Guide To Philosophical Reading And Questioning
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Not all reading is created equal; different situations and different kinds of texts call for different ways of reading. People do not (and should not!) read novels, scientific reports, menus, history textbooks, text messages, math problems, political analyses, and instruction manuals the same way. Reading like a philosopher is a special way of reading, and very few students have much experience with this kind of reading before taking a philosophy class in college.

The following tips are designed to help you build your philosophical reading and thinking skills and develop good philosophical habits; it is a good idea to revisit this document a couple of times throughout the term.

1. To read like a philosopher, you must read texts *slowly* and *more than once*.
    a. You are required to complete the assigned readings *before* coming to class, but you will do yourself a big favor if you read (or at least skim) them again after class.
    b. Philosophical texts tend to be dense and involve many subtle distinctions. The nitty-gritty details are extremely important in philosophy; if you breeze through your readings once, you will miss some of the best parts and be unprepared to *do* all the stuff that makes a person a philosopher.

2. To read like a philosopher, you must *read actively*.
    a. It is important to avoid the passive reading that you might do when you simply need to memorize a bunch of names or dates or body parts, because that does not get you very far in philosophy.
    b. One of the most helpful things you can do to practice reading actively is to ask and try to answer questions, especially "why" questions, as you read.
    c. The following are the sorts of questions that a philosopher aims to answer while reading. I have grouped questions by content, putting multiple nearly identical questions together, so that you can get a better idea of the exact kind of answer that I'm looking for when I ask each kind of question. The groups of questions are ordered by difficulty and sophistication; without building your skills relative to the earlier groups of questions, you will not be prepared to answer the later groups of questions well. If you (try to) answer these questions in your notes as you work through each reading, you'll be ready to participate in class and you'll make yourself a really great study guide. You will also make yourself familiar with and gain practice answering the kinds of questions that you will see on graded assignments. Plus, as you practice, you'll be able to tell which kinds of questions your are getting better at answering and where you've got the most room for improvement.
        i. Did the author write a thesis statement? If so, what is the author's thesis statement? If not, how would you write a thesis statement for the author? What is the conclusion of the author's main argument?
            1. A THESIS STATEMENT is one sentence that is (ideally) written in the first person and that makes it clear to the reader what main claim the author is trying to defend via argument and thereby get

the reader to accept.

2. An ARGUMENT is a set of claims (that is, statements that can be true or false), wherein the premises (all the claims except the last one) are meant to support (that is, provide reason for believing) the final claim, which is the conclusion.
3. These are all questions about the conclusion of the main argument and therefore the conclusion of the persuasive essay as a whole. Answering them well shows that you understand the author's aim(s).
4. Once you understand the author's goal(s), it is good to reflect on exactly how the author plans to meet the self-imposed goal(s).

ii. How does the author argue for the main claim of the paper? What reasons lead the author to accept the conclusion of the main argument? What are the premises that are meant to support the author's conclusion? Why does the author think we should agree with the main claim of the paper?

1. These are all questions about the content of the author's main argument. Answering them well shows that you understand and can recreate the main argument in your own words. It also shows that you are able to figure out what the most important part of the paper is.
2. You need to be able to answer this type of questions before you are ready to answer any evaluative questions about the argument.

iii. What technical terms do you need to understand in order to understand and evaluate the author's argument(s)? How do you define those terms in the most clear and precise way possible? What, if any, are the differences between how the author uses particular words and how other philosophers or non-philosophers use those words?

1. These are all clarification questions about philosophical vocabulary. Answering them well is a crucial first step to being able to understand, recreate, and evaluate the author's argument.
2. Notice the word "you" in the second question; you need to be able to define terms in your own words, not just repeat dictionary definitions of the relevant terms. There are two reasons for this. First, dictionaries often do not define terms the way that a philosopher would, and second, if you can't explain something in your own words, then you do not really understand it yet.
3. If an author is using a word that you do not know, and you cannot figure out the meaning by looking at the context in which the author uses it, it is your job to look up that word. I recommend using a philosophical dictionary, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online), or the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online) rather than a standard dictionary like Webster's.

iv. What is the most likely explanation of what the author means by "…"? Since this author could mean *x* or *y* in this passage, which one of those meanings should I give priority in my thinking as I go forward? What was the author's intention in saying "…"?

