

# Essential Reading Lists

*“Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.”*

~Thoreau

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## Primary Lists (50 Books)

[Fiction](#), Anglo-American, 30 authors, 35 books  
[US History](#), 4 books  
[Science](#), 3 books and a DVD  
[Ethics](#), 2 books  
[Logic and Delusion](#), 2 books  
[Political Philosophy](#), 1 book  
[Philosophy](#), 3 books

## Extended Lists

[Chomsky Selection](#)  
[Human Nature](#)  
[Rationality](#)  
[US History](#)  
[Inspiring People](#)  
[US Founders](#)  
[Law](#)  
[Deep Historical Trends](#)  
[Science](#)  
[Economics](#)  
[Western Classics](#)  
[Middle Eastern Classics](#)  
[Eastern Classics](#)

## More Resources

[Independent Online Media](#)  
[Magazines](#)  
[Subject Introductions](#)  
[TV](#)  
[Radio](#)  
[Podcasts](#)

## Primary Lists (50 Books)

### Anglo-American Popular Fiction (30 authors, 35 books)

- 1) Steinbeck: *Grapes of Wrath*; *East of Eden*; *Of Mice and Men*
- 2) Orwell: *1984*; *Animal Farm* (See "The Freedom of the Press," the suppressed preface to *Animal Farm*, at [orwell.ru/library](http://orwell.ru/library). More Orwell in the extended lists.)
- 3) Huxley: *Brave New World*
- 4) Sinclair: *The Jungle*
- 5) Salinger: *Catcher in the Rye*
- 6) Lee: *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- 7) Twain: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Also see *A Pen Warmed-up in Hell*)
- 8) Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*
- 9) Wilder: *Our Town* (Play)
- 10) Miller: *The Crucible*; *Death of a Salesman* (Plays)
- 11) Morrison: *Beloved*
- 12) Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*
- 13) Hemingway: *Old Man and the Sea*
- 14) Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*
- 15) Walker: *The Color Purple*
- 16) Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- 17) Bradbury: *Fahrenheit 451*
- 18) Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse Five* (Also check out his essays and speeches. There are a few collections.)
- 19) Heller: *Catch 22*
- 20) Golding: *Lord of the Flies*
- 21) Swift: *Gulliver's Travels*
- 22) Shelley: *Frankenstein*
- 23) Dickens: *Oliver Twist*
- 24) Crane: *Red Badge of Courage*
- 25) London: *The Iron Heel*; *Call of the Wild*
- 26) Williams: *A Street Car Named Desire* (Play)
- 27) Angelou: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Autobiography)
- 28) Thoreau: *Walden* (Autobiography. Also see his essay "Civil Disobedience." Both can be found in *The Portable Thoreau*.)
- 29) Carroll: *Adventures in Wonderland*
- 30) Kesey: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Though I think kids can read these books at a pretty young age, for those not ready for these high school standards, there are many collections of classics adapted for children. Great Illustrated Classics is one such series, which includes 66 books.

### US History (4 books)

- 1) Loewen: *Lies My Teacher Told Me*
- 2) Zinn: *A People's History of the United States* (*Voices of a People's History of the United States* is a companion book made up of selections from primary sources. *The People Speak* is a documentary based on it. *A Young People's History* is an adaptation for kids.)
- 3) Blum: *Rogue State* (Chapter 17 is a very concise history of US foreign intervention since 1945. Blum's *Killing Hope* elaborates. For updated list, see "[The Master List](#)" at [williamblum.org](http://williamblum.org))
- 4) Chomsky: *Understanding Power* (Chomsky is indispensable and has dozens of extremely enlightening books. This is as good of a place that I can think of to start. See [chomsky.info](http://chomsky.info) for more.)

## Science and Big History (3 books and a DVD)

- 1) *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (TV series featuring Neil DeGrasse Tyson.)
- 2) *Hawking: A Brief History of Time* (Physics and Cosmology)
- 3) Hawking and Mlodinow: *The Grand Design* (Physics and Cosmology. There are children's science books written by both authors listed inside. They might be better places to start for youngsters.)
- 4) Gould: *The Book of Life: An Illustrated History of the Evolution of Life on Earth*

## Ethics (2 books)

- 1) MacAskill: *Doing Good Better* (also see [effectivealtruism.com](http://effectivealtruism.com))
- 2) Singer: *Practical Ethics* (See Singer's *The Ethics of What We Eat* for ethical issues concerning food choice.)

## Logic and Delusion (2 books)

- 1) Bennett: *Logically Fallacious* (Brief explanations of over 300 logical fallacies.)
- 2) Dobelli: *The Art of Thinking Clearly* (Brief explanations of 99 biases that lead to irrational belief and behavior.)

