Guide To Philosophical Note-Taking
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Updated 5/7/2014

We have all taken notes before, right? But lots of us learned to take notes on our own, without much, if any, instruction. The thing about taking notes that people tend not to tell you, if you are lucky enough to have someone teach you how to take notes, is that there is no single note-taking strategy that works equally well for all the things you might want to take notes about.

Just as the content and structure of philosophical writing tends to be different from other kinds of writing, and the strategies that are most helpful when reading philosophical writing tend to be different from that strategies that are most helpful when reading other kinds of texts, so the best strategies for taking notes for your philosophy classes tend to be different from the best strategies for other classes.

In many classes, students take notes to help them memorize, word for word, things like names, dates, and definitions. Compared to some others, philosophers are not particularly interested in being able to memorize and regurgitate information like that, since those two tasks do not require any critical thinking, and therefore do not demonstrate any particularly *philosophical* skills. So when you take notes for or during a philosophy class, your main goal may be different from what you are used to. Whether you are taking notes while reading on your own or during class, you should take the notes that will help you use your critical thinking skills as you write the notes and when you return to them later. So write down the stuff that will help you understand what the author is saying, why the author thinks whatever it is that they think, how the author's view is like and unlike the views of other authors, whether or not you agree with the author, WHY you agree or disagree with the author, and whatever questions you have about the material that you weren't able to answer just by reading the text. A list of definitions is just a start for notes about a philosophical text, and the names and dates kind of stuff is often not necessary at all.

The following are some general tips and guidelines that I figured out after years of being a philosopher; they won't work equally well for everyone, but I'll do my best to explain why I've found them to be helpful rules of thumb. My tips and guidelines focus on the notes that you would take while reading a text on your own, but they carry over fairly well to the notes that you would take during a class. I focus on the former because students are most likely to need some help when they are on their own, and because when I'm teaching a class, I write enough on the board that students who are observant and reflective can learn a lot about what kinds of notes I find most helpful in philosophy by just following my lead.

Taking Notes in a Book or Article

1. Underlining & Highlighting:
    a. Many students have a habit of underlining or highlighting anything in a text that is (or seems) important. That is not a great habit for a few reasons:
        i. Underlining & highlighting actually take quite a bit of time.
            1. The time you spend running your highlighter or pen along line after line could be better spent on *thinking* rather than what amounts to the most boring arts & crafts project ever.
        ii. They tend to make the text harder to read.

            1. Have you ever looked at a page covered in highlighter after studying for a while and seen the words start to swim around and strobe? Many of us have, and that can be avoided.
            2. Have you ever looked at a page full of underlining and had to squint to keep your focus? Many of us have, and it can be avoided.
        iii. When lots of the text is underlined or highlighted, it doesn't do anything to tell you WHY the underlined or highlighted parts seemed important, or HOW they are related to one another. All it does is tell you to go back and reread huge chunks of the text. So underlining addiction doesn't just waste your time while you are underlining, it wastes your time when you return to the text later, since you'll basically have to start from square one.
    b. So what can you do instead? How can you replace an underlining addiction with more useful habits? Using different symbols to denote different kinds of noteworthy elements of a text is usually much more useful than underlining or highlighting! Symbols generally take less time to write, and they convey a lot more information about the text! Here are some of the symbols I use to mark my texts.
        i. [Square brackets]:
            1. Whenever there is an important part of the text that I know I will want to return to, I enclose it within square brackets. This has made my life so much easier because:
                a. Writing a set of square brackets takes virtually no time, even if the chunk of text you want to mark is very big.
                b. Your eyes can easily find square brackets in a page of text.
                c. Square brackets do not impair the readability of your text
                    i. Thus a book with square brackets generally has a higher resale value than one with underlining or highlighting.
                d. Even if nearly everything on a give page ends up being enclosed within square brackets, the brackets can be used to clump together different bits of text, and thus show you where the author is transitioning from one idea to the next, and where the author is continuing on with the same idea.
        ii. Slash: /
            1. I use slashes to show contrast. There are lots of reasons that you might want to take note of a contrast in a text, including:
                a. To distinguish between two technical terms, highlighting the difference between, say, 'being oppressed' and 'suffering.' A well-placed slash makes it obvious that the two are different.
                b. To distinguish between an argument and an objection, or an objection and a response, if they appear in the same paragraph (something that I strongly discourage my students from doing in their own writing). Separating the point that one person is making from the point that would be made by their real or imagined opponent is incredibly helpful.
        iii. Numerals: 1, 2, 3 …

1. Sometimes an author lists things (reasons, objections, examples, whatever), but the list is spread through a paragraph, a page, or more. Not every list can be crammed into a single sentence, and not every list is formatted as bullet points (though it is easy to find the ones that are). It can be very helpful to you later if you just write a numeral in the margin next to each of the things on the list.

iv. Exclamation point: !

