Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition

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This paper describes how and why I help students learn how to read philosophy. I argue that explicit reading instruction should be part of lower level philosophy courses. Specifically, students should be given metacognitively informed instruction that explicitly discusses relevant background knowledge. In the postscript, I note that student reactions to this type of instruction verify its necessity. The appendix contains a "How to Read Philosophy" handout that I use in my classes.

An Argument for Explicit Reading Instruction

Very few introductory books explain how to *read* primary philosophical texts. Much of the reading instruction that is available is either not entirely accessible to students or missing information that students want and need.[1] Students need reading instruction and part of what they need is not currently available.

A comment regarding how my "How to Read Philosophy" handout (see appendix) was developed will further illuminate what seems to be missing. I began by recognizing that there is a difference between what is familiar to professors and what should be obvious to students.[2] Students do not know what professors know about reading philosophy and what professors know will not be obvious to students. The task then was to write down what professors know about reading philosophy and to describe what professors do when they read. It is just this type of articulation of methods and assumptions that many students need to succeed. (See postscript)

The relative absence of appropriate "How to Read" material is peculiar. As years of listening to plaintive students teaches, intelligent and literate general studies and early major students lack the skills needed to read philosophy well. Students are not familiar with the folkways of academic philosophy and are too often left to learn them through trail

and error. But we do our students a disservice if we let them flounder through with nothing but trial and error. Philosophy professors should not ask students in introductory or early major classes to spend three hours or more per week doing something they have never done before (i.e., read like a philosopher) without telling them how to do it. This is particularly true since we know they are likely to think reading philosophy is just like reading anything else.

Another reason to explicitly show students how to read philosophy is that reading primary texts well is *doing* philosophy, not merely *reading about* philosophy. If a student is truly engaged in reading she will be evaluating and making arguments. If we show students how to read philosophy well we will increase learning and when learning is increased, student enjoyment and retention tend to rise as well.

In sum, if (i) the skills required to read philosophy well are different from other reading skills, (ii) reading philosophy well is doing philosophy, and (iii) people build new skill more completely when they are explicitly shown *how* to perform the skill, then explicitly showing students how to read philosophy well will empower them to read philosophy in a more meaningfully way and thereby increase learning, enjoyment, and retention.

Reading Philosophy and Background Knowledge

There are multiple goals achieved by reading. There are also multiple methods of reading. Nevertheless, background knowledge and meta-cognition are central to expert reading in all settings.[3] In this section, background knowledge is discussed.

Readers understand a text when they construct a meaning by combining the result of decoding letters and words with what they already know. Readers with relatively little relevant background information read very slowly, in part because having so little background knowledge makes constructing the gist of a text difficult. As E. D. Hirsch noted, when "readers constantly lack crucial information, dictionaries and encyclopedias become quite impractical tools. A consistent lack of necessary information can make the reading process so laborious and uncommunicative that it fails to convey meaning."[4] Students confirm Hirsch's claim when they say, "I get nothing out of the reading."

To see how constructivist readers need background knowledge to develop an accurate and rich understanding, consider the following example.

> A federal appeals panel today upheld an order barring foreclosure on a Missouri farm, saying that U.S. Agriculture Secretary John R. Block has reneged on his responsibilities to some debt ridden farmers. The appeals panel directed the USDA to create a system of processing loan deferments and of

publicizing them as it said Congress had intended. The panel said that it is the responsibility of the agriculture secretary to carry out this intent. Not as a private banker, but as a public broker.[5]

Hirsch notes that a great deal of background knowledge is necessary to fully understand this text. "What is a federal appeals panel? Where is Missouri and what about Missouri is relevant to the issue? Why are many farmers debt ridden? What is the USDA? What is a public broker?"[6] John T. Bruer expands Hirsch's insight:

> We need background knowledge in reading for at least two reasons. First, background knowledge helps us make inferential links among the sentences that are written on the page. . . . Second, we need background information to construct and retain a text's gist. Given how our long-term memory works, to understand and remember what we read we have to relate the new information to schemas already in long-term memory. When background knowledge isn't active or available, we can remember very little of what we read.[7]

Given how unfamiliar most general studies and early major students are with background information that is idiosyncratic to philosophy and philosophy course culture, we should not be surprised that many students do not manage to develop a rich understanding of some of the texts we ask them to read. One symptom of this inadequate under-standing is the ubiquitous question: "Will this be on the test?" Many students do not realize that (much of) their grade is determined by their ability to perform skills beyond regurgitating information.

