

Some Suggestions for How to Approach Reading a Philosophical Article or Book

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Most people find philosophy difficult to read. The reading tends to go slowly, and it requires a lot of attention to detail. You will also find that to understand philosophy articles well, you need to read them more than once. The following suggestions are intended to assist you with your reading. My overall suggestion is that you read assigned materials once before the class for which they are due, and then once more after they have been discussed, time permitting.

The basic thing to keep in mind is that philosophical writing is *argumentative* writing. Philosophers undertake to investigate specific philosophical problems or issues, and their writing is generally concerned with (1) exploring the nature of that problem or issue, (2) proposing a solution or view, and (3) arguing in support of that solution or view. Sometimes philosophical writing aims to defend a positive view or theory; sometimes it aims instead to offer a critique of a view proposed by another philosopher or a view that is commonly held; often philosophical writing will offer critiques of opposing views, as well as a defense of the author's positive view.

General Suggestions:

1. Identify the **general problem or issue** that the author is discussing.
2. Identify the specific **theses or conclusions** (the solution or view) that the author intends to argue for or defend.

Usually philosophers will indicate early on in an article the general issue they are discussing and the specific position they aim to defend. (When reading a book, you would want to identify the overall issues discussed in the book and the theses it aims to defend, and do the same for each chapter.)

3. Identify the **arguments** given by the author to support his or her theses or position. That is to say, what does the author tell you in order to justify his or her position? What **premises**—that is, what information, evidence, or considerations—are given to support which **conclusions**?
4. Often, philosophers use words with precise technical meanings; sometimes they will even introduce new vocabulary—new technical terms. Identify the author's **definitions**

of any technical terms or central concepts, because what an author means by his or her terms may not be what you would mean or what is commonly meant.

5. Identify where the author is considering objections to his or her view and arguments; what replies does he or she offer to the objections?
6. Each time you read or reread an article, check to make sure you have correctly identified the main points and arguments. You might practice by reconstructing the author's arguments—write out the conclusion (the thesis the author wants to support), then write out the premises (the evidence or considerations given to support the conclusion). Words or expressions that signal when a conclusion is being drawn include the following: *therefore, consequently, hence, it follows that*. Words that signal premises include: *since, if, because, all, some, none*.
7. You might find that it helps to devise a system of abbreviations to use in the margins of the articles. For example:
 - GI = general issue under discussion
 - T = specific thesis author wishes to defend
 - C = conclusion of an argument
 - P = premise of an argument
 - DF = definition of a technical term or central concept
 - OBJ = objection the author is attempting to answer
 - R = author's reply
8. Once you have identified the author's position and the arguments he or she gives for that position, you can begin to evaluate the position and arguments—you can begin to construct objections of your own.

Steps for evaluating an argument:

- a. Identify the conclusion
- b. Identify the premises
- c. Supply any unstated or missing premises on which the argument relies
- d. Do the premises, assuming they are true, support the conclusion? I.e. Is the reasoning good?
- e. Are the premises true or plausible?