How to Read Philosophy

When you read a philosophical text, your goal is to identify, understand, and evaluate the views and arguments being put forward. This handout discusses two simple tips for helping you achieve this goal.

Annotating

The first tip for getting the most out of your philosophy reading is to annotate as you read. Many students highlight or underline text while they read. This is easy to do, but it isn’t much help; highlighting or underlining only gives you a binary distinction and good critical reading requires more than this. Other students take separate notes on what they read. This can be a lot of help, but it’s also a lot of work. In many cases, annotating offers a better ratio of work-to-reward. An annotation is simply a comment—usually a brief comment—inserted directly into a text. In order to get the most out of annotating, you will need to decide what sort of things you want to comment on, and what you want those comments to look like. It’s good to have a plan in place before you begin, and to use the same plan in all your reading. Simpler is better, and abbreviations are the best. For example, I often use something like the following system:

- **DEF** = definition/official statement of a view or principle
- **DIST** = distinction
- **EXP** = explanation
- **EX** = example
- **AN** = analogy
- **ARG** = argument
- **PREM** = premise
- **CON** = conclusion
- **ASS** = assumption
- **OBJ** = objection
- **RESP** = response
- **SUM** = summary
- ***** = this is really important
- **…** = I need to think about this more
- **?** = I don’t get this
- **!** = this seems unsupported/objectionable/false

Of course, you don’t need to use this system; you should use a system that works for you. But the main point is to pick a system and stick with it.

Additional Resources

On Reading Philosophy
I recommend *Reading a Philosophical Text* by Michael S. Russo
Asking Questions

The second tip for getting the most out of your philosophy reading is to ask questions as you read. Don’t wait until you’re done to think about the material—think about it as you go along. The main questions you should be asking as you read are the following:

- What are the author’s conclusions?
- What arguments does the author offer in support of his or her conclusions?
- Are the author’s arguments successful?

Of course, each of these questions leads to further questions, which lead to even further questions. You cannot hope to answer all the questions, but here is an indication of some of the questions you should be asking:

- What are the author’s conclusions?
  - What do the conclusions mean?
  - Does the author define her key terms?
    - If so, what are the definitions?
    - If not, can you come up with your own definitions?
  - Why do the conclusions matter?
    - Are these conclusions relevant to other readings we have done in this class? (If so, how?)
    - Are these conclusions relevant to other debates in other areas of philosophy? (If so, which?)
- What arguments does the author offer in support of her conclusions?
  - What are the stated premises of the argument?
  - What are the unstated premises of the argument?
  - What do these premises mean?
    - Does the author define her key terms?
      - If so, what are the definitions?
      - If not, can you come up with your own definitions?
    - Does the author try to support the premises of her argument? If so, how?
      - Does the author offer further arguments for the premises?
        - If so, what are they?
        - If not, can you come up with your own?
      - Does the author appeal to any analogies?
        - If so, what are they?
        - If not, can you come up with your own?
      - Does the author offer any examples?
        - If so, what are they?
        - If not, can you come up with your own?
  - Are the author’s arguments successful?
    - Does the author consider objections to her argument or her conclusion?
      - If so, what are the objections?
        - What is the author’s response?
        - Is the response successful?
      - If not, can you come up with your own objections?
        - What might the author say in response to your objections?

Once again, these are not the only questions you could be asking as you read. You may have your own set of questions that you like to ask. But the general point is that, in order to get the most out of your philosophy reading, you must make a deliberate effort to ask questions as you read.