The need for relevant background information has implications for teaching philosophy courses.[8] Professors should give students as much background information as possible regarding the idiosyncra-sies of philosophy generally as well as the special idiosyncrasies of the particular course being taught. Certainly no professor can give all of her students all of the relevant background knowledge needed to move beyond novice performance. However, no professor is completely powerless and each professor fails her students if she does not give what she can. The "How to Read Philosophy" handout in the appendix represents one manifestation of this background information.

Further, professors should help students gather more background information by requiring the mastery of relevant basic philosophical content, such as the definition of a sound argument. Exams should have a comprehensive short answer section to encourage this mastery. Simple mastery of information is an interactive prerequisite for the creation of rich understanding. Exams should also have essay sections because students actually create rich understanding in essays. However, explicit instruction regarding how to integrate knowledge effectively in an essay must also be offered. Without such essay writing instruction students are likely to (typically falsely) assume that essays are simply the location of comprehensive regurgitation of facts. Unless students

are shown how to build reflective arguments from the information they have mastered they are likely to produce essays that seem to parrot the material. Purely "objective" exams are problematic because they do not give students the opportunity to create rich understanding. Exam essays are problematic when they are not accompanied by a requirement that facts be mastered. Dual format exams should encourage learning more fully than single format exams because dual format exams demand the mastery of information *and* encourage students to create their own rich understanding of the material.

The "How To" In "How to Read Philosophy"

The "How to Read Philosophy" handout (see appendix) begins with a description of some of the background information that instructors are apt to assume their students have. Good reading behaviors and unique features of philosophy texts are described. Also described are the differences between reading for enlightenment and reading for information, the differences between problem-based, historical, and figure-based philosophy classes, and the differences between primary and secondary sources. Next, three facets of the process of successful reading are delineated: stage setting, understanding, and evaluation.[9] The stage setting facet requires students to read the entire article quickly. The understanding facet requires students to re-read the entire article very carefully. During the stage setting read each student develops his or her own background information regarding the text. This particularized background information facilitates understanding during the careful re-read. Further, instructions regarding how to take notes while reading are provided, as are examples of note taking and key phrases. The dialogical nature of philosophical texts is also discussed. Finally, some frequently asked questions about reading philosophical texts are answered.

Of course, creating and distributing a handout alone does not typically solve learning problems. A number of scaffolding activities occur before and after students read the handout. First, students read, summarize, and evaluate a short passage in class. Second, students describe what they did while they read, summarized, and evaluated. Each student saves this pre-instructional self-reflection for comparison to post-instructional self-reflection. Third, students read the "How to Read Philosophy" handout. Fourth, students read, flag, summarize, and evaluate the passage again. Fifth, they compare their pre-instructional and post-instructional work to identify what they have learned. This second comparative self-assessment is turned in.[10] Sixth, to make further aspects of the learning process explicit, students examine the comparative post-instructional self-assessment of some of their class-

mates. Seventh, students turn in a formal summary of a complex text. In this summary students are expected to pull together what they have learned into a polished piece of writing. (Instructions for summary writing are provided to students separately.) Finally, this learning process is reinforced by the inclusion of questions regarding "How to Read" in the short answer portion of the exam.

These particular assignments may not fit well in every class. However, the underlying process may be used in a great many contexts. It may be useful then to describe the process in more general terms. We should (i) explicitly show students how to perform the desired skill, (ii) provide detailed models or examples, (iii) give students opportunities to practice the skill in a non-threatening (i.e., pass or fail) environment, (iv) show students how to engage in self-assessment of their performance and require them to do so, (v) evaluate students with very high standards on an attempt to perform the entire skill to the best of their ability, and (vi) reinforce the learning that has occurred by including exam questions regarding how to perform the skill.

Reading and Metacognition

Perhaps what is least familiar to philosophers about the procedure just described are its self-assessment and self-reflection aspects. Learning theorists refer to self-assessment and self-reflection as metacognition. Metacognition is "the ability to think about thinking, to be consciously aware of oneself as a problem solver, and to monitor and control one's mental processing."[11] In this section, metacognition is discussed in more detail.

Bruer concludes that the "most important implication [of recent educational research] is that *how* we teach is as important as what we teach. . . . In short, high-order skills require extensive domain knowledge, understanding when to use the knowledge, and metacognitive monitoring and control. Students who have these things can solve novel, ambiguous problems; students who have high-order skills are intelligent novices."[12] It seems obvious that *how* we teach is important. However, if we unpack Bruer's conclusion we find that his insights recommend some not entirely obvious practices.

