

Reading Philosophical Texts. From Garth Kemerling at Newberry College.

The assignments in your course require you to engage in a close reading of significant texts written by the major philosophers of the Western tradition. Since you may have had little experience in dealing with material of this sort, the prospect may be a little daunting at first. Philosophical prose is carefully crafted to achieve its own purposes, and reading it well requires a similar degree of care. Here are a few suggestions:

Do the assigned reading

The philosophical texts simply are the content of the course; if you do not read, you will not learn. Coming to class without having read and listening to the discourse of those who have is no substitute for grappling with the material on your own. You can't develop intellectual independence if you rely for your information on the opinions of other people, even when they happen to be correct.

Consider the context

Philosophical writing, like literature of any genre, arises from a concrete historical setting. Approaching each text, you should keep in mind who wrote it, when and where it was published, for what audience it was originally intended, what purposes it was supposed to achieve, and how it has been received by the philosophical and general communities since its appearance. Introductory matter in your textbooks and the Internet resources accessed through the course syllabus will help you get off to a good start.

Take your time

Careful reading cannot be rushed; you should allow plenty of time for a leisurely perusal of the material assigned each day. Individual learning styles certainly differ: some people function best by reading the same text several times with progressively more detailed attention; others prefer to work through the text patiently and diligently a single time. In either case, encourage yourself to slow down and engage the text at a personal level.

Spot crucial passages

Although philosophers do not deliberately spin out pointlessly excessive verbiage (no, really!), most philosophical texts vary in density from page to page. It isn't always obvious what matters most; philosophers sometimes glide superficially over the very points on which their entire argument depends. But with the practice you'll be getting week by week, you'll soon be able to highlight the most important portions of each assignment.

Identify central theses

Each philosophical text is intended to convince us of the truth of particular propositions. Although these central theses are sometimes stated clearly and explicitly, authors often choose to present them more subtly in the context of the line of reasoning which they are established. Remember that the thesis may be either positive or negative, either the acceptance or the rejection of a philosophical position. At the most general level, you may find it helpful to survey the exam study questions in your course study aids file as you read each assigned text.

Locate supportive arguments

Philosophers do not merely state opinions but also undertake to establish their truth. The methods employed to support philosophical theses can differ widely, but most of them will be expressed one of the forms of [logical argumentation](#). That is, the philosopher will (explicitly or implicitly) offer premises that are clearly true and then claim that a sound inference from these premises leads inexorably to the

desired conclusion. Although a disciplined study of [the forms of logical reasoning](#) is helpful, you'll probably learn to recognize the most common patterns from early examples in your reading.

Assess the arguments

Arguments are not all of equal cogency; we are obliged to accept the conclusion only if it is supported by correct inference from true premises. Thus, there are two different ways in which to question the legitimacy of a particular argument:

Ask whether the premises are true. (Remember that one or more of the premises of the argument may be unstated assumptions.)

Ask whether the inference from premises to conclusion is sound. (Here it will be helpful to think of applying the same pattern of reasoning to a more familiar case.)

If all else fails, you may question the truth of the conclusion directly by proposing a counter-example which seems obviously to contradict it.

Look for connections

Since these texts occur within a tradition, they are often directly related to each other. Within your reading of a particular philosopher, notice the way in which material in one portion of the text links up with material from another. As the semester proceeds, consider the ways in which each philosopher incorporates, appropriates, rejects, or responds to the work of those who have gone before. Finally, make every possible effort to relate this philosophical text to what you already know from courses in other disciplines and from your own life experiences.

Above all else, don't worry! You'll spend most of your class time going over the assigned readings, often in great detail. You'll have plenty of opportunities to learn what other readers have found, to ask questions for clarification of puzzling passages, and to share your own insights with others. As the semester proceeds, you will grow ever more confident in your own capacity to interpret philosophical texts.