

# You Can Judge a School by Its Book List

How can parents determine where their child will learn the most and become a well-rounded and knowledgeable citizen?

Writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, British educator and [author Charlotte Mason](#) left us with a simple and sound answer to this question: examine school book lists.

*“Most of us can get into touch with original minds chiefly through books; and if we want to know how far a school provides intellectual sustenance for its scholars, we may ask to see the list of books in reading during the current term.”*

For those who may feel ill-equipped to judge whether or not a school’s book list is high-quality, Mason kindly provided the following four criteria:

**1. Length** – A list which only features a handful of books simply does not cut it. Books, Mason implies, must be treated as dietary fare, and a skimpy book list is sure to lead to mental starvation. Mason goes on to note, “A score [20!] of first-rate books should appear in the school curriculum term by term.” Having examined a number of school book lists over the years, I have found that many modern classrooms (purport to) read an average of only 4-8 books per year. Thus, it would seem that today’s schools have a bit of catch-up to do!

**2. Variety** – [Today’s schools](#) tend to teach newer books dealing with modern elements, often to the exclusion of various historical eras and themes. According to Mason, however, schools should offer a wide variety of books to children in order to ensure “an all-round development” in knowledge.

**3. Originality** – Instead of relying on secondary sources such

as textbooks, schools should readily include primary source works in their reading material. On this point, Ms. Mason declares, “[I]f they are not original, but compiled at second hand, he will find no material in them for his intellectual growth.”

**4. Rigor** – Finally, Ms. Mason insists that books must always stretch a child’s mind and challenge him to think and ponder what he has read. “If they are too easy and too direct, if they tell him straight away what he is to think, he will read, but he will not appropriate,” Mason notes. When we [consider](#) that most high schoolers read at less than a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade level, it would seem that today’s schools have largely ignored this recommendation.

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