

Principles for Reading Literature

from Basil the Great

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The following Principles for Reading Literature from Basil the Great are from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

The following advice presents what Basil the Great might have said if he had reduced his work, How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature, to a list of top ten principles for reading. His counsel also applies to other forms of media—music, movies, online content, and the like. The “you” simply represents the reader.

- 1. Read with advice.** Seek out and listen to the counsel of trusted and experienced readers for advice on what and how to read.
Explore what matters and make that the center of your life. Excellent (virtuous) men and women are the best indicators of what is actually rather than seemingly valuable. When reading, keep these things in mind.
- 2. Read with the help of reason and wisdom.** Realize that it is reason bolstered by wisdom that gives you the best guidance in reading rather than your feelings.
- 3. Read with reserve and discrimination.** Know that not all you read is beneficial; therefore, do not always give yourself over to your reading.
- 4. Read with a goal in mind.** Remember where you are going and how literature may (or may not) help you get there.
- 5. Read for what is useful, beneficial.** Know the difference between what is beneficial and harmful or useful and useless, and that some literature is harmful and useless.
- 6. Read keeping in mind what is truly valuable.**
- 7. Read to nourish your soul** (your innermost self). Care of the soul should be one of your central concerns when reading. You are what you read.
- 8. Read in order to train.** Use literature as the means by which you practice to live a better life. Read hard. Train hard. Live well.
- 9. Read for models.** Search your reading for examples of good men and women to imitate, those who are virtuous or excellent; simultaneously note the poor examples of those you should not imitate.
- 10. Read in order to act.** Reading and the thoughts and feelings that originate with reading should always give rise to corresponding behavior—to achieve the good and avoid the bad.

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"Basil the Great is excellent in all his works . . . inferior to none." —Photius (Patriarch of Constantinople)

"Basil started out for his life's work with the equipment of the most liberal education which the age could supply. He had studied Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy under the most famous teachers." —Blomfield Jackson

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