Guidelines on Reading Philosophy

It will be difficult for you to make sense of some of the articles we’ll be reading. This is partly because they discuss abstract ideas that you’re not accustomed to thinking about. They may also use technical vocabulary which is new to you. Sometimes it won’t be obvious what the overall argument of the paper is supposed to be. The prose may be complicated, and you may need to pick the article apart sentence by sentence. Here are some tips to make the process easier and more effective.

Skim the Article to Find its Conclusion and Get a Sense of its Structure

A good way to begin when you’re trying to read a difficult article is to first skim the article to identify what the author’s main conclusion is. Pay special attention to the opening and closing paragraphs, since authors will often tell you there what they intend to be arguing for. When you do figure out what the author’s main conclusion is, try to restate it in your own words. This will help you to be sure that you really understand what the author is arguing for.

When you’re skimming the article, try also to get a general sense of what’s going on in each part of the discussion. What is the structure of the article? Sometimes authors will tell you, early in the paper, what their argument will look like. This makes your job easier.

The articles we read won’t always have a straightforward structure. They won’t always be of the form:

This is the conclusion I want you to accept. Here is my argument for that conclusion...

Philosophers often provide auxiliary arguments, arguments for important premises they appeal to in support of their main conclusion. For instance, the author’s discussion may have the form:

The conclusion I want you to accept is A. My argument for this conclusion is as follows: B and C are true, and if B and C are true, then A must also be true. It is generally accepted that B is true. However, it is controversial whether C is true. I think you ought to accept C for the following reasons...

Here the author’s main argument is for the conclusion A, and in the process of arguing for A he advances an auxiliary argument in support of C. Try to identify these auxiliary arguments, and the claims they’re intended to support; and try to
avoid mistaking one of these auxiliary arguments for the author's main argument.

Articles can be complex in other ways, too. Not everything the author says will be a positive conclusion or a premise in support of his conclusion. Sometimes he'll be supporting his view with a thought-experiment. Sometimes he'll be arguing for a distinction which his positive view relies on. Sometimes he'll be arguing that another philosopher's views or arguments ought to be rejected. Sometimes he'll be defending a view against somebody else's objections.

Keep an eye out for words like these when you're reading:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These are signposts which help you keep track of the structure of the discussion. For example, one philosophy article might run as follows:

Philosopher X advanced the following argument against dualism...
The dualist has two responses to X's argument. First... However, this response runs into problems, because...
A better response for the dualist says...
X might be tempted to counter as follows... However...

... and so on. The words "first" and "however" and "a better response" make it easy to see where the discussion is going. You'll also want to put signposts like these in your own philosophical writing.

Here's another example:

The skeptic says that we can't tell whether we're seeing things as they really are, or whether we're brains in vats being force-fed false experiences, like the inhabitants of The Matrix.
Y raised the following objection to the skeptic... Hence, Y concludes, we have no reason to think our situation is as bad as the skeptic makes it out to be.
This is an attractive response to the skeptic, but I don't think it can really work, for the following reason...
Y might respond to this problem in one of two ways. The first way is...
However, this response fails because...
The second way Y might respond is... However, this response also fails because...
So in the end I think Y's objection to the skeptic can not be sustained. Of course, I'm not myself a skeptic. I agree with Y that the skeptic's conclusion is false. But I think we'll have to look harder to see where the flaw in the skeptic's reasoning really is.
In this article, the author spends most of his time defending the skeptic against Y's objections, and considering possible responses that Y might give. The author's main conclusion is that Y's objection to the skeptic does not work. (Notice: the main conclusion isn’t that skepticism is true.)

Go Back and Read the Article Carefully

When you've figured out what the main conclusion of an article is, and what the overall structure of the article is, go back and read the article carefully. Pay attention to how the various parts fit together.

Most importantly, figure out what the author's central argument(s) are. What reasons does he offer in support of his conclusions? Where in the article does he put these reasons forward?

Also keep an eye out for the following:

- Notice where the author says explicitly what he means by a certain term.
- Notice what distinctions the author introduces or argues for.
- Take special notice of any unargued assumptions you think the author is relying on.
- Consider various interpretations of what he says. Are there any important ambiguities that his argument fails to take account of?

All of these things will help you to understand the article better. And they’ll be crucial when you’re trying to evaluate the author’s argument, and deciding whether or not you should accept his conclusion.

In your notes, you might make a quick outline of the article’s major argumentative "pieces." Draw arrows to diagram how you think those pieces fit together. If you can't do this, then you need to go back and look at the article again to get a better understanding of what the author is up to.