Bruer distinguishes between experts and novices.[13] Experts very skillfully work within a domain (e.g., philosophy) because they have extensive domain-specific knowledge and vast experience "chunking" that domain-specific knowledge. Experts are better than non-experts at grouping related information into a useful, accessible chunk that can be unpacked quickly. For example, experts in moral philosophy easily recognize the conceptual linkages among moral constructivism, subjectivism, intersubjectivism, and objectivism. Experts group these

ideas into one intellectually manageable package of related but dissimilar ideas. Novices may not notice the conceptual linkages. Novices may attempt to memorize the meanings of these terms in isolation by rote. Such novices may be able to accurately identify these definitions on a multiple-choice exam. However, they are likely to have difficulty writing a sophisticated essay because they have not discerned the similarities and dissimilarities needed for rich understanding. To help students perform better, professors should do their best to explicitly describe how they chunk information.

Bruer also notes that among "the basic metacognitive skills are the ability to predict results of one's own problem-solving actions, to check the results of one's own actions (Did it work?), to monitor one's progress toward a solution (How am I doing?), and to test how reasonable one's actions and solutions are against the larger reality (Does this make sense?)."[14] Some novices have more metacognitive skill than others. Students differ in their ability to monitor and control their own learning progress. The metacognitive skills of juniors and seniors tend to be much more sharply honed than are those of first and second year students.

Importantly, students with better metacognitive skills learn new information more easily, accurately, and completely than students with weaker metacognitive skills. Good metacognition is a principle asset in learning.[15] If we want students to learn as much as possible, then we should help them improve their metacognitive skills.

Metacognition is involved in how I teach novices to read philosophy more successfully. Students have self-assessment questions to answer while reading. They must explicitly compare their self-reflection with the self-reflection of others. And, they must turn in written assignments to demonstrate their success.

There are other less obvious ways to encourage metacognition. For example, early in the semester students are *required* to pass notes to each other in class. At the end of class, each student must have contributed at least one question or answer to a written dialogue that took place in note passing during class. To receive credit, students must be on the lookout for material that they do not sufficiently understand and write a question or answer regarding it. In other words, students are given credit for being metacognitive during class.

One may worry that note passing is a dangerous practice because it provides cover to those who want to write off-topic notes and it distracts students from lecture. These worries seem unfounded. First, most students are quite good at multi-tasking. Students can write notes and pay attention to lecture at the same time. Second, the benefits outweigh the burdens: an improved ability to formulate a good question and a greater awareness of when one needs to ask a question. If

the notes are turned in, instructors may receive the further benefit of valuable feedback regarding what is unclear to quiet students. Also, some students use the opportunity to have passionate debates with classmates. One day when the topic of the lecture was secular meta-ethics two students independently discovered the "Euthyphro" question about piety, moved to a discussion of God's attributes in an attempt to resolve it and finally discussed the problem of evil. Their thinking was not as rigorous as it should be by the end of the semester. Neverthe-less, for two students to spontaneously generate an in-depth, on-task conversation in their second week of college is no small achievement. Further, even if students do goof-off during note passing time, they are only getting less out of the class if they are goofing-off more than they would have had note passing not been a part of the course.

Conclusion

By making familiar but not obvious background information explicit and making instruction more metacognitively aware we can improve student learning. Specifically, metacognitively informed instruction that explicitly discusses relevant background information assists philosophi-cal novices to more fully develop the skills necessary to read and do philosophy well. Examples of how to provide this type of instruction include "How To" handouts, dual format exams, credited self-reflec-tions, and note passing.

Postscript: A Comment on Student Reactions

Student reactions to the "How to Read Philosophy" handout further confirm the necessity of explicit instruction regarding metacognition, background knowledge, and "How To" information. Students were asked to write individual reflections about what they learned by reading the handout. Students compared their responses in groups and wrote down four things that at least one member of their group learned. In this unscientific survey, students most frequently reported that they learned that flagging, or abbreviated note taking, is superior to high-lighting. During discussion, one student said almost incredulously to the only group of students that did not include the importance of flagging on their list: "Flagging the article actually helps." The second most frequent response was that re-reading is important to develop under-standing. As one student wrote, "There is a lot more reading involved than first thought." Another student summarized the third most frequent response by saying, "*Every* word is important."

