Reading Philosophy

By Dennis Weiss

The first stage in learning to write philosophy is learning to read philosophy. Reading philosophy well will help develop your appreciation for learning how to philosophize, understanding philosophical issues and the context of philosophical disputes, and identifying and reconstructing philosophical arguments, all skills that will aid you immensely as you begin to write your own philosophical essays. Writing in any discipline does not happen in a vacuum and presupposes some knowledge of the relevant context, problems, and issues of that discipline. You’ll gain this important background knowledge as you carefully and critically read the various selections included in each unit of this course.

Reading philosophy is not that different from reading in other areas such as literature, psychology, or history. It is important, then, that you remember what you might have learned in other courses you have taken such as Critical Thinking, English Composition, Introduction to Sociology, etc., and draw connections between reading this material and reading philosophy.
Philosophy, though, does present some unique challenges and the following guidelines should help you prepare to meet them.

**Reading With the Right Attitude**

Reading philosophy requires the right kind of attitude. You must read with a philosophical attitude, that is, with an open and yet critical mind. Both the kinds of things we think and read about and the way we think and read in philosophy are different than in “everyday life”. We are generally not taught to think abstractly or deeply about too many things. We seem to be encouraged instead to use our intelligence to follow directions and orders and to function from day to day usually without questioning or being too critical. This type of thinking is promoted early in life when we tell our children after they ask “Why?” “Never mind asking why; just do as I say or follow my instructions.”

Philosophy, though, encourages us to question, to question especially those kinds of things we are not usually encouraged to question. In philosophy you have to question. Question everything. It is also important that you try to expand your thinking, to open your mind to new and different ideas without rejecting them out of hand because they seem too strange or too abstract for immediate use in everyday life. No idea or theory should be rejected as being unworthy until it has been considered in a careful and critical way.

You should also read empathetically. When you first read for understanding, just relax and try, as far as you can, to enter right into the thinking of the author. Try to go along with his or her point of view, to engage in it as though it were your own. We call this sort of reading empathetic (empathy is the identification with the feelings, beliefs, and point of view of another person; we empathize with someone when we understand, feel, and respond to something from his or her point of view.) Reading something empathetically does not imply that you are ultimately going to agree with it--after understanding, you may agree or disagree. What it means is going along, at least temporarily, with the thoughts and ideas of the writer, entering into his or her frame of reference and working through the flow of ideas and feelings. Doing this is an important device for understanding the work.

You must also approach the reading of philosophy with patience, knowing that you are going to have to read an essay at least twice perhaps three times, concentrating on some of the harder and key sections even more. Genuine understanding will almost always require more than one reading.

**Reading for Understanding**

In a well composed essay you should be able to find the author’s thesis (chief point, major claim) and the reasons or justifications the author offers in support of the thesis. In reading for understanding you might begin by trying to state the main point in your own words. What is the author trying to say? What is his or her thesis? Can you state this thesis in your own words without looking back at the written work? Let's assume that you have identified the thesis of the essay and can state it in your own words.

Essentially, X says that C.
But in a good essay, there is not only a thesis, there are reasons given in its support. The author does not just pull a central claim out of nowhere; he or she develops and defends the point. If you understand the essay, on the basis of careful empathetic reading, you will be able to state the major reasons for this central claim. You should be able to put in your own words a statement of the following form:

Essentially, X says that C, because R.

In this formula, X represents the author, C represents the thesis, and R represents the reasons for it. The word essentially is present to indicate that you are trying to capture the main points of the author; you are not including every strand of supporting argument or every detail. Keep in mind that in any sufficiently complex philosophical essay, there may be more than one main point.

What reading practices can help in identifying an author’s thesis and supporting reasons? Here are a few suggestions that should help you read for understanding:

1. Make use of the tools provided by this textbook and by the authors of the included texts. Notice and make use of chapter and section headings printed in boldface type or italics. Make use of the introductory comments of a reading, referring to them after the first and even the second readings of the chapter. Use online glossaries that can give you special insights into the meanings of words, concepts and theories that you cannot ordinarily acquire from regular dictionaries.

Keep in mind that reading the philosophical selections is different than reading the introductions to those readings. Primary or original philosophical writings are difficult enough reading merely because they are philosophical in nature, but they are often made more complicated by the fact that they are translations from a foreign language (Greek, Latin, German, French) and also written in another time when even English was used somewhat differently from its usage today. Additionally, you may be reading a brief selection from a much larger work and so may lack some of the needed context. Reading this type of philosophy will require more patience and attention than will reading the introductory material written by the textbook editor.

2. Skimming the text can tell you a good deal, giving you a clear idea of the length and some idea of the difficulty of the piece. Read the first paragraph of an essay carefully, because it may announce the author’s thesis, and it may give you some sense of how the argument will be conducted. Note the first and last sentences of each paragraph and each section within chapters, looking for key expressions that indicate the author’s conclusions, such as “It follows, then, that…” Passages of this sort often occur as the first or last sentence in a paragraph. Look for words or expressions that have been italicized or otherwise highlighted by the author. Pay special attention to the last paragraph because it probably will offer a summary and a brief restatement of the writer’s thesis.

3. Reading with the proper tools can aid in your comprehension. You should read with pen
or pencil in hand and paper nearby. As you read you should underline or highlight key passages and make annotations in the margins. Don’t simply let your eyes rove across the page. You should have a good dictionary and get in the practice of looking up words that are unfamiliar to you.

4. Summarizing is useful in helping you to get the gist of the entire essay. After a first reading of an essay, reread it and simultaneously take notes on a sheet of paper, perhaps summarizing each paragraph in a sentence of two. Summarizing each paragraph, or each group of closely related paragraphs, will help you to follow the thread of the discussion, and, when you are finished, will provide you with a useful outline of the essay. For further help, turn your summary into an outline showing the connections between the main ideas.

5. Paraphrasing is a word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase rewording of a text, a sort of translation of the author’s language into your own and can be useful in helping you to grasp difficult passages.

6. Look for and analyze any examples an author might give to illustrate an otherwise abstract and complex point. Kant is considered one of the most difficult philosophers to read and understand. His use of examples provides an immense aid to understanding his difficult points. Keep in mind that reading for comprehension is a back-and-forth process involving reading, summarizing and paraphrasing, and checking your summaries and paraphrases against the essay or article. Go back and ask yourself if you have correctly represented what an author said. As you read, keep asking yourself whether the author is really saying what you have understood him or her to be saying. Especially if you are inclined to disagree with the author and have found empathy in reading difficult to achieve, you should cross-check your statement of the author’s position against the original to ensure you have not misrepresented him or her. Look for evidence that the author has indeed said what you have attributed to him or her.

Reading for Appraisal
Reading for understanding is only the first step in reading philosophy. Once you feel that you understand what an author is saying, you set aside empathy and read the essay from the point of view of a critic. You have a statement of the main claim and the supporting reasons, and you keep these in mind. On the assumption that this is the claim the author is putting forward, and these are the sorts of reasons he or she is giving for it, you want to look at the essay critically to get a sense of how well the argument is expressed. You want, tentatively, to reach an evaluation of the essay. This is perhaps the hardest part of philosophy but again there are some basic tips you might keep in mind while critically evaluating an essay:

1. Carefully examine the supporting reasons an author has given. Do they in fact support the thesis or has the author committed an error of reasoning? Are the supporting reasons themselves generally acceptable?

2. Try to draw connections between what an author is saying and other things you might
have learned or thought about. John Stuart Mill, for instance, argues that human beings desire only one thing, namely pleasure. Compare this claim to things that you might have read about or discussed in a psychology class or another class.

3. Consider your own experience and intuitions when evaluating an author’s claims. Is there a conflict between what an author says and what you yourself have experienced? For instance, on the basis of your own experience, does it seem true that people only desire pleasure? If not, how could you account for this difference of opinion? How could you establish who is right?

4. Compare and contrast a philosopher’s claim to other claims made by other philosophers. Philosophers, as is the case in most disciplines, often disagree with one another on fundamental issues and most philosophy texts present competing answers to the same question. How would one philosopher you have read evaluate another? What, for instance, would Kant say about Mill’s claim that human beings are motivated solely by the pursuit of pleasure?

