

How to Study Philosophy

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Academic philosophy can be a puzzling beast. The topics are odd (Am I a brain in a vat? Does God exist? Is abortion ethical?), the writing dense, and the arguments complicated. It's therefore natural to feel a bit lost when studying philosophy for the first (or even third or fourth) time.

However, if you approach philosophical questions with a scientist's curiosity, summarize philosophers' ideas in your own words, and push yourself to develop the mental stamina to keep reading when your smartphone's begging you to stop, you're more likely to both enjoy and become good at the ancient reason-based attempt to answer life's big non-empirical questions.

1. Imagine You're a Scientist... kinda

Students new to philosophy often go through predictable phases. "What's the point?" is followed by "These questions are unanswerable..." followed by "No one can prove who's right... so (again), what's the point?"

As a biology major in my first ethics class, I remember thinking, "Who do these humanities nerds think they are, suggesting genetic engineering is somehow 'immoral'? Stick to poetry and leave science to the scientists!"

But the more I studied, the more I realized philosophers and scientists had much in common. Both were interested in objective truth. Both applied a logically rigorous method. Both built on the findings of their community to make collective progress.

The biggest difference was that while scientists studied the physical world and enjoyed the luxury of directly testable data, philosophers studied non-empirical questions, and had to rely almost exclusively on logic and reason. Similar approach, different focus, fewer tools.

Rather than citing measurements from a radio telescope to support a hypothesis, a philosopher would build an "argument" to support his or her "conclusion." Rather than challenging a theory by publishing a new experiment's results, a philosopher would publish a critique exposing its logical flaws.

Once I understood the similarities with science, the entire discipline made sense. I could see how arguments formulated in contemporary America built on arguments first articulated in ancient Greece, similar to how modern scientific breakthroughs build on a body of accumulated scientific knowledge. Answers to those slippery questions I initially dismissed could be judged. The results were rarely irrefutable – philosophers couldn't point to the speed of light or Avogadro's Law to prove their point. But some philosophical arguments were definitely better than others – more logically coherent, built on

premises more likely to be true – and so progress was definitely possible. And since much of that progress had been recorded, I didn't have to start from scratch.

As you begin to sample philosophy's rich body of literature, remember that the approach is similar to that of the scientist, except that the philosopher tackles questions that can't be answered with physical tests, and their primary tool is the thinking organ between their ears.

It's likely to feel foreign at first, and given the controversial topics philosophers cover, somewhat taboo. But give it a fair shot and you may find, as I did, that it's far more interesting and fun than the hard sciences, and a much cooler major than biology.¹

2. Read It

If you're like I was when I first started studying philosophy, focusing your attention on anything other than a video game for more than a few moments is tough. Plus, the temptation to indulge in distractions is hard to resist. Who has the patience to *read* when a friend of a friend we've never met may have posted a marginally clever meme on Facebook?

However, just as chemistry students need to roll up their sleeves and mix chemicals to truly appreciate the reactions, there's no substitute for reading a work of philosophy cover to cover, no shortcut that can replace the benefits of experiencing the arguments, objections and rejoinders yourself.

If reading philosophy is hard at first, good news: it's like lifting weights for the brain. The more you do it, the stronger your mind (and your anti-distraction willpower) becomes, the easier it will be, and the more natural it will feel. Even when it seems everything's flying over your head, keep going – your subconscious is chewing on the ideas, absorbing more than you're aware. Do enough of it, and may even come to *crave* good philosophy.

However, this is unlikely to happen if you're reading Kant. German philosopher Immanuel Kant (brilliant, but wordy and often unclear to mere mortals) could deter even the most determined student. I hear the same is true of Hegel, though I've done my best to avoid him and his "owl of Minerva" (whatever that is...). But for all non-Kant and non-Hegel readings, close your laptop, put your phone on airplane mode, and tough it out.² The mind is the philosopher's most important instrument, so we need yours strong and focused.

If you try reading something and just can't take it, don't judge the entire discipline (or even an entire class) based on your experience with one reading. Philosophers' writing styles differ widely (thank goodness), and so just because you find a reading early in the semester an impenetrable bore doesn't mean you won't find the next an accessible thrill.

¹ Philosophy actually isn't a very practical major, but it's a wonderful double-major or minor.

² To be fair, even some of Kant's works are endurable. His brief writings on political philosophy are surprisingly accessible, and I'm sure Hegel wrote a paragraph or two that select humans can understand. Think I'm exaggerating? Here's the first sentence from chapter six of Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Reason is spirit, when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to the level of truth, and reason is consciously aware of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself." Whatever, Hegel. Luckily, this is not the philosophical norm.