What is most striking about these responses is that students *learned* that re-reading complex material is important for developing an accurate

understanding of the text. Some students did not enter class knowing that re-reading is important for understanding. If students do not know that re-reading is important for understanding when they arrive in core curriculum and early major philosophy classes, then they are likely to think that the understanding garnered from a first read *is* a rich understanding. Without explicit reading instruction many students will not know that they did not fully understand a text that they just read. Consequently, many students will take no steps to increase their understanding. This fact is further evidence of the importance of explicit background information, metacognition, and "How To" instruction. Students need to be taught what constitutes rich understanding and how to assess how well they are doing in their attempts to develop it.

APPENDIX

How to Read Philosophy

(*Warning: Do not use a highlighter when reading this. As you read on, you'll learn why*.)

Introduction

Even if you are very smart and very literate, as I assume you are, confusion and frustration may occur if you do not read philosophy in the way philosophers expect you to. There is more than one *way* to read. In this handout, I describe the basics of How to Read *Philosophy*.

What to Expect

Reading philosophy is an activity and, like any activity (e.g., playing volleyball), it takes practice to become good at it. As with any attempt to learn a new skill, you will make some mistakes along the way, get frustrated with the fact that you are progressing more slowly than you would like, and need to ask for help. You may become angry with authors because they say things that go against what you were brought up to believe and you may become frustrated because those same authors argue so well that you cannot prove them wrong. It is likely that you will find unfamiliar vocabulary, abstract ideas, complexly organized writing, and unsettling views. I mention this because it is normal to have certain reactions, such as confusion, outrage, and frustration, when first encountering philosophy. *Don't confuse these reactions with failure*. Many students who have come before you have had the same initial reactions and succeeded, even your professor.

The Ultimate Goal

Your aim is to develop, or become more confident in, your personal belief system, by building on what you already know about yourself and the world. By evaluating arguments regarding controversial issues, you

should learn to take a well-justified stand that you are able to defend. When you read philosophy you should look for arguments, reasons, and conclusions, not facts, plot or character development, to help you reach your goal of evaluating the plausibility of various positions a person might take on some issue.

Basic Good Reading Behaviors[16]

• Take care of yourself (take breaks, sit where you won't be distracted, give yourself enough time to read well, sit in an uncomfortable chair to avoid dozing off, etc.)

• Interact with the material (talk to your friends and classmates about what you have read, use a dictionary and philosophical encyclopedia while reading, remember you are reading one person's contribution to an ongoing debate, disagree with the author)

• Keep reasonable expectations (you may not understand everything without some effort, you may need to ask for help or clarification).

• Be able to state the author's conclusion and the gist of the argument for that conclusion BEFORE you come to class.

• Evaluate the gist of the author's argument BEFORE class.

• FLAG and TAKE NOTES. (Flagging is explained below)

Important Background Information

Reading for Information versus Reading for Enlightenment
You are familiar with reading for information: You pass your eyes over some words until some information about the world sticks in your head. Reading for enlightenment may be less familiar. When you read for enlightenment you use a text as an opportunity to *reflect* upon yourself and your beliefs. Part of the reason why reading for enlightenment is not easy is because self-evaluation often results in personal growth and sometimes when we grow, we experience growing pains.

Problem-Based, Historical or Figure-Based Philosophy Classes
This is a problem-based class. In problem-based classes, students spend most of their time identifying, reflecting upon, and defending their beliefs. This is *not* a historical or figure-based course. In historical classes, students spend most of their time learning certain themes in the history of philosophy. In figure-based classes, students spend most of their time mastering what certain philosophers think.

In problem-based courses like this one, students read relatively short primary and secondary sources. A secondary source is a text that describes what other people have argued. The textbook for this class is a secondary source. A primary source is a text where a person actually argues that a certain position is correct. The course packet contains primary sources.

So, *you are in a problem-based course where you are supposed to read primary sources for enlightenment.* But how, exactly, does one read for enlightenment? Well, strong philosophy readers, people who read with care, do three things. As people increase their ability to read philosophy well they gradually become unaware that they do facet one and they combine facets two and three. However, it is a good idea for non-experts to do one thing at a time.

A Three-Part Reading Process
Facet One—Stage Setting
(1) Pre-Read:
For a very short time, examine the general features of the article. Look at the title, section headings, footnotes, bibliography, reading questions, and biography of the author. The goal of the pre-read is to get a basic idea of what the article is about. If you know what an article is about, it is easier to make sense of the individual sentences in it. Also, skim the first and last paragraph to see if you can easily identify a focal or thesis 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." 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."