Finally, keep in mind that evaluating an essay is part of the process of coming to understand what an author is saying. You may, in light of your efforts to evaluate an essay, decide that you didn’t fully understand an author’s thesis and supporting reasons. Reading is a circular process of reading, evaluating, and rereading.

For another online guide on reading philosophy, see Jim Pryor’s Guidelines on Reading Philosophy.

You might also find helpful: Research and Critical Reading, by Pavel Zemliansky.
Interrogating Texts: 6 Reading Habits to Develop in Your First Year at Harvard

Critical reading—active engagement and interaction with texts—is essential to your academic success at Harvard, and to your intellectual growth. Research has shown that students who read deliberately retain more information and retain it longer. Your college reading assignments will probably be more substantial and more sophisticated than those you are used to from high school. The amount of reading will almost certainly be greater. College students rarely have the luxury of successive re-readings of material, either, given the pace of life in and out of the classroom.

While the strategies below are (for the sake of clarity) listed sequentially, you can probably do most of them simultaneously. They may feel awkward at first, and you may have to deploy them very consciously, especially if you are not used to doing anything more than moving your eyes across the page. But they will quickly become habits, and you will notice the difference—in what you “see” in a reading, and in the confidence with which you approach your texts.

1. Previewing: **Look “around” the text before you start reading.**

You’ve probably engaged in one version of previewing in the past, when you’ve tried to determine how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from you). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features other than its length.

**Previewing** enables you to develop a set of expectations about the scope and aim of the text. These very preliminary impressions offer you a way to focus your reading. For instance:

- What does the presence of headnotes, an abstract, or other prefatory material tell you?
- Is the author known to you already? If so, how does his (or her) reputation or credentials influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce him or her (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author’s work, concerns, and importance)?
- How does the disposition or layout of a text prepare you for reading? Is the material broken into parts—subtopics, sections, or the like? Are there long and unbroken blocks of text or smaller paragraphs or “chunks” and what does this suggest? How might the parts of a text guide you toward understanding the line of inquiry or the arc of the argument that’s being made?
- Does the text seem to be arranged according to certain conventions of discourse? Newspaper articles, for instance, have characteristics that you will recognize; textbooks and scholarly essays are organized quite differently. Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, register the type of information you’re presented with.

2. Annotating: **Make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish.**

**Annotating** puts you actively and immediately in a “dialogue” with an author and the issues and ideas you encounter in a written text. It’s also a way to have an ongoing conversation with yourself as you move through the text and to record what that encounter was like for you. Here’s how:

- **Throw away your highlighter:** Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but it can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem strangely cryptic the next, unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you at another moment in time. Pen or pencil will allow you do to more to a text you have to wrestle with.
- **Mark up the margins of your text with words and phrases:** ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the reasons you are reading as well as the purposes your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.
- **Develop your own symbol system:** asterisk (*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allow you to capture the important—and often fleeting—insights that occur to you as you’re reading. Like notes in your margins, they’ll prove indispensable when you return to a text in search of that perfect passage to use in a paper, or are preparing for a big exam.
- **Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions:** “What does this mean?” “Why is the writer drawing that conclusion?” “Why am I being asked to read this text?” etc. Write the questions down (in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere. They are reminders of the unfinished business you still
have with a text: something to ask during class discussion, or to come to terms with on your own, once you’ve had a chance to digest the material further or have done other course reading.

3. Outline, summarize, analyze: Take the information apart, look at its parts, and then try to put it back together again in language that is meaningful to you.

The best way to determine that you’ve really gotten the point is to be able to state it in your own words.

Outlining the argument of a text is a version of annotating, and can be done quite informally in the margins of the text, unless you prefer the more formal Roman numeral model you may have learned in high school. Outlining enables you to see the skeleton of an argument: the thesis, the first point and evidence (and so on), through the conclusion. With weighty or difficult readings, that skeleton may not be obvious until you go looking for it.

Summarizing accomplishes something similar, but in sentence and paragraph form, and with the connections between ideas made explicit.

Analyzing adds an evaluative component to the summarizing process—it requires you not just to restate main ideas, but also to test the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of an argument. In analyzing a text, you reflect upon and decide how effectively (or poorly) its argument has been made. Questions to ask:

- What is the writer asserting?
- What am I being asked to believe or accept? Facts? Opinions? Some mixture?
- What reasons or evidence does the author supply to convince me? Where is the strongest or most effective evidence the author offers -- and why is it compelling?

4. Look for repetitions and patterns:

The way language is chosen, used, positioned in a text can be important indication of what an author considers crucial and what he expects you to glean from his argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas or biases. Be watching for:

- Recurring images
- Repeated words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations
- Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues

5. Contextualize: Once you’ve finished reading actively and annotating, take stock for a moment and put it in perspective.

When you contextualize, you essentially “re-view” a text you’ve encountered, framed by its historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances.

- When was it written or where was it published? Do these factors change or otherwise influence how you view a piece?

Also view the reading through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is always shaped by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place.

6. Compare and Contrast: Set course readings against each other to determine their relationships (hidden or explicit).

- At what point in the term does this reading come? Why that point, do you imagine?
- How does it contribute to the main concepts and themes of the course?
- How does it compare (or contrast) to the ideas presented by texts that come before it? Does it continue a trend, shift direction, or expand the focus of previous readings?
- How has your thinking been altered by this reading? How has it affected your response to the issues and themes of the course?
Writing a Philosophy Essay
By Dennis Weiss

As a college student, you may have already done a fair amount of writing in your academic life, beginning in high school English classes and continuing in your college composition courses, general education courses, and courses in your major. Much of what you have learned about the writing process and what characterizes good writing in these other courses is applicable to this introductory philosophy course as well. You should rely on those skills in composing your essays for this course and remember that many of the skills learned in your general education courses are portable and applicable in other courses as well. In any general education course you are likely to encounter several different kinds of writing tasks and you should pay close attention to the details, instructions, and expectations for each of these different tasks.
In this course, you will be doing at least two kinds of writing (other kinds of writing assignments may be made by your instructor). With each reading, you will be asked to complete a micro essay in which you are asked to respond to or react to specific issues raised in that reading. Oftentimes these micro essays will ask you to apply a particular philosophical theory developed in a reading to the writing assignment for that issue. This kind of writing is low stakes writing. You are not being evaluated on the correctness and quality of your writing. The goal of this writing is to encourage you to think about the readings, the philosophical theories they discuss, and how they might be applied to a specific issue. Low stakes writing plays an important role in helping you comprehend the material, formulate some initial hypotheses, and prepare for a class discussion. While you are not graded or evaluated on these low stakes writing assignments, if you fail to participate in the daily forums your instructor may take this into consideration in assigning a grade for the course.

In contrast to the low stakes writing of the daily forums, you will also be asked to write a formal essay at the end of each unit. You might think of these formal writing assignments as higher stakes writing which does involve summative evaluation. These philosophical essays are your opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of a complex issue and how you might employ a philosophical framework in responding to such an issue. These essays are thesis-driven argumentative philosophical essays and will be evaluated according to objective criteria defined in the grading rubric you will find included in this portfolio. The rest of this document will provide some guidelines for completing these writing assignments. But first, let’s discuss some of the basics.

**Some Basic Matters**

With any writing assignment, you want to make sure you understand the basic matters of when it is due, how you are to submit it, what the appropriate length is, etc. For the formal philosophical essays assigned in this course, the dates and times at which they are due are listed in the online course syllabus. Pay attention to these deadlines as you may lose points if your work is late. You will be uploading your essay through the online course website and so your essay should be prepared in a standard word processing program. Keep in mind the following basic guidelines:

- **FORMAT**: Your essay must be typed and double-spaced. Use only standard fonts, font sizes, and margins. Put your name at the top of the first page and do not include a cover.
- **TITLE**: Your instructor may request that you include a title for your essay. Follow his or her recommendations. You may wish to give your file an appropriate name (such as: John Smith mind final essay) prior to uploading it to the course website.
- **LENGTH**: Essays should be approximately 500 – 700 words, though this may vary with individual assignments. Review the instructions for each assignment.
- **STYLE**: Essays should be written following standard college-level academic prose. Many of you will have purchased a student style manual for your college composition courses. You might find it helpful to consult this if you have any questions regarding academic prose.
- **WRITING PROCESS**: For each essay assignment, you will be required to write at least one initial draft. This draft should be a complete draft and not a mere outline, a few sentences, or a paragraph. It should have an introduction, a well developed body, and a
conclusion. More about the writing process is included below.

