

How to Read Philosophy

(Warning: Do not use a highlighter when reading this. As you read on, you'll learn why)

Reading philosophy can be frustrating and difficult. You can expect to encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, abstract ideas, complexly organized writing and unsettling views. You may encounter authors that say things that seem to contradict what they said before or authors whose arguments are so strong you feel like you cannot possibly prove them wrong. These things may make you feel frustrated, confused, outraged and even angry. It is *normal* to have these feelings when reading philosophy. **Don't confuse these reactions with failure.** Many students who have come before you have had the same initial reactions and succeeded, your professor and TA included!

The Ultimate Goal

To develop your personal belief system, by building on what you already know about yourself and the world (and even changing what believe). When you read philosophy you should look for **arguments, reasons, and conclusions.**

The Basics

1. Take care of yourself
Take breaks, sit where you won't be distracted, give yourself enough time to read well, sit in an uncomfortable chair to avoid dozing off, etc.
2. Interact with the material
Talk to your friends about what you read, use a dictionary or philosophical encyclopaedia, disagree with the author.
3. Keep reasonable expectations
You may not understand everything, you may need to ask for help – ask for help!
4. Be able to state the author's main point and the gist of their reasons for it BEFORE you come to class.
5. FLAG and TAKE NOTES

Flagging

Flagging is making notes in the margin of the text, in pencil, as you read it. These notes will remind you of details so that when you reread the text it is easier for you to follow. They also help you identify the main points when you return to the text. There is more than one way to flag, so you should develop a method that works for you. To get you started here are some helpful guidelines.

1. Circle "list" words (such as "First" and "second") & Underline Definitions
2. Write your thoughts (briefly) in the margins (or on a separate page)
3. Use shorthand notes in the margins (such as the following):

Focal: Main or one of the main points
Thesis: Claim the author aims to prove
???: I don't understand this part

Summ: Summary of previous section/part
Rsn: Reason supporting main point
Why?: Why believe this?

4. Accompany shorthands with short notes to clarify the shorthand

Four-Part Reading Process

(1) Pre-Read

Look at the title, section headings, footnotes, bibliography, reading questions, and biography of the author. **The goal is to get a basic idea of what the article is about.** Skim the first and last paragraph to see if you can easily identify a focal or thesis statement (the conclusion or main topic). Focal statements often begin with the phrases “I will discuss...” while a thesis statement is a more specific statement of the author’s goal and often begin “I will show that...”

(2) Fast-Read

Read the entire article fairly quickly. **The goal is to develop a basic understanding of the text.** You should aim to do the following:

1. *****Identify the thesis statement or main point*****

WARNING: You may not be able to do this until you reach the end. Mark things that seem like it is the main point as you read through, then pick the most central one when you get to the end.

2. **Look up the definitions of works you don’t know, and write them in the margins.**

3. **FLAG the structure of the article**

4. **Don’t let anything stop your progress. This is a fast read.**

(3) Careful Reading

Read the article carefully a second time. **The goal is to develop a fuller understanding of the text.** You should aim to do the following:

1. **Read the entire article very carefully**

2. **Correct and add to your previous flagging**

3. **Take lots of notes (not just in the margin, but try to rephrase what the author says in your own words at key points)**

4. **When you finish, summarize the main points of the article in your own words**

(4) Evaluate your Summary

The final step of reading philosophy well requires reflecting on the article and evaluating it. **The goal is to evaluate the article, and identify your beliefs about the article and your reasons for having those beliefs.** Your primary tool for this part is the summary you made at the end of part 3, but you will need to reread certain passages (those which describe the main points you identified). Answer the following:

1. **Do you agree with the conclusion/main point?**

2. **If so, what is so compelling about it?**

3. **If not, write down some reasons why you disagree with it.**