You should expect to read a philosophy article more than once. I’ve been doing philosophy for more than ten years and I still have to read articles many times before I fully understand them. Intellectually digesting a philosophy article takes time, effort, and concentration. You definitely won't understand everything in the article the first time you read it, and there may be some parts of the article you don't understand even after reading them several times. You should ask questions about these parts of the article (in class or after class or in section, as you judge appropriate). You could say:

What is going on on p. 13? Descartes says X, but I don't see how this fits in with his earlier claim Z. Is X supposed to follow from Z? Or is he trying here to give an argument for Z? If so, why does he think that X would be a reason in favor of Z?

Evaluate the Author's Arguments
Obviously, you're only in a position to evaluate an author's argument when you've done the work of figuring out what it is he's really saying, and how his arguments work.

When you come to that point, you can start asking questions like these: Do you agree with the author? If not, what do you think is wrong with his reasoning? Does he appeal to some premise which you think is false? (Why do you think it is false?) Is there some assumption which the author does not make explicit, but which you think is false? Does his argument equivocate or beg the question?

You will often feel that the debates we examine are tangled messes and you don't know whose argument to believe. There's no escaping this. I feel this way all the time. All I can say is, if you work hard, you will be able to make some sense of the mess. You'll start to get a sense of how the different views relate to each other and what their pros and cons are. Eventually, you may realize that things are even messier than you thought, which will be frustrating, and you'll have to go back to the drawing board. This can happen over and over again. You may never reach any definitive conclusion. But each time you try to make sense of the debate, you'll find you understand the issues a little bit better. That's the way we make progress in philosophy. It never gets easier than that.

Sometimes one philosophical issue leads into three other issues, which themselves lead into yet other issues... and you can't possibly explore all of the relevant connections right then. So you'll have to learn to make do without definitive answers. You may not be able to come to a settled view about whether you should accept some philosopher's argument, because that turns on further issues P, Q, and R, which you haven't figured out yet. That's perfectly normal. Your philosophy professors often feel this way themselves, about many of the arguments they read.

Other times, you may be sure that some argument is flawed, but you won't have the time and resources to figure out, or explain and argue for, everything you think is wrong with the argument. In such cases, you may want to provisionally accept one of the argument's premises, and move on to focus on other premises, which you think are more important or which are easier to criticize. (This is why you often hear philosophers saying, "Even if we assume such-and-such for argument's sake, I still think X's argument fails, because...")

What Is an Argument?

An argument is not the same thing as a quarrel. The goal of an argument is not to attack your opponent, or to impress your audience. The goal of an argument is to offer good reasons in support of your conclusion, reasons that all parties to your dispute can accept.

Nor is an argument just the denial of what the other person says. Even if what your opponent says is wrong and you know it to be wrong, to resolve your dispute you have
to produce arguments. And you haven’t yet produced an argument against your opponent until you offer some reasons that show him to be wrong.

When you’re arguing, you will usually take certain theses for granted (these are the premises of your argument) and attempt to show that if one accepts those premises, then one ought also to accept the argument’s conclusion.

Here’s a sample argument. The premises are in red.

1. No one can receive an NYU degree unless he or she has paid tuition to NYU.
2. Shoeless Joe Jackson received an NYU degree.
3. So, Shoeless Joe Jackson paid tuition to NYU.

In this argument, it is clear what the premises are, and what the conclusion is. Sometimes it will take skill to identify the conclusion and the premises of an argument. You will often have to extract premises and conclusions from more complex and lengthy passages of prose. When you do this, it is helpful to look out for certain key words that serve as indicators or flags for premises or conclusions.

Some common premise-flags are the words because, since, given that, and for. These words usually come right before a premise. Here are some examples:

Your car needs a major overhaul, for the carburetor is shot.

My Given that euthanasia is a common medical practice, the state legislatures ought to legalize it and set up some kind of regulations to prevent abuse.

Because euthanasia is murder, it is always morally wrong.

We must engage in affirmative action, because America is still a racist society.

Since abortion is a hotly contested issue in this country, nobody should force his opinion about it on anyone else.

Some common conclusion-flags are the words thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, so, and consequently. These words usually come right before a conclusion. Here are some examples:

You need either a new transmission, or a new carburetor, or an entirely new car; so you had better start saving your pennies.

Affirmative action violates the rights of white males to a fair shake; hence it is unjust.
It is always wrong to kill a human being, and a fetus is undoubtedly a human being. **It follows that** abortion is always wrong.

A woman's right to control what happens to her body always takes precedence over the rights of a fetus. **Consequently,** abortion is always morally permissible.