- **LATE ESSAYS**: Late essays will be subject to a penalty. See the grading rubric and your instructor for further information on this matter.

**What kind of formal writing will I be doing in this course?**

Our writing tasks in this course will be more narrowly defined and revolve around specific scenarios involving concrete details. Obviously you will want to familiarize yourself with those details and the specific writing scenario.

**WRITING TIP**: Be sure you understand exactly what is expected of you in each writing assignment. Most essay assignments will ask you to analyze and critically evaluate a specific philosophical issue. Make sure that you understand the issue that you are to analyze and that you focus on the right issue. A common mistake students make is to write an essay on a related but ultimately different issue.

The writing assignments accompanying each unit of this course are designed to elicit your judgment on a controversial matter. Each of the formal essays you will be writing for this course requires that you formulate a thesis statement addressing the assigned issue and develop an argument in support of your thesis. What do you think? How can you defend your thesis? In a thesis defense essay, you make a claim, almost always clearly articulated in the introductory paragraph of your essay, and in the body of the essay you provide reasonable grounds that support your claim. Your essay provides evidence that a reasonable and unbiased person would accept for establishing the acceptability of your thesis. You have likely written these kinds of argumentative or persuasive essays for other college courses, particularly college composition courses. You want to demonstrate that you have thought carefully and critically about the issues presented in this course and in the readings included in each unit and that you are capable of crafting an argument that pertains to these issues.

As each issue has been relatively narrowly defined, your thesis should be directly responsive to the issue. Generally you will find that each issue admits of only a small number of appropriate theses. A thesis is a statement that makes some clear, definite assertion about the subject matter under discussion. For example, if the issue of your paper is whether abortion is moral, here are some of the many theses you might choose to defend:

- Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances.
- A woman has an absolute right to decide whether to have an abortion.
- Abortion is morally right only to save the life of the mother.

Each of these is a clear, definite statement that takes a position on the morality of abortion, a position that the rest of the paper will attempt to defend. A statement such as “Abortion, pro and con” would not be an appropriate thesis for it doesn’t assert anything. Nor would the statements “Why I believe in a woman’s right to choose” or “I personally believe abortion is wrong” be appropriate. A philosophy paper is not a personal report of how you feel or what you believe. It is an argument for a thesis. Also, try to avoid picking a wishy-washy thesis that hedges your bets, like “There is much to be said on both sides of the abortion question,” or “There are good
arguments for and against abortion.” The object of a philosophical essay is to move beyond merely reporting on the various perspectives on an issue. You should take a stand, plant your feet squarely on the ground, and argue for your thesis as well as you can.

**WRITING TIP:** Your essay as a whole should be clear, coherent, well-organized, and concise. Make sure both you and the reader know at every stage what you are doing, where you are going, and how what you are writing is relevant to the central task of defending your thesis. Know what you want to say; you should have a very sound notion of the point you wish to argue or the position you wish to support. Don’t wander from the issue that you are to analyze and don’t mix together materials that belong in different parts of the paper. Set forth your argument in logical order, supporting your thesis with arguments. Leave out anything that does not advance your argument or further your point. Don’t be afraid to edit your own work, deleting passages that do not advance your argument.

There are many excellent resources available on the Internet which provide guidance on writing a thesis defense essay and in this portfolio of writing resources you will find links to four online “How to Write Philosophy” guides that provide additional insights into writing philosophy essays. In particular, I recommend Douglas Portmore’s “Tips on Writing Philosophy Papers.” If you are encountering problems with the formal writing assignments in this course, I encourage you to review one or more of these writing guides.

**Developing arguments**
The heart of a persuasive essay is the arguments that support the thesis. You have to come up with arguments that are designed to persuade your reader that your thesis is an acceptable one. What is an argument? To put it as simply as possible, an argument for a thesis is a reason for believing that the thesis is acceptable. When you are putting forward an argument in support of your thesis, ask yourself, “If I didn’t already believe my thesis, would this convince me that the thesis is acceptable? Would it tend to convince a reasonable reader who is open-minded enough so that he or she is willing to listen to reasons?” If the answer is yes, then you have your hands on a genuine argument. If the answer is no, then leave it out of the paper and look for a better argument.

**WRITING TIP:** Do not introduce assumptions or speculations into your essay unless you can adequately defend them as reasonable and they are consistent with everything else we know. Don’t leave any important claims unsupported. If you argue that abortion is immoral because the fetus is a person with a right to life you need to support your claims that the fetus is a person and has a right to life. Any claims that may be controversial and not accepted by most reasonable people should be supported. Any claims or arguments that have already been discussed and criticized in class must be supported if you introduce them into your essay.

Your arguments should be well developed and thought out. The number of arguments in an essay is not necessarily as important as the quality of the arguments. It is often better to develop one strong, persuasive argument in support of your thesis than several weak and unrelated arguments.
WRITING TIP: Don’t mistake common forms of discourse for arguments. Some examples:

- Merely citing an example is not an argument.
- Supporting a claim with trite or stock phrases or with clichés is not arguing.
- Simply stating your feelings or beliefs does not constitute an argument.
- Avoid merely reporting, summarizing, or describing other people’s views. Don’t confuse describing your views with arguing for them. Merely describing or explaining what you believe is not sufficient to justify your belief and wouldn’t persuade someone who didn’t already agree with you.

For the purposes of the philosophy writing assignments you will be doing for this course, it is important to keep in mind what these writing assignments are not:

Philosophical essays are not a matter of your feelings or mere opinions

These writing assignments are not simply an opportunity for you to express your opinion or feelings. Philosophy is not generally about feelings or opinions but rationally defensible beliefs. Students often believe that philosophy is simply about the art of bullshit and that any opinion is as good as any other, but this is not true. Some opinions are more defensible than others and you are being called on to present evidence in support of your claims. As you grapple with the complex issues addressed in this course, your opinions are a good starting point—but they are just that, the starting point. Through further reflection, debate and discussion, and critical reading, you should refine your opinions and begin to develop an argument in support of your belief. As you do so, you move from mere opinion to supported belief.

WRITING TIP: Asking a question without answering it is not an appropriate way to give an argument. For example: “What would happen if every woman who wanted an abortion got one?” is not an argument. “If every woman who wanted an abortion got one, millions of innocent lives would be lost” is the beginning of an argument. Don’t resort to rhetorical questions as a strategy for arguing for a claim.

Philosophical essays are generally not solely about factual or empirical matters

Many of the disciplines you are likely to encounter in your general education courses are interested in descriptive matters and conducting experiments in order to resolve empirical matters. Consider the case of Sandra Jensen, the woman with Down’s syndrome who needs a double organ transplant. Sociologists may be interested in people’s attitudes toward those with Down’s syndrome. Medical doctors may want to know the state of her physical health. The general populace is surely interested in how many organs are available and how many are in need. Many people may believe that organs are simply distributed on the basis of who has the most money or influence. These are important matters but they are not philosophical matters. The student of philosophy is interested in the issue of whether it would be fair to deny Sandra Jensen her request for an organ transplant. The empirical matters may be relevant here but they are never sufficient for making the case regarding what is fair. Your paper ultimately has to wrestle with more than simply the facts and descriptive matters regarding what people do. You must address the prescriptive issue of what is fair in this situation. This goes beyond the facts and what
people do and requires that you also wrestle with philosophical theories of justice.

**WRITING TIP:** Merely citing or repeating known facts seldom constitutes an argument. If you are opposed to abortions and wish to argue that abortions are immoral, merely citing the fact that thousands of abortions are performed weekly does not in itself constitute adequate support for your thesis. Facts need to be interpreted. They require a philosophical framework in which the reader is made to understand their significance.

