

# How to Study Shoghi Effendi's Writings: Some Notes on S

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The Bahá'í

religion provides ways to interpret the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh through the authorised interpretations of ÔAbdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. The interpretations of Shoghi Effendi, although not placed in the category of sacred text, are normative for the Bahá'í community and the only interpretative

writing in English. As Collins explains, "No individual's understanding of Bahá'í scripture has any particular authority; Shoghi Effendi's interpretation

is as binding as the sacred text itself and is the filter for approaching the meaning of the sacred text" (Bibliography xiii).

There are many reasons for

studying the writings of Shoghi Effendi. Among those cited by Shoghi Effendi himself include to deepen the understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the application of Bahá'í principles to the needs of individuals and society,[1]

and the development and maturation of the administrative order.[2] These three remain important challenges for the Bahá'í community.

A series of study guides has been

published to meet the needs of Bahá'ís to read and understand Shoghi Effendi's

writings. Few of these study guides reveal an appreciation of the academic research in the field of the psychology. This paper will review the current research in this area and relate this to the study guides already published.

Some recommendations will then be made to individuals, writers and publishers to assist them in the study of Shoghi Effendi's writings.

## How to Study the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

It is not true that the different

study techniques of individuals are equally good. The story from the Tibetan Book of the Dead about the religions of the world - that they are all like rivers following different paths, but all flowing to the same sea - does not apply to the different study techniques of individuals. As Kirby indicates:

"Perhaps

some future edition of the Tibetan Book of the Dead will recognize that while some rivers lead to the sea, others become lost in swamps and bogs" (Style 267). For instance, three students may be asked to

study a chapter from a textbook. The first may read and re-read, the second may underline the main points as he reads, and the third may read and make notes.

The last student, however, will learn the most from his study. However his learning will be optimised if the chapter is initially read without note-taking, and then the section is re-read with notes taken in his own words.[3]

Successful study therefore depends not only on ability and hard work but also on effective methods of study. Research in the psychology of learning has demonstrated that there are a group of techniques which can be applied to any subject matter and lead to improvements in learning, understanding and retention. The sources for this research work have been:

research into the contrasting study habits of good and poor students  
experimental psychology of learning  
empirical studies of the relative effectiveness of different methods of study  
industrial studies of conditions of work efficiency  
questioning students about their experience[4]

### Not Only Lectures

There is a Chinese proverb that summarizes many modern findings in the psychology of learning. If something is wished to be learnt, when heard it is forgotten. When seen, it is remembered, and if done it is understood. Many studies have shown the ineffectiveness of lectures

alone as a method of teaching. For instance, most people forget up to 75% of a talk or lecture within the space of 24 hours.[5] Although this can be improved by a number of methods employed by the listener,[6]

learning from books has the advantage of allowing a student to "go back over difficult passages and proceed at your own pace; in a lecture you cannot go back, and must habituate yourself to the rate at which the lecturer presents his material".[7] The fact that lectures are inadequate

was also indicated by Shoghi Effendi who said that although lectures give a picture of a subject, "it is not sufficient to have a picture".[8]

### The PQRS Method[9]

Research by Thomas and Robinson (1982), Spache and Berg (1978), and Robinson (1970) has demonstrated that a simple study method applied to reading a book significantly improves understanding and memory. The method takes its name from the first letter of the five steps that one follows - preview, question, read, self-recitation, and test.

### Preview

The first activity that is

recommended is to preview a chapter to get an overall picture of the main topics covered and how they are organized. This is done by reading the table of contents at the start of the chapter and then skimming through the chapter, paying particular attention to section headings and sub-headings and glancing at any illustrations. The most important stage of the preview is to read a summary of the chapter after skimming it.

No summaries are provided in the published writings of the Guardian apart from those that are part of the text. For instance an important summary of the whole of *The Promised Day is Come* occurs on pages 111-112; a summary of the first half of *The Advent of Divine Justice* occurs on page 43; a summary of the entire book *God Passes By* is found in the foreword. The reading of these summaries before the text itself is read would be a first step to the effective study of these works.

