



Advice about Studying

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This 'Advice about Studying' contains:

- §1 Introduction.
- §2 How to Read Philosophy.
- §3 Preparing for Group Discussions.
- §4 Preparing for Exams or Essays.

1 Introduction.

Answering a question philosophically requires more than simply stating an author's view on some particular point. It also requires giving their *reasons* for holding that view, and to show how those reasons support (or at least, are supposed to support) the view in question. Similarly, if you offer a criticism of an author's view or argument, it is not enough simply to state your alternative view. You must give reasons (or a clear and convincing example) to show that your view is correct (on the point at issue), and to show how the correctness of your view (or example) entails that the view you criticize is either false or unsupported by the reasons given for it. (**Note:** what is displayed in class on the screen or on the blackboard often is only a statement of a view, and not its supporting argument[s].) The questions posed on exams or in paper topics are closely tied to our discussions in class. If you have been paying attention and understanding our class discussions, and in particular our analyses and assessments of an author's reasoning, you should have no trouble answering the exam questions or writing a good paper on one of the assigned paper topics.

I strongly recommend you read, think about, and carefully re-read A. Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments* (Hackett Publishing Co.). Weston presents the essentials of philosophical analysis, argument and expression very clearly and concisely.

I encourage you to form **study groups** to study and review ('revise') our materials together. There are many details involved in each issue from

many places in our texts; group effort works well to find, understand and integrate them.

Use the instructor's **study questions** (provided on your course website) to guide your reading of the assignments, to guide your review of your class notes, and to help you identify any gaps, puzzles or other questions you have on the material. Jot down questions while you read and bring them to class, or bring them to me in office hours or appointments. Philosophy is very much a matter of questions and answers. To understand philosophical writings or discussions, you must learn to figure out and to understand the specific question(s) a text or discussion seeks to answer. To check your understanding of those questions or answers, you must learn to ask yourself questions about the text, the discussion and about your own understanding. This can be challenging, though also exhilarating!

Carefully study and *use* the *Guidelines for Philosophy Essays* (web). These guidelines concern the fundamentals of writing philosophical essays, including short philosophical essays written in class (or in *viva voce* (oral) exams).

2. How to Read Philosophy.

Like all essays, philosophical essays are written for a particular audience, or at least a particular kind of audience. However, this audience does not always automatically include us. This is especially true in an introductory course in philosophy. So our job in understanding these essays involves working to become part of the audience for these essays. This takes some effort; fortunately, good essays make this effort well worth our while. Making our efforts to read and understand effective requires some planning. This planning is described well by Mark Singer and Robert Ammerman, who write:¹

'All philosophical reading should be directed by

¹Adapted from the Preface to M. G. Singer & R. R. Ammerman, *Introductory Readings in Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's, 1962).

a plan. This is especially true of the materials used in this course. The student should not attempt to read these materials without guidance. “Books are tools, which wise men use to suit their own ends,” it has been said. Young men and women both can use these tools, and the materials used in this course are pre-eminently tools for teaching and learning. Some general advice about reading philosophy can be given here.

‘One difficulty facing beginning students in philosophy is that they do not know how to approach the reading of a philosophical essay. Philosophical writings should always be read with certain questions in mind, and they almost always should be read more than once, for a single reading seldom brings them into focus. “In all ... philosophical studies,” according to G.E. Moore (perhaps with some exaggeration), “the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.” Of course, to discover just what problem a philosopher is trying to solve is not always easy.

‘In studying philosophy, the student is not usually expected to absorb and memorize large amounts of material. This deadens the capacity for reflection, and leaves no zest for it. And reflection here is of the essence. The student should read a selection carefully and thoroughly, several times, asking the following questions:

- (1) What question is this philosopher trying to answer?
- (2) How did the question arise, *i.e.*, Why is s/he trying to answer this question?
- (3) What answer does s/he give?
- (4) Why does s/he give this answer instead of some other one? *I.e.*, What reasons does s/he have for the answer at which s/he arrives?
- (5) Is the answer s/he gives a good one? Does it really answer the question?

In other words, one should always try first to determine the *point* of a selection, to decide *what* the author is trying to prove. Then one should consider *why* s/he is trying to prove that point. Third, one should ask: How does s/he go about proving it?

I.e., What reasons or arguments does s/he give? What evidence or supporting examples does s/he give? Finally one may raise the critical questions: Are his or her reasons good ones? Does s/he really prove his or her point? Has s/he considered and answered all the objections that might bear the other way? Has s/he overlooked any relevant facts?