3. Underline Sparingly

When I was new to philosophy (and new to college generally), I underlined and highlighted up to half of every page I read. *Half*. Everything seemed so important, so essential, so necessary to remember, I didn't want to overlook anything. And so my books and article print-outs became vandalized messes of yellow and pink highlights and black and blue ink.

My lecture notes weren't much better. I'd frantically write down as much of what the professor said as I could, and copy anything he or she wrote on the board word-for-word.

When it came time to prepare for an exam or write a paper, I'd have plenty of "stuff" to review. But was it useful? Not really. Rather than being able to develop a clear understanding that I could synthesize with other ideas, recall to answer questions, or reconstruct in an essay, I was bewildered by foreign ideas presented in a foreign fashion. Rather than helping, my notes only amplified my confusion. I'd tried to record too much, and I'd done it using someone else's style rather than mine.

Good news: while understanding the core structure and primary nuances in a work of philosophy is important, memorizing everything an author (or a professor) says isn't. This is especially good news given our brains' limited computing power. We have to focus on the essentials because absorbing everything is not only unnecessary, it's impossible.

Once I figured this out, my study habits changed drastically. Today I underline at most 5% of any page, usually only enough to complement the concise summaries I'll write in the margins (we'll talk more about summarizing in the margins in a sec). The best stuff to underline? Passages where the author summarizes their view.

For example, here's a paragraph from a David Chalmers's article on the coming age of *super* artificial intelligences.

"On the current analysis, an intelligence explosion results from a self-amplifying cognitive capacity (premise (i) above), correlations, between that capacity and other important cognitive capacities (premise (ii) above), and manifestation of those capacities (conclusion). More pithily: self-amplification plus correlation plus manifestation = singularity."³

The entire paragraph is actually a summary of what Chalmers had been arguing in the preceding 18 pages (that once an artificial intelligence learns to self-improve, it will only be a matter of time before it creates or becomes a *super* artificial intelligence, which may cure all our ills or enslave/destroy us – so please proceed with caution, AI researchers). But it's that final phrase: "self-amplification plus correlation plus manifestation = singularity," that captures the heart.

Here's another example from an article on being a truly rational (and wise) consumer by John Hardwig.

"Thus, if I seek status that accrues to *who I am*, I must seek it through possession, not ownership. The pursuit of status through ownership is part of the frustration of a consumer society. It cannot do what we want it to do. However, in many encounters, possession cannot be ascertained. It is impossible to tell whether the man driving a Porsche on the Interstate posses

³ "The Singularity: A Philosophical Analysis," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 17 (2010), page 19.

or does not possess his car. However, it is likely that he owns it—or at least is able to borrow enough to purchase or lease it.”⁴

John’s broader point (I can call him “John” because we’re friends) is that “owning” a thing (having legal title to it) won’t do much to enrich your life or improve your person. But “possessing” a thing (using it to its full potential to develop your talents) builds skill, facilitates unique experiences, makes our lives more interesting and our selves cooler.

One upshot is that with limited time, we can only truly “possess” a limited number of things, and therefore a rational consumer will consume less, even if they consume more intensely. But my point here isn’t to convince you to become a minimalist hipster – it’s that the key to that paragraph was the very first sentence, and therefore all I underlined. In fact, I could have simply underlined the “*who I am*” phrase, for that was the point that resonated most when I read it – that simply *having* (or in Hardwig’s terms, “owning”) a thing doesn’t (or at least shouldn’t) make us more impressive. It’s *mastering* (or in Hardwig’s terms, “possessing”) a thing that genuinely sets us apart from the herd.⁵

Don’t get the impression from my examples that I underline phrases in every paragraph. I don’t. And neither should you. *Read* every paragraph, but feel no obligation to highlight or underline any but the most important of the important phrases. What qualifies is purely up to you.

4. Summarize in Your Own Words

In addition to only underlining and highlighting the essentials, make a habit of summarizing in your own words in the margins as you read. If you prefer to use an e-reader, just highlight the key text and create an e-note – just a matter of long-tapping and selecting “note” on my kindle.

I’ll usually do this every three to four paragraphs, sometimes only once per page. The idea is to squash everything that’s been said down into something I can actually understand and remember. (If I can’t understand and remember it, it’s useless anyway, right?)

