

Classification of Key Propositions in Expository Literature

Alexei Chadyuk

Executive Summary

Adler and Van Doren argue the importance of identifying key propositions for determining the author's message during analytical reading of expository literature. They suggest that an active reader should mark the sentences containing these key propositions (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 49). However, they do not elaborate on what sort of propositions should be marked and how.

This paper attempts to build a classification of propositions used in expository literature. The classification is based on the definition of key logical components of a structured written discourse (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995, 88-93).

The paper proposes a system of "reader's marks" to be used to identify the key sentences or paragraphs of a written work—to aid the analysis of its arguments. A reader's mark is a one-, two-, or three-letter sign that represents the function of the sentence of the author's text, within the framework of the author's reasoning flow.

The paper focuses on analysis of expository literature, where the purpose of reading is enlightenment, and a specific format of logical argument is employed. A separate treatment of propositions in theoretical and practical works is provided.

1 Introduction

Responsible reading requires from a reader both thorough understanding of the writer's discourse, and ability to criticize its logic (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 142).

To achieve that, the reader should go through the following stages during in-depth reading: (1) dissect the text into more or less elementary propositions, (2) identify their role in the writer's argument, (3) understand the structure and the unity of the writer's argument, (4) agree or disagree with it, and then (5) recognize the significance (or otherwise) of the author's work (ibid., 75-167)

In this paper, I will deal primarily with the second stage of this process: identification of proposition roles within an argument.

As part of it, I suggest the reader leaves pen or pencil marks on the margin next to every proposition that is important to understanding the writer's message. I propose a set of one-, two-, or three-letter marks that I call "reader's marks".

Marking passages helps the reader to understand the writer's argument in its unity; the reader stands back to see what exactly the writer is trying to say.

Secondly, reader's marks become indispensable when the reader tries to re-create the author's argument in a subsequent reading, at a later date.

Propositions and corresponding reader's marks are classified into two categories: structural and conceptual. In addition to this, I propose a group of critical marks—to reflect the reader's agreement or disagreement—as well as dialectical marks, which are essentially links to other sources, published and unpublished.

This classification builds upon the idea of making structural, conceptual and dialectical notes while reading (ibid., 51).

This paper focuses on propositions used in expository literature, where the aim of the reading is enlightenment, because this is the type of literature that follows a specific discipline of logical reasoning.

Expository literature may be divided into practical and theoretical, depending on whether the book tries to achieve some action on the part of the reader, or its purpose is illumination of principles underlying observable phenomena (ibid., 65). This difference in purpose makes the structure of an argument in theoretical books different to that in practical, which is reflected in the types of reader's marks to be used.

2 Structural Propositions

By identifying structural propositions, the reader attempts to answer the first of the four questions that have to be asked when reading a book “What the book is about as a whole?” (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 46).

2.1 Subject of Discussion

SD	Subject of discussion
----	-----------------------

Authors often explicitly stipulate the subject of a particular passage or chapter.

The function of this proposition is auxiliary because, as suggested below (see section 6.2), the reader still has to define the subject for himself, in his own words.

SA	Summary of important points
----	-----------------------------

Often authors re-cap the essence of the chapter or a section in its last paragraphs. These summaries are useful as reminders, and also they re-phrase what has been already said.

2.2 Terms

T	Term
---	------

Adler and Van Doren (1972, 98) define “coming to terms with the author” as bringing the author’s terminology in line with the reader’s use of language, which may sometimes be different.

Marking terms is especially important if a book does not have an alphabetical index. In this case, if you intend to refer to the book later, it may be helpful to draw a small index of key terms on a separate piece of paper after you have finished reading the book, based on the T-marks that you’ve made when reading.

During syntopical or dialectical reading (i.e. reading more than one book on a particular subject in parallel) it is impossible to proceed without bringing all authors to a common set of terms (ibid., 318). In this respect, marking terms becomes crucial.

TD	Term Definition
----	-----------------

A term is often declared, and then a definition of it is given elsewhere in the text, maybe two or three paragraphs later.

Use of TD-mark helps to bring the term and its definition together.

TC	Term Classification
----	---------------------

Some terms are classified into several categories. If this is the case, I suggest highlighting this fact with a specific mark, as well as providing numbering for each category.

2.3 Limits of Discussion

Authors often stipulate fairly early in the text the boundaries of the subject they are going to address. Although this type of proposition may be viewed as structural, I decided to place it in the section dealing with conceptual propositions below.

The reason for that is that the limits of the author's analysis inevitably define the limits to the applicability of the author's otherwise general claims. It is important that the reader stays aware of that, especially if the author does not explicitly state these limiting conditions again when making his claim.

With this, we move to the meat of this work, the classification of conceptual propositions.

