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Taking Notes on Philosophical Texts

Peter Suber

There are many ways to take notes on a difficult book. This hand-out is not designed to strap you into one style but to give you some ideas.

- Take notes on important terms. If they are defined, note their definitions. If they are not defined, try to define them from the author's use of them.
 - If the book was not originally written in English, and if you have any knowledge of its original language, then take notes on the terms actually used by the author.
 - Learn the author's terminology but also learn to do without it. If you don't learn it, then you won't understand the book. If you don't learn to do without it, then you won't be able to paraphrase the author's position e.g. for friends who haven't read the book or for your own comparison to another philosopher who uses different terms.
- Take notes on distinctions. What is supposed to be different from what? If there are technical terms associated with the two sides, note them. If the distinction has a clear motivation or application, note it.
- Take notes on the author's conclusions as well as the author's arguments for these conclusions.
 - Tracking the conclusions is clearly important. But without a special effort it's easy to fall into the habit of tracking nothing but the conclusions. In philosophy we are concerned with conclusions roughly to the extent that they are well-supported. Moreover, your understanding of the book is vastly truncated if you only know its conclusions.
 - Finding the argument for a given conclusion is not easy and often doesn't come with much completeness on the first or even the second reading. This is one reason to take notes on your understanding of the argument, as this understanding emerges. It would be a shame to lose such hard-won knowledge. It's also a reason to put your notes into digital form, so that you can insert new material in the middle of old material without sacrificing legibility.
- Take notes on the important passages, terms, claims, and arguments even if you don't understand them. You will increase your chances of understanding them later if you draw explicit attention to them in your notes.
- Take notes on how a passage, claim, or argument fits into the larger picture of the whole book. Use the author's table of contents as a clue. If you understand the

local argument but not how it fits into the global project, then ask how it fits and start to collect notes on the answer. If you don't understand the global project itself, then use the local argument as a clue. If you don't understand the local argument, then use the global project as a clue. As Pascal said, understand the parts in light of the whole and the whole in light of the parts.

- If you're not sure what a claim means, or why the author makes it, or whether it's consistent with another one, or whether its supporting argument is strong or weak, or how it's connected to its context or to another claim, then make your question explicit in your notes. This has several benefits. It turns your pained failure to grasp into philosophical clarity. At least you can be clear on what you're asking. It raises your consciousness about the question so that you are more likely to see answers, or clues to answers, in your subsequent reading and rereading. Finally, it gives you a place to collect page numbers, partial answers, conjectured answers, and notes toward answers.
 - The experience of reading hard books is almost always a mix of exhilarating insight and puzzling confusion. Making your questions explicit in your notes turns unproductive confusion (panic, anxiety) into productive confusion (wonder, inquiry).
- Making your conjectures explicit in your notes can be as useful as making your questions explicit. If you're not sure how to interpret a passage, then try to articulate different possible or plausible interpretations. By making these explicit, you might be able to eliminate some and find textual evidence for others. At least you'll have sharpened your own understanding of the issues and articulated nuance that deepens the inquiry.
 - Sometimes you will find textual support for more than one of your conjectures. This reveals a tension or inconsistency in the author's text that you might not have discovered otherwise. If you eventually decide that the more important or relevant passages support one reading more than another, then you'll have both the page numbers and the articulate alternatives to make your interpretation persuasive.
- Here's one way to summarize some of the points above. Don't limit yourself to what you know. Write down what you don't understand but hope to understand. Write down your questions and your conjectures. Put your finger on interpretation problems, not just on interpretation results. Make note of passages to reread. Remember that you are writing notes, not a term paper. They don't have to be publishable for the world. They only have to be helpful to you.
 - Notes should be a safe zone where you can explore your own uncertainties, different readings of the text, implications of the author's position, and questions these raise in your own mind. They shouldn't merely record the results of your understanding, but should become part of the process of

understanding.

- Include page numbers with every attempt to restate the author's position. One of the main reasons you take notes is to find page numbers later.
 - Since the pagination differs from edition to edition, make sure that your notes include, once, somewhere, a full citation to the edition you are using.
 - It can be hard to find a small point or quoted phrase on a page if you only record the page number. So I recommend the *John Newman method*. Let the top of page 10 be 10.1, the bottom 10.9, and the middle 10.5, and so on for other intermediate positions on the page. If your notes say that a certain claim is made on page 10.4, then you will save lots of time by looking for it just above the middle of the page.
- Take notes on the similarities and differences between the author you are now reading and authors you have previously read.
 - Notes of this kind can help you trace historical influence forwards and backwards. For example, once you know Hume, your Kant notes can pinpoint passages in which he is replying to Hume, and once you know Kant, your Hume notes can pinpoint passages to which Kant replied.
 - If you are already taking notes on the author's arguments, then you are capturing the logical context of the conclusions. If you also take notes on possible influences, then you will capture the historical context as well.
 - You can simply note points of agreement and disagreement, or you can elaborate them. Do A and B agree because A influenced B? Where they disagree, has B articulated reasons for diverging from A's position? How would A object to B, and how would B reply? How would B object to A, and how would A reply? Reconstructing these imaginary dialogues is an excellent way to sharpen your understanding of both authors and deepen your inquiry into the issues between them.
- If you've ever reread your notes and found that you couldn't understand what you meant, then (at least in future notes) spell out your meaning more fully. It's natural to avoid polished, complete sentences in notes, especially when you are rushed. But don't write so cryptically or telegraphically that you are unintelligible even to yourself.
 - You are the intended audience when you write notes. As you use your notes, learn how much clarity and detail you require.
 - Remember that you'll typically use your notes when you've forgotten just those nuances and connections that your notes describe. If you catch yourself thinking, as you write a cryptic note, "I know what I mean here; I won't forget," then stop yourself short. You're probably wrong.

