

How To Read Philosophy

Professor Hugh Wilder

(Note: This is an adaptation of part of an article originally published by Professor David W. Concepcion, "Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition," in *Teaching Philosophy* 27:4, December 2004, 351-368.)

I. Introduction

Even if you are very smart and very literate, you may get confused and frustrated if you do not read philosophy in the way philosophers expect you to. There is more than one way to read. In this document, I describe the basics of how to read philosophy.

Philosophical writing comes in many different varieties: essays, books (primary texts), textbooks (secondary sources), dialogues (e.g., Plato), meditations (e.g., Descartes), novels (e.g., Dostoevsky), plays (e.g., Sartre), etc. So, there's really no one way to read philosophy. Nevertheless, I try here to describe a way to read philosophy that's pretty general, that works well, with adaptations, for different kinds of philosophical writing. The model works best for the classic argumentative philosophy essay, in which the author is trying to persuade you rationally to believe something. So, you should be looking for *arguments*, *reasons*, and *conclusions*, **not** plot, character development, or appeal to emotion, to help you understand and evaluate the views articulated in the texts you are reading.

II. What to Expect

Reading is an activity and like any activity (e.g., playing volleyball) it takes practice to get good at it. As with any attempt to learn a new skill, you will make some mistakes along the way, get frustrated with the fact that you are progressing more slowly than you would like, and need to ask for help. You may get angry with authors because they say things that go against what you were brought up to believe and you may get frustrated because those same authors argue so well that you cannot prove them wrong. You are likely to find unfamiliar vocabulary, abstract ideas, complexly organized writing, and unsettling views. I mention this because it is normal to have certain reactions, such as confusion, anger and frustration, when first encountering philosophy. Don't confuse these reactions with failure. Many students who have come before you have had the same initial reactions and succeeded, even your teacher.

III. Some Basics

- Read when you know you have enough time to read a substantial amount of the assignment (reading bits now and then doesn't work); read where you won't be distracted; reading in philosophy is not like reading a novel – it takes more time and effort so be prepared to concentrate
- If you are accessing the text electronically (e.g, if you're reading something posted on the Internet), print it. You'll be taking notes on the pages themselves, and you'll need the printed copy in class when it is discussed.
- Interact with the material: use a good dictionary and/or encyclopedia while you read; talk to your friends and classmates about what you've read; "talk" to the author (not out loud, your friends will worry) about your questions and problems with the text.
- Keep reasonable expectations (you may not understand everything without some effort, you may need to ask for clarification).
- Be able to state the author's conclusion and the gist of the argument for that conclusion before you come to class.
- Evaluate the gist of the author's argument before class.

IV. The Four-Step Reading Process

A. Step One: "Pre-Read" the Assignment

For a short time, examine the general features of the chapter, article or book assigned. Look at the title, chapter or section headings, footnotes, bibliography, biography of author, etc. When was the text first published? The goal of the pre-read is to get a basic idea of what the text is about. If you know what a chapter, article or book is about, it is easier to make sense of the text as you read it carefully. For a book chapter or article, skim the first and last paragraphs. See if you can identify focal and thesis statements. A focal statement describes the topic of the text. Focal statements often begin with phrases such as "I will discuss X, Y and Z." A thesis statement is a more specific description of the author's goal. Thesis statements often begin with phrases such as "I will show that X is true and Y and Z are false."

While doing the pre-read, ask yourself “How am I doing?” by answering the following questions:

- What should I expect from the text in light of the title? In light of its author? Its publication date?
- Are there chapters or section headings? If yes, what can I learn from them?
- Is there a bibliography? What can I learn from it?
- Are there footnotes? Are they mostly documentation of sources or do they actually say something? (This lets you know whether you need to read them as soon as you see a footnote in the text.)
- If the assignment is a chapter in a textbook, are there reading questions attached? Is there a glossary?

