

Introduction to Reading Philosophy

1. Forward

First, I'd like to welcome you to a community of people who welcome (or can't seem to stop themselves from) clear and critical thinking about ideas that have and continue to help shape our culture, society, politics, and intellectual activity. In other words, welcome to the philosophical community! This document is an attempt to provide a tool that I wish I'd had when I was transitioning from a community college to the philosophy department at UC Berkeley. The majority of Berkeley's philosophy department is made of up transfer students, and there are fundamental skills that I (and many in my cohort) wish I had been able to work on prior to actually starting classes, or in the early part of the term where free time seems abundant relative to midterm and final season. One of those skills is reading philosophy well and in a way that's compatible with a busy life full of commitments. Thanks to a wonderful department and cohort, I have developed these skills far beyond what I thought was possible for myself. What follows is intended to help you flourish in reading and thinking philosophically sooner rather than later. I hope it helps!

2. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help people interested in reading philosophy, in particular it is aimed at undergraduates who may find new and challenging demands for critical reading, interpreting, and responding (a.k.a doing philosophy). Here, I will try to provide tools and strategies to help you become more effective in engaging with philosophical texts and ideas. First, I'll discuss general advice for reading a particular text, which will help you decide which tools and exercises are best suited to achieve your goals. Next, I'll provide specific tools and more targeted advice for achieving your goals regarding the particular reading you are engaging. Third, I'll provide a series of exercises that help in developing the specific methods laid out in an efficient way. Finally, I will provide links to some other resources so that you can go beyond this document in developing your critical reading skills and thank those who contributed to this project.

Before moving on to the substance of this document, I want to emphasize that you shouldn't take anything said here as gospel, or the 'right' way to read philosophical texts. Everyone is unique and will have a unique set of techniques and tools that best help them to understand and engage critically in philosophical discourse. While there are some very good tools here, play with them, find what works for you, be creative, and don't drive yourself crazy trying to conform to anyone's idea of how to think about philosophy. I also advocate searching outside of the resources provided here to find anything that works for you. Good luck!

3. General Reading Advice

There are many goals that might apply to reading a philosophical text. Some, I believe, are universal. To my mind one universal goal that applies to reading a philosophical text is to understand the text as deeply as possible in an efficient manner and as enjoyably as possible. So, this goal will act as a common thread with the other goals or purposes you might have for reading a particular text. The methods section following this section, will largely be focused on tools that help you engage more deeply with the text in an efficient way.

- a. **Identify why you're reading:** When you begin reading a text, it's very helpful to identify what you want to get out of reading this particular text at this particular time. When you get ready to read a text ask yourself, why am I reading this? Answers can include:
 - i. Because it was assigned for a class
 - ii. Because I need to write an assigned paper on it
 - iii. Because I've always been interested in this author or view
 - iv. Because I want to respond to the author or view
 - v. Because I want to build on the author's work in my own work
 - vi. Because I'm in a reading and discussion group
 - vii. As background for a course or subject you're interested in . . .

Identifying what your reason for engaging with the text is will help you figure out what techniques are most useful to apply for this reading of

the text (you will often revisit texts, many, many times). In other words, knowing your purpose for this particular reading will help you establish how you want to engage with the text, engaging with the text is sometimes called active reading.

Once you've identified what your goals for this reading are, you will have a better idea of what specific techniques are best suited to help you reach those goals. If you are reading because there will be a paper assigned on the topic, you might want to read fast with an eye to identifying key arguments and examples that may show up in a prompt. If you're reading to discuss with a reading group or class, you may want to focus on identifying the central contention of the text, and then go back and briefly examine areas that need clarification or that you might push back on with counterexamples – these can help drive and anchor a discussion about a text.

- b. Active Reading (engagement):** Active reading includes identifying how and why the author is making their argument, posing questions to yourself about the text that help you understand it better, and discussing the text and your questions with others. Active or engaged reading is necessary for understanding any text, philosophical or not, to the fullest extent possible. While it may be foreign or challenging to engage with the text as you read, it is extremely rewarding since engagement is an essential step in thinking for yourself about the subject matter. Many of the methods in the next section are direct ways to engage with a text.

- c. Staying Organized, In and Out of the Text:** One of the most valuable skills gained with an education in philosophy is the ability to organize your thinking on a particular subject in a clear and concise manner. Organizing your thoughts on the text includes learning to identify the structure, claims, context, and key concepts therein. It's also important to organize your reading schedule, e.g. what you will read, when you will do it, and how much time you'll devote to it. The methods and

examples sections of this document specific tools and exercises for managing a heavy and dense reading load while still engaging wholeheartedly with the text.

