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AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

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How to Read Philosophy

Author: The Editors of *1000-Word Philosophy*

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When you are reading philosophy in any form—a book, essay, dialogue, or anything else—it's going to take time: philosophy isn't the kind of subject to be taken in passively while you sit back and relax.^[1] There may be ideas and claims that you don't immediately understand, but this is completely normal: philosophy, more than many other subjects, requires actively trying to understand what the text means.

Practically, this means that before you read, you should find a comfortable place to read without distractions. You should also mark up the text or take notes, especially when an author defines any important terms or theories.

This essay will help you get the most out of your reading by providing a 3-step strategy for reading philosophical texts.

1. Step 1: Skim to Get the Lay of the Land

Once you're ready, you can start by skimming the text to try to figure out the *topic*: e.g., God's existence, what knowledge is, the morality of abortion, or any other philosophical topic.

Next, look for the author's *main point*, their conclusion on that topic. In contemporary philosophy articles, this will often be in the introduction, sometimes explicitly stated as a thesis. In older writings, the main point may not become clear until the end of the text. But it's OK to skip to the end! Philosophy isn't a mystery—there aren't spoilers.

When you start reading, it's OK not to know whether you agree with the author's main point. In fact, it's best to hold off on forming an opinion until you find their *argument*, or their support for that main claim.^[2] At this stage, your goal is just to know where the author is going.

Sometimes it is difficult to find the main point by skimming, especially if the text is a dialogue or a poem. But it can still be worthwhile to skim to see what's coming up and how it's organized. You might even write a brief outline of the text to keep track of its organization. Sometimes the author will do this for you—contemporary articles often summarize their organization at the end of the introduction.

2. Step 2: Read Slowly and Actively

Once you know the lay of the land, you should start reading more slowly and seriously, starting from the beginning. Look for the author's *argument* for their main point—the reasons they provide for their conclusion. As you go, check in with yourself about how comfortable you feel that you understand what the author is saying. When you feel your confidence slipping, slow down.

Don't assume the author agrees with a claim they're talking about

Philosophers sometimes write at length about some view or argument, even though they don't agree with it. Sometimes this sets up a contrast with their own views. If an author brings up conflicting ideas, it can seem like they are contradicting themselves. But be on the lookout for indications of which ideas are accepted by the author and which aren't.

Ask yourself what you think about the author's ideas

Philosophers very often write in response to questions and objections that they think readers will have. If you are reading passively, and not forming questions and objections, it can be unclear why the author is talking about something. As you take notes, mark up where you find yourself doubting a claim and why.

Read charitably

Whenever we can, we should interpret someone's ideas in the strongest possible form. Philosophers call this *the principle of charitable interpretation*.^[3]

Suppose an author argues that we do not have free will. This will seem ridiculous or simplistic, since surely people do things all the time—they're not frozen in place! But stop yourself and ask what the author *means* by "free will." Perhaps it is *not* the idea that *people never do things*, but rather that *everything people do is determined by past events*. This is more plausible.

It's always worth looking for a charitable interpretation, even if afterwards the idea is still

implausible. Doing so helps ensure that you are considering the best possible argument.

3. Step 3: Pause When You Need Help

When you get confused, it's tempting to just skip ahead a few paragraphs and hope that the text starts making sense. Occasionally this works, but often you'll end up *more* confused. Philosophical ideas and arguments build gradually, incorporating previous concepts as they go. When you get confused, backtrack a little ways, and try to pinpoint exactly where you got lost.

Apply your own words and examples

A good test for understanding a text is whether you can put the author's ideas in your own words. With a difficult passage, try "translating" it into words that make sense to you.

Sometimes you understand the words, but find the ideas very abstract. In this case, fill in your own examples of what the author is saying. Imagine how you would apply a concept or a claim to a simple, concrete case.

Look up any confusing terms

When you are confused because there is a specific word that you don't know, or which seems to be used in a strange way, look it up in a reference *specific to philosophy*, such as:

- *1000-Word Philosophy*
- *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Some of these entries are long, but you don't need to read the entire entry—just read until you understand the technical term. Sometimes philosophy is *about* how to define a concept, and the entry will contain lengthy discussion of the term. Nevertheless, a reference can still give you the gist of it.

Try an alternative translation where applicable

If the text was translated from another language, try a different translation of a confusing passage.

Talk to other people

It will be easier to work out puzzling passages with people reading the same text—especially if all of you are using the strategies above.

4. Conclusion

Reading philosophy can be disorienting, even baffling. But if you develop good reading habits like the ones above, philosophy will be more comprehensible, rewarding, and enjoyable.^[4]

Notes

^[1] For an introductory explanation of what philosophy is, see [What is Philosophy?](#) by Thomas Metcalf.

^[2] For an explanation of what philosophers tend to mean by an "argument," see [Arguments: Why Do You Believe What You Believe?](#) by Thomas Metcalf.

^[3] Using the principle of charity in reading and, really, all forms of listening to understand other people is part of being a critical thinker. For an introduction to critical thinking, see [Critical Thinking: What is it to be a Critical Thinker?](#) by Carolina Flores.

^[4] Philosophy is easier to read when it is better written. For an introductory guide to writing philosophy, see [How to Write a Philosophical Essay](#), by the Editors of *1000-Word Philosophy*.

For Further Reading

[David W. Concepción: "Reading As A Philosopher."](#)

[Jim Pryor: "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy."](#)

[Kimberly Blessing: "I Re-Read, Therefore I Understand."](#)

[Crystal L'Hote: "Reading Philosophy – Some Tips"](#)

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