The other useful addition to the published texts of Shoghi Effendi's longer works would be headings and sub-headings as exist in *Citadel of Faith*, *Messages to the Bahá'í World and The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. However these headings would benefit by addition to a table of contents to be most effective. No headings exist in present editions of *The Promised Day is Come*, and *The Advent of Divine Justice*. [10] Future editions would benefit from their addition. Students of these texts would benefit in adding headings and sub-headings to their copies of the books.

## Question

This stage is understood to mean that the student turns each section heading into a question that he expects to answer while reading the section. It is also recommended that the reader thinks up questions while skimming. Anderson (1985) found that when two sets of students read a chapter from a book and were tested on it, the group that had been set advance questions performed significantly better in tests of comprehension and recall. Questions aid study because they focus attention on the subject matter, and provide a personal purpose for reading - "a purpose beyond the fact the material is assigned". [11] It also hastens the studying process by preventing distraction while reading. Mace uses the analogy of food to explain the importance of questions in the learning process: "Curiosity is the appetite of the mind. Information is more readily retained, . . . [and] more readily acquired, when it comes in answer to a question" (Psychology 39).

## Read

Reading the text with a view to answering questions and making meaningful connections with information already known and familiar concepts has been demonstrated to be an effective study tool. Underlining, highlighting and marking key words and phrases are recommended. Note taking is thought to be better delayed until an entire section is read, so that the relative importance of the various points made in the text can be judged.

The approach of "deep" reading has been shown to significantly improve studying. "A deep approach to reading involves relating facts to conclusions in an active way which should bring the reader close to the author's intended message. Students who adopt such an approach to studying in general show a greater awareness of their teacher's main educational aims. They also find their work more interesting and rewarding - in terms of both personal status and higher grades". (Entwhistle, Styles 271)

The process of note taking should not be underestimated. It forces the reader to pay attention and understand the text. The notes should be "as brief as possible"[12] and in one's own words - "the student's private critical commentary".[13] Large areas of white space lead to the best notes - so that practically they can added to and visually they allow the reader to focus on the important themes.[14] The two most important activities while reading and note taking that improve memory involve organizing the material in a hierarchical fashion and adding meaningful connections to the information presented.[15]

Relating these to the writings of Shoghi Effendi indicates that cross-references would add meaningful connections to the material.

### Self-Recitation and Testing

After finishing reading a section from a book, the reader should attempt to recall the main points and recite these acoustically. This process reveals gaps in the knowledge and further organises and consolidates the information. Studies show that students forget up to 80% of what they learned from reading two weeks after studying. However if the main points of their reading was recited immediately after reading, only 20% was forgotten in the same period.[16]

Once the chapter is finished testing and review of the material is important. The testing process should also involve skimming the chapter again checking key points, and re-reading the summary.

## The Benefits of Discussion

The benefits of discussing study

material is stressed in all the newer works on effective study. One work indicates that "discussion is an essential part of the study" in some subjects.[17] There are many reasons why discussion is recommended. It aids students "to remove misconceptions and frequently provides a solution to some nagging difficulty which has been holding you up".[18] It can give you a fresh viewpoint, exposing one to a variety of viewpoints and interpretations. Facts and theories can be brought into perspective. It also contributes to the study process by giving the student "renewed enthusiasm and deepened understanding".[19] "Interest in work is more readily sustained by working and talking with others than by solitary work and meditation" (Maddox, Study Skills 152-3). The mere act of communicating and explaining your work to others can serve to clarify your own thoughts. Another benefit is that "we learn to accept criticism, and to become more tolerant and less extreme in our opinions"[20] - a benefit that will spill over into many other of our daily activities.