The key is to record your own mini-summaries *in your own words*. **Do not copy down what the author already said, and do not write in a style that mimics theirs, or mine, or anyone else’s.** The point is to facilitate *your* understanding, so write your mini-summaries using words and in a style that’s most natural for *you*.

Do this regardless of whether you think you fully comprehend what the author (or speaker if you’re listening to a lecture) is attempting to convey. If it makes you feel better, indicate uncertain summaries by following them with “(?)”. Maybe what’s confusing now will become clear once you’ve read the next section. But only if you’ve put forth the mental energy to at least try to summarize the first section.

⁴ “Ownership, Possession, and Consumption: On the Limits of Rational Consumption,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 46 No. 3, Fall 2015, page 290.

⁵ Notice how Hardwig used the terms “own” and “possess” in a unique, specific fashion. Philosophers will commonly assign a precise, technical definition to a common word or words. So be on the lookout for that, and be sure to keep their terminology in mind when summarizing and critiquing their view (and feel free to abandon confusing terms completely if their odd usage gets in the way of your understanding).

Even if you reach the end and are still confused, what's important is that you gather *something* from the reading, even if it's not comprehensive, even if it misses the author's intent. You'll get a chance to shore up mistakes later when you type up your notes. But when you're reading it (or listening to a lecture) for the first time, the point is to simply translate the longwinded, unnecessarily pretentious philosophy-speak into something that makes some sense *to you*.

For example, here's a passage from book eight of Plato's *Republic* on the "democratic man" followed by the mini-summary I wrote in the margin.

"[H]e lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on."⁶

This poor chap on which Plato blames democracy's tendency to devolve into a tyrannical dictatorship unfortunately sounds a lot like me... However, here's the summary I wrote of that and several surrounding paragraphs in the margins:

"His pursuits are varied and shallow."

That's it. Given how long the *Republic* is, and how eloquent Plato was, there was no way I could capture (and be expected to recall) all the finer details. But the simple fact that the democratic man's "pursuits are varied and shallow" was enough. When needed, I could use that memorable phrase to elaborate on how the democratic man indulges in wine for a time, then abstains to prove that he still can; gets lazy and eats his mom's fudge, then goes on a diet and hits the elliptical machine; dabbles in athletics, then business, then writing "how to study philosophy" guides. But if I had tried to remember that long paragraph verbatim, along with all the other long paragraphs in the *Republic*, Plato's concept of the democratic man would have been lost in the shuffle.

Here's another example from my print-out of Thomas Nagel's "The Absurd."

"If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us into cutlets before we got too stringy—even if we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose—that would still not give our lives meaning, for two reasons. First, we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings; second, although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us."⁷

My five-word summary in the margin:

"What if we're alien food?"

⁶ Anchor Books (translated 1973), page 254.

⁷ The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 68, No. 20 (1971), page 721.

Sometimes when you're taking notes like this, ideas will come to mind. You'll disagree with an author, think of some other topic their argument might be relevant to, or want to do additional research.

When this happens, definitely record those thoughts, but indicate that they're not part of your summary by placing them within [brackets]. Here's another example from Nagel's "The Absurd."

"Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical."⁸

My note to self in the margin (indicated by the brackets):

"[google Latin phrase]"

I apparently didn't care enough to follow through, because I still don't know what "sub specie aeternitatis" means, but thankfully didn't need to. Nagel's argument, which you can figure out without knowing a lick of Latin, is that our lives are absurd due to the fact that we know they're not important (mere blips in time on a rock flying through space), but at the same time we can't help but take ourselves *oh* so seriously (apparently so seriously that we feel the need to use Latin in order to confuse normal people – philosophers: stop with the Latin).

5. Create Your Own Consolidated Notes

When it comes time to study for an exam or write a paper, wouldn't it be nice to have a concise write-up of everything you've covered? An organized overview of the author's main points, possibly with a few select quotes, that even includes highlights from your professor's lectures? And wouldn't it be awesome if everything were written in language that you could easily appreciate, understand, remember and apply?

That's exactly what I'd like you to create using your underlined passages, margins summaries and lecture notes.

With the reading and your lecture notes in front of you, open your favorite word processor (and turn off your wifi so you're not interrupted or tempted to check Twitter... *again...*). Type the title of whatever you're summarizing at the top, followed by the author, followed by the beginnings of a one-paragraph overview.⁹

This opening summary paragraph, which I always italicize, will be an incomplete, imperfect draft. So even if you feel completely unqualified to summarize the topic at hand, start typing anyway to force yourself to accept the responsibility, and to get your mind in the complicated argument condensing mood. The outcome may be ugly. But who cares. The point is to make the ideas more understandable for *you*, not publish the next great philosophical breakthrough. And when you're done creating the rest of your write-up, you can (and should) come back and polish the intro summary.

