to write such a beast. Allow ten–fifteen minutes here.

5. Turn to the table of contents and think about what each chapter likely contains. You may be done—in many cases in grad school the facts in any particular book will already be familiar to you; what is novel is the interpretation, and you should already have that from the introduction and conclusion. Allow five minutes here.

6. (Optional) Skim one or two of what seem to be the key chapters. Look for something clever the author has done with her or his evidence, memorable phrases, glaring weaknesses—stuff you can mention and sound thoughtful yourself when it is your turn to talk in the seminar room. Allow ten minutes, max.

7. Put the notes and photocopied review in a file folder and squirrel it away. These folders will serve as fodder for future assignments, reviews of similar books, lectures, grant applications, etc.

8. Miller time. Meet some friends and tell them the interesting things you just learned—driving it deeper into your memory.

Will you learn as much using this method as you would if you spent the five–eight hours reading it in the conventional method? Heck no. But the real meat of the book—the thesis and key points—will actually be more clear to you using this method. Otherwise it is too easy for a graduate student to get lost in the details and miss the main points.

This method works better with some books than others. If a book is considered especially important, or if it falls squarely within your research area, you should give it more time. And never, ever tell the professor that you read the assignment in an hour. Not even if that professor is me. I'll flunk you.