

Guidelines for reading philosophy

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1 Stage 1: Pre-read & Fast-read

Aim of this stage: to set expectations about what the text is about and activate any relevant prior knowledge you might have to help you understand it.

What it looks like: Look over the essay article before you start reading, taking notes on a number of topics (see questions below). Then do a fast read-through of the article, not much more than a skim, adding to your notes.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is there an **abstract**/ summary? What does it say?
- What kind of **structure** does the essay have (how many sections, what does each address, etc.)?
- Is there a **thesis** statement? What is it? Where does the author state it?
- Does the author use any recurring **vocabulary** that seems important to the article? If so, does the author explain what he or she means by it? Where?
- Are there any **reading questions** attached? Where might I be able to find the answers to these?

2 Stage 2: Reading for Understanding

Aim of this stage: to be able to explain (to your friend, for example) what the author's thesis is and how he or she goes about arguing for it.

What it looks like: Re-read the article while referring to the notes you took during stage one, taking the time to slow down for difficult or important passages. Check how your reading meets or differs from your expectations from reading. End by jotting a quick summary of the main arguments and the important sections of the essay.

A complication: When discussing an argument or opposing position, philosophers often use the **principle of charity**. They will present the opposing position in as best and strongest a form as they possibly can. (This is not merely a courtesy. If they present the strongest version of the opposing view, and still manage to refute it, their own position will look more compelling.) So, philosophers often spend considerable time discussing an opposing view, theory, or argument, explaining it in detail, and trying to see how it might be strengthened or made better. (Before they then attack it.) If you don't keep track of where the author is presenting his or her own view, or that of her opponents, it can start to look like the author is contradicting him or herself. One of the things your stage 2 reading should help you get clear on where this is happening.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do I know what the author is saying? Have I re-read **difficult passages**? Has my understanding of them improved?
- What is the **thesis**? Was I correct in my first guess as to what the thesis was?
- Can I explain **in my own words** why the author thinks the thesis is correct?
- Can I explain what the author means with the technical vocabulary he or she uses?
- How is my understanding of the article **different** from what I encountered in my fast read?

3 Stage 3: Evaluating the Arguments

Aim of this stage: To critically engage with and evaluate the author's arguments. Determine: is what the author saying right? Why or why not?

What it looks like: use your notes from stages 1 and 2 to try and determine answers to the questions below.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do I find the conclusion **well-defended**?
- How might an undefended conclusion be defended (given what else the author says)?
- Do I find this a persuasive argument? Why or why not?
- Can I think of any **counter-examples** to the author's argument?
- Is there anything that **bothers** me about the author's argument? (Why?)
- How might the author's point be **applied to something else** that he or she doesn't mention?

Notes

¹This handout makes liberal use of ideas presented by Jim Pryor on his <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html> and by David Concepción in his *Reading Philosophy With Background Knowledge and Metacognition*, Teaching Philosophy 27 (4):351-368 (2004)