⁸ Ibid, page 720. ("Ibid" means "same as the reference just made," which in this case was Nagel's "The Absurd.")

⁹ Sometimes it's more efficient to combine several authors into one topic-themed set of notes—use whatever works best for you.

Here's an example of what my one-paragraph summary looks like for Mathison and Davis's 2018 article, "Is There a Right to the Death of the Foetus?"¹⁰

"Mathison and Davis (M&D) consider and reject three arguments as to why pregnant women should be able to demand that an Unborn Developing Human (UDH) be terminated even when it might be transferred into an artificial womb: 1) the Biological Parents' Rights (BPR) (or burdens of biological parenthood) argument, 2) the Genetic Privacy argument, and 3) The Parents' Property argument. As to the first, they argue that any emotional burden a person might experience knowing that their unwanted offspring is alive and living in the world isn't reason enough to justify the decision-making power to have it terminated. To the second, they argue that while we may have a right to not have our genetic information misused, this doesn't entail a right to full and complete genetic privacy, and further, our kids carry only one half of our genetic information (at most), and therefore their existence does not put our full genetic privacy at risk. And to the last, since it is inappropriate to think of and treat adults as pieces of property, it is similarly inappropriate to think of and treat UDHs as pieces of property. And even if it were, sometimes justifiable limits may be placed on how we use things we own."

There's of course more to the article (much more). But this captures three key arguments in favor of a right to have an Unborn Developing Human¹¹ terminated rather than transplanted into an artificial womb, as well as the reasons M&D reject them. This is where the applied ethics abortion discussion is moving, by the way – to how to handle unwanted pregnancies once neonates can be gestated outside the mother from conception through full development, when aborting the pregnancy won't necessarily require terminating the UDH. Maybe the *super* artificial intelligence that Chalmers predicts can help us figure it out (if it doesn't enslave or destroy us first).

Here's a related example on the same topic, Christine Overall's "Rethinking Abortion, Ectogenesis, and Fetal Death."

"Overall, a feminist ethicist who once endorsed ectogenesis [ectogenesis just means gestation in an artificial womb] as a full solution to the traditional abortion debate, offers a reconsideration of her view in response to two key concerns: 1) the worry that were transplants into artificial wombs to become the default option, women might be forced to undergo procedures in ways that might diminish respect for their health and bodily integrity, and 2) the fact that women in many cases seek abortions in order to avoid the psychological harms of being an unwilling biological parent, which non-terminal ectogenetic transplants would undermine. A core feature of Overall's view is that she grants UDHs full moral status once they are removed from the womb, but makes their status contingent upon their mother's stance towards them while still in the womb. And Overall clarifies her view by contrasting it with Soren Reader's, where Reader advocates for a mother's right to terminate the UDH even when it is a fully developed and birthed baby, whereas Overall limits the right to the death of the UDH to while it is still within the mother."

¹⁰ Bioethics, Volume 31, number 4, 2017, pages 313-320.

¹¹ "Unborn Developing Human" or "UDH" is a neutral (and intended to be scientifically accurate) term that I use instead of the pro-choice leaning "fetus" or the pro-life leaning "baby." Some students love and adopt it, others continue to use baby and/or fetus. You're free to do the same.

Once you have your own one-paragraph summary started (remember, the above are polished – expect yours to initially be messy, but eventually very clear since they’ll be written *by you, for you*), skip down a few lines and title the first section, bold and/or underline it. Here’s where you’ll add additional core details and unpack the primary points included in your summary.

When deciding how to organize the sections, sometimes it’s best to follow the original author (by book chapter titles or article section headings). But often, since the point is to make the ideas *yours*, it’s better to organize in a way that makes the most sense to *you*.