3 Conceptual Propositions

A correctly structured argument consists of five major elements that have to be present in any expository work: (1) problem and its implications, (2) author's claim or proposed solution, if the problem that is being addressed is practical, (3) evidence that supports the claim or method, (4) author's assumptions that make the evidence a valid proof for the claim, and finally (5) conditions that limit the applicability of all the above (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995).

Based on this structure, I offer the following framework of conceptual propositions in expository literature. The purpose of the conceptual marks is thus to draw the critical reader's attention to the structure of the argument, and to highlight the fundamental elements of the author's reasoning process.

Drawing the parallel with Adler and Van Doren's (1972, 46) four-question model, the conceptual marks help to answer questions number two, three and four.

Question number 2: "What is the book about in detail?"

The reader's marks highlight the type of problem the author addresses, what the author's claim is and what evidence is given to support it. This structure gives all the necessary elements to answer the above question.

Question number 3: “Is it true?”

The conceptual marks will not tell you whether the author is uninformed or misinformed, the first two types of criticism that are available to the reader (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 157). However highlighting the author’s assumptions gives you a clue about the validity of the logic that the author uses, the third type of criticism.

The fourth type, completeness of the analysis, is aided by checking that the factors that limit the applicability of the author’s claim are made explicit.

Question number 4: “What of it?”

Finally, highlighting the significance of the problem provides you with the initial attempt at answering this question.

It may not be until some time after you have finished reading the original text that you will arrive at an understanding of the significance of this work for you personally. It is then very important to return to the notes that you made on the text in your diary or on a separate piece of paper, and write it down.

3.1 Problem and Its Significance

P	Problem
PC	Significance of the problem / cost

Unless the author has made an effort to illuminate the significance of the problem, as well as the cost of not solving it, the reader is unlikely to read through all of the argument (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995, 48).

Highlighting the problem’s significance prepares the reader to answer the fourth question that the book should be asked: “why is what you say important?” (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 46).

3.2 Proposed Solution

The solution proposed by an author is the centerpiece of any expository work as it usually forms the core argument of the work.

To reflect that importance, I suggest that, apart from marking the margin alongside the passage, the reader should underline the writer’s core arguments (see also section 6.3).

3.2.1 Claim in Theoretical Works

A	Claim
---	-------

In theoretical works, where the purpose of writing is sharing better understanding of our world, the author attempts to make a claim that explains the cause of the observed phenomena—but does not necessarily propose a route to addressing the problem—the problem that makes the research significant in the first place.

Making a claim is the main purpose of scientific reporting (Booth, Colomb and Williams 1995, 94); therefore this is what you should be looking for when defining the core argument of the work.

A claim is, of necessity, something you either agree or disagree with (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995, 95). There is also an option of suspended judgment (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 142)—but that is only a delayed agreement or disagreement.

Judgment is the acid test of a claim. If you do not feel the urge to judge, the proposition you are looking at is probably not a claim.

I propose a more detailed treatment of claim judgment in Chapter 4 below.

3.2.2 Proposed Method in Practical Works

AM	Proposed method
----	-----------------

The main purpose of a practical book is to make you achieve something (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 66).

Therefore the method of solving the problem that the writer proposes should be viewed on a par with the main claim of a theoretical writer. It is indeed the central part of the writer's argument.

3.3 Evidence

Just like the above, this class of propositions and corresponding marks has a dual function, depending on whether the author's exposition is theoretical or practical.

3.3.1 Evidence Supporting Theoretical Claims

EA	Evidence supporting the claim / method
----	--

In theoretical works, propositions of this class will attempt to prove that the author's claim is valid.

Some evidence that the author provides in support of his initial claim requires further evidence to prove its validity (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995, 105).

This makes this proposition look like a claim itself, i.e. it will require further evidence to support it. There's no point in re-marking this sub-claim, once it has been marked as EA—valid or not, it is still used by the author as evidence.

Instead, we propose a separate marking for evidence that the author provides to support his sub-claim.

EEA	Further evidence supporting evidence-claim
-----	--

If you mark something that initially looks like evidence supporting the major claim (EA), but in the later analysis you discover that it merely provides supporting evidence to a sub-claim, it will be easy to change EA to EEA.

Equally, if you mark something as a claim (A) and then discover that this proposition is a sub-claim that the author uses as preparatory evidence for a higher-order claim further on in the text, just change your mark from A to EA.

3.3.2 Actions as Part of the Method

EM	Actions as part of the method
----	-------------------------------

Above, we drew a parallel between a theoretical claim and practical solution to a problem. To take that analogy further, actions proposed by a writer of a practical book should be put in the same league as the evidence provided by a theoretical author in support of his hypothesis.

