



War Books: Jacob Olidort on How to Read

by [Jacob Olidort](#)

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Articles & Testimony

"How" to read seems a strange and perhaps even condescending way to propose a book list. However, given that reading takes time, and that those who might have the most use for good reads often have little time and long lists to go through, as well as many outlets to consult (including blogs, tweets, recommendations), it might be more useful to reflect on how I go about choosing what books I read and how I consume information.

I generally consume information around what I need to know to keep up with the day's events and with my field of study, leaving space for items that are a bit more random. In the former category, my reading tends to come from media: *Politico* Playbook, Lawfare, *Washington Post* every morning; the *Atlantic* at least once a week for deep dives into topics I might not otherwise think about (like a recent article on the history of ice cream); and the *New York Review of Books* and *Foreign Affairs*, which, together, give me windows into the current conversations on everything from aspects of living, culture, education, and politics (the *NYRB* has an added bonus of keeping me apprised of goings on in my hometown of New York City). And, of course, time on the Twitter feed, where I might find something interesting that I had not been looking for. I also make sure to read latest pieces by friends, favorite journalists and columnists. To keep up with my field of study, I regularly do "homework reading" -- a combination of cursory skims of latest releases and more meticulous primary-source translations of Arabic texts. For "homework reading," a course or a book project which I may be preparing can be helpful "action-forcing mechanisms."

There is also when I read. The most regular is my metro reading on the way to work (currently making my way through Barbara Tuchman's *Guns of August*) and my weekend combination of fiction and nonfiction (typically either biographies or issues-oriented books). The current weekend combination is Donna Tartt's *Goldfinch* for fiction, and Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris's *War by Other Means*.

I also try to make time for a more ancient and increasingly rare form of reading: listening. This is the least consistent mainly because it requires a substantial amount of empty time to think about and do nothing -- so, typically, a drive

or a walk. Poems, plays, and great speeches are all pieces written in order to be spoken out loud or listened to rather than read and can be as satisfying and meaningful as good music. Indeed, *hearing* how words come together, and how speechwriters and poets string together syntax for effect is essential for appreciating good communication. Anniversaries of historical events, holidays, and birth/death dates of famous people tend to be good occasions to make time for purposeful listening. Most recently, I listened to Jeremy Irons's reading of T.S. Eliot poems over New Year's Day 2017, recordings of Martin Luther King Jr.'s early speeches during Black History Month last year, and a recording of Yevgeny Yevtushenko reading his poem "Babi Yar" to learn more about him after his death in April.

What may be most surprising here is that most of these do not fall into the category of "war books" mentioned in the series title. Maintaining a broad-ranging reading habit (and a broad-ranging way of reading) is a priority, and is in keeping with views of people whose thinking I admire. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, for example, consistently underscores the importance of reading about history and culture, on at least one occasion [saying](#). "You're as well off if you've read 'Angela's Ashes' and Desmond Tutu's writings, and if you've studied Northern Ireland and the efforts for rapprochement there, and in South Africa following their civil war, as you are if you've read Sherman and, obviously, von Clausewitz." He reinforces this view with occasional reading lists, such as [as this one](#), which include a biography of Scipio Africanus alongside works on military history and strategy. Indeed, others, such as Francis Gavin, have [emphasized](#) the importance of straying intellectually well beyond one's discipline not only to escape "the obsession on the immediate" but also to usefully explain "the importance of powerful and deep socio-cultural, technological, demographic, normative, and ideological forces that shape the world we live in." Indeed, in [my research](#) I have found that an understanding of ISIS is incomplete unless it considers the group's interest in theology, prayer, education, and even nutrition.

Growing up amid the endangered species of used bookstores, I was fortunate to have acquired an interest in broad reading -- and, in particular, reading lesser-known works by celebrated authors (since those, typically, were on the discounted shelves). Occasionally this led to pleasant discoveries, such as Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*, but on more than one occasion to disappointments, such as John Updike's *Terrorist*. It was when I was faced with the daunting task of reading 150 books in one year in preparation for my comprehensive exams in graduate school that I first became aware of the need for a way to read that would enable me to account for the major arguments of different authors, summon examples and case studies, and put them into conversation with other authors and my own ideas.

In a career that moves between academia and policy, I balance between reading to consume information and reading to make information useful. The latter falls into three broad categories of books: those on how to think, how to write, and how to live, each described below, along with my recommended readings for each (which I came across through some combination of friend suggestions, friend publications, book reviews, research, bookstore perusals, and Amazon recommendations).