To prevent discussion

degenerating into trivial talk and gossip, it is necessary introduce some note of formality to the process. A topic needs to be decided beforehand, and a plan prepared - "this could take the form of a list of questions concerning the topic".[21] A chairman is needed to keep the discussion to the point and encourage all to contribute. Rowntree recommends between six and eight participants and a framework adopted whereby someone opens the discussion at each session.[22] The best results are obtained when the participants have done some preparatory work and thinking. The traditional method of having a teacher who speaks and a class that listens has been shown to be ineffective. Over-reliance on this system "tends to result in boredom and lack of interest" in the students.[23]

Consultation is stressed in

Bahá'í writings, and leads to "greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. . . . The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation" (Bahá'u'lláh, Consultation 3). It is interesting to note that Shoghi Effendi recommends participants of Bahá'í summer schools to enrich their knowledge of the fundamentals of the Faith "through lectures, study, and discussion".[24]

## Conclusion

In conclusion

the systematic use of these study methods will improve the understanding, learning and retention of the writings of Shoghi Effendi. However interesting

these techniques are, in themselves they represent relatively superficial and peripheral aspects of studying. "To see these techniques as skills in themselves is misleading, for this has the effect of isolating them from the student's thinking about the content of the study task of which they form a part. Thus for example underlining should be seen as a part of reading a text and note-taking as part of listening to and making use of a lecture presentation" (Svensson, Skills 68).

## The Study Guides

There are now 8 study guides in existence (see works cited section). They use a variety of approaches. All of them incorporate methods to facilitate learning but none of them is comprehensive.

The guide of *The Advent of Divine Justice* (20 p.) prepared by Dr. Dwight Allen, an eminent educationalist, is a series of detailed questions on the text. The questions need reflection and not many straightforward factual questions are posed.

The Bergsmo guide (200 p.) contains a series of introductory essays on the life and station of Shoghi Effendi, followed a compilation of questions for all the writings. These questions are also largely reflective.

The Holley guide to *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (9 p.) is essentially a table of contents as is the guide to *God Passes By* (21 p.).

The *Advent of Divine Justice* guide prepared by the Study Outline Committee (14 p.) also contains a table of contents and an excellent "topical study" (pp. 6-13). It ends by asking fifteen "thought questions" which could be used as material for discussion.

The Khan guide to *The Promised Day is Come* (25 p.) has a thematic guide (pp. 1-6, 11-15) and much supplementary information (on the rulers and monarchs that Bahá'u'lláh addressed; pp. 21ff) and cross referencing. There are also two sets of questions: "discussion questions" (p. 16) and "review questions" (p. 17-20). Some of the factual sections of the book are organised into hierarchical notes. A useful example of this hierarchical organisation is in the section of *The Promised Day is Come* which details the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the Kings. This is organised in the study guide by looking at the characteristics,

the content of the Tablet, and the consequences of each recipient (pp. 7-12). As a guide to one work, the Khan guide incorporates more of the elements of effective study than the other guides.

## The Ideal Book

The subject of an ideal book would be a theme. It would contain an introduction putting the work in context, and summarizing the major ideas. The book would be broken up into chapters, and the text broken up into headings and sub-headings, which would be listed in a table of contents. The text itself would be footnoted extensively explaining terminology, with cross-referencing to other of the writings of Shoghi Effendi, and clarification of historical and other references. There would be much space on the sides of the pages so that readers can add their own supplementary notes. There would be a full index.

## The Relevant

Many of Shoghi Effendi's writings are compilations of letters published in a chronological order.[25] This leads to the publication of letters dealing with subjects of general import mixed with more specific and determinate letters. Among the many examples of less important published letters are a request by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of India to send them "five copies of the Urdu Translation of 'Kitáb-i-Iqán'",[26] an approval of the 1949-1950 budget of the American Bahá'í Community,[27] an appeal for funds for the purchase of a Bahá'í centre in 1953,[28] an acknowledgement of a letter,[29] and a request for the number of British Bahá'ís and assemblies.[30] *Unfolding Destiny* has a text of 462 pages of letters published in chronological order. It is impossible to know which of the letters and messages in the book are relevant to Bahá'í activity today without reading them all.

