

Philosophy at Southampton

Developing Study Skills in Philosophy

'The more I practise, the luckier I get.' (Arnold Palmer)

Acknowledgements

In compiling this document we have received help from many sources. In particular we have drawn on some of the Study Skills leaflets produced by the Student Advice & Information Centre in the Students' Union, material produced by Schools of Chemistry and Mathematics, a booklet produced by the University Mathematics Teaching Conference at Nottingham in 1981 and the University of London's Philosophy Study Guide. In addition we have had valuable input from a number of staff and students.

Each section of the booklet consists of a discussion of the issues, and includes a short set of questions for you to ask yourself. If the answers to these questions indicate problems, you should do something about it - either yourself or by asking someone else, for example your tutor or a friend.

This is not a document to be read from cover to cover and then put away. Use it as a reference from time to time when you need to, for example at examination time or when you are having study problems during your course.

Remember that studying is an individual thing, but that the ideas and suggestions in this booklet have been found helpful by many students in the past.

We would value feedback on this document. Please tell us if you find any of it helpful, or if there are any additional matters relating to Study Skills that we should include.

The University has a [Study Skills Website](#) which you might also find helpful.

A useful recent book giving general advice is: Phil Race, *How to Get a Good Degree*, Open University Press (1999)

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Getting Organised - Managing Your Time

Questions to ask yourself:

- *Am I spending enough time studying - or too much?*
 - *Have I reasonably planned the use of my time each week?*
 - *Is my private study time being used effectively?*
 - *Does my concentration wander too much when I am studying?*
 - *Do I often put off studying and do other things instead?*
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At university you are moving into a new learning environment. You will need to make an early start on organising your time. You will have a number of things competing for your time: study (attending lectures and tutorials, reading and writing essays ...), domestic needs (eating, phoning home, sleeping ...), leisure activities (choral society, visiting Winchester, relaxing with friends ...). Increasingly students also do some paid work and the extra demands that this makes on you - in terms of time and energy - mean you will have to organise your time (and energy) that much better.

As soon as you can (during the first couple of weeks) draw up a timetable for a normal week in term-time. This will include lecture times, tutorials and private study time. It may include social commitments (e.g. meetings at the Chaplaincy or hockey training). Some times will be fixed and mandatory, like lectures or orchestral rehearsals. Others may be more flexible, like private study and going out with friends.

The most obvious difference between your work studying Philosophy here at Southampton and your work at school is that you will be much less heavily time-tabled here. You will only be doing four units at any one time and you will not have more than three hours of 'contact time' per unit - lectures, tutorials,

seminars or study hours - each week for any one unit. This does not mean that you do any less work here than in school. It means that you take much more responsibility for your own learning. The University provides certain facilities and resources - the library, computer facilities, the teaching staff and the formal teaching and informal advice that they give you. But for the rest, your mastery of your subject is something for you to achieve. The structures we put in place can only assist you in this endeavour - they cannot do it for you.

Plan your periods of study time when you feel at your best and able to concentrate. This may depend on the vagaries of your biological clock! Some people are awake and raring to go at the crack of dawn. Others are at their best in the late evening when (and if) things are quiet. Remember to schedule routine things like reviewing lecture notes as well as meeting requirements like completing essays for tutorials.

As well as times for individual activities you should plan for the total amount of study time each week. The question of how much this should be is not an easy one. The important thing is that your study time should be used effectively. In philosophy, you study four units per semester. As a rough guide you might expect to spend 10 hours per week on each unit (i.e. a 40 hour working week). Sometimes you will spend more time, for example during revision. Sometimes you may spend less, for example when studying outside term-time.

Some employees in industry work a 35 or 40 hour week, but those in the professions work rather longer hours. Think of people you know: hospital doctors, school teachers, barristers, police officers, people working in business, and consider what long hours some of them work. A survey of university academic staff conducted a couple of years ago revealed that most were working 50-60 hours per week on average.

As well as the total time spent studying, its distribution is important. Research has shown that periods of about an hour are ideal. Much shorter and little will be achieved. Much longer, and concentration drops. Short breaks enable concentration to become re-established. Periods of an hour during the day when you do not have consecutive classes are therefore useful in this respect, and you are likely then to be within easy reach of help, for example your colleagues on the course. Studying regularly through the year, during vacations and term-time, perhaps peaking near examinations, is also more effective than trying to cram everything into a short period, for example during the Easter Vacation.