- d. **Be Charitable:** The principle of charity is making a sincere effort to interpret an interlocutor's or author's claims in their strongest or most compelling form. This principle has a long history in philosophy, going back to Socrates. But, being charitable isn't always easy, so it's very important to ask yourself, am I interpreting what this author is saying in the most charitable way I can? For any specific claim that you might think of as objectionable, is there a way to interpret what the author is saying that makes more sense or may be more accurate? The way you reconstruct an author's argument and the questions you pose to yourself about the text can be wonderful opportunities for checking if we are being as charitable as we can before responding to the argument.

4. Specific Techniques

What follows is an assortment of specific techniques to help you navigate and critically evaluate texts efficiently and deeply. They can be mixed and matched with each other and with techniques found elsewhere or developed by you to help achieve your goals surrounding a reading. Experiment with them, expand on them, and find what works for you in particular contexts. Exploring how they work together can help you establish your own techniques that might help others one day!

- a. **Finding the Best Times and Places to Read for You**

Everyone is different and will have different times best suited for reading philosophy depending on their personality and schedule. Some people are sharpest and most energetic in the morning, others in the middle of the night. As a general rule, one particularly fruitful time

to read a text is immediately before an opportunity to discuss it, in class or with some other group. It's also important to find out what the best reading environment for you is. Some factors to consider are:

- Location: Do you read best in your room? In a library? Outside in nature? At a coffee shop or café?
- Bodily position: Do you read better lounging on a sofa or in a comfortable chair? Sitting at a desk? Lying down?
- Paper or screen: Do you prefer to read from a paper book or printed paper, or do you prefer to read from a computer or tablet screen? (Note: if you like to read from a screen, consider investing in some kind of blue light filter, either as glasses or added to your screen directly)

b. Setting Time Limits

One very important technique that I wish I'd known coming into our program is setting time limits, particularly shorter than what you think you need, to engage a particular reading. Find the times that are best for you and see some of the exercises for fruitful and efficient reading.

- ◆ I want to emphasize that this is an extremely important skill to develop. Nearly everyone finds themselves with a reading load that is nearly impossible (or actually impossible) to manage with their schedules if they try to closely read every sentence in every text. Setting time limits can help you train yourself to look past points that aren't central to the main claims in a text, and practice makes perfect. When you start setting time limits, you'll probably only make it part way through a text. That's ok, you can extend the time limit skim to the conclusions or key sections, looking for main arguments or claims. Alternatively, you can just leave it and try again later -this is preferable - this time doing your best to ignoring qualification, sub arguments, background information and the like.

c. The First Reading: Sketching a Map

It is widely thought that the first time(s) you engage a text, you should do it with the intent to sketch out some main features like:

- Theses
- Main claims
- Key concepts
- Argument structure
- Explicit or implicit assumptions
- Examples

But how do you sketch a map of the text? The key is to go over the paper quickly, looking for phrases that indicate the general structure and main points of the paper, setting aside the details. Often times the author will use the introduction as a ‘road map’ to the structure of the rest of the work (but not always). They will then use particular phrases to ‘sign post’ what they are trying to accomplish in that section of the text. Here is a list of phrases to keep an eye out for:

- I have just – indicates a summarization of what the author takes themselves to have done in the prior section(s)
- Now, I will – indicates what the author is trying to do with the following section
- Consider (the following) – the author may be about to give an example, may be responding to someone else’s claim, or might be qualifying a claim
- I will argue x – the author is clarifying what their claim is
- I am not arguing/claiming/saying/asserting – this qualifies what the author is explicitly not arguing for, but what someone might think they are or should argue for

d. Highlighting and Shorthand

One very effective way to engage with a text actively is to use coded highlighting and/or shorthand symbols. Highlighting and using shorthand help you actively pay attention to what’s going on in a text. You’ll be critically evaluating the meaning and importance of particular

sentences and sections as you go along. There are many ways you can code for different colors and symbols.

Using this kind of coded highlighting and shorthand in these examples is a great way to organize what your reading by identifying structure and what is doing meaningful work in the text. It's a great technique to combine with time limits because you feel comfortable coming back to the text and engaging with it later on a more granular level, so if there is something you don't understand you can tag it and move on.

Another reason it's helpful to do this kind of codification is that when you come back later to reread the text you can quickly identify where the most meaningful content is.