While doing the pre-read, ask yourself "How am I doing?" by answering the following questions:

Is this a primary or secondary text? Should I expect an argument or a description of an argument?

Am I reading for information or enlightenment?

What is the focal statement of the article? Is there a thesis statement? What is it?

What should I expect to find in the text in light of the title?

Are there section headings? If yes, what can I learn about the article from them?

Is there a bibliography? If yes, what can I learn about the article from it?

Are there footnotes? Are they essentially documentation or do they say something? (This lets you know whether you need to read them when you see a number in the text.)

Are there reading questions attached? If yes, in light of these questions, what can I expect to find in the text?

(2) Fast-Read:
Read the entire article fairly quickly. The goal of the fast-read is to develop a basic understanding of the text. When doing the fast read, remember to do the following:
• Identify the thesis statement.

Warning: You may not be able to do this until you reach the end of the article. Mark anything that seems like it might be a thesis statement or conclusion when you first notice it, then pick the one that seems most central when you are done. In some cases, the author may not even actually write a thesis statement down, so you may need to write one for the author.

• Look up definitions of words you don't know and write them in the margins.
Warning: Don't get bogged down while doing this. If it is too difficult to figure out which meaning of a term an author seems to have in mind, or if you have to read an entire encyclopedia entry to figure out the meaning, just move on. (If you read near a computer see On-line Dictionary: http://dictionary.reference.com/ and Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/.)

• FLAG the structure of the article in as much detail as possible without getting bogged down. When you flag a text you put marks in it that will allow you to reconstruct the meaning of the text without having to re-read the entire text again. *See below for specific suggestions on how to flag an article*.

• Don't let anything stop your progress. This is a fast read. You may skim long examples.

While doing the fast-read, ask yourself "How am I doing?" by answering the following questions:

Have I identified the thesis statement and written it down?

Do I know what the conclusion of the author's argument is and have I marked places in the text where important steps toward that conclusion occur?

Facet Two—Understanding

Develop a sophisticated understanding of the text. You should be able to explain to a friend how the author defends her/his conclusion. Once you are able to coherently explain the article in your own words, you have truly internalized it—good job. When reading for understanding, remember to do the following:

• Re-read the entire article VERY CAREFULLY.

• Correct and add to your previous flagging.

• Take lots of notes. In these notes, rephrase what the author says in your own words.
Remember: You should practice the principle of charity when taking notes. Describe the author's view in the most favorable way possible. If you have trouble taking notes, stop at the end of every section or paragraph (sometimes even every sentence) and mentally rephrase the meaning of the text in your own words.

• Draw diagrams or flow charts of the major moves in the article if doing so helps you.

• Bring together all your work so far into a summary that is detailed enough that you won't have re-read the article again to remind yourself of the author's argument.

While reading for understanding, ask yourself "How am I doing?" by answering the following questions:

Do I know *exactly* what the author is saying? Have I re-re-read passages that were confusing at first?

Can I connect the dots? Can I explain in my own words why the author concludes what she or he concludes? (In the fast-read you find the conclusion and do your best to figure out the steps to it. In the read-for-understanding, you come to fully understand each step in detail.)

Facet Three—Evaluating

Now that you have made yourself a concise and easy to articulate summary of the author's argument, it is time to evaluate it. When evaluating, your main tool is the summary you made, but you will need to re-re-read certain passages. At this stage, you are entering the debate, rather than simply learning about it. When evaluating a text, remember to do the following:

• Fix any mistaken flagging as you re-re-read important passages.

• Write down anything new that you discover as you go through the text again.

While evaluating a text, ask yourself "How am I doing?" by answering the following questions:

Have I looked to see if every conclusion in the text is well defended?

Have I thought about how an undefended conclusion could be defended? (Have I been charitable?)

Do I think the arguments for the conclusions are persuasive? Why or why not?

Can I think of any counter-examples to any assertion made by the author?

Can I put my finger on exactly what bothers me about what the author says? Can I explain where and why I think the author made a mistake?

Have I thought about how the author might respond to my criticism?

Have I identified some of my own beliefs that can't be true if the author is right?

Is there is a conflict between what I believe and what the author says? If so, to avoid being a hypocrite I must ultimately change my mind or show that the author's reasoning fails in some way. *Simply identifying a disagreement does not constitute an evaluation.*

Have I figured out, exactly, what the author got wrong so that I may continue to believe as I always have with confidence?