Your Working Environment

Questions to ask yourself:

- *Is there too much noise where I work?*
 - *Are there too many distractions or interruptions where I work?*
 - *Is the place where I work uncomfortable?*
 - *Does my concentration wander too much where I am studying?*
 - *Do I have everything I need at my place of work?*
-

As well as time management you need to consider the environment where you work. It may sound obvious, but most of us work better if we have somewhere which is reasonably comfortable (but not soporifically so) and adequately heated, lighted and ventilated. You also need to be free of things which might distract you. This will vary between individuals: some prefer to work alone and others in groups. Some prefer to work in silence and others with some quiet background music. You should experiment to find which suits you best. If you are living with others in hall or in a house it is often useful to have a friendly discussion to reach agreements about one another's work needs in terms of noise and interruption. You may find that you work best in the library where you will not be disturbed (find a place in the deep recesses of the Mathematics section for example, where nobody will find you).

Information - Where and How to Find it

Questions to ask yourself:

- *Do I know where I have put the Philosophy Handbook?*
 - *Where can I find out officially what I need to know?*
 - *Who can I ask who will know the answers to my questions?*
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Sometimes when you are studying there may be occasions when you are not sure what the requirements are. The important thing is to find the answers to questions which are concerning you as soon as you can, and from a reliable source. Do not rely on what your friends tell you. Tutors are often faced with students who tell them "my friends say that X is true..." when in fact X is

completely false. You will have a wealth of written information issued by the University, the School and your subject discipline. If you haven't already done so, spend a few minutes familiarising yourself with the contents of these documents. You will find authoritative answers to many of your questions in these sources. Other matters appear on the phil-talk email lists and on noticeboards from time to time, for example at examination time the draft timetables appear. It is important to look at the noticeboards regularly to see if anything relevant to you has been posted. A lot of information is now on the [University's](#) and on [Philosophy's](#) Web pages. If you cannot find the answer to the question that is worrying you then ask your personal tutor, the unit coordinator, or the Office for Philosophy. If they don't know the answer they will know someone who does!

Reading Philosophy

At no stage in one's career is reading philosophy easy. Some people claim to read philosophy for pleasure. Wittgenstein is reported to have said that he found reading some philosophy a 'kind of agony'. Many people are inclined to agree with this. Whatever good intentions philosophers have to make their works clear, accessible, and fun to read, the result is rarely any better than more dull and dense prose with a few corny jokes. Remember that you read philosophy not for the pleasure of the moment but for what you can come away with.

It is important, then, that you make your reading of philosophy as efficient and rewarding as possible. In order to do this you must maintain a sympathetic but critical attitude to the text. This can often be best achieved by approaching the text with a number of general questions in mind. Normally you will not have got everything you could have out of the text until you can answer the following questions.

What conclusion does the author wish to reach?

It is very rare that you will be asked to read a piece in which the author is not arguing for or against a certain thesis or conclusion. (The conclusion might even be 'no conclusion can be reached on this topic'.) Understanding what that conclusion or thesis is will be the first and most important step in understanding the reading.

Why is that conclusion interesting?

Of course, the conclusion may not seem very interesting to you, at least not at first. But, you hope, the conclusion should be interesting to the author. In what way? Does it contradict common sense? Or the view of some great philosopher of the past? Or some contemporary rival? Generally speaking, philosophers are writing to convince some people who hold a certain view.

Who are those people and what is the view? Another way of thinking about this is to ask yourself why you think you have been set the reading, or why it appears on a reading list. What philosophical problem does it bear on, and how? What else that you know about does it connect with?

What is the argument?

This is often the most difficult part. A thesis, generally, is not merely asserted, but argued for. To identify the argument is to determine what premisses or assumptions are being used, and to determine what logical inferences are being made. Philosophers are often very inexplicit about this. Certain premisses will be taken for granted and so not even mentioned. Many different arguments might be used, but not properly distinguished. Identifying the argument or arguments, then, often requires great imaginative and forensic skill, but is indispensable for a real understanding of the text.

Is the argument valid in its own terms?

This question is really seamless with the last. If you think that you have identified the argument, but it is flagrantly invalid, then think again. Perhaps you have misunderstood something. Many readers apply a principle of hostility to philosophical texts, thinking that it is obvious that there must be a serious mistake somewhere, all one need to do is identify it. A better tactic is to apply a principle of clarity instead. If the argument seems flawed try to think of ways in which it can be repaired. The task here is not one of literal interpretation of the text, but of constructing the strongest line of thought available from the text. This is where some of the best, and most creative, philosophical work is to be done.

Even with your best efforts, however, not all arguments can be rescued. The most common way of showing the invalidity of an argument is to find a counter-example. A counter-example to the argument is a case in which the premisses are true but the conclusion false. This shows that the argument is logically invalid, and the next task is to identify the particular logical mistake made.