3.3.3 Examples and Anecdotes

EG	Example
----	---------

This is more or less self-evident. Just a reminder may be appropriate.

Highlight an example or anecdote that you believe is valid for the author's claim (see also 3.4. Author's Assumptions). An anecdote is the same as evidence. It may be fun to read or even re-tell, but the reader should always watch out, and assess why and how the author is telling the story. Caveats and warnings about evidence that the author uses to support his claims (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995, 97) are even more valid for anecdotes.

The casual manner in which anecdotes are usually presented may take the reader off-guard, so when you encounter this type of evidence, go back and ask some questions:

- Is the author is trying to borrow credibility: does the authority of the people in the author's example give his evidence reliability it does not otherwise deserve?
- Is the author trying to give the story a spin? This is particularly valid for historical examples, when people in the story are no longer present to argue back.
- Does the author give an interpretation to words and actions of other people? With time, our perspectives, views and beliefs change, often dramatically, so would there be different interpretations at the time of things actually happening?
- If the author were to have brought up his claim immediately after the things in his story had actually happened, would the story have supported the argument then?

3.4 Author's Assumptions

AS	Assumptions supporting evidence's validity
----	--

Booth, Colomb and Williams (1995, 90) use the term *warrant* to define the proposition that is provided by the author to argue that the evidence proves the author's claim.

In the case of practical literature, this type of proposition is the one that explains why the actions the author proposes that you take will indeed lead you to the goal that the author wants you to achieve.

3.5 Limits of the Argument

Booth, Colomb, Williams (1995, 134) use the term *qualifications* to define the range of limiting conditions that authors use to draw the boundary for applicability of the author's claim.

Below, I suggest the following classification for these limits that have to be marked in the text (ibid., 135-142).

L	Conditions limiting applicability / Limit of discussion
LI	Issues that may arise when applying method / contraindications
LA	Objections to be answered / Alternative claims
LR	Answers to objections / Evidence rebutting alternative claims
LF	Objections that cannot be re-butted / "problem" areas

4 Criticism and Critical Marks

Judgment should only be attempted when you've understood the author's argument completely (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 142).

Arrived at via the route of understanding, judgment should always be a required element of responsible reading (Adler and Van Doren's Question number 3).

4.1 Agreement

Adler and Van Doren urge a reader to express her judgment of the original text as: (a) agreement, (b) disagreement, or (c) suspended judgment (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 143).

Mark the claim with a plus sign underneath the A-mark, if you agree with the author's claim.

+	Agreement
---	-----------

Do not rush to agree. This classification's main purpose is to help you with the critical judgment, so before you agree with the author's arguments, check that all elements of the Booth, Colomb, and Williams's (1995, 142) model are present and valid as discussed above.

4.2 Disagreement

In the area of disagreement, reasonable criticism is limited to four types (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 156). I offer the use of the following marks to denote them:

CU	Author is uninformed
CM	Author is misinformed
CL	Author is illogical
CC	Author's analysis is incomplete

You need to identify and understand the author's evidence before judging whether the author is uninformed or misinformed.

Identify the author's assumptions and how they link evidence to the author's claims before you judge whether the author is logical in his conclusions.

And finally, the quality of the limitations that the author is offering with regards to his arguments should give you a clue whether the writer's analysis of the subject matter was complete.

The CL- or CC-mark should accompany the A-mark that denotes the author's claim. CU- and CM-marks should be applied both to the A-mark and to the evidence (E-mark) that you believe the author has a problem with.

You may also wish to write a separate comment on your criticism in your notes.

4.3 Suspended Judgment

Finally, in the case of a suspended judgment, leave the A-mark next to the author's claim with no mark underneath it.

This empty space will remind you to come back and make your call.

5 Dialectical Marks

Dialectical reading is necessary to arrive at an understanding that can only be provided by more than one book (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 309). Part of that understanding will come through logical arguments of the authors, classification and marking of which is discussed above.

Notes that reflect the dialectical thinking of the reader have to be done elsewhere, normally in the reader's journal or diary. Therefore dialectical marks are essentially hyperlinks to the notes in the journal, or to other sources.

Two other alternatives that I suggest are references to pages in this book, and also references to subject of further interest, reading or research.

D {date}	Reference to Dialectical notes in the reader's journal or diary
DP #	Reference to page number within the book
DF	Subject for further research or reference to suggested further reading

6 Practical Aspects of Using the Classification

6.1 When to Use It?

Almost every sentence of the original work can be allocated into one or more of the above classes. The reader should decide whether a particular section of the text requires a detailed analysis and classification.

Normally, detailed sentence-by-sentence analysis should be done when

- The chapter presents the core thread of the argument
- The reader wants to understand in detail the context and the reasoning behind the author's exposition.
- Understanding of the chapter is required for dialectical reading

Otherwise it is up to the reader to decide when the classification should be used.