Generally, try to code for what you want to pay attention to in a paper, i.e. if you're reading for general understanding, then code for signposting and thesis sentences. Some common things to use codified colors to highlight or tag in the margins with shorthand are:

- Signposts
- Key terms
- Premises
- Conclusions/Claims
- Theses
- Examples
- Qualifications – On an initial read it's ok to highlight that there is a qualification and skip that section for the sake of time, you can come back to it later and see how it changes the argument.
- Generally important content
- Super important content

Here is an example of a key of shorthand used by Ravit Dotan as an example for shorthand symbols:

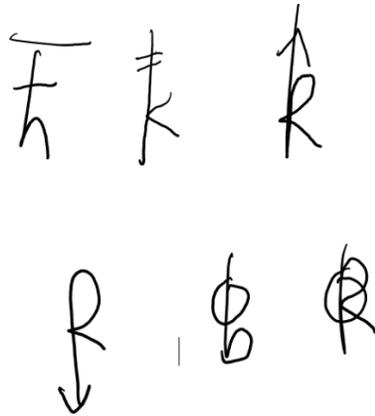


Figure 1 -These shorthand symbols were created by Ravit. From to bottom, right to left: thesis sentence, key concept, review of what came before, review of what is to come, objection to a claim, response to an objection

Here is an example of coded highlighting, also provided by Ravit from Srinivasan, Amia (forthcoming), *Radical Existentialism. The Philosophical Review*:

P.7:

It is generally thought, by internalists and externalists alike, that intuitive reflection on a range of well-known cases – brains-in-vats, unwitting clairvoyants, dogmatists, and so on – supports internalism over externalism. Meanwhile, the case for externalism is largely theoretical, resting primarily on externalism’s ability to neatly dispatch with sceptical threats, albeit at the cost of counterintuitive verdicts on cases. But the three cases I described above – RACIST DINNER TABLE, CLASSIST COLLEGE and DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – disrupt this tidy view of things. For externalism has a much easier time of vindicating what I take to be the intuitive verdicts on these cases than does internalism. In RACIST DINNER TABLE and CLASSIST COLLEGE, the subjects have a belief that is, *ex hypothesi*, reliably and safely connected to the truth. It is thus no mystery, from the externalist perspective, how such beliefs could be justified, since they straightforwardly satisfy the typical externalist conditions on justification.¹⁴ In DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, meanwhile, the subject fails to exhibit such a connection between her belief and the truth, even while doing as best as she can by her own

Figure 2 -- Codified highlighting

- Examples ~ purple
- Very important content ~ orange
- Important content - yellow

P.15:

Having set out this new challenge to internalism, the remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In §2 I offer a diagnosis as to why our intuitive verdicts diverge between these two sets of cases, old and new. In the new cases, subjects are operating under what we might call conditions of bad ideology: that is, conditions in which pervasively false beliefs sustain and are sustained by systems of social oppression. When we consider subjects operating under such conditions, I want to suggest, the externalist verdict that justification is a matter of an agent's structural relationship to the world becomes much more intuitively appealing than the internalist verdict that justification is a matter of how things stand from the agent's individual perspective.

I then go on to canvass strategies for an internalist response to my challenge. In §3 I raise, and respond to, the objection that my new cases are importantly disanalogous to the old cases. In §4 I discuss a different line of internalist criticism: that my 'bad ideology' cases are too morally/politically charged to generate reliable intuitions. In §5 I briefly show how my challenge applies to mental state internalism, and thus to internalism generally. In §6 I conclude with a discussion of how my challenge bears on the debate over externalism's status as a genuinely 'normative' epistemology, and what is deeply at stake in the choice to be an internalist or an externalist.

- Signposts – green
- Definition of key term – blue
- Very important content – orange
- Important content – yellow

Try this, read these paragraphs all the way through, and then reread them, but this time only reread the highlighted parts and see if you still get the same picture. Finally, if you're reading from a pdf, OneNote by Microsoft (included in the Office Suite for free from Berkeley) is a great tool. You can highlight, write with a stylus, and annotate with a great deal of freedom.

e. Reconstructing

After your initial (or subsequent) reading, it's very helpful to either write down a reconstruction of the main structure and claims of the text. It doesn't have to be fancy or long – a few sentences will suffice, remember

you're talking to yourself – but, writing down what you thought about the text while it's fresh will help you remember and process what you've read. The summary or reconstruction isn't just helpful for encoding what you just read long term. It also: provides an opportunity to critically engage with the kinds of questions in the next subsection, gives you a chance to see how your thinking evolves with time (it's helpful to go back on subsequent readings and see if your understanding has changed), and gets you in the practice of writing about philosophy, which will make papers of any length and depth significantly easier!

f. Asking General Questions

Having a general stock of guiding questions to ask yourself about a text is essential for active reading, engagement, and your own understanding. These are also the kinds of questions that you'll be addressing in your philosophical writing. They help you critically evaluate the text and provide you a directed way of deepening your understanding the author charitably.