**Philosophical essays are not simply reports or research papers**
The essays that you will be writing for this course do not require that you do any additional research, other than critically reading the assigned selections and the material providing background information. In your forum posts you will be asked to discuss what you think this or that philosopher might say in addressing a particular issue or how you might apply a particular philosophical theory to an issue. The final writing assignment for each unit asks you to develop your own response to a particular issue. These assignments are not designed for you to simply report on what some great philosophical figure said but to articulate and defend your own view on the matter. Let’s return to the case of Sandra Jensen for a moment. In addressing this case in your essay for this unit, it would be a mistake to write an essay in which you explain what John Stuart Mill would say or what John Rawls would say. In such a case you would no longer be addressing the issue of whether you think it would be fair to deny her request for an organ transplant. You would be addressing the topic of what Mill thinks or what Rawls thinks. And while it may be worthwhile to address these topics as part of your preparation for writing an essay about Sandra Jensen, this should not be the focus of your writing.

**WRITING TIP:** Remember that there is a difference between mere expository writing, where you are explaining or summarizing or describing, and persuasive writing where your goal is to persuasively support a thesis with appropriate arguments.

**Philosophical theories as tools**
Many introductory philosophy students are confused when confronted with the task of articulating and defending their own philosophical views. They are more comfortable with simply reporting what other philosophers have said. Furthermore, students are unsure of how to use a philosophical theory and what it could mean to analyze a case from the perspective of a particular framework. The various philosophical readings included in each unit of this course will introduce you to a series of frameworks for examining the central issue of that unit. For instance, in the unit on justice you will be introduced to a variety of different philosophical accounts of justice, each of which highlights a different way of thinking about justice, including merit, natural rights, utility, fairness, and capability. Each of these frameworks highlights different aspects of the case of Sandra Jensen and each has their strengths and weaknesses. You might think of these various theories as different tools in the philosophical tool box. They each do slightly different things and give us a slightly different perspective on our problem.

**WRITING TIP:** Using examples and counterexamples can often be a good strategy in explaining your points and offering some support for your thesis. Be careful, however, not to rely too heavily on isolated examples. The mere fact that one person you know
died from complications due to an abortion does not mean that abortions are unsafe nor does it adequately support such a thesis.

After considering the variety of approaches to justice, you are then asked to take a stance on Sandra Jensen’s request. Having worked with and critically thought about these various theories/tools, you now have to decide which tool you think is best for this particular job. Let’s imagine that you have been impressed by John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian account of justice and you believe that Sandra Jensen’s case ought to be determined on the basis of utility. You’re then going to write an essay in which you address the issue of whether it is fair to deny Sandra Jensen her request from the standpoint of utility. Your essay is not going to be about how Mill would assess the case of Sandra Jensen. Rather, you will be writing as a utilitarian yourself and defending how you, as a utilitarian, think this matter ought to be resolved. In your essay, you are going to make the best case you can for a utilitarian analysis of this matter. You are using this theory as a tool to analyze this case. Make good use of the tool and your essay will be a success. But you don’t need to reinvent the tool or even address the matter of who first invented it. You just need to pick up the tool and use it properly.

In drawing on a particular philosophical framework you may find it useful to briefly and concisely mention a specific point that a philosopher makes in articulating that framework. Let’s stick with case of Mill and Sandra Jensen for a moment. In his utilitarian account of justice, Mill argues that all persons have a right to equality of treatment “except when social expediency requires the reverse.” You might find it useful in your own analysis of the case of Sandra Jensen to make use of this point and you should be free to do so. But again, your goal in citing this point is not to discuss how Mill would analyze the case of Sandra Jensen but to make use of one of the tools that Mill has included in his framework.

**WRITING TIP:** It is perfectly all right to use an argument from a lecture you have heard or an essay or book that you have read, including this textbook. When you adopt an argument as your own, you take responsibility for it. By including it in your paper, you are saying that you believe it is a convincing argument. If you are aware of criticisms of the argument, you should attempt to address these criticisms when you adopt the argument. If you are paraphrasing or quoting remember to supply the necessary documentation.

**Can I mix and match philosophical frameworks?**

It is only natural for beginning philosophy students to be attracted to different elements in different philosophical theories and want to combine the best elements from a variety of theories. But you should resist doing so. Philosophers value consistency and clarity above all else and it is often the case that when you combine elements from different philosophical frameworks you risk combining elements that are ultimately inconsistent. This is especially the case when you realize that philosophers expect their frameworks to apply at a fairly general level, precisely where they are likely to run into inconsistencies with other theories.

Let’s take a look at a common mistake in this regard. When exposed to different ethical theories, it is not uncommon for beginning philosophy students to find both John Stuart Mill’s emphasis
on consequences and happiness and Immanuel Kant’s emphasis on duty attractive. When confronted with a complex moral case such as the one presented in the unit on ethics, Bertram Harper’s aiding his wife Virginia to die, students sometimes want to combine Mill’s emphasis on happiness and Kant’s emphasis on duty, and support their thesis using both theories. Mill and Kant are a bit like oil and water, however, and their theories pull us in very different directions. Mill says look only at the consequences when making a moral decision and Kant says never take the consequences into consideration when making a moral decision. How am I to both look and not look at the consequences when making a moral decision? This is impossible and the inconsistency in the advice is indicative of why it is more generally not possible to combine distinct philosophical frameworks. The readings included in each unit of this text have been selected to highlight distinct and divergent philosophical frameworks and as such it is generally not possible to take elements from one framework and combine them with elements from another framework. If you are motivated to do so, you should exercise extreme caution and perhaps seek the input of your instructor.

Who is my audience?
Knowing your audience for a particular writing assignment is very important for couching your comments appropriately. For many of the writing assignments included in this course, you are given fairly specific directions regarding the writing scenario and its context. Some of the writing assignments ask you to imagine that you are a judge, or a member of a transplant committee, or are writing a letter to the editor, or even that you have been transported into a television show. You should feel free to make use of these contexts to structure your essay, but you need not. In either case, you should assume that your audience is a reasonable and unbiased individual already familiar with the details of the writing assignment and generally familiar with the philosophical frameworks you will be employing. Your essay should not devote much space to summarizing the details of the case or summarizing your given philosophical theory. You should instead focus on the task of articulating your thesis and the good grounds that provide support for it. If you are asked to write an essay about Sandra Jensen, for instance, you don’t want to include a lengthy paragraph rehearsing the details of her case. Assume that your reader is already familiar with these details, as the writing scenario suggests. And were you to offer a utilitarian analysis of her case, you shouldn’t include a paragraph in which you summarize the utilitarian theory of justice. Instead, simply use the theory in your analysis. Make use of the tool, don’t describe it. Assume that your reader is already familiar with the details of the case and the outlines of the philosophical framework you will be employing. Get directly to the task of supporting your thesis.

WRITING TIP: Do not beg the question when arguing. Begging the question is a form of reasoning in which the conclusion of an argument merely restates the premise. Such an argument assumes or takes for granted precisely what it is supposed to establish. Consider the following:

I believe abortion is wrong. It is not right for people to have abortions. I think it is terrible that so many innocent children are being murdered.

This passage does not present any arguments. It is circular and repetitious, merely
repeating the first statement with slightly different words. In other words, this passage begs the question and should convince no one that abortion is wrong.

**A process approach to writing**

This course has been designed to insure that you adopt a process approach to writing. Writing and revising drafts are important parts of the writing process. In your college composition courses you have likely learned about the importance of writing a draft, having it reviewed, and revising it before submitting a final draft. We will employ a similar process in this course. Part of learning to be a good writer and a good student of philosophy is learning how to draft your comments, share them with others so that they can be reviewed, and then replying to those reviews and improving your writing and your thinking.

Your instructor may employ a peer-review process as part of writing process. If so, you will be asked to read and comment on one of your peer’s essays, possibly completing the Peer Evaluation Form included in these writing resources. Take this as an opportunity to learn about how one of your peers is approaching the writing assignment and help one another to clarify and strengthen your ideas.

Following this peer evaluation, you will be asked to revise your essay as necessary and then upload a draft to mydigitaltext where it be evaluated and commented upon using the Quickmarks discussed elsewhere in these writing resources. Once your essay has been evaluated, you will be given an opportunity to revise it once more before uploading your final draft. Take this time to review the comments and Quickmarks and perhaps meet with your instructor to review any areas of your essay where you have concerns. You might also find it helpful to visit your college’s writing center if they have one and get the help from a trained writing tutor.

**WRITING TIP:** End your paper with a summary and a conclusion that briefly reviews your main argument and leaves the reader with the essay’s most important points. It is seldom appropriate to introduce new points, material, or arguments in the conclusion.

