



How to Read Philosophy

So you've made the leap from learning philosophy out of bland and banal course textbooks to doing philosophy by interacting directly with philosophers and their arguments from the horse's mouth. Congratulations!

Now, reading anything takes time, but reading philosophy can be especially time consuming if you're not practiced in efficient reading strategies. It's also very different from how you might read for pleasure, or for gathering factual information from articles and news reports. In these, you can skip and skim over the text, or indulge yourself in moments of inattention while still getting a pretty complete understanding of what's going on. In philosophy, every sentence can be a morsel of reasoning, crucial to the argument offered by an author in support of their claims.

In contrast to other forms of writing, philosophical writing almost always *offers arguments*. This does not mean that they involve people arguing, or are written LIKE THIS TO INDICATE SHOUTING (!), but that they aim to state and then give reasons for accepting some position or other. In fact, the definition of an 'argument' relevant to most academic work can be lifted straight out of a Monty Python Sketch (Google: 'Monty Python's Argument Clinic'): An argument is a connected series of statements to establish a definite proposition. Note that it may help you to memorise this definition and hold it in your head to help you when you're reading anything at all at this level. Read on to see why...

Close scrutiny and careful attention pay dividends in understanding argument., opening up fruitful opportunities for interpretation, analysis and evaluation (all the things you need to show us you can do in your essays and class contributions).

There is one other important difference from other literary forms: philosophical writing usually contains an internal dialogue not present in other styles, where an author, using the same voice (i.e. without indicating a change in character or speaker) will disagree with himself and suddenly begin trying to knock out his previous point.

Expect this, and do not be thrown by it. This represents the typical back and forth of philosophical thinking: we state a position, consider problems with that position, and either reject it or adapt it to avoid the original problems we found. And so on with our new position, and on it goes. The mark-up below can be used to assist your engagement with this structure. ¹

¹ This isn't true for all texts, especially those written in dialogue form, e.g. Plato's *Dialogues* or Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*



So, without further ado, here are some top student, teacher and examiner generated tips for getting the most out of your reading, primary texts or otherwise. These tips are sequential, so go step by step until you get the hang of it.

Step 1: Getting ready

- Sounds obvious, but find a comfortable place to settle for your conversation with the author (usually a big (famous) old dead guy²). Not too comfortable, or you'll fall asleep, but not so uncomfortable that you're compelled to stop after only a short time. Reclining on a sofa isn't such a great idea: sleep may follow soon after.
- Pen. Always have a pen. Be prepared to mentally reframe 'defacing your books' into 'enhancing them with the wonder of your own thoughts'. Mark-ups, notes, questions and thoughts written directly into the book (provided you own it) will speed up your reading in future revisits.

Step 2: What you need to know

All of your learning in philosophy should be guided by the following questions, though they are especially pertinent when reading primary texts. They will help you to quickly formulate some kind of background or context for the content therein. This will help you to more quickly understand what on earth is going on.

- ***What's the point?*** (What is the fundamental focus of the discussion being presented, e.g. which area of philosophy does it relate to, is it focused on any particular theory, argument or example, etc. Examples might include: discovering the nature of justice, classifying different political systems, etc).
- ***Why did they bother?*** (What was the author's motivation for sitting down and spending so much time writing this philosophical treatise when they could have been out doing something else far more exciting? Usually this is to do with responding to some problem or issue they've discovered or are otherwise annoyed about.)
- ***What are they trying to prove?*** (It is rare for any philosophical writing to be done without the intention of providing rational argument to persuade someone of to accept some claim made by the author, so it's important to identify what exactly they're arguing for, i.e., trying to prove. This is known as their *thesis*. It is essential that you can identify the central thesis of any article, since without this the philosophical foundation of it cannot be located. How are you to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments given for and against this thesis if you don't know what it is?)
- ***How do they try and prove it?*** Or, what's the argument? Remember, an argument is a series of linked propositions acting as reasons (or premises) to establish the truth of some further proposition

² Big as in famous, not oversized. And yes, unfortunately, the majority of the people you'll read will be dead and male, women being somewhat underrepresented in the ancient, classical and modern philosophical literature, and philosophy being a very slow discipline in which ideas initiated 30 years ago can be 'recent'.



as the argument's conclusion. The reasons lead us logically to the conclusion (or not, in bad or weak arguments).

