

Reading Philosophy – Some Tips¹

Philosophical texts are meant to be read slowly. Read them too quickly and you are likely to miss the point, just as you would if you were to fast-forward through a movie or a song. The following reading method works best for me; other methods may work best for you.

(1) The first time through, read *very* quickly to determine the overall thesis and to get a sense of the reading's structure. What is the main conclusion? How many sections and sub-conclusions are there? How are they related? Is the philosopher presenting a positive argument (for their view), a negative argument (against an opposed view), or both? Where do the most important moments appear to be? Which passages look especially complicated and will likely require increased attention?

(2) **STOP** to consider what you think about the matter. Do you agree with the thesis? Why or why not?

(3) Now, read a second time for a deeper appreciation and comprehension, paying close attention to the details of the arguments. How does the philosopher argue for the conclusions or sub-conclusions that they reach? What reasons are given? What are the premises of the argument(s)? What sort of evidence is offered? What are the key inferences? What background assumptions are in place? What's the big picture?

(4) Read a third time with an evaluative eye, and with the aim of formulating elaborations, questions, and challenges. Are some passages unclear or strange? Are the inferences valid? Is the evidence strong? Are the assumptions correct? Has something important been overlooked? What are the implications? Does the reasoning have absurd or immoral consequences? What other applications might the argument have, whether in philosophy or another field? What connections do you see between this text and others? What consistencies or inconsistencies, similarities or differences do you spy? How might someone with a different worldview respond to the text? How might the argument be improved, if at all?

(5) **STOP** to consider what you think. Have you changed your mind? Why or why not?

I imagine it will take you about 2 hours to be prepared for a regular class meeting; I cannot imagine any circumstances in which you could adequately prepare in less than one hour. Hopefully, you will quickly realize that your enjoyment of the class is (in part) a function of how well you prepare for it. Incidentally, the experience of students who have prepared and students who have not prepared varies so drastically that it is only minimally correct to say they have attended the same class. In short: preparing is an inexpensive way to increase the value of your education.

As we move through the process of appreciating and evaluating varied arguments and worldviews, your own philosophical judgments may change often. It takes great intellectual strength to persevere through this confusion and uncertainty, and through texts that are difficult to read. Still, I'm confident that you will find the intellectual strength required, if you wish to summon it, and I can assure you that there are deep and abiding rewards if you do.

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