More often, counter-examples can be attempted to the main thesis, rather than the argument. If an author claims that all *F*'s are *G*, rack your brains to see if you can think of an *F* that is not a *G*. If you can, you have found a counter-example and (if it is genuine) you have refuted the thesis.

Another common defect in philosophical arguments is equivocation, where an author uses a term in more than one sense, and the argument only goes through because this ambiguity is ignored. This can be very hard (so very rewarding) to detect.

In all this, remember that the philosophically mature and responsible attitude is that understanding must precede criticism.

Should the premisses of the argument be accepted?

Even if the argument is valid in its own terms, you might still want to reject the conclusion, perhaps because you have found a counter-example to it, or because it conflicts with something else you believe. It might even contradict something else the author has said elsewhere. At this point your strategy is to examine the premisses or assumptions of the argument. Are they true, or are there counter-examples to one or more of these? Or perhaps there are other concerns for rejecting them. If the argument relies on false premisses, then it doesn't prove anything.

If we accept the argument and conclusion, what else follows?

Sometimes philosophers are explicit about the further implications of their view. Often they are not. If not, here is your own chance for real originality.

Finally: A Caution

These notes are intended to help you read philosophy. But not all you read can be approached through these questions. Sometimes philosophers present views without argument. Sometimes they present arguments apparently without views. Some philosophers think that the governing assumptions of these notes, that philosophy requires arguments for conclusions, is a vulgar mistake, and real philosophy requires something else. In all such cases, following this guide to the letter will lead only to frustration. But you can still apply the spirit: approach the text in a sympathetic but critical way; try to determine why the text is thought to be philosophically interesting; try to work out how it connects with other things you know about. Don't just read: think.

Writing Philosophy

What Sort of Thing is Expected?

Writing assessed essays gives you the opportunity to show your understanding of the topic, and to demonstrate your own philosophical skills. Of course, we will be delighted if you can come up with entirely new insights and arguments in an assessed essay, but it is important to bear in mind that a student essay can be very good without being very original. Your primary aim should be to demonstrate clear understanding of the issues raised by the question, and to engage critically with the views of others who have addressed those issues before you.

We don't require you to commit yourself unreservedly to one point of view or conclusion in your essay – though of course you may do so if you believe and are prepared to argue that it is the right one! Nor do we expect that you will always agree with the views of your lecturers and tutors, or with current orthodoxy. What we do expect and indeed require is that you *argue* your case in your essay. From the point of view of examiners, *what* you think is much less important than what you say about *why* you think what you do. That is to say, at this stage of your philosophical education presenting and defending a view clearly and effectively is much more important than whether or not your examiners believe the view to be true.

Preparation

First, study the question or questions set. The phrasing of essay topics (as of examination questions) may be deliberately ambiguous, or provocative, and hence it may be necessary to spend some time deciding (and in the introduction to your essay explaining) what you take the question to mean.

If you are not sure what to read on the topic of the essay, be sure to ask your lecturers and/or tutors for advice. Don't try to read too much; it is much more effective to read a few items carefully (and again, your lecturers and tutors will be able to help you decide which these should be) than it is to skim over many. If the question concerns a particular philosophical text (e.g. "Are Hume's arguments against the possibility of miracles sound?"), concentrate on reading that text, rather than on secondary literature (i.e. commentaries and critical works). Reading secondary literature is never a substitute for getting to grips with the primary work in question, though it can be very valuable if used intelligently and critically. Remember that reading of this sort should be a stimulus to your own thought about the issues and/or texts in question, and never a substitute for it.

Perhaps the most important advice we can offer about preparation is to start early: allow yourself enough time to think about the topic you have decided to write on, to do the necessary reading, and to plan your essay.

Writing

Clarity is all-important. Make sure that you understand what you are writing, and that your reader can do so too. Grammar, punctuation and spelling are important, and neglect of them gives a general impression of illiteracy. Even more important is lucidity of expression. Examiners are not impressed by vagueness or ambiguity, since these usually indicate lack of precision in thought rather than profundity.

Clarity depends largely on *structure*: you must have a *plan* for your essay. Broadly speaking, your essay should have an introductory section, in which you state the terms of the argument, your understanding of the question and the way you intend to proceed, a middle section, where you argue your case, and a conclusion, in which you should summarise the preceding argument to bring out its essential features (rather than merely repeating it). But it will almost

always be useful to divide your essay into more sections than these three, perhaps using headings and sub-headings. Consider numbering points, and use plenty of "signpost" phrases, such as "First, I shall consider..." and "I shall now go on to discuss...", to make clear to the reader what you are doing and where the essay is going.