1. Books on how to think

One of my most humbling experiences came shortly after receiving my doctorate in Islamic intellectual history when I read a newly released 600-page book, with original translations from a dozen languages, and carrying the simple title of *What is Islam?* As I had studied with [its author](#), Shahab Ahmed, I correctly expected the book to be, as [one reviewer](#) put it, "not merely field changing, but the boldest and best thing I have read in any field." Like its author, the book embraces rather than ignores contradictions, and pushes readers to question deeply their assumptions and frameworks for analyzing -- in this case, per the book's subtitle, what it means to be "Islamic" and why that label is meaningful to adepts. For me personally and professionally, reading a book centered on such a seemingly basic question after just having finished a doctorate on the topic could not have been better timed. In particular, as I entered the fast-paced world of policymaking and media headlines and the marketplace of "experts," the book was both a reminder to be, and a tool for being, humble about what I know and don't know, challenging

assumptions and correctly framing data to accurately reflect phenomena for an informed but inexperienced community.

Besides being a landmark work in my field, the work therefore became part of my curriculum of books on how to think -- specifically, how to critically analyze and synthesize information, how to bring different perspectives together for a correct understanding, and how to ask the right questions of situations and information you are given. The fields of national security and foreign policy require such thinking, and in short time, and few individuals do this effectively. Among works in this genre are Ernest May and Richard Neustadt's *Thinking in Time*, Gregory Treverton's *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* and *National Intelligence and Science*, and Jacob Shapiro's *The Terrorist's Dilemma*.

A subset of works on thinking are works on strategy -- a favorite Washington word that is used to such an extent that, to paraphrase Lawrence Freedman (who literally wrote the history of strategy), can mean everything and therefore can mean nothing. For the purposes of my reading list, strategy is a way of thinking for decision-making. In addition to Freedman's *Strategy*, I have benefitted from works by Thomas Schelling (*The Strategy of Conflict* and *Arms and Influence*) and Colin Gray.

2. Books on how to write

Aside from mastery of substance and thinking, part of the job of being an expert (especially if one cares to be a useful, and therefore, good expert) is the ability to communicate. In particular, writing for decision-makers requires brevity, correct word choice, and an ability to anticipate what that decision-maker knows already so as to "cut to the chase" faster. "BLUFs" ("bottom line up front") and "Executive Summaries" serve that function in the organization of a piece of writing. But assuming an important person is also a voracious reader (why else would she or he read your work in the first place?) and may decide to continue reading the entirety of what you wrote, you had better be sure what you wrote is what you meant to say and -- if it is on a topic with policy relevance -- that anything written is fair game to be taken as actionable policy guidance.

In his *On Writing*, Stephen King emphasizes that there is no better or more effective way to learn how to write well than to read good writing. (Another added plus is that you can assume good writing is something senior decision-makers read and will give an additional insight into their frames of reference). Some authors and titles I would recommend in this genre (some of whom King recommends in his list of books to read that helped him write) include *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, John Updike's *Rabbit* series, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*, Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler...*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* and *Goodbye Columbus*, and Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*.

3. Books on how to live

This section heading may be misleading, so a word of clarification. Far from "how-to" self-help guides, what I mean by "how to live" works are books written by individuals who have lived big (not necessarily long) lives and who have lessons to impart. A big life does not necessarily mean one of fame (although some have achieved this too) but rather one that includes a range of experiences, often difficult ones. There tend to be few books in this genre since there have been comparatively few truly "big" moments in history (whether tragic or great), few who have survived to describe them and still fewer who have described them well. This rare coincidence means that "books on how to live" are both those on "how to think" and "how to write," but are also much more. It is also this category of books that are the ones worth rereading.

At the top of my list would be *U.S. Grant's Memoirs and Letters* (and, as a compendium volume, I would recommend Ronald White's new biography, *American Ulysses*). It is difficult to read his memoirs and think that this was a work written from a place of deep desperation and in a short period of time. The hero of the Appomattox and former

president of the United States found himself penniless and racing against time as he battled throat cancer at the end of his life. And yet Grant was able to reach far into the details of his early travels and his campaign plans to reveal an individual who cared deeply for the human condition and making correct decisions in difficult situations. One favorite example is his vivid description of the first bullfight he witnessed while serving in the Mexican War, and his impression of the "sickening" sight, writing, "I could not see how human beings could enjoy the sufferings of beasts, and often of men, as they seemed to do on these occasions."

Other works in this category I would recommend are Churchill's *The Second World War* and his *River War*, Seneca's *Letters from a Stoic*, Primo Levi's *Periodic Table* and *If This is a Man*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, David McCullough's *The Wright Brothers*, and Wislawa Szymborska's *Map: Collected and Last Poems*.

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