

How to Read Philosophy
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How to Read Philosophy

Note: definitions of caps-locked statements are at the end of the handout.

How to Read Anything Argumentative

Read **actively**.

- Identify what trips you up, what intrigues you, or what you don't yet know, and see how the text or your own thoughts can resolve your confusion, intrigue, or ignorance.

Read with **flags**.

- Write short, change-able notes explaining the function of parts of the text.

Stages of Reading

Part 1: Stage-Setting

- **Pre-read:** Look at the reading questions, title, section headings, footnotes, first paragraph, last paragraph to identify a FOCAL STATEMENT.
- **Fast-read:** Skim the article to try to identify a THESIS STATEMENT. Flag the general structure of the argument towards that thesis (without getting bogged down).

Focal	General topic this article will discuss
Thesis	Specific claim the author hopes to prove
Sum	Summary
Spost	A signpost or statement that explicitly marks an important transition in the text
Asn	Assertion of fact or an important claim the author will argue is true
Discuss	A discussion or explanation of a view, assertion, or problem

Part 2: Understanding

- **Thorough Read:** Flag thoroughly, take written or visual notes in your own words, and write a summary detailed enough that you don't have to re-read it to remember the author's argument. The goal is to understand the text well enough to explain to a friend how the author defends their conclusion.

Dfn	Definition
Dst	Distinction
Rsn	Reason supporting an assertion or conclusion, a justification of a claim
Arg	An argument (combination of an assertion and a reason)
Con	Conclusion of an argument

Part 3: Evaluating

- Thorough Reflection: Flag moments where you think the author may have skipped a step, taken a wrong step, or stepped somewhere you don't grasp. The goal is to develop, before class, a tentative opinion on the strength of the author's argument for their conclusion.

???	What? I don't get it. I must reread this passage carefully
=x?	This means what exactly?
Why?	Why should someone agree with this?
CX	There's a counterexample to this claim
Self	This conflicts with my own beliefs
[Underline]	This is important

Two Specific Features of Philosophical Writing

Philosophical writing is often dialogical.

- Try to track when the author themselves is talking vs. when an imaginary supporter or an imaginary objector is talking.

Obj	Objection to an argument or reason
Reply	Reply to an objection
Rejoin	Rejoinder or response to a reply

Philosophical writing is often case-based.

- Ask yourself: what's the role of this case in the argument? Is it an apt example?

Real	A real-world example
Thought	A thought experiment
Dis!	A purported analogy that you find dis-analogous

Definitions

FOCAL STATEMENT: A focal statement describes the topic of the text. Focal statements often begin with phrases such as "I will discuss X, Y, and Z."

THESIS STATEMENT: A thesis statement is a more specific description of the author's goal. Thesis statements often begin with phrases such as "I will show that X is true and Y and Z are false."

This handout is adapted from David W. Concepción's "Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition" (Teaching Philosophy, 2004) and informed by advice from Mara Bollard.