Some big key questions to keep in mind throughout your reading and summarizing/reconstructing include:

- What is the author's central claim? Or, What is the author trying to convince me of?
- What is the structure of the argument?
- What does the author mean by this term or concept?
- What work is this section doing in the text? (Antonia Peacocke's reading guide, see resources, has a list of options that are very helpful at <https://antoniapeacocke.com/teaching>)

Following is an excerpt from Antonia Peacocke's writing guide that is extremely helpful for charitably engaging with a text (these are great to write in the margins or to use in structuring your summary of the text):

“1. Write down questions in the margins that you would like to ask the author, for example:

- This sentence is ambiguous; did you mean *this* or *that*?
- Does *this* claim also apply in *these* other, similar cases?
- Is *this* meant to be an assumption, or a point that you've already proven?
- What is a specific example to which *this* general claim applies?
- Try to answer these questions yourself on behalf of the author.

2. Write down objections to the author's argument, for example:

- Here's a counterexample to *this* claim.
- *This* claim doesn't follow from *that* claim, though you seem to think it does.
- *This* isn't a full explanation of the phenomenon you've set out to explain.
- *These* claims, put together, have absurd or unacceptable consequences.

Try to think about potential responses the author could make to your objections." (Peacocke, Antonia, Reading a Philosophy Paper)

g. Discussing

Similar to written summarization, reconstructing, and critically evaluation, discussing a text with your cohort, GSIs, friends, family, or faculty is a very important way to process and encode what you actually think, and to critically engage with a text. In all likelihood, you will stumble into long conversations about subject matter that arises in your coursework. But here are some tips for getting as much value as possible from discussions:

- Organize specific times to discuss specific readings or issues and try to stay on topic during those meetings.
- Have someone, or multiple people tasked with keeping the discussion on topic, and have some mechanism established for refocusing the conversation.
- Aside from the targeted meetings to discuss particular subjects, give yourself some amount of designated free discussion time to let

philosophical dialogues go where they may, but be cognizant about how much time you can commit to this and stick to your time limits.

- Use the questions you ask when reading and reflecting on the text to structure your group discussions, maybe share which questions you want to raise ahead of time.
- Making an effort to interact with other people with a variety of opinions that may help you to check how charitably your understanding and critical engagement with a text is. If it's not too distracting, then taking notes during these discussions can help you process what was discussed.

5. Exercises: Tools for Practicing Method

Following are some exercises that can be practiced as both individually and as a group that help to sharpen your philosophical tool set:

- Give yourself some time limit that is significantly shorter than you think you need to read a particular text. The rationale behind this strategy is to help you focus on the main of the text without getting bogged down in the details. If you generally average 7 pages an hour when reading philosophy, maybe give yourself an hour to read 15 pages. Once finished, try to reconstruct the argument, then try: evaluating each premise, asking what assumptions may be unstated in the text, posing one objection to the author, and considering how the author would respond.
 - Once finished reading, give yourself a short period to **write down** your reconstruction and answer the questions. Once you have discussed it with others, go back and compare your initial thoughts to what you wrote down.
- Give yourself a compressed period of time to read a text (in the same way as the last exercise) immediately before a discussion section, lecture, or study group that is on the same text. Then discuss the text to engage with it in a group setting to see what you understood well and to get a sense of what others picked up on that you may have missed. This is a great way to explore the differences each group

member found in the main point of the text, which can be followed by more specific exploration of the details.

- Keep a philosophy journal. Commit to writing for some period every day (or every weekday). 15-30 minute periods are very helpful to practice philosophical writing, organize your thinking, and provide a resource to reflect on the evolution of your ability to critically engage. The content is entirely up to you. It might be your thoughts on things you've read, your own ideas, or just to get practice exploring your philosophical thinking.

6. Acknowledgments & Other Great Resources

I would like to express special thanks to the people that have helped to provide the content that makes up this guide. First, the majority of this document stems from conversations with Ravit Dotan, a PhD candidate here at UC Berkeley. This document either wouldn't exist or would exist in severely diminished form were it not for Ravit's generosity with her time and knowledge. I would also like to thank Antonia Peacock (you can find a link to her web page and her reading and writing guides in section 6 of this document). Our gratitude also extends to Jim Pryor, whose philosophical reading and writing guides are held in the highest regard and commonly referred by our faculty here at Berkeley (also linked to in section 6). Thank you, Jim. Last but not least, I would like to thank my cohort and friends here at Berkeley, be they undergraduate students, graduate students, or faculty.

- **Jim Pryor's guide to reading philosophy can be found at ~**
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>
- **Antonia Peacocke's tips for reading philosophy can be found at ~**
<https://antoniapeacocke.com/teaching>

Finally, I want to thank everyone involved in the UC Berkeley MAP (Minorities and Philosophy) chapter. Particularly, this project never would have gotten off the ground, or would be substantially diminished without Jonah Ragir, Tony Rook, and again, Ravit Dotan.

Warm regards and best of luck,

Jeremy Salholm