There are also a lot of online resources for learning about logical fallacies, cognitive biases and cognitive distortions. Here are a few:

<https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/>  
<https://yourbias.is/>  
<https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies>  
<http://fallacyfiles.org/>  
<http://www.skepdic.com/>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_distortion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_distortion)

## Political Philosophy (1 book)

- 1) Russell: *Proposed Roads to Freedom* (Introduction to proposed political/economic systems.)

## Philosophy (3 books)

- 1) Russell: *The Problems of Philosophy* (Short introduction to the major problems of philosophy.)
- 2) Russell: *History of Western Philosophy* (Brief introductions to all the major philosophers with a strong emphasis on historical context.)
- 3) West: *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*

## Extended Lists

### Chomsky Selection

*Understanding Power* (Discussions, 1989-1999. Cited in primary list.)  
*The Essential Chomsky* (Articles and lectures, 1959-2006.)  
*Masters of Mankind* (Articles and lectures, 1969-2013.)  
*Because We Say So* (Articles, 2011-2014.)  
*Who Rules the World?* (2016, from recent articles.)

### Human Nature

Kahneman: *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Intuitive v deliberative thought and various biases that are built into intuitive thought. There are several discussions of the book on Youtube.)  
Trivers: *The Folly of Fools* (Self-deception and in-group/out-group assumption reversals. See [Chomsky and Trivers](#) discussion on Youtube for overview.)  
Chomsky: *What Kind of Creatures Are We?* (A short overview of Chomsky's entire philosophy, from the nature of thought and language to the political arrangements best suited to that nature. For a short overview of just the thought and language side of this, see *Why Only Us: Language and Evolution*.)

### Rationality

Taleb: *The Black Swan* (How uncommon but crucial events are systematically neglected in our understanding of the world.); *Antifragile* (How to rationally deal with uncertainty.)  
Ellenberg: *How Not To Be Wrong: The Power of Mathematical Thinking*

### US History

Gonzalez: *The Harvest of Empire* (The history of US-Latin America relations. There's a documentary by the same name based on the book.)  
Bailyn: *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America—The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675*  
Slack: *Liberty's First Crisis: Adams, Jefferson and the Misfits Who Saved Free Speech*  
Kinzer: *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire*  
Kazin: *War Against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914-1918*  
Stone and Kuznick: *The Untold History of the United States*, chapter 4 (The use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There's a documentary by the same name based on the book and a discussion on The Real News Network. For the full account, see *The Decision To Use The Atomic Bomb*, Gar Alperovitz.)  
Cumings: *The Korean War*  
Young: *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*  
Ellsberg: *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*  
Alexander: *The New Jim Crow* (How the war on drugs functions as a new Jim Crow.)  
Anderson: *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*  
Reid: *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care*

### Inspiring People (Chronological)

Socrates: *Apology* and *Crito*, by Plato (For a critical biography see Stone's *The Trial of Socrates*.)  
Jesus: *Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas* (These are in chronological order. I compiled Jesus's sayings by theme in "The Moral and Existential Teachings of the Bible," at stephenwarren.org. The most plausible biography I know of is *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, by Bart D Ehrman. For implausible but interesting alternative views see Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* and Aslan's *Zealot*.)

Gandhi: *What Gandhi Says* by Finkelstein (For a serious critique of Gandhi see Roy's *The Doctor and the Saint*.)

Malcolm X: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; *Malcolm X Speaks; By Any Means Necessary* (The Autobiography is a classic. The other two are speech collections. For a critical biography see Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*.)

King: *A Testament of Hope* (For a shorter collection see West's *The Radical King*.)

West: *Black Prophetic Fire* (Discussion of 6 inspirational people.)

## US Founders

Paine: *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (The greatest of our founders and only revolutionary.)

Jefferson: *Writings* (His letters are the most interesting.)

Madison: *Federalist* No. 10 and 51 (Shows the explicitly anti-democratic foundations of our government. This can also be seen in other *Federalist Papers* and his *Notes on the Convention*.)

## Law

US Declaration of Independence

US Constitution

US Bill of Rights

UN Charter

International Bill of Human Rights (Includes: Universal Declaration of Human Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights)

Witt: *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History*

## Deep Historical Trends

Diamond: *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (The ultimate geographical roots of European world domination. There's a summary on Wikipedia and a documentary based on the book.)

Pinker: *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined; Enlightenment Now* (Both books document long term progress trends.)

Deutsch: *The Beginning of Infinity* (On the foundation of enlightenment and progress.)

