

The SQ3R Method of Study

(An Instruction on the Art of Reading and Research)

The Meaning of SQ3R

This term **SQ3R** standeth for *Survey, Question, Read, Recall, and Review*. It is a method of study that bringeth order and understanding to the reading of books. The first letter **S** signifies **Survey**. Let us therefore begin with the first step, which is *to survey the book*.

The Purpose of Surveying

To *survey* a book meant to take a *general view* of it—to behold it from above, as one that looked upon a field before he entered to plow it. By surveying, a man saveth much time; for if a book be of four or five hundred pages, it is unwise to begin from the first page without knowledge of its matter. Many a student loseth months in reading books that profit him nothing, because he readeth without survey.

When thou surveys a book, thou shalt quickly discern whether it is useful for thy research, whether it pertained to thy subject, and whether it is written with understanding. Thus the time of thy labour shall not be wasted.

Benefits of Surveying

1. It saveth time.
2. It revealed the subject and purpose of the book.
3. It helped thee judge whether the book is profitable or vain.
4. It maketh plain whether the book is dry and wearisome, or pleasant and instructive.

Some books are written so scholastically that the common reader fainted after a few pages. Others are lively and quicken the mind. By surveying first, thou shalt know which is which.

How to Survey a Book

When thou takes a book in thine hand, do the following things with diligence:

1. **Behold the Title** – Consider what subject the book speaketh of.
2. **Learn of the Author** – Know who hath written it, and what spirit or wisdom he beareth.
3. **Read the Preface or Introduction** – There the author declared his purpose, the reason of his writing, and the chief matters he covered.
4. **Examine the Table of Contents** – The *Chapters and Headings* show the order and substance of the work.
5. **Look into the Index (if it be an English book)** – There thou shalt find the words and themes, and the pages wherein they are treated. Thus, if thou seekest “God,” “Christ,” or “the Spirit,” the Index guideth thee straightway unto them.

The Scholar’s Courtesy toward Books

When a man presented thee with a book, receive it with care. Look not upon it lightly and set it aside, for this wounded the heart of him that wrote it. Rather, glance through the contents, read a little of the preface, and give thy good word, saying, “This seemed full of knowledge; I shall read it when time allowed.”

In many churches I have observed the tables of the pastors: some filled with books, others bare and void. Where there be no books, how shall wisdom dwell? Yet some have their tables full of *legal files* and *court papers*, and little of the Word. Such a one spendeth his days upon earthly matters, not divine understanding.

The Use of Index and Bibliography

If thou desires to know whether a book is well researched, look upon its *Bibliography*. There thou shalt see what sources the author hath used, whether he hath built his work upon truth or upon imagination. Every serious writing must declare its *sources*, lest it be counted as theft of others’ thoughts.

Therefore, when thou sees the Bibliography, consider the breadth and depth of the author’s study; for from the roots the tree is known.

A Practical Way of Surveying a Chapter

If thou hast no time to read a whole book, yet wouldst know its essence, read thus:

- The **Introduction** of the chapter,
- Some **Relevant Portion** in the midst, and
- The **Conclusion** at the end.

By this thou shalt know the author’s argument and spirit without reading every page. The Index and Contents shall aid thee to find what part concerned thy research.

Assignment of Practice

Next time, take a book—any that is related to thy study—and *practice the survey*. Look at the title, the author, the preface, the table of contents, and the relevant chapters. Write briefly in thine own words what thou hast learned therefrom. Take two chapters only, not the whole book, that thou mayest learn the art of surveying.

The Formation of Judgment

After thou hast surveyed, form thy **own opinion**. Ask thyself:

- Was the book profitable?
- Did it increase my knowledge?
- Was it well-researched?
- Was it dull and barren, or full of light and truth?

Thus by practice thou shalt learn discernment. For every researcher must not only read, but *judge rightly* what he readeth.

Conclusion

Behold then, this is the first part of the SQ3R method — the **Survey**. By it thou opens the door of understanding before thou enters into the house of knowledge. Use it faithfully, and thou shalt become wise in study, saving thy time, and gaining much profit in the work of research.

The Importance of Questions

If there be no question, let us move forward. As for those who are online, I know not how they ask their questions—whether they write them or send them forth in some manner. If any question cometh, do make it known.

Now the second step is *Question*. This meant that as thou readest a book, thou must raise questions within thine heart. As the author written, thou shouldest ask: “Why doth he say this? What reason or proof hath he for such a saying? Is this but a thought of his own mind, or standeth it upon firm ground?”

Therefore, as thou readest, write down whatsoever questions arise in thy mind concerning that portion of the book. If thou findest no answer within the book, then this is thy *critique*—that the writing provoked many questions, yet answered them not.

