Reading philosophy can be incredibly rewarding. It can also be rather difficult. At its best, reading philosophy can take you to a magical place where time stands still and you’re left to explore a glorious new landscape of ideas. At its worst, it can drop you off in a jungle of confusion where you’re left to be devoured by the “I Feel So Stupid” monster.

Accordingly, it’s worth our while to talk a little about how to read philosophy because if you’re armed with some reading strategies at the outset, you’ll find the entire experience much more enjoyable. Reading philosophy really should be fun. If it isn’t fun on some level, you’re probably not doing it properly.

The Dirty Window Model

I find that it helps to think about reading philosophy like cleaning a very dirty window. At first, before you read the material, the window is so filthy that you can’t see through it at all. Reading the material once is like going over the window with one washing; it gives you a fuzzy overview of the general landscape outside. Each subsequent reading is a like another washing of the window, presenting the landscape with increasing clarity, until eventually you can see everything pretty well.

The important point to remember is that we should always be prepared to read difficult writings (or parts of them) multiple times. On each reading, however, there are some general things for us to bear in mind.

Things to Remember on Every Reading

- We should be patient, both with the author and with ourselves.

  Not understanding a reading, or part of it, is absolutely fine. Everybody finds some readings hard to follow, so if you’re confused by a certain writing, that doesn’t mean that anything’s wrong with you. It doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong with the author, either. The author is probably presenting some very precise and complex ideas and is doing his or her best to share these ideas with you.

  Often, what was unclear on our first reading of the article will be much clearer the second time through, even when that’s days, weeks, or months later and even when we haven’t consciously thought about the material in the meantime.

- We should take small bites and chew thoroughly.

  Philosophical is often dense and tightly reasoned. It’s usually not the sort of thing that we can breeze through. Read in small doses and take the time to really think about what the author is saying. Pay very close attention. Don’t skim.
• We should do our best to understand the words.

We should look up words that we don’t understand, and if we are familiar with a word, we should remember that the author might be defining her terms in particular ways instead of relying on their everyday meanings; consequently, we should be on the lookout for indications that special meanings are being applied. We should also remember that the writer might employ or introduce specialized terminology.

• We should do our best to understand the sentences.

We can break down complex sentences into their parts. Sentences are always composed out of “chunks” of ideas. Short sentences have little chunks; long sentences have bigger chunks. Sometimes long sentences are hard to understand because it’s difficult to see where one chunk ends and the other begins. Reading the sentence out loud can help us to hear these chunks as separate units and understand how they fit together. We can also take advantage of grammatical clues, reading around “comma clauses” and parenthetical comments and breaking a sentence into smaller parts around sentence connectors other than “if…then…” and “or.”

We should remind ourselves of the referents of any pronouns in the sentence. For example, in the sentence “The original conclusion isn’t weakened by these new observations,” we should be sure we know what “the original conclusion,” is and what “these new observations” are.

If a sentence is a general claim or principle, we should find specific examples for it. If our examples don’t fit what’s written later on, we can go back and change our example until we find one that works.

We should try to rephrase confusing sentences. Sometimes a sentence is puzzling because it was written in a style different from what we’re accustomed to. It helps to rephrase these sentences to express the ideas in a way that’s more natural to us.

• We should focus on units of the right size.

As a rule of thumb, where we look for the important ideas depends upon the size of the passage presenting the argument. Normally, we look for the important ideas in passages that are one step smaller than the passage that contains the argument we’re analyzing. (For example, if the argument is in a paragraph, we look at sentences. If the argument is in a section, we look at paragraphs. If the argument is in a chapter, we look at the sections. If an argument is in a book, we look at the chapters.) Once we know the size of the unit that we can expect to give us the important ideas, we see whether or not each unit at that level presents us with an important idea and, if it does, we identify that idea. (This may require us to identify the main point of a paragraph, section, or chapter, or to summarize the most important ideas of each.)
And we should remember that if an argument is contained in a “large chunk,” for example a book, we can often choose to focus on different levels – zooming in and zooming out. If we want to get a sense of how an entire book works, we can skim the chapters and think about what the main idea of each is, putting the conclusions of each chapter together to understand the argument for the ultimate conclusion of the entire book. We can then go back to examine the argument in each chapter, each section, each paragraph, if we want.