‘One should therefore first read through an assignment fairly rapidly in an attempt to get a general picture of what it is about, not worrying at first about details. Then one should read it again, more slowly, attempting to fit the details into the general picture. Reading a philosophical essay intelligently is analogous to assembling a jigsaw puzzle: It is much easier to put the separate pieces together if you have an idea of what the picture is about. You should not feel discouraged if at first this seems difficult. Often it is difficult. But nothing really worthwhile comes easy. Lewis Carroll once said:

When you come to any passage you don’t understand, *read it again*; if you still don’t understand it, *read it again*; if you fail, even after *three* readings, very likely your brain is getting a little tired. In that case, put the book away, and take to other occupations, and next day, when you come to it fresh, you will very likely find that it is quite easy.

It is remarkable how often a procedure like this works. However, you will be well advised not to be stopped by just *one* passage. If you come to a passage you don’t understand, read on a bit; maybe the context will make it clear. Also, be prepared to revise your general idea of an author’s point and strategy when you start to fit the details together. Your first general impression may require revision on your way to a comprehensive understanding of a piece of philosophical writing.

These remarks provide only some general hints to help students with reading and grappling with our materials. They will not take the place of the student’s own reflection. Nor will they take the place of discussion, which is often invaluable in clearing up a point and helping one settle one’s own ideas’. (Adapted from the Preface to M. G. Singer & R. R. Ammerman, *Introductory Readings in Philosophy*, New York: Scribner’s, 1962.)

3 Group Discussions.

The purpose of group discussion is to allow *you* actively to explore our issues and texts, and to practice philosophical skills of analysis and argument evaluation. Small group discussions and projects will be held frequently during the seminars. Please read the following *carefully* and follow these recommendations.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF DISCUSSION GROUPS?

One important part of this course is for you to learn more about conducting and participating in effective discussion. The learning goals, then, are these:

- To increase skills of analytical reading & thinking.
- To increase skills of effectively contributing to a successful group discussion.

HOW DOES THE GROUP FUNCTION WHEN INTERPRETING PHILOSOPHY?

In understanding and assessing a piece of philosophical writing, it is important to distinguish – and to learn to distinguish – those questions which can be answered definitely from those questions which must be judged more tentatively because there are important considerations both *pro* and *contra* (though not necessarily equally balanced considerations). Moreover, both of those kinds of questions must be distinguished from other questions which must be left open because either there is no plausible basis for answering them, or there are equally plausible considerations for either answer (very rare).

In philosophy modules we value highly those interpretations which are supported by evidence from our readings (including support for claiming that no reasonable answer can be given to a certain question). We will ask repeatedly, ‘Where in the reading do you find evidence for your statement?’ Of course, a particular passage from our reading may be taken as evidence for different conclusions, or one reader may place more or less emphasis on that passage in relation to other aspects of the reading. Part of our challenge will be to learn how to resolve such differences, or how to determine when such differences are not resolvable.

In a successful discussion, the group helps each member expand, deepen, and challenge his or her understanding of the reading and the discussion question posed about that reading.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD GROUP DISCUSSION?

A successful discussion group about philosophy differs markedly from some other kinds of discussion we all engage in. It is a specific kind of group interaction with its own ground rules and ways of interacting. It is not merely a debate. The purpose of a debate is to convince other people of the rightness of your own view(s). However, debates do not require you to assess the adequacy of your own view(s), and they do not necessarily involve assessing the adequacy of your grounds for your view(s). Neither is philosophical discussion a bull session. Bull sessions consist either of friendly contests to tell the tallest tale, or kicking around ideas without carefully assessing their adequacy, or the adequacy of their evidence or supporting reasons. Philosophical discussion aims at finding out the truth about some question. Part of philosophical discussion involves trying to convince others of the rightness of your views, but in doing so, *philosophical* discussion enables you to reassess both your reasons for your view and the adequacy or truth of your view, in part by considering the questions, challenges, evidence and arguments offered by your discussion partners.

One scholar describes a group discussion this way:

Much of our everyday talk is made up of description in which we seek in one way or another to convey ideas to other people. It is usually concerned with what we know. ... A learning group discussion is far more tentative, even halting, in its progress, for it deals not with certainty but with search ... Listening to a group discussion, one is likely to hear such expressions as ‘it seems to me’, ‘I think’, ‘I believe’, [or ‘But what about?’]. (A. W. Combe, *The Professional Education of Teachers*.)

WHAT HAPPENS IN A DISCUSSION GROUP?

Discussion begins with someone's observation or question. It should be a question that opens up the reading in some provoking or interesting way. State what you do not understand or what you find intriguing. Statements often begin 'I noticed that' or 'I was intrigued by' or 'I didn't understand why' or 'I think the author's view (or argument) is'.