Be sure to proof read your final draft prior to uploading. While our focus in these writing assignments is on the quality of your philosophical arguments, mistakes in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure detract from your making your point clearly. Use your word processor’s spell and grammar checking programs but do not rely exclusively on them as they will not catch all your mistakes. Take care to avoid common punctuation problems, fused sentences, sentence fragments, pronoun errors, etc.

**WRITING TIP:** Try to use language as precisely as possible. Vague words like “stuff” or “thing” are evidence of a sloppy mind. Your prose should be proper to the subject—not forced or stilted, not full of words you would never use except in a philosophy paper, but nevertheless carefully chosen.
Improving Your Writing
By Dennis Weiss

While this course concentrates on philosophical writing, your writing will still be judged according to the standards of college academic prose. This means that matters of writing style, organization, grammar, spelling, and sentence structure will play a role in the overall evaluation of your writing. If you are not confident in your writing skills, there are several places you may seek help. York College has a writing center where you can go and receive individual attention and help crafting a better written essay. Most professors are happy to have their students visit the writing center and will often encourage students to use these indispensable service. Many college writing centers also offer extensive help through their web sites. Here are a couple of recommended links to online writing centers where you can get help on writing strategies, adopting a process approach to writing, grammar and style issues, and other matters.

- The Purdue Online Writing Lab
- Colorado State University: Writing@CSU
- Guide to Grammar and Writing: Capital Community College
Additionally, there are many fine online sites with helpful guidelines on grammar and writing style, including:

**The Elements of Style** by William Strunk
From the website Bartleby.com: Asserting that one must first know the rules to break them, this classic reference book is a must-have for any student and conscientious writer. Intended for use in which the practice of composition is combined with the study of literature, it gives in brief space the principal requirements of plain English style and concentrates attention on the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.

**Guide to Grammar and Style** by Jack Lynch
Revising Drafts

 Rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost.
 —William Zinsser

What this handout is about

This handout will motivate you to revise your drafts and give you strategies to revise effectively.

What does it mean to revise?

Revision literally means to “see again,” to look at something from a fresh, critical perspective. It is an ongoing process of rethinking the paper: reconsidering your arguments, reviewing your evidence, refining your purpose, reorganizing your presentation, reviving stale prose.

But I thought revision was just fixing the commas and spelling.

Nope. That’s called proofreading. It’s an important step before turning your paper in, but if your ideas are predictable, your thesis is weak, and your organization is a mess, then proofreading will just be putting a band-aid on a bullet wound. When you finish revising, that’s the time to proofread. For more information on the subject, see our handout on proofreading.

How about if I just reword things: look for better words, avoid repetition, etc.? Is that revision?

Well, that’s a part of revision called editing. It’s another important final step in polishing your work. But if you haven’t thought through your ideas, then rephrasing them won’t make any difference.

Why is revision important?

Writing is a process of discovery, and you don’t always produce your best stuff when you first get started. So revision is a chance for you to look critically at what you have written to see

- if it’s really worth saying,
- if it says what you wanted to say, and
- if a reader will understand what you’re saying.

The process

What steps should I use when I begin to revise?

Here are several things to do. But don’t try them all at one time. Instead, focus on two or three main areas during each revision session.
Wait awhile after you’ve finished a draft before looking at it again. The Roman poet Horace thought one should wait nine years, but that’s a bit much. A day—a few hours even—will work. When you do return to the draft, be honest with yourself, and don’t be lazy. Ask yourself what you really think about the paper.

As The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers puts it, “THINK BIG, don’t tinker” (61). At this stage, you should be concerned with the large issues in the paper, not the commas.

Check the focus of the paper: Is it appropriate to the assignment? Is the topic too big or too narrow? Do you stay on track through the entire paper?

Think honestly about your thesis: Do you still agree with it? Should it be modified in light of something you discovered as you wrote the paper? Does it make a sophisticated, provocative point, or does it just say what anyone could say if given the same topic? Does your thesis generalize instead of taking a specific position? Should it be changed altogether? For more information visit our handout on thesis statements.

Think about your purpose in writing: Does your introduction state clearly what you intend to do? Will your aims be clear to your readers?

What are some other steps I should consider in later stages of the revision process?

Examine the balance within your paper: Are some parts out of proportion with others? Do you spend too much time on one trivial point and neglect a more important point? Do you give lots of detail early on and then let your points get thinner by the end?

Check that you have kept your promises to your readers: Does your paper follow through on what the thesis promises? Do you support all the claims in your thesis? Are the tone and formality of the language appropriate for your audience?

Check the organization: Does your paper follow a pattern that makes sense? Do the transitions move your readers smoothly from one point to the next? Do the topic sentences of each paragraph appropriately introduce what that paragraph is about? Would your paper work better if you moved some things around? For more information visit our handout on reorganizing drafts.

Check your information: Are all your facts accurate? Are any of your statements misleading? Have you provided enough detail to satisfy readers’ curiosity? Have you cited all your information appropriately?

Check your conclusion: Does the last paragraph tie the paper together smoothly and end on a stimulating note, or does the paper just die a slow, redundant, lame, or abrupt death?

Whoa! I thought I could just revise in a few minutes.

Sorry. You may want to start working on your next paper early so that you have plenty of time for revising. That way you can give yourself some time to come back to look at what you’ve written with a fresh pair of eyes. It’s amazing how something that sounded brilliant the moment you wrote it can prove to be less-than-brilliant when you give it a chance to incubate.

But I don’t want to rewrite my whole paper!

Revision doesn’t necessarily mean rewriting the whole paper. Sometimes it means revising the thesis to match what you’ve discovered while writing. Sometimes it means coming up with stronger arguments to defend your position, or coming up with more vivid examples to illustrate your points. Sometimes it means shifting the order of your paper to help the reader follow your argument, or to change the emphasis of your points. Sometimes it means adding or deleting material for balance or emphasis. And then, sadly, sometimes revision does mean trashing your first draft and starting from scratch. Better that than having the teacher trash your final paper.

But I work so hard on what I write that I can’t afford to throw any of it away.
If you want to be a polished writer, then you will eventually find out that you can’t afford NOT to throw stuff away. As writers, we often produce lots of material that needs to be tossed. The idea or metaphor or paragraph that I think is most wonderful and brilliant is often the very thing that confuses my reader or ruins the tone of my piece or interrupts the flow of my argument. Writers must be willing to sacrifice their favorite bits of writing for the good of the piece as a whole. In order to trim things down, though, you first have to have plenty of material on the page. One trick is not to hinder yourself while you are composing the first draft because the more you produce, the more you will have to work with when cutting time comes.

**But sometimes I revise as I go.**

That’s OK. Since writing is a circular process, you don’t do everything in some specific order. Sometimes you write something and then tinker with it before moving on. But be warned: there are two potential problems with revising as you go. One is that if you revise only as you go along, you never get to think of the big picture. The key is still to give yourself enough time to look at the essay as a whole once you’ve finished. Another danger to revising as you go is that you may short-circuit your creativity. If you spend too much time tinkering with what is on the page, you may lose some of what hasn’t yet made it to the page. Here’s a tip: Don’t proofread as you go. You may waste time correcting the commas in a sentence that may end up being cut anyway.

### How do I go about the process of revising? Any tips?

- Work from a printed copy; it’s easier on the eyes. Also, problems that seem invisible on the screen somehow tend to show up better on paper.
- Another tip is to read the paper out loud. That’s one way to see how well things flow.
- Remember all those questions listed above? Don’t try to tackle all of them in one draft. Pick a few “agendas” for each draft so that you won’t go mad trying to see, all at once, if you’ve done everything.
- Ask lots of questions and don’t flinch from answering them truthfully. For example, ask if there are opposing viewpoints that you haven’t considered yet.

### Concerns

**Whenever I revise, I just make things worse. I do my best work without revising.**

That’s a common misconception that sometimes arises from fear, sometimes from laziness. The truth is, though, that except for those rare moments of inspiration or genius when the perfect ideas expressed in the perfect words in the perfect order flow gracefully and effortlessly from the mind, all experienced writers revise their work. I wrote six drafts of this handout. Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times. If you’re still not convinced, re-read some of your old papers. How do they sound now? What would you revise if you had a chance?