1. Exclamation points express shock, which I usually feel while reading for one of two reasons:
    a. Either the author has said something that I think must be wrong (though I may not yet be sure why I think so),
        i. This is exciting because, if I want to, I can return to this passage, try to figure out exactly how the author went wrong, develop an objection, and maybe even come up with a better alternative. Doing any of those things can make a substantial contribution to the relevant philosophical debate!
    b. Or the author has said something that I think is totally right and I have never thought about it before (or at least not that way), and for some reason it strikes me as important.
        i. This is exciting because I will probably want to return to the passage to think about it more. If it struck me as important and true, I'll want to continue thinking about the passage to be sure that it really is correct and to consider how it might give me reason to change my existing beliefs or ways of thinking.

v. Question mark: ?

1. Question marks let me know where I got confused about what the author is saying or why the author is saying it. I mark such places so that I can return to them later, try to figure them out on my own, ask my colleagues about them, read some additional material, or whatever it will take to clear things up.

vi. Underline:

1. Really, Rachel? Didn't you just say a bunch of nasty things about underlining above? Yes, I did. But I also used hedging words like 'usually' and 'generally' and 'tends to.' I do some underlining, though *very* sparingly, and usually only for single key words. Here are some examples of times when underlining a single term can be really useful (and not a relapse into underlining addiction):
    a. If an author uses a technical term, like 'epistemology' (a term I had to look up literally dozens of times as an undergraduate before I was able to remember what it means reliably), and then explicitly defines that term in the text (thank you, author!), I will underline that single word, so that anytime I need to remind myself what epistemology is, I can glance through my text really quickly to find the

definition (and I will probably also write "def." in the margin right next to that definition).

b. If an author uses a word or phrase that is functioning as a signpost, that is a good one to underline. A word functions as a signpost when it tells you explicitly (or at least gives you a clue about) the task that the author is trying to achieve in that particular part of the text. Here are some examples of terms that can be used to as signposts (though note that these terms are not *always* used as signposts, so you should not just underline them every time they appear):
   i. Therefore / thus / so / in conclusion
   ii. Despite / however / nevertheless
   iii. Goal / aim / purpose / thesis
   iv. Alternatively / in contrast
   v. Assume / suppose
   vi. Example
   vii. Objection
   viii. Response
   ix. Because

vii. But suppose that the author doesn't use those signposts? Suppose you have to read between the lines to figure out that the author has turned his or her attention away from the main argument and toward a potential objection? Well, in that case, writing 'objection' in the margin will be incredibly useful! Once you've done the hard work of figuring out what is going on, use a brief word or two in the margin as a signpost for yourself later on.

<u>Taking Notes in a Notebook or Digital Document</u>

1. Appropriate Citation
   a. Always include a full citation in your notes of the sort that you could copy directly into your bibliography or works cited page, because:
      i. It gives you practice writing bibliographic citations, which most students need.
      ii. This good habit decreases the likelihood of your accidentally plagiarizing.
      iii. It saves you time in the long run to do this the first time that you have the text in front of you.
      iv. If it has been a while since you've taken the notes, or if you are loaning them to a friend, you (or your friend) will be able to find the text that the notes are about even if you don't remember the specific edition, translation, or whatever.
   b. Always enclose in quotation marks and cite every direct quotation from any source.
      i. If you copy into your notes without appropriate citation, that is plagiarism.
      ii. Students regularly get caught and punished for plagiarizing because they copied from a source into their notes without citation, and then later copied from their notes into a paper, thinking that the words were their own and not in need of citation. Don't risk it! Plagiarism is a problem whether it was done intentionally or accidentally, so saying that you made

an "honest mistake" is not a legitimate excuse for plagiarism.

iii. See also the reasons for (a).

c. Always note the page number when you paraphrase from a source in your notes.

i. See the reasons for (a) and (b).