Again, timing is all important. Allow yourself enough time to write at least one draft of your essay (two would be better), and to have someone (not necessarily a philosophy teacher or student) read over the draft to point out where things may not be as clear as they could be. Don't forget to proof-read the final draft; an essay full of typos and spelling mistakes is a sure indication to examiners of an essay that has been hastily and carelessly written.

Content

Argue, never merely assert, and show awareness of possible counter-arguments. In this context "argument" means any form of rational persuasion; your primary concern in the essay should be with the giving of reasons. Again, mere statement of views and opinions, whether they be your own or those of others, is not enough; views and opinions must be discussed, defended and/or criticised. Avoid waffle and irrelevance -- the word limits for assessed essays do not leave space for wasteful writing.

Getting the most out of Lectures

Questions to ask yourself:

- ***Can I hear and see clearly in the lectures?***
 - ***Do I find that the lecture has sometimes started when I get there?***
 - ***Do I find that I have forgotten to bring something important to the lecture?***
 - ***Do I sometimes feel "I wish I had asked ..."?***
 - ***Can I understand what is in my notes when I look back at them?***
 - ***Do my copies of printed notes and handouts have my annotations on them?***
 - ***Can I relate my lecture notes to the set reading?***
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Listening to lectures is an active business. You need to prepare yourself in advance (for example, by doing the set reading) and consolidate on what you have learned afterwards. Making notes is often essential if you are to make

the most of lectures but this also needs to be approached carefully and with thought.

Preparing for Lectures

Make sure you arrive before the lecture starts and that you have all that you need with you. This includes, as well as the obvious things like something to write with and on, previous lecture notes, which may well be referred to, the textbook if one is being used, and previous hand-outs. Sit where you can see the board or OHP most clearly, and where you can hear best.

Philosophy is a progressive subject, so you will understand a lecture better if you have done some work in relation to previous lectures.

Your Notes

Taking notes is a skill that you need to think carefully about. What follows contains some suggestions, but your task is to develop your own procedures and style so that your notes are as useful as possible to you. You may find that it takes a bit of time and effort for you to find a style you are comfortable with, but the effort will be worth the rewards. Taking down verbatim what the lecturer says is very rarely the best response to a lecture. But you will need to cultivate an abbreviated form of taking such notes, using keywords, or key phrases. In particularly difficult cases the lecturer will usually be happy to explain the idea again if necessary. However, we are not mindreaders, so you have to ask! Do not feel embarrassed! If you are finding something difficult then so are a good number of your colleagues. You will earn their undying gratitude, and perhaps more surprisingly that of the lecturer, with appropriate questions during lectures. If you find it difficult to ask questions during a lecture, approach the lecturer as soon as the lecture has ended.

Sometimes a lecturer will provide handouts, for example, when there are detailed arguments which you need to understand or specific quoted passages to discuss. You should expect to annotate these handouts during the lecture, as the spoken discussion will often be explaining the principles underlying what appears in print.

You will need to review your notes after lectures. There is well-documented research which shows that if you go to lectures and then do nothing with the notes, the most you will retain will be about 10%. This can be doubled or trebled if you review the material within 24 hours, and this will considerably increase the effectiveness of your work, especially when it comes to revision time. When you get to the end of a particular section of the work make a summary containing the important definitions, arguments and objections. This will be useful revision and an aid for later use before examinations.

There are many approaches to the organisation of notes. One possibility is ... By the time you get to the end of a course unit you should have a set of notes for which the pages are numbered, headings and important definitions and

results underlined or highlighted, and for which you have an index or a list of contents. You need to be able to find your way through a set of notes, which will often contain some quite complicated ideas. Dating your notes can also help to find things. The overall aim is to put together a set of notes which you can use effectively.

Think about mundane things like stationery. Loose-leaf files are convenient for lectures as you will want to review and rearrange your notes afterwards, but for your consolidated set of notes you might find a hard-backed notebook better. Think about the use of colour and highlighting to emphasising important results and formulae.

Finally, if you feel that a lecturer is writing unreasonably fast see whether your colleagues in the class agree. If not you may need to work at speeding up your note taking. If they do agree then you should approach the lecturer individually or as a group and explain (in the nicest possible way) the difficulty in keeping up.

