

Advice on reading political theory

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You may have come this far in your education without thinking very hard about reading. You have to do a fair amount of it as a university student, but often it just seems like a chore—or a struggle. Probably you will not have been especially reflective or systematic in your approach to reading texts. Reading, however, is a skill that needs to be learned just as you need to learn to write essays, take lecture notes, or pass exams. You probably have to read a lot of very different texts, and at very different levels of comprehension. In general, compared with other professors, I assign fewer pages and expect slower and deeper reading. So my tips are most useful for that. (In other courses, skimming for key facts or claims will be your central skill.)

Before you start reading:

- Create a focused reading environment: turn off specific sound sources such as screen shows or favourite music, and minimise any other distractions. Environments with some ambient noise appear to help some people concentrate (e.g. working in a coffee shop), but conversations or tunes you are trying to avoid overhearing/listening to are just distractions.
- It might help to set a timeframe: aim to work on the article for 45 minutes, then take a break.
- Look at any reading questions you've been given. What direction do they point you in? What kinds of things do you think this article might have to say in answer to them? Keep these questions at the back of your mind as you read.
- Look through the first two pages of the article, then turn to the last page and read that. Ask yourself, "given the title of this article, what we've studied so far, anything the professor has previewed about this topic, and any other clues I've picked up, what is likely to be the main point of this article? Why is it on the syllabus at this point?" Scribble a few notes to yourself in answer to this question.

How to get the most out of reading:

First time through:

- Here's where skimming is useful. Read quickly and look for structure in the text. This could be a thesis statement (e.g. "In this article I will argue that...") or a concluding statement (e.g. "Thus I've shown that..."). Look also for signposts (e.g. "My first point is that....," "It follows that..."; or section headings). Highlight any statements that seem especially important. Get a feel for the structure of the whole thing.

Second time through:

- Read slowly and look for sections you do and don't follow. If the author has lost you, mark the place where you got lost, and the place where you picked up the thread. Then you can work on filling the gaps. Look up any unfamiliar terms. Don't labour along without understanding something basic.
- Mark any sections that seem especially interesting or relevant. Make a note in the margin reminding yourself what you thought was important here.
- Write any questions in the margin. These could be questions of clarification, e.g. "What exactly does Tallbear mean by 'articulation?'" or critical questions, "How does Young justify her selection of criteria for oppression?"

- Consider making notes as you read, rather than (or as well as) highlighting. Your notes should be clear, indicating the argument structure, not just copying out chunks of the text. Notes don't have to be straight lines of handwriting: they can include arrows, symbols, diagrammatic representations of the argument, pretty pictures, doodles, thought bubbles, etc.

When you have finished reading:

- Skim over the text as a whole one more time to remind yourself of the big picture.
- Try to summarise what you've read without looking back at the text. Your retention of reading increases enormously even just by *trying* to do this. If this seems hopeless, quickly write down just what you remember, no matter how goofy.
- Use any reading questions or your own questions to go back over the article and try to figure out answers.
- Bear in mind that it's never possible to adequately understand a theoretical text after one sitting. Most philosophers read an article they intend to use in their work six or seven times before they are satisfied they understand it. Some spend a whole career trying to understand a particular book. You don't have to go that far, but you can't stop at skimming—even though in other contexts it's useful. If by chance you are asked to read something you've already read in another course, never miss the opportunity to read it again and find further layers of meaning, and to observe how a different interpretive context can change what you find in a text.

There are several good reasons for reading carefully:

- If you read slowly you are more likely to remember what you read than if you just skim through an article.
- You are more likely to effectively process the ideas you are reading, which will move you more quickly to the stage of critical thinking. Critical thinking is perhaps the most central skill in doing philosophy; but you can't make intelligent critical comments about a text you haven't read properly.
- Students often unconsciously model their own writing on things they read. Avid and attentive readers are often the best writers.
- Like all political theorists, the people who have written the texts we're reading have laboured over them taking care with every word; in some cases, the authors are articulating difficult political views that they have had to passionately defend at some personal risk. For both these reasons we have an ethical responsibility to read carefully and charitably.
- Careful reading is a life-skill! Lots of people fail to read things carefully and suffer the consequences, whether they are reading recipes, legal documents, or detective fiction.

If you feel lost or confused:

- Try the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for a good online reference work with relevant entries (e.g. "Privacy," "Michel Foucault," "Feminist Perspectives on Power," "Hannah Arendt.") There is an *Encyclopedia of Political Theory* that is OK. Use the library database to look up reviews of any books we're reading, or perhaps secondary literature that discusses older texts. (Only use a regular dictionary to look up words you don't know the literal meaning of; it won't help you resolve philosophical problems in the use of terms.)
- Try getting together with someone else from the class to go over answers to the reading questions or drafts of short papers.
- Make a note to ask the professor in class for clarification, or visit office hours.