2. Choosing a Format

a. There are lots of ways that you might format your notes. Which format is best depends somewhat on the specific goals that you are trying to achieve by taking the notes, as well as your particular strengths and weaknesses. I'm just going to talk about the three note-taking formats that I use on a regular basis.

i. Outline

1. This kind is probably the kind most familiar to and often used by undergraduates in philosophy classes, and it is often good (though not always the best).
2. The body of this document follows the outline format, with different levels of indenting, letters, numbers, and roman numerals to organize the different ideas under discussion.
3. Taking this kind of notes prepares you for class discussion and small to medium sized assignments. It helps you develop your understanding of the text as a whole, without necessarily having any more specific task in mind ahead of time.
4. Benefits of this format are:

a. It is relatively familiar to most students.

b. It is easy to read.

5. Drawbacks of this format are:

a. Students tend to think that they can do a decent outline as they read through a text for the first time, but generally, you need to read the whole thing through once, and then write an outline as you read through a second time in order to correctly translate the structure of the text into your outline. If you don't put in a good amount of time, your outline can be pretty poor quality without your realizing it.

b. Sometimes the outline format lures students into spending all their note-taking time on describing what the author said and none of their time on what they think about the author's views, how the author's views relate to other views, potential support or criticism for the view that the author has left out, and so on.

ii. Page by page

1. This kind is probably less familiar to most undergraduate students.
2. Taking notes page by page (or paragraph by paragraph, or section by section, or chapter by chapter) is exactly what it sounds like. You start by noting the first page of the book or article, and then explain what happens on that page. Only when you've hit captured all the main elements from that first page do you move on to the second page and do the same thing. Once you've read the second page, you may need to go back to your notes about the first page and make some changes.

a. If you would like to see an example of this kind of notes, just visit Rachel in office hours and ask.

3. Taking this kind of notes prepares you for class discussion and small to medium sized assignments. It helps you develop your understanding of the text as a whole, without necessarily having any more specific task in mind ahead of time.
4. Benefits of this format are:
    a. It divides the text into smaller, more manageable chunks, which helps students who find philosophical texts intimidating. In general, the more you can do to break your philosophical work down into smaller tasks and to proceed through the small tasks systematically, the more confidence you will feel and the less likely you are to make big mistakes.
    b. Because it is generally less familiar and it divides the text into bits, this kind of note-taking forces students to slow down, which is often particularly helpful both for students who are struggling and for students who are particularly committed to or interested in mastering the material.
    c. For the same reasons, this also tends to help people do more critical thinking and less mere copying.
5. Drawbacks of this format are:
    a. It is less familiar.
    b. It isn't always as easy to read.
    c. It tends to take more time than students would generally spend if taking notes in outline format (but not more time than a *good* outline).

iii. Specific goal

1. This kind is usually not the best option for undergraduates unless they are writing substantial term papers, thesis papers, or other capstone-type projects that require them to seek out sources beyond the ones that a whole class is required to read.
2. This is what you do when you already know what you want to write or talk about, and you have reason to believe that you've found a text that will help you work toward that specific goal that you already have in mind.
3. Before writing this kind of notes, you need to identify the specific things that you will be looking for as you read the text. For instance, you might be looking for references to a certain text, objections to a particular kind of argument, and evidence in support of one particular claim. If those are the three things you are looking for, then your notes will be divided into three parts, and whenever you come across a bit of text relevant to one of those three things, you make a note of the page number(s) and why it seems relevant in that specific section of your notes.
4. This kind of note-taking is good insofar as:
    a. It saves you time.
    b. It keeps you focused.

    c. It organizes your notes in the way that will be most useful when you turn your attention back to your own writing.

3. To speak very generally, philosophical texts are argumentative (meant to persuade) so the most important things to articulate in your notes about a philosophical text are:
    a. WHAT the author is trying to convince the audience to believe (and/or do),
    b. WHY the author thinks we ought to believe (and/or do) that,
    c. HOW the author's views is like or unlike the views of others whose work you've studied, and
    d. WHETHER and WHY you agree or disagree with the various parts of the author's views.