B. Step Two: Fast-Read the Assignment

Read the entire assignment fairly quickly and at one sitting, if possible. (Of course, if the assignment is a whole book, this will take longer; but still give the whole book a fast read over a few sessions.) The goal of the fast-read is to develop a basic understanding of the text. When doing the fast-read, remember to do the following:

- In an article or chapter in a primary text, identify the thesis statement. You may not be able to do this until you reach the end of the article. Mark anything that seems like it might be a thesis statement or conclusion when you first notice it, then pick the one that seems most central when you are done. In some cases, the author may not even actually write a thesis statement down, so you may need to supply one for the author.
- Look up definitions of words you don’t know and write them in the margins. Don’t get bogged down in this. If it is too difficult to figure out which meaning of a term the author has in mind or if you have to read an entire encyclopedia entry to figure out the meaning of the term, move on.
- “Flag” the text with brief notations in the margins. Using your own abbreviations or symbols, note major sections and steps in the overall argument. Identify the topic and thesis when they are stated. Identify separate arguments for the thesis (you should number them when more than one is given). In each argument, identify premises and conclusion. Note objections and rebuttals. Also flag sections you do not understand, so you can return to them later. These marginal flags are more helpful than highlighting. Highlighting just tells you that you think something is important. Marginal flags tell you *why* you think it’s important.
- Don’t let anything stop your progress. This is a fast read. You may skim long examples.

While doing the fast read, ask yourself “How am I doing?” by answering the following questions:

- Have I identified the thesis statement and written it down?
- Do I know what the conclusion of the author’s argument is and have I marked places in the text where important steps toward that conclusion occur?

C. Step Three: Read for Understanding

Now carefully re-read the assignment and your flags and notes, in order to develop a sophisticated understanding of the text. You should be able to explain to a friend how the author defends her/his conclusion. Once you are able to coherently explain the article in your own words, you have truly internalized it - good job! When reading for understanding, remember to do the following:

- Correct and add to your previous flagging.
- Take lots of notes. In these notes, try rephrasing what the author says in your own words.
- Try drawing diagrams or flow charts or outline the major moves in the text.
- Use “indicator words” to help identify important parts of arguments. Conclusions are often introduced by such words as “therefore,” “hence,” “thus,” or “consequently.” Reasons or premises are often indicated by the words “because,” “since,” “as,” etc. Authors often use these words and phrases to help the reader keep track of the argument. Use them to keep yourself from getting lost.
- Write a summary using all your work so far, that is detailed enough that you won’t have to re-read the article again to remind yourself of the author’s argument.

While reading for understanding, ask yourself, “How am I doing?” by answering the following questions:

- Do I know exactly what the author is saying? Have I re-read passages that were confusing at first?
- Have I done enough dictionary and encyclopedia work, so that I understand all the terms and concepts?
- Can I connect the dots? Can I explain in my own words why the author concludes what she or he concludes? In the fast read, you identified the conclusion and steps leading up to it; in reading for understanding, you aim to truly understand the conclusion and steps you identified earlier.

D. Step Four: Read for Evaluation

Now that you have made yourself a concise summary of the author's argument, it is time to evaluate it. Evaluation is still part of reading philosophy, since reading philosophy is active, critical reading, not just passive absorption of material. When evaluating, your main tool is the summary you made, though you'll also have to re-read passages in the text - to make sure your summary is correct and fair, and to figure out passages that seemed clear before but on evaluation begin to look murky. At this stage, you are entering the debate, rather than simply learning about it. When evaluating a text, remember to do the following:

- Fix any mistaken flagging and notes as you re-read important passages;
- Fix your outline and any diagrams you made;
- Fix your summary when necessary;
- Write down anything new that you discover as you go through the text again.

When evaluating a text, ask yourself "How am I doing?" by answering the following questions:

- Have I looked to see if every conclusion in the text is well defended?
- Have I thought about how an undefended conclusion could be defended? (Have I been charitable to the author?)
- Do I think the arguments for the conclusion are persuasive? Why or why not?
- Can I think of any counter-examples to any assertion made by the author?
- Can I put my finger on exactly what bothers me about what the author says? Can I explain where and why I think the author made a mistake?
- Have I thought about how the author might respond to my criticism?
- Have I identified some of my own beliefs that can't be true if the author is right?
- Is there a conflict between what I believe and what the author says? If so, to avoid being a hypocrite, I must ultimately change my mind or show that the author's reasoning fails in some way. Simply identifying a disagreement does not constitute an evaluation.
- Have I figured out, exactly, what the author got wrong so that I may continue to believe as I always have with confidence?
- Have I figured out, exactly, which of my beliefs I must change in light of what I have learned from the author?
- Have I looked for some point that the author did not consider that might influence what I think is true?

