

Tips for Reading Philosophy

1. Take notes as you read. Try to identify for each paragraph or section what claims the author is making and what arguments are offered in their support. The author may be doing any one of a number of things in a given section of text. Here are some possibilities to consider:
 - a. The author is laying out a claim or an argument that is supposed to be obvious or commonsensical. Try to assess whether the author endorses this position or whether he or she aims to show we should reject it.
 - b. The author is announcing what position he or she aims to defend in what follows.
 - c. The author is identifying someone else's argument or position.
 - d. The author is introducing a distinction or a term that he or she will later deploy in argument.
 - e. The author is identifying some desiderata: some consideration or motivation that a good argument will accommodate, make sense of, or explain.
 - f. The author is offering a counter-argument or a counter-example to his or her opponents' position.
 - g. The author is offering a possible counter-argument to his or her own position and will then go on to try to defuse it.
 - h. The author is trying to explain why an argument seems appealing even though it is flawed.
 - i. The author articulating a puzzle or a philosophical problem.
 - j. The author is trying to interpret a text of another author.
2. Identify any important, special, or unfamiliar terms the author is using. Sometimes philosophical writers use familiar words in unfamiliar ways. Be on the look out for such so-called 'technical' uses. Keep track of how and where the author uses these terms. Try to write out a definition of the terms or at least some examples of the author's use.
3. In general, try to come up with examples that illustrate the author's claims.
4. When the author offers examples or analogies in support of an argument, try to be clear exactly how they work and how they are supposed to contribute to the argument.

¹ This handout is a revised version of materials prepared by Professor Janet Broughton of U.C. Berkeley.

5. Keep track of where the author speaks in his or her own voice and where the author is characterizing the views of others. Sometimes this is surprisingly difficult. Also, be attentive to what sort of voice the author employs and in particular whether the author is being serious, ironic, or sarcastic.
6. If a passage or sentence is confusing, try to write it in your own words.
7. Pay attention to terms like 'if,' 'only if,' 'because,' 'since,' 'for,' 'therefore,' 'thus,' 'but,' and 'consequence.' These terms often signal the structure of the argument that is being given.
8. Write down examples, additional arguments, questions, counter-examples, and objections that occur to you as you are reading the text. Keep an eye out for possible paper topics or points you may wish to make in a paper or an exam.
9. Reread! It helps to read the text once through to get a sense of the large structure, then a second time through to appreciate the finer step-by-step argumentative structure, and then a third or fourth or 5th time through to master the argument. Re-approach the text with your questions and objections in hand to see whether the text addresses them.
10. Try to read charitably. If some argument seems awful, try to see if there is a better reading of the text that does not make the mistake you identify. If not, try to see whether the argument could be reformulated, with minimal changes, to avoid the problem you identify. If not, try to figure out why the author took the position did and what sort of consideration drove the author to make that argument. In general, you want to strive to make an author's argument as good and strong as possible, even if you believe that it is wrong. Try to read bearing in mind the assumption that the author is intelligent and trying to get at the truth. Do not be satisfied with an interpretation on which the author has said something just stupid unless there's no alternative.
11. Try to identify ambiguities in the author's argument or claims.
12. Try to identify when the author relies on important suppressed premises.
13. Reread. It is a mistake to think that you will or should understand a philosophical text on a first reading. It often takes multiple readings to understand a text. With some of the best texts, one continues to learn even after readings in the double digits.
14. Talk over the text with a friend. See if together you can state the points and the arguments of the text in your own words. See if you can explain the text to someone who hasn't read it.
15. Reread.