

Tips for Understanding Philosophy

The worst readers. — The worst readers are those who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole.

— Nietzsche, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, 137.

Marks of the good writer. — Good writers have two things in common; they prefer to be understood rather than admired; and they do not write for knowing and over-acute readers.

— Nietzsche, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, 138.



[I]n the midst of an age of ‘work’, that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once, including every old or new book: — this art [philology--or philosophy!] does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.

— Nietzsche, *Dawn Preface*

Lectures

- Read the material before lecture. A good lecture does not just regurgitate what was in the reading. It gives some description but also moves ahead to interpretation and analysis of the issues in the reading. Often students complain that a professor was “off on a tangent”; sometimes they’re right, but often I have found that they hadn’t done the reading first (so, how could they even know what a tangent was?).
- Bring questions about the reading to lecture. Keep them in mind as you listen; if they’re not answered, bring them up if possible.
- Don’t try to write everything down. Real listening takes a lot of concentration. Transcribing a lecture will take too much attention away from your ability to understand the meaning of what is said. (Don’t lose the forest for the trees.) We will review the material in section, so focus on the larger themes being covered. Make notes about these themes and about question which you have. These are the building blocks of understanding much more than is a hastily-made transcription.
- Compare your lecture notes with other classmates; this helps eliminate gaps and clarify the points made by the professor. Check them with me (if you like) in section or during office hours.

Readings

- Philosophy needs to be re-read. Unlike some fiction, philosophy needs to be read slowly and deliberately. Don’t rush through it -- think about issues as they are raised, going back and forth if necessary. And if you’re burning out, take a break. You will find that a text can seem quite different the second time through. Thomas Kuhn, a noted philosopher, wrote

When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer, ...when these passages make sense, then you may find that more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have changed their meaning. (Kuhn, from The Essential Tension, p. xii.)

- Margin Writing (or “glossing”) is better than highlighting/underlining. It takes time and slows things down (I read about 10 pages an hour!) but it forces you to constantly ask yourself: What did I just read? Did that make sense? Summing up a paragraph in the margins makes studying much easier because you already have the bullet points of a crib sheet written. Highlighting, on the other hand, often turns into a cheap substitute for careful concentration; how many books have you seen with entire pages highlighted? Were those readers grasping the main points? Probably not.
- Note Problem Passages (e.g., with a “?” or “Q.”) as you read. These are good points for discussion in section (where we can clarify or debate them). It’s so easy to let a question go and move ahead but that only makes studying later more difficult. Copy out important points and questions you have onto a separate sheet of paper; in other words, organize as you go along.
- Read philosophy in a different order than fiction. Often a philosophical work can be made easier to understand if you read the contents, introduction (philosopher’s, editor’s, or both) and conclusion first. In other words, size it up. This frames for you what the writer is trying to do. Skimming the first sentence of each paragraph can also help. Then, go ahead and read the assignment from beginning to end. (Don’t write as you read the intro./conclusion--just get the gist.)
- Sum up what you have read in a single paragraph. Take 10-15 minutes to write this up right after you’re done reading. (This serves a similar function as margin writing, but is cumulative.)
- Use secondary sources when you’re out of ideas. Such sources are valuable when you have hit a brick wall or are short on time. Not a recommended substitute for primary material!!

General Tips

- Discuss Philosophy with classmates. More than almost any other subject, philosophy must be discussed and debated to be clearly understood. Get together to ask each other questions, review, compare lecture notes, etc. Read each other’s papers before handing them in.
- Bring questions and problems to my office hours (or Dr. Mackey’s) well before the tests or papers. Getting a clue early can save a lot of last-minute desperation.
- No question is too simple for discussion section. Chance are, others have the same question.