How to Read Philosophy

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Reading a philosophy text is very different from reading a newspaper article or a chemistry textbook. When you read a work of philosophy, your goal is not just to record the facts. Rather, you need to figure out what the author is trying to argue for, and what premises are being put forward as support. In addition, you need to determine whether the relevant argument is any good. In other words, you need to identify, understand, and evaluate the author’s reasoning. This handout discusses two simple steps to help you achieve this goal.

The first step is to annotate as you read. Many students highlight or underline text when they read. This is easy to do, but it isn’t much help; highlighting 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. Simpler is better, and abbreviations are the best. For example, I often use something like the following when I’m reading:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEF</td>
<td>definition/official statement of a view or principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIST</td>
<td>distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXP</td>
<td>explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EX</td>
<td>example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AN</td>
<td>analogy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of course, you don’t need to use this particular system. The point is just that you need to decide on a system and stick with it.

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 are the author’s arguments?
- Are the author’s arguments successful?

Of course, each of these questions leads to further questions:

- What are the stated and unstated premises of the argument?
- What do these premises mean?
- Does the author define their key terms?
- Does the author try to support their premises?
- Does the author consider any objections?
- Are there any objections that the author overlooks?

These are not the only questions to consider, but they should give you an idea of the kinds of questions you should be asking. The general point is that, in order to get the most out of your philosophy reading, you need to make a deliberate effort to ask questions as you read.