You should have these questions in your mind before you open even the first page of the text itself. They should inform your interrogation of the material. While fictional literature like novels may be gently padded through with cognitive slippers made from cotton wool, philosophical literature of any stripe deserves to be interrogated. It's not that it's bad, but just that it will slip from your fingers unless you scrutinise it down to the full stop. So, our catchphrase is:

INTERROGATE THE LITERATURE

Sorry it's not that catchy.

Step 3: Get down to interrogating

- Be like a detective and use the blurb, contents page, or even descriptions on bookseller websites or Google Books to give you an idea of what to expect. When doing this, ask: 'What does this tell me about what to expect? How does this connect with my prior knowledge?'³
- Read the first and last paragraph of the text (or section of text). This should provide you with answers to some of your questions, like 'What's the point?', 'Why did they bother?' and 'What are they trying to prove?'
- Review your findings: what do you know already about the text and what to expect?

Step 4: Fast-read!

Much what you'd expect: read the text fast. You won't understand everything (this is **normal**) so don't expect to, and don't stop. Keep going to the end. Your goal here is to get an overall sense of the architecture of the discussion, of the moves the author makes to motivate, state and defend his or her thesis. Broad brush strokes are all that is required. This further develops your background knowledge, and some of the above questions should begin to be answered.

Step 5: Close read

Now, go sloooooooooooooowly. Really slowly. Slower than you'd want to. This may be painful, but it will be immensely worth it at the end when you have the satisfaction of being able to give the clearest and most accurate account of an author's argument, how they present it through discussion *and* what you think of other

³ This may not be possible in the case of journal articles or essays. Here, seek the abstract, heading and subheadings, and also look at the author and their credentials.



interpretations of it. Philosophy is hard, so work hard and set yourself up to be able to pat yourself on the back.

As you read slowly, scrutinise the text with the questions above in your mind at all times. Consider whether and how each sentence contributes to building an answer for any of those sentences. Mark-up the text as you go. Your highlighter should have been slung in the bin by now (or just kept out of reach) since highlighters only tell you *that* a section is more important than another, but not *why or how* it is. Marking up will speed up your understanding of the latter, and thus make your reading more efficient.

Marking up should include the following:

1. Identification of the structure of the argument/discussion by noting down things such as ‘focus’, ‘thesis’, objections (obj1, 2 , etc), reasons (R1, R2, etc) and so on.
2. Underlining particularly important sections (in conjunction with other notations)
3. Connections to other ideas or literature.
4. Clarification of meaning, such as making implied references explicit.
5. A note of bits you don’t understand: use ‘?’ to denote confusion, but do try and say why you’re confused (in tiny, tiny writing, if you must).

Here are some suggested marking up methods, but you should try and create your own too:

Df	Definition
Q	Important question raised by the author/speaker – can be used to determine focus or shift in argument.
Cf.	‘See...?’ some other theory, reference, author, etc.
E.G.	An example, when you’ve found a good example to illustrate the point.

Some of the readings have examples of this kind of mark-up. But you’ll have to look at them all to find out which they are! Check Moodle’s downloadable reading list for Socrates and Plato and see if you can find them.

Step 6: Summarise what you’ve read

This does three things:

- (1) It forces you to check you’ve been paying attention, and how much. If there’s a step in the argument you can’t summarise, you need to go back and review the text.
- (2) It consolidates your first reading so enhances your ability to recall the information later.
- (3) It provides you with a handy first point of reference when you come back to read the text again later, allowing you to create your own preliminary source of information.

I do this by writing a bullet-pointed summary of the focus, thesis and argument (including objections) onto 2-3 sticky notes which I then stick to the first page of the text. I do this within 10 minutes of reading the text,



to ensure it's fresh in my mind, and because recall at this stage is proven to enhance memorization. I also find this invaluable whenever I have to go back to the text, sometimes a long while since the last reading, and want a quick summary of what it says and how it says it. This way, I get more of a return on the initial investment of my time: I don't need to go searching for my notes on the text, since they're right there on it, and I've used my initial work with the text to make future work much, much easier.

And, you're done!



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