Peradventure thou mayest seek other sources to find the answers thereof; but it is meet that thou shouldest raise questions, and then search diligently whether the same be answered within the book or without.

The Exercise of the Mind

When thou findest answers, whether from the same book or from other writings, compare them one with another. By doing this, thou shalt perceive the author’s understanding and also thine own growth in discernment.

Even so with the Holy Scriptures: they are best understood by those who raise questions as they read. When one asked, “Why is this written? What meant this word?” then he is stirred to seek the truth. For if no question be raised, no answer shall be sought.

Thus thy mind is exercised, and courage growth within thee—to inquire even of great scholars and not to receive all things blindly. They that question not, learn not; but they that ask, increase in knowledge.

The W-Questions

In studying, there are six chief questions, oft called the *W-questions*:

- **Who** are the people in the text?
- **When** did it happen?
- **What** took place?
- **Where** did it occur?
- **Why** was it written?

- **How** was it done?

In Urdu, these begin with the letter *Kāf*—*Kaun, Kab, Kya, Kahan, Kyon, Kaise*. These questions may be used not only in reading books but also in studying the Holy Bible.

When thou asks such things, thy understanding increased, and thou learners to observe both Scripture and text with a discerning eye.

The Example of the Parables

Take, for instance, the parables in the Gospel of Matthew. One author may explain a parable in one manner, another in a different way. Thou mayest add thine own questions also:

Who are the persons in the parable?

Where was it spoken—by the sea, in the wilderness, or upon the mountain?

Having read thus, thou mayest seek further light from commentaries or scholars. Some interpret the parables allegorically, saying, for example, that in the parable of the *Good Samaritan*, the Samaritan is Christ Himself, the wounded man is mankind, and the robbers are the powers of darkness.

This is an allegorical interpretation. Yet thou mayest consider whether such an explanation truly expressed the Lord's meaning. Another expositor may view it as a *case study*, wherein Christ speak to a certain lawyer to awaken his conscience.

By comparing both interpretations, thou shalt discern which one be more balanced and faithful to the intent of the Master.

The Habit of Questioning Teachers

Therefore, be not silent in the presence of thy teachers. When thou asks, clarity cometh; but when thou keeps questions within, thou returnest home with an unsearched mind. So raise thy questions with reverence and zeal.

The Third Step — Read

We have now seen *Survey* and *Question*. The next letter *R* is for *Read*.

To *read* is not merely to let thine eyes pass over words, but to engage both eye and mind together. Many read with their eyes while their thoughts wander afar. They read three or four paragraphs and then awake, saying, "Where am I?"

Therefore, when thou readest, let thine eyes be open and thy mind awake. Some are slow readers, others swift. Some understand better when they read aloud, for the ear helped the mind. Others prefer silence. Use whatsoever manner helped thee best—but read for understanding, not for speed.

The Need for Comprehension

If the book be difficult, slow thy pace, but understand what thou readest. For reading without understanding is but the shadow of learning.

Some believe that silent reading enabled more pages to be read; yet others comprehend better by reading aloud. Try both, and see which profited thee most. But practice reading, for reading is a skill that must be exercised.

The Neglect of Reading

Alas, in our land, the habit of reading is scarce found. Children read only their course books, and little more. Even at the university, many rely upon *test papers* and *guess papers*, passing examinations with little true knowledge. Thus they gain a degree, but not understanding.

He that hath read only the prescribed book knoweth but a fragment; yet he that seeketh other authors and wider sources gaineth wisdom.

Our educational system faileth to encourage the love of books. In many lands abroad, every community hath a public library—open freely, that people may borrow, read, and return. Thus reading is nourished among the people.

But here, few visit the great *Quaid-e-Azam Library*, or the libraries of their schools and universities. Even in our seminary, though we possess twelve thousand volumes on theology, few come to read save when compelled by an assignment.

Much has been invested, yet the readers are few. O that pastors and students of God's Word would come and make use of these treasures!

For truly, reading enlarges the soul, strengthened the mind, and prepared the servant of God to handle aright the Word of Truth.

[The Decline of the Desire for Learning](#)

Verily, there is little inclination toward learning in our land; therefore, men come not willingly unto study.

Many say unto us, "I desire to do my B.Th., or my M.Div., or even my Ph.D." Yet they seek the degree without learning.

They say, "How quickly may I finish my B.Th.? How soon may I take my M.Div.?"

And when asked, "But how wilt thou accomplish it?" they answer, "I only desire the degree."

Then I said unto them, "What profit is there in a parchment if thou hast not learned? Our calling is not to gain degrees but to gain understanding."