## Messages

*to America*, *Citadel of Faith* and *Messages to the Bahá'í World* are in the same style of a chronological printing of letters, but have the significant advantage of headings and sub-headings. These volumes contain a number of very significant letters of Shoghi Effendi, some of which are even more relevant today than when they were written. These include "The Spiritual Potencies of the That Consecrated Spot", and "A God-Given Mandate" in *Messages to America*; "The Challenging Requirements of the Present Hour", "A Turning Point in American Bahá'í History" and "A Mysterious Dispensation of Providence" in *Citadel of Faith*; "The Summons of the Lord of Hosts" and

"Evidences of the Resistless March of the World Crusade" in Messages to the Bahá'í World. There is need for a compilation of these letters in a separate volume.

### Thematic Books

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh is another example of how Shoghi Effendi's books are not presented in study format. Again the letters deal with a mixture of different subjects. A more intelligent presentation of the themes of the World Order letters is Call to the Nations, where subjects are arranged thematically. Some of these letters are more important than others,[31] particularly the letter "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh". Ruhyyih Khanum has written: "I know from his [Shoghi Effendi's] remarks that he considered he had said all he had to say, in many ways, in the Dispensation [of Bahá'u'lláh]" (Priceless 213). Leroy Ioas has said that Shoghi Effendi on many occasions told him that "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" was his "will and testament".[32] David Hofman states: "Without deep study of this basic document ["The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh"], no Bahá'í can claim to be truly knowledgeable of his Faith" (Hofman, Expounder). It would seem more appropriate that "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" would be published as an appendix to God Passes By.

The other thematic books are Guidance for Today and Tomorrow and Principles of Bahá'í Administration. The former successfully deals with a number of broad Bahá'í topics, and the later is a more applicable selection of sections from Bahá'í Administration to the present situation of the Bahá'í community.

An important principle of the Bahá'í Faith is that it is "scientific in method".[33] The application of a scientific method to the study of the writings is the subject of this paper.[34]

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[1] Deepening nos. 121 and 131

[2] Deepening no. 120; Yazdi, Blessings 90

[3] Maddox, How to Study 10

[4] adapted from Maddox, How to Study 10

[5] Ellis and Hopkins, How to succeed 193

[6] Among these are taking notes and active listening. Other aids to listening to lectures include anticipating what is being said, listening out for the major ideas, watching for signals leading to a new idea, and being armed with questions in preparation. See Carman and Adams, Study Skills 9.

[7] Maddox, How to Study 10

[8] From a letter dated 27 January 1939 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual quoted in Deepening no.100

[9] Also called the SQ3R method (standing for survey, question, read, recite, review)

[10] The present editions of The Advent of Divine Justice (1984 and 1990) do not contain section headings but places them in a contents section at the beginning of the book. The 1969 edition contains the section headings in the text itself.

[11] Carman and Adams, Study Skills 106

[12] Parsons, Effectively 36

[13] Mace, Psychology 46

[14] Casey, Study 41

[15] Atkinson, Psychology 261, 255-6

[16] Carman and Adams, Study Skills 116

[17] Open University, Preparing 7

[18] Maddox, How to Study 149

[19] Rowntree, Learn 105

[20] Maddox, How to Study 153

[21] Open University, Preparing 13

[22] Rowntree, Learn 109

[23] Maddox, How to Study 151

[24] Shoghi Effendi, Advent 54

[25] These include Messages to America, Citadel of Faith and Messages to the Bahá'í World, Letters of the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, Arohanui [to New Zealand], Lights of Divine Guidance, Unfolding Destiny, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, Dawn of a New Day, Messages to Canada, Bahá'í Administration

[26] Dawn of a New Day 51

[27] Citadel of Faith 63

[28] Messages to the Bahá'í World 156

[29] Arohanui 77

[30] Unfolding Destiny 216

[31] One of the letters provides a prototype of correlating the Bahá'í Faith with current issues: "Shoghi Effendi wrote his last general letter [The Goal of a New World Order] to the Western friends because he felt that the public should be made to understand the attitude the Bahá'í Faith maintains towards prevailing economic and political problems" (From a letter dated January 1932 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual quoted in Priceless 212-213).

[32] Ioas, In the Days

[33] From a statement prepared by Shoghi Effendi for the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, July 1947.

[34] I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir to the paper in our many discussions of it.

[35] For a full bibliography to the writings of Shoghi Effendi see Collins, Bibliography 31-37.

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