

## How to Read Well:

### **1. WRITE ON THE TEXT**

This is crucial. We need to really *interact* with a text in order to get any meaning out of it, and interacting with words means to produce more words, to parse the words, to question the words, etc. You should underline important passages, place brackets around them, or star them in the margins; when you scan the text later, these passages will then jump out at you, making discussion and paper-writing easier. Circle key terms or words you don't understand. Note places where the author provides definitions. Note places where there are open questions, or where answers to questions are provided. Note places where questions are *asked*. Ask your own questions. Write your thoughts in the margins, write question marks in the margins, write challenges to the author's claims in the margins or concrete examples of these claims in the margins. If you think a sentence could mean several things, write down those options. If you think the author is missing something, write that down too. Write down page numbers of recurring ideas, or ideas that connect to each other, or ideas you're interested in.

### **2. Use a Dictionary**

Look up words you don't understand! If this term is one that the author is using in a particular way (as a "term of art"), keep track of the differences. Does the author provide his or her own definition? Can you locate that?

### **3. Re-read**

Come back to the text again and re-read it. It is often helpful to read the text once all the way through without getting hung up on some of the trickier details in order to get a broad picture of what the author is trying to say. *What are the main ideas of the text and what are some of the most important ways they are supported?* Check in with yourself every couple pages or even every couple paragraphs with these questions in mind. Ask yourself these questions when you are done reading. Write down your answers in a few sentences. Then, *go back to the text and read it again*. (Give yourself some time between reads. You deserve a break!) New neural pathways will have been formed from your last read, connections will be opened up and strengthened, and you will be able to gather more on a second go. You can try getting at those trickier parts. Map them out. Every new read of a text will bring new things to our attention that we didn't see before, which is valuable for understanding the text and our thoughts about it.

## **How to Write a Good (Philosophy) Paper:**

### **Focus, Focus, Focus:**

Make sure you have **focus** in your philosophy paper. Often, a prompt will be very vague. It is up to you to focus your essay on one aspect of the general question or comparison you are asked to respond to or make. This focus will take several forms:

**Introduction and Thesis** – this section of your paper should be short. Avoid elaborate or dramatic introductions; these are usually only filler. State clearly what the problem and question is, how it appears in the text, and what your response to this is. How will you be approaching it? What will you be accomplishing in this paper? This should all happen in a few sentences. Your thesis should take a clear position on the question that is not too broad. Even if your paper is only expository, it should still have a focus – your thesis should tell *why* the author made certain claims, or that one claim or set of claims is related to another for such and such reasons, etc.

**Body/Summary** – These sections should be focused on the text. What does it say on the *specific, focused* point you chose above? How are the ideas related? All of your summary should be *relevant* to your thesis (to the question you are asking, the point you are trying to make, and how you are going about doing this). *This means that you will only include summary of ideas or passages found in the text if they are relevant to what you are trying to accomplish in the paper.* A general summary of the whole text is rarely ever helpful and is often used as filler. Make sure that every quotation is similarly focused; ask yourself—is this fulfilling a purpose in my paper? Am I using this to prove a point? That purpose can be as evidence for substantiating your claim about a point the author makes. But make sure that you do not over-use quotes, and that you do not use quotes when you could easily paraphrase what the author is saying in your own words.

### **What to Avoid:**

**Meaningless repetition.** If you repeat anything, make sure there is a purpose to that repetition, that you are adding something new to the idea. Watch out for this when contextualizing quotes. It is important to introduce a quoted passage, and to explain afterwards what is meaningful about this quote, what it shows or tells us, how it proves a larger point, how it connects something or answers some question. However, it is easy in either of these tasks to fall into the trap of just repeating what the quote says in different language. Avoid this meaningless repetition.

**Excessive Quotations.** Be choosy in what you quote. These are not long papers, so I want to hear from *you*. Summarize and explain what is going on in your own words, bringing evidence in when necessary, but not to do your work for you. Make sure the quotes you do choose are the appropriate length, and you do not quote more than you need. Always ask yourself—is this whole quote necessary?

**Attacks on the author or complaints about the author's writing style.**

**Presenting an opinion as an objective report, and making claims about the text without providing support for those claims.**