Have I figured out, exactly, which of my beliefs I must change in light of what I have learned from the author?

Have I looked for some point that the author did not consider that might influence what I think is true?

Two Important Details
(1) Flagging

When you flag a text you put short notes, preferably in pencil, in the margins of the text (unless you are using a library book) that will remind you of many details in the text so that you will not have to re-read an entire text to reconstruct its meaning in your head. Flagging marks allow you to pick out various important features of the text for further study.

Flagging is better than highlighting because flagging is more detailed than highlighting. If all you're interested in doing is distinguishing something that seems important from other stuff that doesn't seem important then highlighting is fine. But you want to do more than just distinguish important from unimportant. There is more than one kind of important thing in a philosophy text, and you want to mark your text in such a way that you can tell the difference. Another good thing about flagging is that you can "unflag" and you can't "unhighlight." The flexibility to change your notes is important because sometimes as you read further into a text, or read it a second time, you realize that something that seemed important really isn't important.

There are many ways to flag a text. You should develop your own method and notations. You should use whatever marks help you attain the goal of noting the different types of important parts of a text. A part of the text is important when it must be present for the author's conclusion to make sense. On some occasions important things are a sentence or a clause in length, but other times important things are a paragraph or a page long. The following are suggestions of abbreviations that have been particularly useful to me. But, again, feel free to use terms not on the list that you find helpful and ignore any, or all, of these if you find them unhelpful. In addition to these terms, I circle "list" words (e.g., First, second, [i], [ii]) and I underline definitions.

Tracking the Flow[17]

Focal	General topic this article will discuss
Thesis	Specific claim the author hopes to prove
Dfn	Definition
Dst	Distinction
e.g.	Example
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

Rsn   Reason supporting an assertion or conclusion, a justi-
           fication of a claim
Arg   An argument (combination of an assertion and a reason)
Obj   Objection to an argument or reason
Reply   Reply to an objection
Rejoin   Rejoinder or response to a reply
Con   Conclusion of an argument
Sum   Summary
Spost   A signpost or statement that explicitly marks an im-
           portant transition in the text

Self-Monitoring
???   What? I don't get it. I must reread this passage carefully
=x?   This means what exactly?

Reader Evaluation
Why?   Why should someone agree with this?
[<u>Underline</u>] This is important

Flagging should naturally evolve into note taking. If you are inclined
to write "???" in a margin, it is a good idea to write out more fully
what confused you. If you can articulate your confusion you are a good
way down the road to figuring out what's going on. During your re-
read for understanding make sure to spend as much time as necessary
to fully grasp what is going on in the "???" section.

(2) Key Words
Some students find the following list of words or phrases that signal
a significant moment in a text helpful. However, there are many texts
where authors will not use any of these terms or phrases. These are
words or phrases to be aware of so that if they come up you are ready,
but you should not read a text as if you are on a treasure hunt for these
words or phrases.

Focal statements are often signaled by phrases such as 　I will discuss 　Consideration will be given to 　My main concern is	*Thesis statements are often signaled by phrases such as* 　In this paper I argue that 　I hope to conclude that 　I will show that
Premises, Reasons, or Assertions are often signaled by words or phrases such as 　Because, Since, For, Whereas 　Secondly, It follows that 　Given that 　As shown or indicated by 　The reason is that	*Objections or criticisms are often signaled by words or phrases such as* 　Moreover, However 　It could be objected that 　Opponents of my view might claim 　Critics might say, On the other hand 　There is reason to doubt
Replies or Rejoinders are often signaled by words or phrases such as 　This criticism fails because 　My opponent does not notice that 　In response we should remember 　Nevertheless, On the other hand	*Conclusions are often signaled by words or phrases such as* In summary, Thus, Therefore, So, 　Hence, Accordingly, Consequently 　As a result 　We may infer, Which entails that

A Final Complication

Linear versus Dialogical Writing

Students sometimes ask me one or all of the following questions: (1) Why does the author contradict herself? (2) Why does the author repeat himself so much? (3) Why is this reading so wordy? Students ask these questions, I think, because they expect the reading to be linear when, in fact, philosophical writing is usually dialogical. So, let me tell you a little bit about dialogical writing and then I will answer each question individually.