If the observation is rich in possibilities, group members stay with it for a number of contributions. To keep the conversation going, members use the strategies of analysis (of whatever kind) we have been learning in class. Group discussions need not achieve, and need not aim at, the final truth (or lack of truth) about a question. Group discussions aim to have each member expand and check his or her insights by group interaction and by grounding discussion in the text. It is expected that people will refer specifically to the text to support their points.

In RESPONSE to one member's contribution, the next person often briefly restates what the last person said and then may:

Ask for clarification: 'What did you mean by ...?'

Ask for further support: 'Where in the reading did you find evidence for that?'

Suggest further evidence to support the idea: 'Yes, and did you notice that's also supported by ...'

Give examples to support and extend the position: 'An example I can think of is ...'

Add further related ideas: 'Furthermore, ...'

Raise complications or disagreements: 'The problem with that is ...'

Note contrasts and similarities: 'Yes, and that's like ...' or 'Notice how that differs from ...'.

Apply the idea to a new situation: 'What if we took that idea and applied it to ...'

Etc.

By staying with a topic, group members work beyond the obvious or superficial.

When the topic has been explored, someone offers another observation or question, and the process repeats.

WHAT CAN PEOPLE DO TO SUPPORT OR HINDER GROUP DISCUSSION?

In every successful discussion group, participants need to share in certain actions that help the group do its work.

PRODUCTIVE ACTIONS:

Gatekeeping: encouraging someone else to speak or helping to keep order when several speak at once.

Timekeeping: warning other members when time is nearly up; helping to move the group to the next task.

Sponsoring and encouraging: complimenting someone on a good contribution; making helpful explanations; encouraging nonparticipants.

Building: building usefully on someone else's contribution by adding more evidence or examples, or extending an analysis, or comparing and contrasting someone's point with other aspects of the issue.

Challenging: disagreeing *constructively* by politely and informatively pointing out problems in a person's suggestion, by insisting on clear definitions, or holding the group to high standards of evidence and support.

Listening: restating another person's point and building on it; making signs of listening, such as looking attentively at the speaker, or murmuring agreement.

Relieving group tension: jokes as diverting remarks that relieve tension, yet not joking around so much as to interfere with the group's work.

At the same time, participants should avoid these actions which usually hinder group discussion:

COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE ACTIONS:

Sidetracking to irrelevant topics.

Changing to a new topic before the group has fully explored the present topic.

Interrupting others.

Monopolizing discussion.

Putting another person down, rather than courte-

ously but clearly disagreeing with him or her.

Withdrawing.

Passing judgment prematurely on someone's idea, rather than trying to explore its possibilities.

Failing to listen.

HOW CAN I PREPARE FOR A GROUP DISCUSSION?

Successful group discussions don't just happen. They result from careful preparation and committed, constructive action by each person in the group. Unless every, or almost every person is well prepared, the discussion will founder. Carefully reviewing the Reading Guide and Study Questions, and preparing good Weekly Questions, should prepare you to participate effectively, productively, and happily in both small group and class discussions. (These guides to group discussion (§3) adapted from W. F. Hill, *Learning Through Discussion* [Sage Publications, 1969], following adaptations by Drs. Craig Nelson and Judith Hansen, both of Indiana University.)

4 Preparing for Exams or Essays.

The study questions are designed to thoroughly review the material we have covered in their part of the course. Some of the questions overlap, but none of them simply repeat others. We will have dealt with virtually all of the points queried explicitly in class; those we haven't discussed are ones you should be able to answer on the basis of our discussion (and the readings). Recall that in answering a question philosophically, it is not enough to simply state an author's view on some particular point, but also to give their *reasons* for holding that view, and to show how those reasons support the view in question. Similarly, if you offer a criticism of an author's view or argument, it is not enough simply to state your alternative view. You must give reasons (or a clear and convincing example) which show that your view is correct (on the point at issue), and to show how the correctness of your view (or example) entails that the view you criticize is either false or unsupported by the reasons given for it. (Note that what is put on the blackboard often is only a view or principle, and not its supporting argument[s].) Working through the study questions again carefully should enable you to inte-

grate the material we've been working on, or at least help you determine what points you're fuzzy on and need to ask questions about.

If you can answer the study questions adequately, you will be able to do well on any examination. The questions on the exam will draw on the points they raise, and some of questions may be taken directly from the study questions. This module is not designed to be a guessing game, but to be a study of the material. Thus the exam is designed to determine how well you've understood that material. In-class exams are CLOSED BOOK, NO notes, Open Mind!

Make-up examinations will be extremely difficult to arrange, and will not be allowed without *prior* worthy excuse.

Also see: Philosophy Essay Guidelines.
How Not to Arrange a Concession.