



Lincoln Reading and Writing

"The last thing the intellectual establishment looked for from this folksy, self-educated prairie politician was literary ability."

-- Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword* (2006)

Abraham Lincoln was a self-educated man and a born writer. While his lack of formal education was perfectly normal for children living on the trans-Appalachian frontier, his desire for book learning and his constant scribbling were not. Lincoln's lifelong engagement with reading and writing tells us a good deal about his method of self-improvement and how he engaged his world.

It is hard to know what precisely Lincoln read, and at what age. The best available evidence has Lincoln in his teenage years, reading and taking notes from books such as

Thomas Dilworth's speller, which he borrowed, as he did most books he read. Earlier still, Lincoln probably learned to read from the family Bible. At New Salem during his early twenties, Lincoln embarked on his most intensive period of study and immersed himself in books on history, biography, grammar, surveying, and the law—taking assiduous notes to aid his comprehension. Unable to purchase books himself, he borrowed them from friends. As a one-term U.S. congressman between December 1847 and March 1849, Lincoln resided in a boardinghouse next to the Library of Congress, and undoubtedly read many important books there (some previously owned by Thomas Jefferson) as he prepared speeches and other legislative work.

Habitual note-taking and working through ideas on paper also helped to make Lincoln a great writer. Always striving to understand and be understood, Lincoln rarely addressed a problem without first taking up his pen, carefully crafting his arguments, and editing for clarity. As a young politician, Lincoln wrote a profusion of newspaper articles—much of this published anonymously or under a pseudonym. As an appeals lawyer, Lincoln further honed his writing through clearly argued briefs routinely submitted for judicial review. Between 1854 and 1860, Lincoln delivered more than 150 speeches—nearly all based on carefully crafted notes drafted, revised, and reworked beforehand. During the Civil War, Lincoln's writings provided leadership and inspiration through public letters and such memorable utterances as his Gettysburg and Second Inaugural addresses.

Page from Abraham Lincoln's student sum book, ca. 1824-26
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division