Euthanasia involves choosing to die rather than to struggle on. **Thus,** euthanasia is a form of giving up, and it is **therefore** cowardly and despicable.

Authors do not always state all the premises of their arguments. Sometimes they just take certain premises for granted. It will take skill to identify these hidden or unspoken premises. We will discuss this more later. Whether an argument convinces us depends wholly on whether we believe its premises, and whether its conclusion seems to us to follow from those premises. So when we're evaluating an argument, there are two questions to ask:

i. Are its premises true and worthy of our belief?
ii. Does its conclusion really follow from the premises?

**These are completely independent issues.** Whether or not an argument's premises are true is one question; and whether or not its conclusion follows from its premises is another, wholly separate question.

If we **don’t accept the premises** of an argument, we don't have to accept its conclusion, no matter how clearly the conclusion follows from the premises. Also, if the argument's conclusion **doesn’t follow** from its premises, then we don't have to accept its conclusion in that case, either, even if the premises are obviously true.

So bad arguments come in two kinds. Some are bad because their premises are false; others are bad because their conclusions do not follow from their premises. (Some arguments are bad in both ways.)

If we recognize that an argument is bad, then it loses its power to convince us. That doesn't mean that a bad argument gives us reason to **reject** its conclusion. The bad argument’s conclusion **might** after all be true; it's just that the bad argument gives us **no reason to believe** that the conclusion is true.

Let's consider our sample argument again:

1. No one can receive an NYU degree unless he or she has paid tuition to NYU.
2. Shoeless Joe Jackson received an NYU degree.
3. So, Shoeless Joe Jackson paid tuition to NYU.
In this argument, the conclusion *does* in fact follow from the premises, but at least one of the premises is false. It’s not true that one has to pay tuition in order to receive an NYU degree. (NYU gives out a number of honorary degrees every year to people who were never NYU students, and never paid tuition.) Probably the other premise is false, too: as far as I know, Shoeless Joe Jackson did not ever receive an NYU degree. So this argument does not, by itself, establish that Shoeless Joe Jackson paid tuition to NYU.

**Vocabulary Describing Arguments**

Most of the arguments philosophers concern themselves with are—or purport to be—deductive arguments. Mathematical proofs are a good example of deductive argument.

Most of the arguments we employ in everyday life are not deductive arguments but rather inductive arguments. Inductive arguments are arguments which do not attempt to establish a thesis conclusively. Rather, they cite evidence which makes the conclusion *somewhat reasonable to believe*. The methods Sherlock Holmes employed to catch criminals (and which Holmes misleadingly called "deduction") were examples of inductive argument. Other examples of inductive argument include: concluding that it won't snow on June 1st this year, because it hasn't snowed on June 1st for any of the last 100 years; concluding that your friend is jealous because that's the best explanation you can come up with of his behavior, and so on.

It's a controversial and difficult question what qualities make an argument a good inductive argument. Fortunately, we don't need to concern ourselves with that question here. In this class, we're concerned only with deductive arguments.

Philosophers use the following words to describe the qualities that make an argument a good deductive argument:

**Valid Arguments**

We call an argument **deductively valid** (or, for short, just "valid") when the conclusion is entailed by, or logically follows from, the premises.

Validity is a property of the argument's *form*. It doesn't matter what the premises and the conclusion actually say. It just matters whether the argument has the right form. So, in particular, a valid argument *need not* have true premises, nor need it have a true conclusion. The following is a valid argument:

1. All cats are reptiles.
2. Bugs Bunny is a cat.
3. So Bugs Bunny is a reptile.

Neither of the premises of this argument is true. Nor is the conclusion. But the premises are of such a form that if they were both true, then the conclusion would also have to be true. Hence the argument is valid.
To tell whether an argument is valid, figure out what the *form* of the argument is, and then try to think of some other argument of *that same form* and having true premises but a false conclusion. If you succeed, then every argument of that form must be invalid. A valid form of argument can *never* lead you from true premises to a false conclusion.

For instance, consider the argument:

1. If Socrates was a philosopher, then he wasn't a historian.
2. Socrates wasn't a historian.
3. So Socrates was a philosopher.

This argument is of the form "If P then Q. Q. So P." (If you like, you could say the form is: "If P then not-Q. not-Q. So P." For present purposes, it doesn't matter.) The conclusion of the argument is true. But is it a valid form of argument?

It is not. How can you tell? Because the following argument is of the same form, and it has true premises but a false conclusion:

1. If Socrates was a horse (this corresponds to P), then Socrates was warm-blooded (this corresponds to Q).
2. Socrates was warm-blooded (Q).
3. So Socrates was a horse (P).

