

## New Shorter Reading Plan For Great Books of The Western World

Paul R. Murray

### ABSTRACT

The Great Books of the Western World is a 54 volume set published by the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It comes with a ten year reading plan that includes writings by 74 authors and includes readings from many of the 443 works included in the 54 volumes. Although the ten-year reading plan is broadly inclusive of authors and works, it is far too long and time consuming to be useful as either an introduction to the Great Books or as a review. The writer has therefore developed an abbreviated reading plan that includes all 74 authors and substantial or independent sections from a majority of the works, and yet can be completed by reading 8 pages a day or 250 pages a month for one year. The 13,111 pages have been condensed to 2,989 pages that, despite their shortened length, keep the scope of the original ten-year plan. The Great Books of the Western World are part of the intellectual heritage of the West, and the writer hopes that his New Shorter Reading Plan makes these books more accessible and comprehensible to anyone interested in the thoughts that go into making up Western culture.

I have had a constant companion for the last nine years. Whenever I have traveled, or stayed home, whenever I have been busy or have had free time, my companion has been with me. She has taken up nine years of my life, and she has been deep, dense, and difficult to get to know, but always challenging and thought-provoking. She is frustrating and causes me to lose sleep, and yet I can't let her go for she speaks to me more deeply than anyone I know of the profound things of this maddeningly short and elusive life we all lead. She is the great love of my life: She is the 54 volume set of Great Books of the Western World.

To help the reader steer through the rocky shoals of these volumes the publisher of the Great Books of the Western World, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, has furnished a convenient 10 year reading plan that touches on every writer of the 54 volumes. I have faithfully followed the plan, and now that I am arriving at the last year of the 10 year reading plan I feel like I am qualified to speak of the strengths and weaknesses of the reading plan.

The original 10 year reading plan is structured to include readings that are easy in the early years and become more difficult over time. They are also structured thematically, for example centering on politics in one year of the reading and law or philosophy the next. Lastly the readings cover every writer in the volumes, and almost every work. It is useful in that it is inclusive and thorough, but its huge scope presents some problems.

I found that through the years I was forgetting what I had read previously, and I felt the need for a shorter reading plan that would include all the writers and most of the works, but would be brief enough to read within a year and enable me to keep the whole structure in my head so as to form a pattern and a whole.

It is with the hope of increasing the brevity but maintaining the scope of the original reading plan that I have developed a new, shorter reading plan for The Great Books of the Western World. It is with deep regret that I cannot include the original reading plan alongside my new plan since the amount of space consumed would have been prohibitive. I refer the reader to pages 112-131 of volume 1 of the 54 volume set. It is with great humbleness that I offer my new reading plan, since I more than anyone realize that it, too, has limitations. I freely confess my ignorance in scientific and mathematical fields, and I therefore have followed the original reading plan rather closer than I have in other fields. The reader might well disagree with the chapters, sections, or pages that I have singled out for inclusion in my new reading plan. In any reading plan that stresses brevity, hard choices have to be made, and such choices are often debatable. But if by following my new reading plan the reader is able to form a conception of the whole, and the reader is made curious by the sections I have included for reading to go ahead and read the work in its entire, original form, then my plan will have been successful.

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The original reading plan consists of 13,111 pages, while my new reading plan consists of 2,989 pages. I have managed to include every author and almost every work by each author. I have endeavored to include entire sections or parts of works to give the selections a wholeness. By reading about 8 pages a day, or 250 pages a month, the entire reading

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plan can be completed in exactly one year. This reading plan can serve as both an introduction to the complete reading of the set, and as a review after the 10 year reading plan has been completed. I would also recommend that the reader memorize one sentence or phrase from each work to more firmly keep the structure of the whole in his/her mind. What sentences are memorized will of course depend upon the reader. The Great Books of the Western World are not classics to gather dust on bookshelves. They are part of our western heritage and serve as the foundation of our thought and culture. They are accessible to all and readily comprehensible. Just one year at 8 pages a day suffices to bring a curious reader into a deeper knowledge of the living ideas that make up the foundation of Western knowledge. All we need to bring is our desire to know.