For example, here are the first sections of my notes on Marxism, based on my Phil 290: Social and Political Philosophy notes from when I was an undergrad, and the Marx chapter from Will Kymlicka’s *Contemporary Political Philosophy*.¹²

3 Core Themes of Marxism (3 Planks)

1) **Private ownership of the means of production** (a market within which capital and labor are privately owned and sold) is **morally impermissible** because

- i. It’s a system of **exploitation**
- ii. It **alienates** persons from their true nature

2) Gap between formal and substantive equality **discredits liberal justice**

3) Capitalist economy **disfigures human nature**—turns us into materialistic, competitive consumers; rather than perfecting our nature as cooperative beings possessing a plurality of qualities (including the natural capacity to enjoy work for its own sake)

Key Terms:

Capitalists—dudes who don’t really work, but just invest, own things (not small business owners, but people on Shark Tank)

Means of Production—stuff used to create goods (land, factories, industrial machinery)

Much of this actually follows Kymlicka’s presentation, including his usage of the term “planks.” Taking another look at this now, I should actually delete that phrase since “plank” isn’t a word I use unless I’m talking about abdominal exercises.

As you can see, sometimes it helps to **bold** key terms and phrases, even when they don’t make your explicit “key terms” list. And I also sometimes bullet or number ideas, and use sub-bullet indentation to organize premises, sub-premises, objections and replies.¹³

¹² 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press (2001).

¹³ Consider listing objections the author proactively considers with an “X” in front of them (“X: blah blah blah”) and then putting an “R” in front of the replies (“R: blah blah blah”). And of course you can record your own objections by placing them within [brackets].

In fact, sometimes it's helpful to reconstruct arguments in the traditional "premise, premise, conclusion" format. For example, here's my summary of Robert Nozick's Libertarian Anti-Taxation Self-Ownership argument, which he covers in the first full work of philosophy I ever read, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*.¹⁴

- 1) We own ourselves.
- 2) We therefore own our talents.
- 3) We therefore own the fruits of our talents.
- 4) Therefore, we are entitled to 100% of our income, and taxation for anything other than police and the military is unethical.

If I wanted to be super clear, there are actually implicit (hidden) premises working with these explicit (stated) premises to move from one sub-conclusion (which simultaneously serves as a premise) to the next. For example, 1.1 might be, "Owning yourself entails owning your talents, too." But since I understand that, and these notes are for me, that can remain unsaid.¹⁵

Including criticisms of arguments you've summarized (others' or your own) is also a good idea. For example, in my Marx notes, I include the criticism that while Marx may be correct that capitalism is sometimes alienating and exploitative, this doesn't mean socializing the means of production (his ultimate solution) is the best way to rectify those issues (maybe improving working conditions and instituting a living wage would be better). For Nozick's anti-taxation argument, I include the critique that even if we own ourselves and our talents, since we don't do anything to *deserve* our natural talents (intelligence, good looks, athleticism), a prohibition on taxation for purposes beyond police and the military does not follow (if I don't 100% deserve the advantages I'm born with, I don't 100% deserve the money I'm able to earn using them; maybe *most* of it depending on my sacrifice and effort, but not *all* of it).

You can plug in your own objections and other interesting points wherever you like, but I'll usually include an "Objections and Asides" or "Bonus Points" section at the very end to capture the notes I placed in [brackets] while reading, as well as anything that's come to mind since. In my case, these are useful for sprinkling into lectures or creating discussion prompts. In your case, they're exactly the sort of thing you might develop into an essay and/or course project.

Once you have everything drafted, be sure to go back and refine your opening overview summary. Having that one-paragraph overview will crystalize how the author's main points logically fit together, give you a quick-reference come exam prep time, as well as a nice synopsis that you might drop into a paper with a little tweaking. And the fact that you wrote it and revised it will make it far more illuminating and meaningful than would a summary written by someone else, including your professor.

Give everything one last readthrough, rearranging and rewording as appropriate. You've put in the effort to do the reading, underline the most important passages (5% at most), draft summaries in the

¹⁴ Basic Books (1974) – read this around 2002 on recommendation of my Intro to Philosophy professor, Dr. John Claiborne. Wound up specializing in social & political phil and applied ethics, so it must have made an impression.

¹⁵ Actually, I share these notes with my students, too, but expect that they can fill in the gaps, especially if they've done the readings as I always ask.

margins, and type up a consolidated notes page. Another five minutes of polishing could make the difference come exam-prep and paper-writing time.

If cleaning up a particular section continues to give you trouble, remember that philosophy is supposed to logically flow (just like science), with the various reasons working together to support some conclusion. If an argument simply isn't clicking, that could mean that the author made a terrible mistake. Or it could just mean you don't yet adequately understand it (which is probably the philosopher's fault... Why did you have to be so confusing, Hegel?).

Either way, that's precisely when you should email or call your professor—make them earn their modest paycheck, and make them feel useful at the same time.

Thanks for your interest in academic philosophy, hoping this was helpful, and happy philosophizing,

Matt