Since this second argument has true premises and a false conclusion, it must be invalid. And since the first argument has the same form as the second argument (both are of the form "If P then Q. Q. So P."), both arguments must be invalid.

Here are some more examples of *invalid* arguments:

### The Argument

If there is a hedgehog in my gas tank, then my car will not start.
My car will not start.
Hence, there must be a hedgehog in my gas tank.

If I publicly insult my mother-in-law, then my wife will be angry at me.
I will not insult my mother-in-law.
Hence, my wife will never be angry at me.

Either Athens is in Greece or it is in Turkey.
Athens is in Greece.
Therefore, Athens is in Turkey.

### Its Form

If P then Q.
Q.
So P.

If P then Q.
Not-P.
So not-Q.

Either P or Q.
P.
So Q.
Invalid arguments give us no reason to believe their conclusions. **But be careful:** The fact that an argument is invalid doesn't mean that the argument's conclusion is false. The conclusion might be true. It's just that the invalid argument doesn't **give us any good reason to believe** that the conclusion is true.

If you take a class in Formal Logic, you'll study which forms of argument are valid and which are invalid. We won't devote much time to that study in this class. I only want you to learn what the terms "valid" and "invalid" mean, and to be able to recognize a few clear cases of valid and invalid arguments when you see them.

**Exercise**

**For each of the following arguments, determine whether it is valid or invalid. If it's invalid, explain why.**

Your high idle is caused either by a problem with the transmission, or by too little oil, or both.
You have too little oil in your car.
Therefore, your transmission is fine.

If the moon is made of green cheese, then cows jump over it.
The moon is made of green cheese.
Therefore, cows jump over the moon.

Either Colonel Mustard or Miss Scarlet is the culprit.
Miss Scarlet is not the culprit.
Hence, Colonel Mustard is the culprit.

All engineers enjoy ballet.
Therefore, some males enjoy ballet.

Sometimes an author will not explicitly state all the premises of his argument. This will render his argument invalid as it is written. In such cases we can often "fix up" the argument by supplying the missing premise, assuming that the author meant it all along. For instance, as it stands, the argument:

1. All engineers enjoy ballet.
2. Therefore, some males enjoy ballet.

is invalid. But it's clear how to fix it up. We just need to supply the hidden premise:
1. All engineers enjoy ballet.
2. Some engineers are male.
3. Therefore, some males enjoy ballet.

You should become adept at filling in such missing premises, so that you can see the underlying form of an argument more clearly.

Exercise
Try to supply the missing premises in the following arguments:

If you keep driving your car with a faulty carburetor, it will eventually explode. Therefore, if you keep driving your car with a faulty carburetor, you will eventually get hurt.

Abortion is morally wrong. Abortion is not a constitutional right. Therefore, abortion ought to be against the law.

Sometimes a premise is left out because it is taken to be obvious, as in the engineer argument, and in the exploding car argument. But sometimes the missing premise is very contentious, as in the abortion argument.

Sound Arguments

An argument is sound just in case it's valid and all its premises are true. The argument:

2. The moon is made of green cheese, then cows jump over it.
3. Therefore, cows jump over the moon.

is an example of a valid argument which is not sound.

We said above that a valid argument can never take you from true premises to a false conclusion. So, if you have a sound argument for a given conclusion, then, since the argument has true premises, and since the argument is valid, and valid arguments can never take you from true premises to a false conclusion, the argument's conclusion must be true. Sound arguments always have true conclusions.

This means that if you read Philosopher X's argument and you disagree with his conclusion, then you're committed to the claim that his argument is unsound. Either X's conclusion does not actually follow from his premises--there is a problem with his reasoning or logic--or at least one of X's premises is false.

When you're doing philosophy, it is never enough simply to say that you disagree with someone's conclusion, or that his conclusion is wrong. If your
opponent's conclusion is wrong, then there must be something wrong with his argument, and you need to say what it is.

**Exercise**

*Here are some sample arguments. Can you tell which ones are valid and which of the valid arguments are also sound? (There are 5 valid arguments and 2 sound arguments.)*

I. If Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal. Socrates is a man. So, Socrates is mortal.

II. If Socrates is a horse, then Socrates is mortal. Socrates is a horse. So, Socrates is mortal.

III. If Socrates is a horse, then Socrates has four legs. Socrates is a horse. So, Socrates has four legs.

IV. If Socrates is a horse, then Socrates has four legs. Socrates doesn't have four legs. So, Socrates is not a horse.

V. If Socrates is a man, then he’s a mammal. Socrates is not a mammal. So Socrates is not a man.

VI. If Socrates is a horse, then he’s warm-blooded. Socrates is warm-blooded. So Socrates is a horse.

VII. If Socrates was a philosopher then he wasn’t a historian. Socrates wasn’t a historian. So, Socrates was a philosopher.