### What can get in the way of good revision strategies?

Don’t fall in love with what you have written. If you do, you will be hesitant to change it even if you know it’s not great. Start out with a working thesis, and don’t act like you’re married to it. Instead, act like you’re dating it, seeing if you’re compatible, finding out what it’s like from day to day. If a better thesis comes along, let go of the old one. Also, don’t think of revision as just rewording. It is a chance to look at the entire paper, not just isolated words and sentences.

**What happens if I find that I no longer agree with my own point?**

If you take revision seriously, sometimes the process will lead you to questions you cannot answer, objections or exceptions to your thesis, cases that don’t fit, loose ends or contradictions that just won’t go away. If this happens
(and it will if you think long enough), then you have several choices. You could choose to ignore the loose ends and hope your reader doesn’t notice them, but that’s risky. You could change your thesis completely to fit your new understanding of the issue, or you could adjust your thesis slightly to accommodate the new ideas. Or you could simply acknowledge the contradictions and show why your main point still holds up in spite of them. Most readers know there are no easy answers, so they may be annoyed if you give them a thesis and try to claim that it is always true with no exceptions no matter what.

**How do I get really good at revising?**

The same way you get really good at golf, piano, or a video game—do it often. Take revision seriously, be disciplined, and set high standards for yourself. Here are three more tips:

- The more you produce, the more you can cut.
- The more you can imagine yourself as a reader looking at this for the first time, the easier it will be to spot potential problems.
- The more you demand of yourself in terms of clarity and elegance, the more clear and elegant your writing will be.

**How do I revise at the sentence level?**

Read your paper out loud, sentence by sentence, and follow Peter Elbow’s advice: “Look for places where you stumble or get lost in the middle of a sentence. These are obvious awkwardness’s that need fixing. Look for places where you get distracted or even bored—where you cannot concentrate. These are places where you probably lost focus or concentration in your writing. Cut through the extra words or vagueness or digression; get back to the energy. Listen even for the tiniest jerk or stumble in your reading, the tiniest lessening of your energy or focus or concentration as you say the words . . . A sentence should be alive” (Writing with Power 135).

Practical advice for ensuring that your sentences are alive:

- Use forceful verbs—replace long verb phrases with a more specific verb. For example, replace “She argues for the importance of the idea” with “She defends the idea.”
- Look for places where you’ve used the same word or phrase twice or more in consecutive sentences and look for alternative ways to say the same thing OR for ways to combine the two sentences.
- Cut as many prepositional phrases as you can without losing your meaning. For instance, the following sentence, “There are several examples of the issue of integrity in Huck Finn,” would be much better this way, “Huck Finn repeatedly addresses the issue of integrity.”
- Check your sentence variety. If more than two sentences in a row start the same way (with a subject followed by a verb, for example), then try using a different sentence pattern.
- Aim for precision in word choice. Don’t settle for the best word you can think of at the moment—use a thesaurus (along with a dictionary) to search for the word that says exactly what you want to say.
- Look for sentences that start with “It is” or “There are” and see if you can revise them to be more active and engaging.
- For more information, please visit our handouts on word choice and style.

**Works consulted/additional resources**

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on
this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.


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If you enjoy using our handouts, we appreciate contributions of acknowledgement.
Fallacies

By Dennis Weiss

A fallacy is a kind of error in reasoning and many beginning philosophy writers will occasionally encounter fallacies in their writing, which an evaluator may point out and which will then need to be addressed. Many fallacies are very common and while easily identifiable and diagnosed, also easily find their way into writing. You will find some fallacies explicitly identified in the Quickmarks, such as begging the question or employing emotionally charged language. Your instructor may also alert you to fallacies that appear in your writing or you may find comments on your essays identifying fallacious reasoning. There are many excellent online resources that define and provide examples of fallacies, helping you to identify fallacies and avoid them in your own writing. Five of the better online resources for fallacies are:

- The Fallacy Files
- Logical Fallacies: An Encyclopedia of Errors of Reasoning
- Fallacies: The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- Fallacies: The Nizkor Project
- Stephen’s Guide to the Logical Fallacies
Philosophy Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

By Dennis Weiss

For students interested in learning more about a particular philosopher or philosophical theory or simply in clarifying the meaning of a key philosophical concept, there are a number of excellent dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy, many of them available online or through your college library’s database subscription service. Here we include a list of the more widely recognized authoritative resources widely available to students.

Online Dictionaries of Philosophy:

- A Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names
- Dictionary of Philosophy
Dictionaries of Philosophy (that may be available through your college library):
  • The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy
  • A Dictionary of Philosophy
  • The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy

Online Encyclopedias of Philosophy:
  • The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
  • The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Encyclopedias of Philosophy (that may be available through your college library):
  • The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy
  • The Encyclopedia of Philosophy
Effective Listening and Notetaking
Effective and Listening and Notetaking

Listening is a skill that should be taught since eighty percent of what you know is learned by listening. This packet contains specific recommendations to help you listen to a lecture more efficiently.

Efficient notetaking is necessary for students to have a record of lectures for future study and review. This packet gives a variety of techniques to improve notetaking skills including mapping.

This information has been adapted from a variety of Study Skills textbooks. The last page of this packet is a bibliography of these textbooks.

Listening Tips

You must learn to listen effectively because eighty percent of what you know is acquired through listening. Listening is a skill that requires the constant application of certain principles until they become habitual. Here are some suggestions:

1. Be prepared to listen by keeping up to date with your textbook reading. Read the chapter before the lecture!

2. Determine the main idea and all important details that were given in connection with it.

3. Learn to recognize that the speaker is making an important point by:
   
   a. pausing
   b. giving examples
   c. repeating what has been said
   d. repeating the textbook
   e. increasing volume or changing pitch of voice
   f. taking more time on one area
   g. adding class activities or worksheets
   h. using body language (facial expression, gestures, posture, pace)
   i. writing on the chalkboard
   j. using direct statements (this is very important) or signal words (examples: significant, most)
Ten Ways to Improve Listening

1. Find area of interest - maintain eye contact even if the subject appears boring. There will be some information that will be useful.

2. Judge the content, not delivery. Find out what the speaker knows, not how he presents it.

3. Withhold evaluation until comprehension is complete – don’t become preoccupied with rebuttal before idea is completely presented. Don’t listen defensively.

4. Listen for ideas - main ideas, central facts, organizational patterns.

5. Be flexible in notetaking.

6. Work at listening - spend energy to give conscious attention.

7. Resist distractions - a matter of concentration.

8. Exercise your mind - develop an appetite for hearing a variety of presentations difficult enough to challenge your mental capacities.

9. Keep your mind open - be careful of emotional impact of certain words - don’t listen defensively composing a rebuttal.

10. Capitalize on thought speed.
    Speech speed - 100-200 words per minute
    Thought speed - 400-500 or more words per minute.

Take advantage of differential - do not allow distractions during this time.

Ten Questions to Ask Yourself While Listening

1. What is he saying; what does it really mean?
2. How does that relate to what he said before?
3. Where is he going; what’s the point he’s trying to make?
4. How is that helpful; how can I use this?
5. Does this make any sense?
6. Am I getting the whole story?
7. How does this relate to what I already know?
8. Is he leaving anything out?
9. How does this relate to what I already know?
10. Do I understand what he’s saying or should I ask for clarification?
Ten BAD Listening Habits, by Ralph G. Nichols

1. Finding the subject uninteresting
2. Judging delivery, not content.
3. Allowing excessive emotional involvement
4. Listening for details, not central ideas
5. Using non-flexible notetaking
6. Paying poor attention to the speaker
7. Being easily distracted
8. Avoiding difficult material
9. Refusing to accept new ideas
10. Thinking about irrelevant topics

How To Take Good Lecture Notes

A good set of lecture notes is one of your most important assets in getting ready for an examination. If you have the facts in readable form, you are well equipped to do the necessary reviewing.

Many students take notes in a very haphazard style claiming that they will copy them later. This is a poor policy for two reasons:

(1) usually the notes don’t get copied and the originals are not much use after a few days or weeks have gone by, and

(2) if the notes are copied, it is a waste of time because they can just as well be done correctly in the first place.

Three important findings from studies concerned with notetaking:

1. Notetaking helps you listen; it does not interfere with listening and comprehension.

2. Students who study their notes using the recitation method remember one and a half times more after six weeks than students who do not review.