Polk: *Crusade and Jihad: The Thousand-Year War Between the Muslim World and the Global North*

Kaku: *Physics of the Future*

## Science

Dawkins: *The Selfish Gene* (How evolution works.)

Dyson: *The Scientist as Rebel; Dreams of Earth and Sky* (Collections of book reviews.)

## Economics

I've read a lot of books on economics, but not a comprehensive introduction. The economists whose articles, interviews and books I've found most helpful are Dean Baker, Robert Reich, Gar Alperovitz, Richard D. Wolff, Robert Pollin, Paul Krugman, Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz. (You've got to be careful with the last three. They're establishment insiders and as such are very careful to stay inside established boundaries of acceptable discussion. Reich does this too, but less so.)

## Western Classics (Chronological)

Homer: *Odyssey; Iliad* (Wikipedia summary will probably suffice.)

Aristophanes: *Clouds; Lysistrata* (Plays)

Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar* (Play)  
Cervantes: *Don Quixote* (Great but very long. An abridged version will probably suffice.)  
Milton: *Paradise Lost*  
Voltaire: *Candide*  
Rousseau: *Emile*  
Emerson: *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*  
Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*, 1st edition (Poetry. See final edition for much more material.)  
Turgenev: *Fathers and Sons*  
Hugo: *Les Miserables* (I read a 400-page abridged version. The full book is 1,500 pages.)  
Dostoyevsky: *Crime and Punishment*  
Tolstoy: *War and Peace* (Great book, but very long. Questionable time investment. There are abridged versions. That might be the way to go.); *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Very short.)  
Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Found in *The Portable Nietzsche. Basic Writings of Nietzsche* is a complementary collection. Together they contain all his major writings.)  
Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Play)  
Chopin: *The Awakening*  
Shaw: *Caesar and Cleopatra* (Play)  
Kafka: *The Hunger Artist* (Short Story)  
Orwell: *Homage to Catalonia; The Road to Wigan Pier; A Collection of Essays*  
O'Neill: *The Iceman Cometh* (Play)  
Beckett: *Waiting for Godot* (Play)  
Wallace: *Infinite Jest* (Great book, but very long. Questionable time investment. *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* might be a better way to check out his great writing.)

## Middle Eastern Classics (Chronological)

*Epic of Gilgamesh*  
Bible (Most of the popular stories are in Genesis and Exodus. Job and Ecclesiastes are great existential texts. I put together a collection of the main moral and existential passages of the Bible, some information on the Bible's development, its historical context, and suggested further reading. See ["The Moral and Existential Teachings of the Bible"](#) at stephenwarren.org.)  
Koran

Wright's *Evolution of God* is a great analysis of the development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The *Very Short Introduction* series has books on the Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, Judaism, Christianity, Koran, and Islam.

## Eastern Classics (Tentatively chronological, dates uncertain)

Confucius: *The Analects*  
Lao Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*  
Buddha: *A Buddhist Bible* (Includes a wide range of Buddhist texts and the *Tao Te Ching*, listed above.)  
Chuang Tzu: *Basic Writings*  
*Bhagavad Gita*  
Krishnamurti: *Total Freedom* (Modern Eastern philosopher)

The *Very Short Introduction* series has books on Hinduism, Buddhism and Indian philosophy.

This extended list still leaves out many important books. I have plenty more suggestions.

## More Resources

### Independent Online Media

Audio-Visual (Available as podcasts also.)

DemocracyNow.org

TRNN.org (The Real News Network)

Written

CommonDreams.org

Truthdig.com

Truthout.org

Antiwar.com

TheIntercept.com

Beat the Press, Dean Baker at CEPR.net

### Magazines

*The Progressive* (The best introductory magazine for good politics.)

*Z Magazine* (The most independent and critical magazine.)

*The Nation*

*New York Review of Books* (Very educational, but strong establishment bias.)

*New York Times Book Review* (Good short reviews, but strong establishment bias.)

### Subject Introductions

*Very Short Introduction* book series

Wikipedia

### TV (and online)

Link TV

PBS (Establishment bias, but still informative.)

### Radio (and online)

NPR (Establishment bias, but still informative.)

### Podcasts

Intercepted with Jeremy Scahill

The Scott Horton Show

Moderate Rebels

The Wright Show

Deconstructed with Mehdi Hasan

Ralph Nader Radio Hour

Economic Update with Richard D. Wolff

Behind the News with Doug Henwood

Rationally Speaking

Future Perfect

Sean Carroll's Mindscape

Science Salon

Exploration

Revisionist History, Malcolm Gladwell

Conversations with Tyler