

How to Survive (and Maybe Succeed in) a Philosophy Class

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Last Updated: Sept. 9, 2020

Alas, there aren't a lot of shortcuts in philosophy. Like getting in shape, there are better and worse ways to do it, but at the end of the day you are going to have to regularly put in the hours to make progress at it. Still, there are some things you can do that will make success a lot more likely, and that will help you avoid unnecessary misery. That's what this handout is about.

1. Assume you will spend more time reading for your philosophy classes than you usually would
 - a. This will seem surprising, especially because most philosophy classes have less pages of assigned reading. What you will find, though, is that the reading can sometimes be tougher than you might have expected. That's normal. It will mean it will take you a long time to do the reading, though, and especially, to read properly. By read properly, I mean to read slowly, making sure you understand what is going on, and by learning to ask yourself questions about the reading (for example: "Does that argument really work?"; "Why think *that*?"; "Is this a counterexample?").
 - b. Students don't tend to believe that philosophy reading can be challenging until too late in the term. This is something to get on top of right away, and if you wait six weeks before realizing that you aren't really following the readings it is typically too late for us to do much for you.
 - c. Especially for people new to reading philosophy, or who want to actually get good at philosophy, it is very helpful to read the material *three times* if you want to have a reasonably good grip on what's going on. No, really—I mean it. The key is to read the article in different ways each time.
 - i. First, *before* class meets, you read it very carefully. You look up any words or phrases you don't understand. At this point you may not understand much. Indeed, you may be more confused than anything else.
 - ii. Right *before* class meets, you should then go back and *re-read* the article again. This time, though, you are skimming the article. The point of doing this is to get a sense of how the article hangs together. You needn't be worried about particular details, or trying to understand all the intricacies of particular arguments. Instead, you just want to figure out the basic structure of the article and be able to articulate what the article is about and what it is trying to show. [Note: some people prefer to skim first, then deep read. You do you.]
 - iii. Now, go to class, take notes, and ask questions about the article. *Sometime after class is over, you should go back and read the article carefully one more time.* This will help you put everything together, and to make sure it sticks in your head properly.
 - d. Do you find yourself thinking the following: "everything is pretty clear in class, but after I leave class I start to get confused again . . ."? That's usually a sign you

aren't doing the process described above. It is a lot of work, but if you are having any trouble at all in understanding what is happening your philosophy class, you should try the reading process described above before you try anything else.

2. Make use of specialized philosophy dictionary. No, really.
 - a. One reason philosophy can seem hard is that there is so much specialized vocabulary involved in the reading and lectures. If you want an old-timey book that looks impressive on your bookshelf, I recommend the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* because it is relatively inexpensive (for its size), it is full of useful entries, it is relatively up-to-date, and it makes you look like an intellectually serious person. Other good options include the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* and the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*.
 - i. Pro tip 1: Don't get the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the older 4 volume hardbound *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* from the 1960s. The former has insufficiently informative entries (unless you are using the full version, which is very big and very expensive.) The latter has entries that are now often out of date.
 - ii. Pro tip 2: Obviously, there are some online resources. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is world class, but oftentimes pitched for graduate students and faculty. Other resources like the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy are a bit more variable. Unfortunately, Wikipedia still ranges from good to an idiosyncratic mess when it comes to philosophy.
 - b. Use your dictionary! When you are reading, make sure you look up any words you don't know (you will find this is useful advice for *any* course in college). Highlight and define those terms in the margins.
3. Assume you will do worse on your first paper than you are used to doing. Philosophy is hard, and writing philosophy papers is hard. Follow any directions on how to write philosophy papers, and don't be afraid to ask your instructor(s) for help.
4. Make use of office hours.
5. When you do get panicked about how you are doing, ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Do I look up the words I don't understand in the reading?
 - b. Do I read the assigned reading three times?
 - c. Upon discovering that you are not doing (a) or (b), start doing them.
 - d. If you are doing them, and *still* not getting anything, then definitely talk to your TA or professor right away.
6. Remind yourself that philosophy can be challenging, but excellent, and certainly the most relevant academic field for being an interesting person. So, have fun, try to learn stuff, and stay reflective.