3. Students who take no notes or do not study their notes forget approximately 80% of the lectures by the end of two weeks.
Good lecture notes must:

1. present a neat, attractive appearance.
2. indicate the main points of the lecture.
3. show the relationship of the details to the main points.
4. include enough illustrative detail to enrich notes and content.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TAKING NOTES:

1. USE INK! Notes in pencil will smear and are hard to read anyway. Be sure to use a large notebook.
2. Date your notes for reference in test preparation.
3. Leave wide margins and don’t crowd your lines together. Notebook paper is cheap - never mind if you use a whole line for just one work. Plenty of white space is important in order to show the relationships of ideas to each other.
4. Use notetaking shorthand to reduce as many ideas as possible.
   a. Reduce to essential words - don’t use complete sentences.
   b. Use symbols as a substitute for words.
   c. Abbreviate by using initials, half words, creative spelling.
5. Don’t take too many notes. Do more listening than writing.
6. Don’t try to take down everything the lecturer says. All lecturers have to repeat a great deal, but you only need to put it down once.
7. Don’t take down the first thing he says on any topic - it’s probably introductory material.
8. Listen for signals. He’s almost sure to say something about “The first point I want to discuss today…”
9. Don’t try to make a formal outline. You’ll only get bogged down in your letters and numbers and won’t be able to concentrate on listening and trying to understand.
10. Underline the first main topic. Then write down, in list form but without numbers, the most important things he talks about. (Don’t try to make sub-topics and sub-sub-topics.) Keep on doing this until you find that he is talking about something else. Then you will know it’s time for another main topic.
11. Don’t bother to number sub-topics unless the lecturer says: “There are three reasons...” or mentions a specific number of facts. Then number them so you will be sure to learn that many facts when you study for your examination. In other words, don’t number just for the sake of numbering, but make the numbers mean something.
12. Read your notes over as soon after class as possible to fix handwriting, spelling and clarity.
HERE IS A SAMPLE NOTETAKING TECHNIQUE:

The 2-6-2 Form of Lecture Notes

1. Use lined notebook paper measuring 8-1/2” x 11” with three holes in the margin.

2. Before writing on your note paper, divide the sheets the following way:

   6"
   "
   2"
   Questions

   NOTES

   SUMMARY

3. Take your notes in the large, open section of the paper just as you would take notes ordinarily.

4. When going over your notes, place key questions in the two-inch margin on the left. These questions will help you in your review of these notes at a later time.

5. Write brief summaries in the section 2 x 6 inches at the bottom of the page. These will help you in your review, when you want to know general ideas, or which topics deserve extra attention (these are the ones which seem vague to you.)

In reviewing notes, use the questions and summaries as “talking” or “starting” points for recitation. Go into the notes themselves only when you feel that you are not prepared to develop the questions and summaries.
COMMON ABBREVIATIONS FOR NOTETAKING

Devise your own abbreviation for words used frequently in a course. Be consistent! Always use the same abbreviation for the same word.

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SOLUTIONS TO COMMON PROBLEMS IN NOTETAKING

A. Illegibility - It is usually sufficient that a student can read his own notes. It is advisable to go over notes while still fresh in order to clarify any illegible parts. This is particularly important in the case of notes that had to be taken rapidly.

B. Points Missed - Leave spaces. Try to fill in later from the text or by checking with classmates or teacher.

C. Spelling of a Word Not Known - Write the word as best as possible phonetically. Code (Sp?) and check later.

D. Missed Lectures - When a classmate must miss a lecture and entrusts you with taking notes for him, use a piece of carbon paper and provide him with his own copy. Thus, there is less chance that he will be using your notes at times when you would like to have them available for review and also less chance of the notes being lost. If you must miss a lecture, your classmates can reciprocate for you.

E. Ink or Paper Supply Becomes Exhausted - A replacement might be obtained from a neighbor if it can be done quickly and unobtrusively. Otherwise the student should listen especially carefully and write the missing notes as soon as he possible can. Since forgetting
is rapid when notes are not taken, it is wise to check paper, pencil, and ink before leaving for class.

F. **Poor Physical Situation** - When seeing or hearing is difficult, a seat change for the next lecture, or even during the same lecture, is in order. If a problem arises such as light glare preventing students from seeing the place on the board where the lecturer is writing, the lecturer might be informed of this. He would probably rather be interrupted to be informed of such a condition than to have part of his lecture lost.

G. **Poor Physical or Emotional Condition** - Try to concentrate deeply on the topics of the lecture and to become very interested in them. Such practice may help a student forget minor physical discomfort or emotional upset by detracting from it for a while.

**MAPPING**

Here is an alternative way of notetaking:

Since the brain does not deal with data in a chronological linear fashion, and we do not listen “like someone sucking up spaghetti”, mind map can show relationships and how the parts relate to the whole. Mapping allows you to see the total picture.

**STEPS TO FOLLOW:**

1. You need several sheets of blank paper, standard size.
2. Print the main subject in the middle of the page and draw a geometric shape around it.
3. All ideas plotted on a mind map should be expressed in just one or two key words.
4. Key words should be concrete, meaningful, and summon up the same image or idea each time they are used. Strong nouns or verbs.
5. Think of subtopics that will represent all the data. Print these on lines connecting to the main subject.
6. The supporting points come after subtopics.

**ADVANTAGES:**

1. The main idea is more clearly defined.
2. The relative importance of each idea is clearly indicated. More important ideas will be nearer the center and less important ideas will be near the edge.
3. The links between the key concepts will be immediately recognizable because of proximity and connection.
4. Recall and review will be more effective and rapid.
5. Structure allows for the easy addition of new information without scratching out or squeezing in.
6. Each map will look different, aiding recall.
Here is a sample mind map:
Use these to make mind maps of your own.
HANDWRITING TIPS

Do you have trouble reading your own writing after you have taken notes? Here is an alphabet that may help. Think in straight lines and circles.

\[ \text{abcdefg\_ijklmnopqrstuvwxy} \]
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTE TAKING SYSTEM

5 Methods
- The Cornell Method
- The Outline Method
- The Mapping Method
- The Charting Method
- The Sentence Method

THE CORNELL METHOD
The Cornell method provides a systematic format for condensing and organizing notes without laborious recopying. After writing the notes in the main space, use the left-hand space to label each idea and detail with a key word or "cue."

Method - Rule your paper with a 2 ½ inch margin on the left leaving a six-inch area on the right in which to make notes. During class, take down information in the six-inch area. When the instructor moves to a new point, skip a few lines. After class, complete phrases and sentences as much as possible. For every significant bit of information, write a cue in the left margin. To review, cover your notes with a card, leaving the cues exposed. Say the cue out loud, and then say as much as you can of the material underneath the card. When you have said as much as you can, move the card and see if what you said matches what is written. If you can say it, you know it.

Advantages - Organized and systematic for recording and reviewing notes. Easy format for pulling out major concept and ideas. Simple and efficient. Saves time and effort. "Do-it-right-in-the-first-place system."

Disadvantages - None

When to Use - In any lecture situation.
THE OUTLINING METHOD

Dash or indented outlining is usually best except for some science classes such as physics or math.

1. The information which is most general begins at the left with each more specific group of facts indented with spaces to the right.
2. The relationships between the different parts are carried out through indenting.
3. No numbers, letters, or Roman numerals are needed.

Method – Listening and then write in points in an organized pattern based on space indentation. Place major points farthest to the left. Indent each more specific point to the right. Levels of importance will be indicated by distance away from the major point. Indention can be as simple as or as complex as labeling the indentations with Roman numerals or decimals. Markings are not necessary as space relationships will indicate the major/minor points.

Advantages – Well-organized system if done right. Outlining records content as well as relationships. It also reduces editing and is easy to review by turning main points into questions.

Disadvantages – Requires more thought in class for accurate organization. This system may not show relationships by sequence when needed. It doesn’t lend to diversity of a review attach for maximum learning and question application. This system cannot be used if the lecture is too fast.

When to Use – The outline format can be used if the lecture is presented in outline organization. This may be either deductive (regular outline) or inductive (reverse outline where minor points start building to a major point). Use this format when there is enough time in the lecture to think about and make organization decisions when they are needed. This format can be most effective when your note taking skills are super and sharp and you can handle the outlining regardless of the note taking situation.