Linear writing moves in a straightforward way from one idea to the next, without examining (m)any supporting or contradictory ideas. Dialogical writing explicitly acknowledges and responds to criticism. It may be helpful to think of philosophical writing as a monologue that contains a dialogue.[18] The author is speaking directly to you, delivering a monologue for your consideration. But in the monologue, the author is telling you about a dialogue or debate that she or he knows about, while giving you reasons for thinking that her or his understanding of that debate is right. As you know, in some debates there are more than two sides and sometimes people on the same side have different reasons for believing what they believe. Authors will take the time to tell you about as many sides, or different camps within one side, as they think you need to know about to understand, and be persuaded by, their view. This confuses people sometimes because it is hard to keep track of whether the author is arguing for their side or talking from another point of view or camp within the same side for the sake of (good) argument.

Points to remember about dialogical philosophical texts

• Authors sometimes support their views with thought-experiments (i.e., examples that ask you to imagine how things would be if something that is not true, were true).

• Authors sometimes argue that other thinkers haven't noticed an important difference between two things. Authors draw distinctions.

• Authors sometimes argue that another philosopher's views or arguments ought to be rejected.

   There is something really tricky here. Fair-minded writers will practice the principle of charity. According to the *principle of charity*, one should give one's opponents the benefit of the doubt; one should respond to the best thing that someone who disagrees with you could say, even if they didn't notice it. Sometimes attempts to abide by the principle of charity results in authors presenting arguments for the correctness of views they ultimately reject. That is, for the sake of (good) argument some authors will present reasons for thinking that their critics are right. *Try to avoid mistaking charitable elucidation for the author's main argument.*

Now that you are more familiar with dialogical texts I can answer the questions students sometimes ask about them.

Frequently Asked Questions

(1) Why does the author contradict herself?
Sometimes thinkers do unwittingly contradict themselves. Most of the time, however, people perceive a contradiction where there isn't one because they fail to notice a change in "voice." Authors will describe many sides, and camps within a side, but they will voice agreement with only one side or camp. If you lose track of the fact that the author is considering an alternative view, you will mistakenly think that a fair-minded examination of a different point of view is a contradiction. Keeping track of where you are in the argument is crucial to understanding. If you think you see a contradiction, double or triple check your flagging to make sure that you are not simply missing something.

(2) Why does the author repeat himself so much?
Usually philosophers do not repeat themselves all that much. Sometimes, however, they use examples that are so long, or discuss material that is interesting but ultimately tangential for such a long time, that they (correctly) assume that their readers have lost track of the point being made. In such cases, a simple repetition may occur for the benefit of the reader. More often, however, people lose track of where they are in an argument and consequently mistake something new for repetition. Again, keeping track of where you are in an argument is crucial to understanding and flagging really helps readers keep track of where they are.

(3) Why is the writing so wordy?
Some people think philosophers use all sorts of fancy words to intimidate their readers or show off. This reaction is understandable but mistaken in at least three ways. First, it is a mistake to become angry with an author because you have a limited vocabulary. There is an opportunity for learning here. Take it.

Second, there is an international community of philosophers, and like all specialized communities (such as you and your friends), there are certain patterns in the way members of that community talk to one another. Metaphorically, when you enrolled in philosophy class you walked into a room where a bunch of people have been having a conversation for a very long time. You need to adapt to their idiosyncratic ways of talking if you want to participate in their conversation. Of course, philosophers shouldn't be rude and intentionally try to exclude you with their words. But it is important to realize that they didn't know you were coming, so they might not have done everything possible to make your inclusion as easy as *you* would like. Whatever the author's faults, do your part—be open to what is being said, try your

hardest to understand, and don't assume the worst about the author, even if the author doesn't always behave as you would like.

Third, and most importantly, not every complex idea can be stated in simple terms. Sometimes simplification is over-simplification, where the important nuances of what a person really thinks are lost. It is true that some philosophical writing is more complicated than it needs to be, but not all of it is. Some philosophical writing needs to be complicated to express a complicated idea. Part of the beauty of philosophy is its complexity. Do your best to appreciate the beauty of complexity.

Summary: What Successful Philosophy Readers Do

• Abide by the "Basic Good Reading Behaviors"

• Before class, complete all three facets of reading well

• Flag and Take Notes to keep track of where you are in the dialogue

Notes

1. Among the useful resources, however, are John Arthur, *Studying Philosophy: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2nd Ed.) (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004); Gary Kessler*, Reading, Thinking, And Writing Philosophically* (2nd ed.) (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2001); and Mark B. Woodhouse, *Reading and Writing About Philosophy* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1989).