- We should remember that the author may present multiple, interrelated, positions and arguments, and adopt a different attitude toward each.

If there are multiple arguments in a reading, it helps to understand how the arguments are related to each other. Arguments are frequently in what we might call an “oppositional relationship.” There may be a position or argument, for example, another argument that serves as an objection to that position or argument (criticizing a premise or an inference), yet another argument which serves as an objection to that objection, and so on.

It helps to understand what attitude the author adopts toward the various arguments. She might be advancing a position or argument as her own. She might be examining a position or argument. She might be criticizing a position or argument as one counter to her own position or argument, either as a pre-existing position or argument or else as a possible objection to her position or argument.

- We should apply the principle of charity.

Given the basic intelligence and honesty of most people and the substantial screening process that’s involved in getting one’s work published, the probability that the author is saying something obviously stupid or incorrect is very low. This isn’t to say that what’s published is always correct, of course, just that we should try, wherever possible, to avoid attributing serious mistakes to the author.

This is particularly important to remember because it’s easy to think that we can appear to be intelligent by finding something wrong with what other people say or write, and this can launch us on a “seek and destroy” mission in which we’re always out to find a problem with other peoples’ positions or arguments. Avoid this. Frankly, one of the quickest ways to appear unintelligent is to rapidly and uncharitably misinterpret someone else’s position and then to mercilessly criticize what that person said as if the misinterpretation were correct. Don’t do that. Be rational and kind and cast what other people write and say in the best possible light. The best possible light is more apt to be illuminating.
We should tolerate mess and disagreement.

It’s important to accept the fact that arguments in real life are sometimes messy, in which case we’ll need to exercise our best judgment when deciding what ideas are important, what role the ideas play, and how the inferences run. As a result, different people might come up with different analyses of an argument. That’s okay. The chief thing is to find an analysis of the argument that charitably elucidates, clarifies, and exposes what the author probably had in mind.

We should be honest with ourselves.

We should not try to fool ourselves into thinking that we understand something that we know, on some level, we don’t understand. Not understanding a reading, or part of it, is absolutely fine. For one thing, intelligence isn’t understanding everything; intelligence is being able to distinguish between what we do understand and what we don’t understand. For another thing, our questions and confusions might contain the germ of a genuine insight, so we should treat them as very valuable resources!

Bearing this general advice in mind, let’s take a closer look at what we should do during each of our multiple readings of a text.

First Reading

- Read through the writing, if it’s an article. If it’s a book, read through a chapter or a chapter section.
- If it’s your own copy, you might want to mark particularly interesting or important bits with pencil.
- Just try to get a sense of what the author is saying and decide whether or not the piece is interesting or important enough to read again.

Second Reading

Go through the reading again, either marking the text, preferably in pencil, or taking notes, preferably using a word processor. (If you decide to take notes, this would be a good time to begin a computer file for the reading. Include all information necessary for a citation of the work, and make sure that you put quotation marks around direct quotations, noting page numbers. These notes can be a very useful resource later on, especially if you want to refer to the paper in a work of your own.)
Take special care to mark in the text or include in your notes:

1) The main position or positions advanced in the reading.

2) How the author goes about supporting the main position or positions.
   This can include:
   - *Organizational cues*, such as summaries of what will be or has been done, section headings, transitions, and subject-changes.
   - *Background material*, or anything that will help you to understand the arguments, like guiding questions, definitions of specialized terminology, description of positions, and important distinctions.
   - *Argumentative material*, or anything that constitutes part of an argument for a position, including answers to the guiding questions, important ideas, obvious inferences, obvious arguments, objections to ideas or arguments, and objections to the objections.

3) Your own responses
   Focus especially on the following reactions:
   - *Confusion* - Are there passages, positions, or arguments that you don’t understand or find confusing?
   - *Recognition* - Are you reminded of anything, another question, idea, argument, passage, or reading, for example?
   - *Agreement* – Do you find yourself in strong agreement with any positions?
   - *Disagreement* - Do you have objections to any positions or arguments? Do you think that you *might* have objections to some positions or arguments, because you feel “funny” about them
   - *Curiosity* - Are there questions, ideas, arguments, or passages that you find particularly intriguing? Do any questions occur to you?
   (Obviously, if you’re taking notes, make sure to identify this material as your own, not the author’s.)