- As your understanding of the book improves, don't just add new notes to express this understanding. Delete old notes that misrepresent the text. When you review your notes cold, and have forgotten your new, hard-won clarity, then old misleading notes will either mislead you or slow you down as you mentally correct them and work through your confusion one more time.
- When you quote from the text, use quotation marks. When you reread your notes later, or write a paper based on them, you can save yourself a trip back to the book.
 - This is also good practice for secondary sources you might read alongside the primary source. If you take notes on another scholar's reading of your primary text and fail to use quotation marks in your notes, then you might forget later that these are someone else's words. To use them as if they were your own words would be plagiarism, and its inadvertence would not excuse it. (For the same reason, put full bibliographic citations to these sources in your notes, and attribute all quoted passages to specific authors and works.)
- Find a code to distinguish your notes on the author's position from your notes commenting on it or comparing it with someone else's position. In effect, the former are in the author's voice, the latter in your own voice. (For example, I use my initials to label my own intrusions on the author's position.)
 - Again, remember that you'll typically use your notes long after you've taken them and forgotten subtleties like this. Don't confuse yourself about who said what.
- If you're developing your own thoughts on the *merits* of the position you're reading, put them in your notes too, unless you have another place to put them. Take evaluative notes alongside your more interpretive notes.
- If the book you are reading has a poor index, enlarge it with your own entries. If it has a good index, enhance it by underlining or circling the page numbers corresponding to the most important passages on a certain term or concept.
- Whenever you can, make charts, diagrams, tables, and pictures. Make connections between concepts as clear as you can, using graphical connectors if that helps. Show what aligns with what by aligning them in a table or connecting them with arrows. Show what corresponds to what by drawing them in correspondence. Draw families of connected concepts as family trees.
- If your notes on a book are generally thorough, but your notes for a particular chapter are skimpy, then jot an explicit warning to yourself about the skimpy coverage of that chapter. When you review later, you'll need signs like this to help

you strengthen weak sections of your notes and to know which sections of your notes can be relied upon and which cannot.

- If you take notes with pen on paper, then periodically type them into a word processor. This allows you to search for notes for any topic or word. It also allows you to reorganize your notes later in order to bring all notes on a certain topic together. It allows you to delete old and misleading notes. It allows you to put new notes where they belong thematically. It allows you to rewrite vague notes as your clarity improves, and to rewrite abbreviated notes as you find more time to spell out what you meant. It allows you to print legible copies for use in class. It allows you to back them up and prevent disaster. It allows you to cut and paste into the files where your essays are taking shape.
- Consider taking notes on a computer in the first instance. It's not always convenient, but if you'd retype them into a computer anyway, then you may save time in the long run. On the other hand, if you have time to retype your hand-written notes (a big "if" for many students), then you may find that you improve their clarity and organization in the process, and welcome the chance to do so.
 - I find it very natural to take a printout of my notes to class, and to enlarge and improve my notes by taking new, handwritten notes on the printout. After class I incorporate the marginalia into the digital file. This worked well for me as a teacher and it should work just as well for students, especially when it's awkward or distracting to use a computer in class.
- Is it possible that you will take more philosophy courses in the future? Will you want to continue your philosophical growth even after your formal coursework has ended? If so, then think of your notes as a starting point for future reading and reflection. Plan to return to them to refresh your memory about what an author said. Plan to return to them to add layers of new understanding. Write them with these future plans in mind.
 - Think of your notes as dynamic and open-ended. Expect to add layers of new notes based on new readings, new questions, deeper reflection, and comparisons with other thinkers. If you think of your notes as perpetually unfinished and growing, then you should feel less anxious about their incompleteness. They should be part of your continual philosophical inquiry, not a mere deposit of your first effort to understand a difficult book and the philosophical position it embodies.
 - In short, it's artificial and probably stultifying to make a hard and fast distinction between reading philosophy and doing philosophy, or between interpreting philosophical texts and undertaking philosophical inquiry. Your reading notes are not just "student work" to be superseded when you leave your apprenticeship. If you keep them open to revision, then they

will accompany you as you master this discipline. They can be both producer and product of your mastery.

- Consider keeping a philosophical journal. This is not a diary about daily events or a notebook for reading and class notes. It's a laboratory where your own thoughts can grow. It will help your note-taking in many ways. First, it will give you an outlet for thoughts that might not belong among your reading notes. Second, it will give you practice in articulation and analysis that will pay off in your note-taking and all your other writing. Third, it will raise your consciousness about issues that you might well encounter in your reading.
 - For best results, I recommend keeping your journal private. You are more likely to be candid and courageous with yourself if you believe that nobody else has access to it.
 - If you number the pages (and volumes) of your journal, then you can refer to them in your reading notes as well as in subsequent journal entries.