1. These are all clarification questions about how best to interpret philosophical phrases and claims. They are like the questions in the

previous section, but they don't necessarily focus on single words, and there is more space to have differing opinions about how to answer them. Answering these questions well requires you to take into account and synthesize everything you know about the author, the historical context in which the piece was written, the goals of the text at hands, and so on.

v. Does the author make any arguments other than the main argument? If so, how do they relate to the main argument? Do the other arguments justify individual premises (that is, do they support a conclusion that functions as a premise in a larger argument)? Do they support points that are related but peripheral to the main argument? Are they distractions from or irrelevant to the main argument? What are the premises and conclusions of those other arguments?
    1. These are all questions about the relative importance of different parts of the paper. Answering them well shows that you understand and can recreate those arguments *and* that you understand how the different parts of the paper fit together and which of them are more or less important.
    2. If you find an argument, and the conclusion of it is not the one mentioned in the thesis statement, then you've found one of these other arguments.

vi. What objection(s) to the argument(s) does this author consider? Does the author discuss what people might say if they think there is a problem with the author's argument?
    1. An OBJECTION is a criticism of either (a) the structure of an argument (there might be a problem with how the premises fit together to support the conclusion, which is to say, a problematic inference) or (b) the content of one or more of the premises (a premise might be false, undefended, or indefensible). Objections tell you exactly what someone thinks has gone wrong in an argument and exactly where in the argument the problem is.
        a. A good objection should be detailed; it requires more than just a sentence.
        b. Questions do not count as objections.
        c. Saying that the conclusion is false also does not count as an objection; an objection has to engage with the *argument*, which means the reasons and reasoning, not just the outcome of the reasoning.
    2. These are all questions about *the author's* critical reflection on his or her own view. Answering them well will show me that you can understand the text and tell the difference between when the author is speaking in his or her own voice and when the author is imagining what his or her critics might say about the argument being made.

vii. Why does the author think we should not be persuaded by the objections that an opponent might make? How does the author try to respond to the imagined reasons to reject the argument(s)?

1. A RESPONSE is basically an objection to an objection. A good response tells you exactly where and how someone's objection to an argument goes wrong. By diffusing an objection, a response is a way to defend the original argument at which the objection was aimed. All the criteria for good objections carry over to good responses: they are detailed, they cannot be questions, and so on.
2. These are all questions about the how *the author* attempts to strengthen his or her position after critical reflection. Answering them well will show me that you can understand the text and tell the difference between when the author is speaking in his or her own voice and when the author is imagining what his or her critics might say about the argument being made.

viii. Can you think of any additional objections and responses to the argument(s) that the author did not write about? What potential problems with or strengths of the author's argument does the author *not* consider? Why might someone think we should not agree with the author about the conclusion of the paper, given the author's reasons in support of that conclusion? Why might someone think there is a problem with either the content or the structure of the author's argument?
    1. These are all questions about *your* critical reflections on what the author has said. Answering them well will show me that you can do more than just repeat what has already been written in your own words; it shows that you can actually add to the philosophical dialogue by pushing it forward in a new direction.

ix. If you had to take a stand, would you agree with everything, nothing, or part of what the author says? Why? As far as you can tell, are all of the premises of the argument justified and true? That is, do you think the argument has good content? In your estimation, are all the premises related in a way that supports the conclusion? That is, do you think the argument has a good structure?
    1. These are all evaluative questions about *your own* view of the argument's strengths and weaknesses. Answering them well shows me that you are able to use reasoning to evaluate the arguments of others and thus to support your own views. It also shows that you are ready to put your own conclusions to work in influencing the ways you think, speak, and act relative to the topic under consideration.

x. How does the material in this reading relate to the other readings we have done in this class? How does the material in this reading relate to material that you have covered in other classes? How does this material support or contradict ideas you have been exposed to in other contexts outside the classroom?
    1. These are all questions about your ability to situate what you are learning in a larger context. Answering them well will show me that you are integrating the material we are covering with other elements of your educational experience and your life outside the college. By doing so, you fix the material more firmly in your

memory and open up lots of opportunities for more sophisticated analysis and evaluation of the issues at hand.

xi. Does this material make you think differently about your everyday beliefs, desires, emotions, actions, relationships, and so on? If so, how? Have you changed your mind about anything after reading this article, and if so, what and why? After reading this article, do you plan to think, say, or do things differently outside of class or outside of school entirely? Do you feel differently or expect to feel differently under some circumstances now that you've thought about the issues raised in this article?
    1. These are all questions about how this reading does or might affect you as an individual. Answering them well and in the affirmative demonstrates the transformative potential of philosophical thinking.

It takes a lot of practice to get in the habit of asking and attempting to answer these questions while you read, but the more practice you give yourself, the better equipped you will be to succeed in all the elements of this class. And success in this class gives you a lot more than just a good grade on your transcript, which (to be honest) matters very little in the grand scheme of most peoples' lives. Becoming a person who thinks more like a philosopher means becoming a person who can communicate more clearly and persuasively with colleagues, loved ones, and fellow citizens. It means becoming a person who can recognize mistakes in their own thinking and thus have more true (or at least defensible) beliefs over time. It means becoming a person who has the ability to solve problems on his or her own, without a parent, boss, or other authority figure doing all the hard and interesting work for you. It means becoming a person who has the confidence to take a stand for the things that you think matter most, whatever those are.