You should ignore:

1) Repetitions of ideas and arguments
2) Clarification of ideas and arguments, including examples
3) Explanations for why the author or others believe or do something
4) Tangents. This includes side issues and refuted or minor positions and arguments. It can be hard, and task-relative, to decide what is and what is not a tangent. In general, if your understanding would not be compromised if you forgot a passage, you can consider that passage a tangent.
Third Reading

Go over what you’ve marked in the text and polish your markings, or review the notes you’ve taken and polish your notes.

Pay special attention to:

1) The main position or positions advanced in the reading.
   - Do you still think that these are the main positions advanced in the reading? If not, what do you now think that the main position or positions are?

2) How the author goes about supporting the main position or positions.
   - Organizational cues, such as summaries of what will be or has been done, section headings, transitions, and subject-changes.
     - If you’re reviewing your markings, do you want to erase your marks for any of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
     - If you’re reviewing your notes, do you want to add any organizational aids? Do you want to use this material to divide your notes into sections? Do you want to cut some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
   - Background material, or anything that will help you to understand the arguments, like guiding questions, definitions of specialized terminology, description of positions, and important distinctions.
     - If you’re reviewing your markings, do you want to erase your marks for any of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
     - If you’re reviewing your notes, do you want to reorganize some of this material to make the connections easier to see? (For example, do you want to give this material special sections, or do you want to distribute it throughout your notes, integrating it into the argumentative portions?)
     - Do you want to combine some of this material? Do you want to divide some of this material into smaller parts? Do you want to clarify some of this material? Do you want to cut some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
   - Argumentative material, or anything that constitutes part of an argument for a position, including answers to the guiding questions, important ideas, obvious inferences, obvious arguments, objections to ideas or arguments, and objections to the objections.
     - If you’re reviewing your markings, are there multiple arguments? If so, how are the arguments related to each other? How does each argument go? Do you want to erase your marks for some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
     - If you’re reviewing your notes, are there multiple arguments? If so, do you want to give each argument its own section? How are the arguments related to each other? You might want to add some comments explaining these interconnections. How does each
argument go? You might want to reorganize some ideas to make their connections easier to see. You might want to combine some ideas. You might want to divide some ideas into smaller ideas. You might want to clarify some ideas. You’ll probably want to solidify the argumentative role of the ideas (deciding whether they’re premises or subconclusions, for example) and the inferences between them, perhaps diagramming the arguments or representing the arguments in numbered-lined form. You might want to add some missing conclusions. You might want to cut some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant.

3) Your own responses

- **Confusion** - Are there passages, positions, or arguments that you don’t understand or find confusing? Can you articulate what you fail to understand or find confusing? Is there a germ of an insight hiding in your confusion? Specifically, is there something amiss with the confusing position or argument? If so, what’s amiss? How might the position or argument be improved? What might be a better position or argument?

- **Recognition** - Are you reminded of anything, another question, idea, argument, passage, or reading, for example? How does the reading compare to what you’re reminded of? What are the similarities and differences? Which do you prefer, and why?

- **Agreement** – Do you find yourself in strong agreement with any positions? Do they withstand scrutiny? If you accept one of these positions or arguments, what implications might it have? What problems might it help solve?
Disagreement - Do you have objections to any positions or arguments? Do you think that you might have objections to some positions or arguments, because you feel “funny” about them? Try to articulate these objections. Do they withstand scrutiny? If so, what’s wrong with the position or argument? How might the position or argument be improved? What might be a better position or argument?

Curiosity - Are there questions, ideas, arguments, or passages that you find particularly intriguing? Do they withstand scrutiny? Do any questions occur to you? Can you clearly articulate these questions? What do you think is the best answer to one of these questions? Why is that the best answer?

That’s a lot of advice to see all at once, I know, and you certainly don’t need to adhere to it slavishly, but it can serve as a guide to help you tackle the longer, more difficult readings that you might encounter.