Example – Extrasensory perception

   _ Definition: means of perceiving without use of sense organs.
   _ three kinds –
   _ telepathy: sending messages
   _ clairvoyance: forecasting the future
   _ psychokinesis: perceiving events external to situation
   _ current status –
   _ no current research to support or refute
   _ few psychologists say impossible
THE MAPPING METHOD

Mapping is a method that uses comprehension/concentration skills and evolves in a note taking form which relates each fact or idea to every other fact or idea. Mapping is a graphic representation of the content of a lecture. It is a method that maximizes active participation, affords immediate knowledge as to its understanding, and emphasizes critical thinking.

Advantages – This format helps you to visually track your lecture regardless of conditions. Little thinking is needed and relationships can easily be seen. It is also easy to edit your notes by adding numbers, marks, and color coding. Review will call for you to restructure thought processes which will force you to check understanding. Review by covering lines for memory drill and relationships. Main points can be written on flash or note cards and pieced together into a table or larger structure at a later date.

Disadvantages – You may not hear changes in content from major points to facts.

When to Use – Use when the lecture content is heavy and well-organized. May also be used effectively when you have a guest lecturer and have no idea how the lecture is going to be presented.

Example –

EXTRASENSORY PERCEPTIONS

3 TYPES

TELEPATHY
- SENDING MESSAGES

CLAIRVOYANCE
- FORECASTING THE FUTURE

PSYCHOKINESIS
- PERCEIVING EVENTS EXTERNAL TO SITUATION
THE CHARTING METHOD
If the lecture format is distinct (such as chronological), you may set up your paper by drawing columns and labeling appropriate headings in a table.

**Method** – Determine the categories to be covered in lecture. Set up your paper in advance by columns headed by these categories. As you listen to the lecture, record information (words, phrases, main ideas, etc.) into the appropriate category.

**Advantages** – Helps you track conversation and dialogues where you would normally be confused and lose out on relevant content. Reduces amount of writing necessary. Provides easy review mechanism for both memorization of facts and study of comparisons and relationships.

**Disadvantages** – Few disadvantages except learning how to use the system and locating the appropriate categories. You must be able to understand what’s happening in the lecture.

**When to Use** – Test will focus on both facts and relationships. Content is heavy and presented fast. You want to reduce the amount of time you spend editing and reviewing at test time. You want to get an overview of the whole course on one big paper sequence.

**Example** – Chart format for a history class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>IMPORTANT PEOPLE</th>
<th>EVENTS</th>
<th>SIGNIFICANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941-45</td>
<td>FDR</td>
<td>WWII</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>INVOLVEMENT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE SENTENCE METHOD

Method – Write every new thought, fact or topic on a separate line, numbering as you progress.

Advantages – Slightly more organized than the paragraph. Gets more or all of the information. Thinking to track content is still limited.

Disadvantages – Can’t determine major/minor points from the numbered sequence. Difficult to edit without having to rewrite by clustering points which are related. Difficult to review unless editing cleans up relationship.

When to Use – Use when the lecture is somewhat organized, but heavy with content which comes fast. You can hear the different points, but you don’t know how they fit together. The instructor tends to present in point fashion, but not in grouping such as “three related points.”

Example 1 –
A revolution is any occurrence that affects other aspects of life, such as economic life, social life, and so forth. Therefore revolutions cause change. (See page 29-30 in your text about this.)

- Sample Notes – Revolution – occurrence that affects other aspects of life: e.g., econ., socl. Etc. C.f. text, pp. 29-30

Example 2 –
Melville did not try to represent life as it really was. The language of Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael, for instance, was not that of real life.

- Sample Notes – Mel didn’t repr. Life as was; e.g. lang. Of Ahab, etc. no of real life.

Example 3 –
At first, Freud tried conventional, physical methods of treatment such as giving baths, massages, rest cures, and similar aids. But when these failed he tried techniques of hypnosis that he had seen used by Jean-Martin Charcot. Finally, he borrowed an idea from Jean Breuer and used direct verbal communication to get an un-hypnotized patient to reveal unconscious thoughts.

- Sample Notes – Freud 1st – used phys. trtment; e.g., baths, etc. This fld. 2nd – used hypnosis (fr. Charcot) Finally – used vrb. commun. (fr. Breuer) – got unhypnop, patnt to reveal uncons. thoughts.
Bibliography

Johnson, Sue. *The 4 T’s: Teacher/You, Text, Talk, Test - A Systematic Approach to Learning Success*. California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo


Participation Quiz Instructions

Participation quizzes are designed to familiarize students with the method of having a discussion unmediated by an instructor or other moderator.

The quizzes are fifty to seventy-five minutes in duration (depending on the duration of your regular class time), and are worth 20 points. Each contribution to the discussion garners 5 points, but to earn 20 points on the quiz the discussion must last the full class period. Any shorter discussion will garner fewer points for all students.

When you come to class on a quiz day, please arrange the chairs in a tight circle facing the center of the room. Each student will receive four post-it notes, and you should write your first and last name on each of them.

Please begin the quiz with your post-it notes on the back of the desk (the edge closest to you). Move one note per contribution to the discussion to the front of your desk as the quiz proceeds. There are two methods for conducting a participation quiz.

1) The student who begins the quiz will call on the next speaker. Raise your hand if you wish to speak. If no other hands are raised and you have something to say, proceed without waiting for the former speaker’s permission. When calling on a new speaker, please consider the number of post-it notes on your classmates’ desk fronts. When presented with a choice, please select the student with the fewest number of participation quiz points so far.

2) Simply speak as you have something to say, without waiting to be called on.

Decide which method works best for your class, and use it.

When appropriate, I will intervene 5-10 minutes before the end of the period and establish a speakers’ order. The speakers’ order will allow students who have been waiting to speak for quiz points to contribute consecutively rather than waiting to be called on.

At the end of the quiz, move your desk back to its original position and leave only the notes for which you should receive credit on the front of your desk. Please deposit unused notes for which you will not receive quiz credit in the trash on your way out the door.

Since the purpose of this quiz is to foster discussion, not to accomplish a particular conversation goal, you are evaluated on the basis of your engagement in the discussion and not on the nature or quality of individual contributions. However, I reserve the right to deem contributions of “no credit” value if the comment is radically off-topic or otherwise inappropriate to the discussion. I will also intervene if any student’s participation prevents others in the class from participating, or if a student waiting to speak is repeatedly overlooked—though I prefer that you self-moderate in this regard.

Other tips for fostering a successful quiz:
• Stay focused; quiz contributions should consist of analytic commentary or specific and contextualized questions about a text. Personal narratives or anecdotes are not appropriate, and may be deemed by the instructor to be of “no credit” value. If you have an extra-textual example that you deem important, recount it as briefly as possible and immediately bring it back to the text.

• Focus on analysis and interpretation, not plot summary or description. Though you can’t know fully what direction a quiz discussion will take, you can prepare for the quiz in advance by making sure that you understand the plot or main argument of the text. Call up a classmate and clarify points that seem vague to you before the quiz session. Mark interesting passages, write down questions, notice elements of the text you think might be worth talking about, and have at least an idea of why you think so that you can explain to classmates.

• If you wish to change the subject during a quiz, first allow classmates who may wish to continue speaking about the topic already on the table to do so. Also, it is sometimes beneficial to allow someone with a very immediate response to your point to speak out of turn. Use good judgment in calling on successive speakers, in order to emulate the natural flow of conversation as much as possible.

• Make arguments! It’s most fun to talk about texts when competing perspectives emerge, and one can search for new evidence that aids in debating the relative merits of those perspectives.

• Offer evidence in the form of direct textual support for every claim you make—and always cite your evidence by page number and/or a description of roughly where the evidence is located in the text. Your classmates will find it useful to see for themselves the quote or scene to which you are referring.

• Take notes. The participation quiz content may be useful when writing a paper. If a quiz is very contentious, it may translate well into an argumentative paper—and if students have been diligent about offering textual support, you’ll have a ready-made quotation base.

• Remember, if you have participated fully and made four contributions to the day’s quiz, remain respectful of your fellow classmates who haven’t and give them an opportunity to participate. Perhaps encourage some of your classmates to participate!