V. Frequently Asked Questions

A. Why does the author contradict him or herself?

Sometimes philosophers do unwittingly contradict themselves (and you may spot this in your own evaluation). But most of the time, readers perceive a contradiction where there isn't one, because they fail to notice a change in "voice" or fail to understand where the author is in developing the argument. Authors often describe many sides, and many camps within a side, but they will voice agreement in the end with only one. If you lose track of the fact that the author is considering an alternative view or a possible objection to his or her own view, then you may mistakenly think that the author is contradicting him or herself. Keeping track of where you are in the argument is crucial to understanding.

Another reason philosophers may seem to contradict themselves is that sometimes they develop their views in stages. Again, tracking the flow of the text, using flagging and indicator words, will help you identify the different stages of an argument. Later stages may correct and improve upon earlier stages. The author is not contradicting him or herself, but just getting closer to the final stage, the view the author thinks is best.

B. Why does the author repeat her or himself so much?

Philosophers do like to talk! But they usually don't repeat themselves much. Sometimes examples go on pretty long, and a philosopher will finish the example by repeating the point that introduced the example, just to remind the reader. Sometimes distinctions are subtle, so that claims that seem to be repetitious really aren't. Sometimes claims are repeated when they are being subjected to repeated criticism. Again, the repetition is for the benefit of the reader.

C. Why do philosophers use such big words, and so many words I don't understand?

Some people think philosophers use fancy words just to intimidate their readers or to show off. This reaction is understandable but mistaken for at least three reasons. First, it is a mistake to get mad at an author just because you have a limited vocabulary. There is an opportunity here; take it!

Second, there is an international community of philosophers and like all communities (such as that of you and your friends), there are certain patterns in the way members of that community talk to one another. Metaphorically, when you enrolled in a philosophy class you walked into a room where a group of people have been having a conversation for a very long time. You need to adapt to their ways of talking if you want to participate in their conversation. Of course, philosophers shouldn't be rude and intentionally try to exclude you with their words. But it is important to realize that they didn't know you were coming, so they might not have done everything possible to make your inclusion as easy as you would like. Whatever the author's faults, do your part: be open to what is being said, try your hardest to understand, and keep a dictionary handy!

Third, and most importantly, not every complex idea can be stated in simple terms. Sometimes simplification is over-simplification, where the important nuances of what a person really thinks are lost. It is true that some philosophical writing is more complicated than it needs to be, but not all of it is. Some philosophical writing needs to be complicated to express complicated ideas. Part of the beauty of the world is its complexity. Likewise, part of the beauty of philosophy is its complexity.

D. You say I should spend at least as much time and possibly twice as long preparing for class as I spend in class each week, but sometimes you only assign us one or two chapters or essays for a whole week. It only takes me an hour or so to read the assignment, so what am I supposed to be doing the rest of the time?

Good question, but I hope that if you've read this far about how to read philosophy you can guess the answer. You really can't read a chapter or two of philosophical writing in an hour. That is, you can't complete all four steps of the reading process described in an hour. Completing the full process will simply take more time. Reading philosophy involves more than passing your eyes over each line of text. It is not a spectator sport. It involves pre-reading, fast-reading, reading for understanding, and reading for evaluation, as I've described. Different people will work at different speeds, but you should expect to spend at least two or three hours on each chapter or essay, and more challenging material will take longer. When teachers plan class reading assignments, they keep in mind the rules about the course requiring about twice as much reading time as class time. If you're completing the assignments in much less, you're probably not following the method described here - and you're probably not getting as much from the readings as you could be.

VI. Summary: What Successful Philosophy Readers Do

- Practice the basics: Give yourself enough time to complete the full process of reading the text before class; read from a printed text whenever possible; always have a dictionary and encyclopedia available, etc.
- Complete all four steps of the reading process before class: pre-read, fast-read, read for understanding, read for evaluation.
- Flag, take notes and use indicator words to keep track of where you are in the conversation you're having with the author.