**Persuasive Arguments**

Unfortunately, merely having a sound argument is not yet enough to have the persuasive force of reason on your side. For it might be that your premises are true, but it's hard to recognize that they're true.

Consider the following two arguments:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument A</th>
<th>Argument B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Either God exists, or 2+2=5.</td>
<td>1. Either God does not exist, or 2+2=5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 2+2 does not equal 5.</td>
<td>2. 2+2 does not equal 5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. So God exists.</td>
<td>3. So God does not exist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both of these arguments have the form "P or Q, not-Q. So P." That’s a valid form of argument. So both of these arguments are valid. What’s more, at least one of the arguments is sound. If God exists, then all the premises of Argument A are true, and since Argument A is valid, it must also be sound. If God does not exist, then all the premises of Argument B are true, and since Argument B is valid, it must also be sound. Either way, one of the arguments is sound. But we can’t tell which of these arguments is sound and which is not. Hence neither argument is very persuasive.
In general, when you're engaging in philosophical debate, you don't just want valid arguments from premises that happen to be true. You want valid arguments from premises that are recognizable as true, or already accepted as true, by all parties to your debate.

Hence, we can introduce a third notion:

A **persuasive** argument is a valid argument with plausible, or obviously true, or antecedently accepted premises. These are the sorts of arguments you should try to offer.

**Conditionals**

A claim of the form "If P then Q" is known as a **conditional**. P is called the **antecedent** of the conditional, and Q is called the **consequent** of the conditional.

In this class, you can take all of the following to be variant ways of saying the same thing:

- If P then Q
- P implies Q
- P -> Q
- P is sufficient (or: a **sufficient condition**) for Q
- If you've got P you must have Q
- A **necessary condition** for having P is that you have Q
- Q is necessary for having P
- It's only the case that P if it's also the case that Q
- P only if Q

Note the terms **sufficient condition** and **necessary condition**.

To say that one fact is a **sufficient condition** for a second fact means that, so long as the first fact obtains, that's enough to guarantee that the second fact obtains, too. For example, if you have ten children, that is sufficient for you to be a parent.

To say that one fact is a **necessary condition** for a second fact means that, in order for the second fact to be true, it's required that the first fact also be true. For example, in order for you to be a father, it's necessary that you be male. You can't be a father unless you're male. So being male is a necessary condition for being a father.

When P entails Q, then P is a **sufficient condition** for Q (if P is true, that guarantees that Q is true, too); and Q is a **necessary condition** for P (in order for P to be true, Q also has to be true).
Now, just because P entails Q, it doesn’t follow that Q entails P. However, sometimes it’s both the case that P entails Q and also the case that Q entails P. When so, we write it as follows (again, all of these are variant ways of saying the same thing):

- P if and only if Q
- P iff Q
- P just in case Q
- P <-> Q
- if P then Q, and if Q then P
- P is both sufficient and necessary for Q
- P is a necessary and sufficient condition for Q

For example, being a male parent is both necessary and sufficient for being a father. If you're a father, it's required that you be a male parent. And if you're a male parent, that suffices for you to be father. So we can say that someone is a father if and only if he's a male parent.

**Consistency**

When a set of propositions cannot all be simultaneously true, we say that the propositions are inconsistent. Here is an example of two inconsistent propositions:

1. Oswald acted alone when he shot Kennedy.
2. Oswald did not act alone when he shot Kennedy.

When a set of propositions is not inconsistent, then they’re consistent. Note that consistency is no guarantee of truth. It’s possible for a set of propositions to be consistent, and yet for some or all of them to be false.

Sometimes we say that a proposition P is incompatible with another proposition Q. This is just another way of saying that the two propositions are inconsistent with each other.

A contradiction is a proposition that’s inconsistent with itself, like "P and not-P."

Sometimes it’s tricky to see that a set of propositions is inconsistent, or to determine which of them you ought to give up. For instance, the following three propositions all seem somewhat plausible, yet they cannot all three be true, for they’re inconsistent with each other:

1. If a person promises to do something, then he’s obliged to do it.
2. No one is obliged to do things which it’s impossible for him to do.
3. People sometimes promise to do things it’s impossible for them to do.