6.2 Notes vs Marks

Reader's marks are not the only tool in critical reading. Another important aid is writing summaries.

Until you are able to summarize the ideas of the author in your own words, you do not fully understand what is being said (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 125). Two kinds of notes I find particularly useful.

First, the subject of the discussion. I write a short phrase that defines the subject of what is being said on that page, across the top margin of the page.

Second, I write down a summary of every key proposition on a separate piece of paper. Later these summaries are typed up into my word processor and make up my Book Notes (see Appendix). I use Book Notes later when I need to quickly refresh what was said in the book.

They also represent my compromise on the issue of book defacement that I address in the Appendix. Anything that does not have to be physically linked to the printed text on the page to make sense (like, for example, underlining) is taken out to that extra piece of note-paper.

6.3 Underlining

Adler and Van Doren (1972, 49) suggest that the reader should underline the key propositions in the text. I suggest underlining *only* the key propositions—and nothing else.

This paper addresses quite a wide spectrum of propositions that the reader should identify and mark on the source's page. I would suggest that the reader should develop a system of marks for herself—on the basis of the one proposed—the system that goes beyond mere underlining. Underlining should then be reserved for the next level of systematization.

The marks attempt to bring the body of the text to a certain framework. By just looking at the marked page, you are able to see the structure of the author's exposition, and then work back to the structure of the argument. You have to spend about five seconds per page to recreate that structure—thus speeding up the second reading of the text.

If you have two minutes to reproduce in your memory the essence of a 200-page book, classification marks discussed in this paper will be of little help. However if you underline only the key claims made by the author, a quick flip through the book will take you to those sentences very quickly.

Thus, you have three very distinct speeds of reading—I will give here the approximate timing scenarios to put them in perspective:

- 50 seconds per page: analytical reading;
- 5 seconds per page: looking for classification marks and organizing them in your mind;
- 0.5 seconds per page: a flip to look for the underlined claims.

Underlining less also has two obvious advantages: first, although we may not notice it, underlining tends to be quite time consuming, which affects the speed of analytical reading; second, your book is tidier after you have finished reading it.

7 Limitations of Classification

1. The proposed classification of propositions and accompanying marks is intended to help in highlighting the structure of the argument. It should make it clear if any of the components of the argument that are described above are missing.

However it remains the reader's responsibility to decide for himself if the above components fulfill their purpose.

2. Adler and Van Doren suggest that a reader should quickly skim the text, in preparation for the in-depth reading. The purpose of this skimming is to understand the book's general structure and outline its main arguments (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 32).

It is possible to envisage a system of marks to assist in skimming. However, this remained beyond the scope of this paper.

Appendix

Ethical Aspects of Book Defacement

Although Adler and Van Doren (1972) argue that marking the pages is a sign on intellectual ownership, many people will find this habit distasteful. It makes the book untidy and usually unreadable for other people, and thus denies them the enlightenment that it gave to you, when you first read it.

Admittedly, if you look at what defines the value of the book at the Internet auctions and second-hand stores, it becomes obvious that the less marks are in the book the higher its market value.

I believe that the value of understanding that is brought to the first reader when he marks the pages more than outweighs the obvious cost to subsequent readers.

The cost itself is also falling. Given the current level of technology, the cost of producing a book is so low that more books are being produced than read.

An article in *The Economist* quotes the research showing that the average number of work hours needed to buy a cheap book has fallen from 4 hours in 1904 to around 20 minutes in 2004. At the same time, the average number of people that read the same book is falling, judging by a dramatic decline in popularity of public libraries (*Economist* 2004).

Increasingly, when we want to read a book, we just buy it, as opposed to borrowing it.

As to the market value, one may reasonably assume that a book from the first edition of Stanislavsky's "To The Actor" will have sky-rocketed in its auction value, if the marks on its pages were attributed to Clark Gabriel.

Auxiliary marks

Apart from underlining the most important propositions in the text, I suggest other ways of highlighting less critical but nevertheless interesting or important statements. You could either circle your own marks on the margin, or you can add an asterisk or exclamation mark to them.

You may sometimes encounter a witty phrase that you like and may want to quote in the future. It should not necessarily be a part of the logical argument, but still I encourage you to mark them with a double-quote.

(")	Quote
-----	-------

Selected Bibliography

Adler, Mortimer J., and Van Doren, Charles. 1972. *How to Read a Book*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone. Original edition, 1940.

Booth, Wayne C., Colomb, Gregory G., and Williams, Joseph M. 1995. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Economist (London). 2004. End of Story? 29 April.

http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=2629145 (subscriber access).