2. I borrow here from Melinda Messineo, Robin Rufatto, Tom Talbert, and Dave Concepción, "Guide For New Faculty," Ball State University, Office of Teaching and Learning Advancement, Spring 2003.

3. John T. Bruer, *Schools for Thought: A Science for Learning in the Classroom* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), especially chapter 3, "Intelligent Novices: Knowing How To Learn," and chapter 6, "Reading: Seeing the Big Picture."

4. E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 60.

5. Ibid., 13.

6. Ibid.

7. Bruer, *Schools for Thought*, 180–81.

8. Bruer makes a similar point. Bruer, *Schools for Thought*, 190, 194.

9. Similar methods are recommended by Kathryn Russell and Lyn Robertson, "Teaching Analytic Reading and Writing: A Feminist Approach," *Teaching Philosophy* 9:3 (September 1986): 207–17; Kessler, "Reading, Thinking, and Writing Philosophically," *op. cit.*; James Pryor, "How To Read A Philosophy Paper," www.princeton.edu/~jimpryor/general/reading.html; Jeff McLaughlin, "How to Read a Philosophy Paper (including

this one),” www.cariboo.bc.ca/ae/php/phil/mclaughl/courses/howread.htm; and Letitia Meynell, “Reading Philosophy Actively,” http://myweb.dal.ca/lt531391/readphil.pdf.

10.   If time for grading is scarce, an instructor need only read a small number of the comparative self-assessments in detail and “grade” on a pass or fail basis. There are two reasons why it is important to initially give students credit for this work. First, the abruptness of the change in teaching and learning styles from high school to higher education is reduced. This reduction in abruptness eases student anxiety and builds student confidence. Second, giving credit for this work takes advantage of the assumption made by some students that uncredited work is unimportant. To transfer responsibility for success firmly to the student, credit should not be given for such assignments as the semester progresses. For more on strategies for easing the transition from high school to higher education, see Ruth Beard and James Hartley, *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (4th ed.) (London: Harper and Row, 1984), chap. 5: “Adjusting To Higher Education.”

11.   Bruer, *Schools for Thought*, 67.

12.   Ibid., 77–78.

13.   Ibid., 59ff.

14.   Ibid., 72.

15.   John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, eds., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (expanded ed.) (Washington: National Academy Press, 2000); A. L. Brown “Domain-Specific Principles Affect Learning and Transfer in Children,” *Cognitive Science* 14 (1990): 107–33; J. H. Flavell and H. M. Wellman, “Metamemory,” in *Perspectives on the Development of Memory and Cognition*, ed. R.V. Kail, Jr., and J. W. Hagen (Hillside, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1977); J. H. Flavell, “Metacognition and Cognitive Monitoring: A New Area of Cognitive-Developmental Inquiry,” *American Psychologist* 34:1 (1979): 906–11; A. L. Brown and J. S. DeLoache, “Skills, Plans, And Self-Regulation,” in *Children’s Thinking: What Develops?* ed. R. S. Siegler (Hillside, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1978); J. D. Bransford, R. Sherwood, N. Vye, and J. Rieser, “Teaching Thinking and Problem Solving,” *American Psychologist* 41:10 (1986), 1078–89; J. D. Bransford, B. S. Stein, N. J. Vye, J. J. Franks, P. M. Auble, K. J. Mezynski, and G. A. Perfetto, “Differences in Approaches to Learning: An Overview,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 111 (1982): 390–98; A. L. Brown, J. D. Bransford, R. A. Ferrara, and J. C. Camione, “ Learning, Remembering, and Understanding,” in *Handbook of Child Psychology, Vol. 2: Cognitive Development*, ed. P. H. Mussen (New York: Wiley, 1983); E. M. Markman, “Comprehension Monitoring: Developmental and Educational Issues,” in *Thinking and Learning Skills, Vol. 2: Research and Open Questions*, ed. S. F. Chipman, J. W. Segal, and R. Glaser (Hillside, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1985).

16.   I have borrowed from Jennifer McCrickerd in developing this material. Jennifer McCrickerd, “Reading Philosophy,” www.drake.edu/artsei/philrel/fachomepages/ jenhomepage/ReadingPhilosophy.html (site no longer active).

17.   I have borrowed some flagging notation from Meynell, “Reading Philosophy Actively,” *op. cit.*

18.   I am grateful to Paul Ranieri for insisting that I put this idea this way.

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