If thou desires learning, then shalt thou turn unto the books; but if thou seekest only a paper with a seal, then art thou among those whose hearts are shallow in purpose.

[The Habit of Reading](#)

Therefore, strengthen thine habit of reading.

Some say, "When I read a book, sleep overtakes me."

Yea, they read not to learn, but to sleep!
But unto him that hath understanding, reading becomes as daily bread.

If thou readest daily, one page, or two, or three, thy appetite shall grow thereby.
And the day shall come when thou shalt say, "This day I have not read, and it seemed I have not eaten."

Thus is the hunger for learning kindled within the soul.

Read, therefore, an increase in knowledge.
For without reading there is no research;
and without books there is no fountain of understanding.
Reading is essential.

The Command to Read

I say unto my students continually, "Read! Read! Read!"
For many hasten to me, bringing outlines and drafts.
And I ask, "Whence came these writings? Hast thou read aught upon this subject?"
They answer, "Nay, Sir, it came unto my mind, and I wrote it down."

Then I say unto them, "Go, and read again.
Take five or seven books upon this theme;
and when thou hast read, return and write.
Then shalt thou perceive with clarity."

For no man may produce wisdom apart from reading.

The Three R's of Study

Now let us come quickly unto the **Three R's**:

First, Read.

Second, Recall.

Third, Review.

Thus is formed the foundation of study.

The Art of Recall

When thou hast read, then shalt thou recall what thou hast read?
Call to mind the things which thine eyes have seen and thine heart hath received.
This recalling strengthened memory and discernment.

For by recalling, a man perceived what profit he hath gained from reading.
If thou hast made notes, then in recalling, thou shalt remember the things which were most needful.
But if thou hast written nothing, the days shall pass, and thou shalt forget what once thou knewest.

Therefore, recall thy readings, and write again those things which are profitable;
for oft shall they serve thee in thy preaching and writing.

The Duty of Review

And the third is **Review** — that is, to look again.
For in reviewing, thou shalt behold what before thou sawest not.
When thou reviewest thy notes, thou shalt perceive what was lacking and what must be added.

He that reviewed not his work, loseth the fruit of his labour.
But he that returned unto it, findeth understanding and growth.

Thus the Three R's are profitable: **Read, Recall, and Review.**
They make firm the knowledge gained and deepen the root of comprehension.

The Method of Study

This, then, is the method of study — the SQ3R method — that ye may gain the full profit of reading.

For many read continually, yet perceive nothing.
But he that readeth with method and remembrance, his heart is enlightened.

Survey the matter first; question it; read it; recall it; review it.
Thus shall thy learning be complete.

The Question of Interpretation

Then one of the students asked, “Master, if two writers interpret the same passage differently, how shall we know which is true?”

And I said, “Examine the Scripture first.
Where doth the Scripture interpret itself?
How much witness of the Word supported his saying?
He whose commentary agreed with the witness of Scripture is more faithful than he whose thoughts wander afar.

If a writer interpreted broadly or from a liberal mind, measure him by the Word.
Go back and forward within the Scripture, for oft the key lieth in the verses before and after.”

Then I gave an example: “In the Revelation of John, the Lord said, ‘I know thy works.’
What works are these? To know, go backward unto the message to Thyatira: ‘I know thy works, and thy love, and faith, and service, and patience.’
Thus Scripture interpreted Scripture.
So teach you to find within the Word the meaning of the Word.”

The Reverence for the Holy Word

Another asked, “May one read the Holy Scripture lying down?”

And I said, "If it caused offence unto thy brother, refrain.
For some count it irreverence to read the Holy Word in such manner.
Yet if thou art weary, take a gentle rest and read with reverence of heart."

For many are sensitive in their faith.
Once, when I underlined a verse in my Bible, a man rebuked me, saying,
'Thou hast written upon the mouth of God!'
So I sought peace, for I knew his frame of belief.
Thus, be mindful of the conscience of others, that none stumble by reason of thee."

On the Place of Reading

Then was I asked again, "Should the Word be read only in a holy place?"

And I said, "Holiness lieth not in the place but in the heart.
If the heart be clean, every place becomes holy.
For the Word of God cleanest not the outer chamber but the inner man.

If thou art among men and thy heart desired to read, read before them;
for thou does no wrong.
But if thou seekest solitude for meditation, then find a quiet place that thou mayest hear the
still voice of God."

The Reverence of Context

Know ye that reverence different by context and custom.
In some lands, men lay the Bible upon the floor or beneath their feet,
not understanding our manner of honour.
But in our house, if the Bible falleth, we lift it up and kiss it, for we hold it sacred.

Therefore, take heed to context and culture, lest by ignorance one bring offence.