

Guidelines on Reading Philosophy

It will be difficult for you to make sense of some of the articles we'll be reading. This is partly because they discuss abstract ideas that you're not accustomed to thinking about. They may also use technical vocabulary which is new to you. Sometimes it won't be obvious what the overall argument of the paper is supposed to be. The prose may be complicated, and you may need to pick the article apart sentence by sentence. Here are some tips to make the process easier and more effective.

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Skim the Article to Find its Conclusion and Get a Sense of its Structure

A good way to begin when you're trying to read a difficult article is to first skim the article to identify what the author's main conclusion is. Pay special attention to the opening and closing paragraphs, since authors will often tell you there what they intend to be arguing for. When you do figure out what the author's main conclusion is, try to restate it in your own words. This will help you to be sure that you really understand what the author is arguing for.

When you're skimming the article, try also to get a general sense of what's going on in each part of the discussion. What is the structure of the article? Sometimes authors will tell you, early in the paper, what their argument will look like. This makes your job easier.

The articles we read won't always have a straightforward structure. They won't always be of the form:

This is the conclusion I want you to accept. Here is my argument for that conclusion...

Philosophers often provide auxiliary arguments, arguments for important premises they appeal to in support of their main conclusion. For instance, the author's discussion may have the form:

The conclusion I want you to accept is A. My argument for this conclusion is as follows: B and C are true, and if B and C are true, then A must also be true. It is generally accepted that B is true. However, it is controversial whether C is true. I think you ought to accept C for the following reasons...

Here the author's main argument is for the conclusion A, and in the process of arguing for A he advances an auxiliary argument in support of C. Try to identify these auxiliary arguments, and the claims they're intended to support; and try to avoid mistaking one of these auxiliary arguments for the author's main argument.

Articles can be complex in other ways, too. Not everything the author says will be a positive conclusion or a premise in support of his conclusion. Sometimes he'll be supporting his view with a thought-experiment. Sometimes he'll be arguing for a distinction which his positive view relies on. Sometimes he'll be arguing that another philosopher's views or arguments ought to be rejected. Sometimes he'll be defending a view against somebody else's objections.

Keep an eye out for words like these when you're reading:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These are signposts which help you keep track of the structure of the discussion. For example, one philosophy article might run as follows:

Philosopher X advanced the following argument against dualism...
 The dualist has two responses to X's argument. First...
 However, this response runs into problems, because...
 A better response for the dualist says...
 X might be tempted to counter as follows... However...

and so on. The words "first" and "however" and "a better response" make it easy to see where the discussion is going. You'll also want to put signposts like these [in your own philosophical writing](#).

Here's another example:

The skeptic says that we can't tell whether we're seeing things as they really are, or whether we're brains in vats being force-fed false experiences, like the inhabitants of The Matrix.
 Y raised the following objection to the skeptic... Hence, Y concludes, we have no reason to think our situation is as bad as the skeptic makes it out to be.
 This is an attractive response to the skeptic, but I don't think it can really work, for the following reason...
 Y might respond to this problem in one of two ways. The first way is... However, this response fails because...
 The second way Y might respond is... However, this response also fails because...
 So in the end I think Y's objection to the skeptic can not be sustained. Of course, I'm not myself a skeptic. I agree with Y that the skeptic's conclusion is false. But I think we'll have to look harder to see where the flaw in the skeptic's reasoning really is.

In this article, the author spends most of his time defending the skeptic against Y's objections, and considering possible responses that Y might give. The author's main conclusion is that Y's objection to the skeptic does not work. (Notice: the main conclusion isn't that skepticism is true.)

Go Back and Read the Article Carefully

When you've figured out what the main conclusion of an article is, and what the overall structure of the article is, go back and read the article carefully. Pay attention to how the various parts fit together.

- Most importantly, figure out what the author's central argument(s) are. What reasons does he offer in support of his conclusions? Where in the article does he put these reasons forward?

Also keep an eye out for the following:

- Notice where the author says explicitly what he means by a certain term.
- Notice what distinctions the author introduces or argues for.
- Take special notice of any unargued assumptions you think the author is relying on.
- Consider various interpretations of what he says. Are there any important ambiguities that his argument fails to take account of?

All of these things will help you to understand the article better. And they'll be crucial when you're trying to evaluate the author's argument, and deciding whether or not you should accept his conclusion.

In your notes, you might make a quick outline of the article's major argumentative "pieces." Draw arrows to diagram how you think those pieces fit together. If you can't do this, then you need to go back and look at the article again to get a better understanding of what the author is up to.

You should expect to read a philosophy article more than once. I've been doing philosophy for more than ten years and I still have to read articles many times before I fully understand them. Intellectually digesting a philosophy article takes time, effort, and concentration. You definitely won't understand everything in the article the first time you read it, and there may be some parts of the article you don't understand even after reading them several times. You should ask questions about these parts of the article (in class or after class or in section, as you judge appropriate). You could say:

What is going on on p. 13? Descartes says X, but I don't see how this fits in with his earlier claim Z. Is X supposed to follow from Z? Or is he trying here to give an argument for Z? If so, why does he think that X would be a reason in favor of Z?

Evaluate the Author's Arguments

Obviously, you're only in a position to evaluate an author's argument when you've done the work of figuring out what it is he's really saying, and how his arguments work.

When you come to that point, you can start asking questions like these: Do you agree with the author? If not, what do you think is wrong with his reasoning? Does he appeal to some premise which you think is false? (Why do you think it is false?) Is there some assumption which the author does not make explicit, but which you think is false? Does his argument equivocate or beg the question?

You will often feel that the debates we examine are tangled messes and you don't know whose argument to believe. There's no escaping this. I feel this way all the time. All I can say is, if you work hard, you will be able to make some sense of the mess. You'll start to get a sense of how the different views relate to each other and what their pros and cons are. Eventually, you may realize that things are even messier than you thought, which will be frustrating, and you'll have to go back to the drawing board. This can happen over and over again. You may never reach any definitive conclusion. But each time you try to make sense of the debate, you'll find you understand the issues a little bit better. That's the way we make progress in philosophy. It never gets easier than that.

Sometimes one philosophical issue leads into three other issues, which themselves lead into yet other issues... and you can't possibly explore all of the relevant connections right then. So you'll have to learn to make do without definitive answers. You may not be able to come to a settled view about whether you should accept some philosopher's argument, because that turns on further issues P, Q, and R, which you haven't figured out yet. That's perfectly normal. Your philosophy professors often feel this way themselves, about many of the arguments they read.

Other times, you may be sure that some argument is flawed, but you won't have the time and resources to figure out, or explain and argue for, everything you think is wrong with the argument. In such cases, you may want to provisionally accept one of the argument's premises, and move on to focus on other premises, which you think are more important or which are easier to criticize. (This is why you often hear philosophers saying, "Even if we assume such-and-such for argument's sake, I still think X's argument fails, because...")