Getting Help - When and from Whom

Questions to ask yourself:

- *Am I coming away from tutorial sessions feeling little benefit? If so why is this?*
 - *What can I do to make more of the help I am given?*
 - *Am I learning from my friends?*
 - *Are my friends learning from me?*
 - *Are there things I am afraid to ask for help with? What should I do about it?*
 - *Do I feel encouraged by the help I get?*
 - *Do I feel confident about asking for help?*
-

There are many sources of help available for your work, apart from the timetabled classes themselves. One of the best sources of help is fellow students. Working as part of a small group on a regular basis, provided everyone is contributing, is an excellent source of learning. This is particularly useful when a group of you is unable to sort something out as it is a more efficient use of a tutor's time to deal with a group together.

The course lecturer or one of the other tutors on the course can be approached for help. If they are busy they will fix an appointment for you.

If graduate students are teaching you, you can arrange to see them. Your personal tutor can sometimes help with first year material and with some of the later course units depending on the subject.

You should seek help from tutors when you feel you are really stuck. If you make sense of a text at first you need to wrestle with it for a while before giving up. Then return to the problem, after some subconscious processing has occurred. We all sometimes find ideas popping into our heads unexpectedly, so it is a good idea to keep a notebook handy to jot them down to work on later. The intellectual struggle is perhaps the most important part of the learning process.

Examinations - Preparation and Revision

Questions to ask yourself:

- *Do I feel reasonably confident about exams?*
- *Am I revising systematically and in good time?*
- *Do I know what the exam requirements are?*
- *When I read the exam paper is it usually roughly what I expect?*
- *Do I plan the use of my time in exams?*
- *Do I often feel I could have done a lot better?*
- *Do I usually feel that I have performed somewhere near my best?*
- *Do I panic a lot in exams?*
- *Do I feel overwhelmed with stress and worry before exams?*
- *Am I managing stress OK?*
- *Am I a bit too laid back about it all?*
- *Can I usually predict roughly how well I have done?*

Planning Revision

Planning revision is important. It is not something you can do at the last minute. You should be revising during the course, for example during part of the Easter vacation. This will help not only with preparation for examinations but also with later parts of the course. During the latter half of each semester you should draw up a revision timetable. Plan to finish well before the examinations. This will give you flexibility in case something unforeseen such as illness or a bereavement disrupts your revision. It will also give extra time for additional work on things which have caused you particular problems during your revision.

Revision Techniques

It is not good enough simply to read and re-read your notes. You must be actively involved in philosophical thinking. When doing logic, for example, re-work some problems which you have tackled earlier in the course, to give yourself some confidence. Try additional exercises from textbooks. Make sure you work through past exam questions. Past papers are sometimes distributed in lectures, or they may be available in the library. Make written summaries as you revise your lecture notes. This will help to organise your perspective on the material. And, of course, use feedback from essays that you have written. This is partly why we give it.

Make sure you have periods of relaxation, and sufficient sleep. You need to be in good physical as well as mental condition to be able to concentrate and do your best.

Finally bear in mind that efficient learning is an individual thing, but that the ideas above have been found helpful by many students in the past.

Getting Help

If you really get stuck ask friends. In fact doing part of your revision as a group can help you to learn and can give you a feeling of confidence. Lecturers and tutors are glad to help, but you must have specific points to ask them about and you must do it in plenty of time. Tutors occasionally get students appearing at their office on the morning of an exam saying "I don't understand my notes", sitting down and opening them at page 1. We know that they are unlikely to do very well in the exam that afternoon! On the other hand a student coming a week beforehand asking for help on a specific issue or a particular part of a text is likely to be well prepared.

Coping with Stress

Nobody can go through life without meeting stressful situations. Even a hermit must feel stress sometimes! A healthy amount of stress associated with important occasions can motivate you and increase your concentration so that you perform well - ask any athlete. Continuous stress over long periods however is counterproductive, and needs to be dealt with. When preparing for examinations you will be under a certain amount of stress - they are after all important occasions. This is why relaxation is so important, as a way of giving you stress-free periods. So don't give up going to orchestra practice, or your regular voluntary work, or church on a Sunday, or whatever you normally do outside your academic work. Your revision plan must include periods free of work.

For a few people the feeling of stress can be such that it seriously inhibits their ability to work effectively during revision or examinations. If that is the case then it is important to recognise these symptoms and seek professional advice from the Health Centre or the Student Counselling Service. There is no stigma about needing to do this for a short time - we all need help from professionals on occasion.

Before the Exam

Make sure that you collect your exam timetable in good time, and that you are quite clear where and when your examinations are. This and the other things in this section all sound very obvious, but one does encounter the occasional student who turns up at the wrong time or in the wrong place. Unbelievable but true!

Make sure you get there in plenty of time. Allow more time than usual - the traffic may be heavy, your bicycle tyre may puncture. If you are very early you can always go somewhere and relax. Get a good night's sleep.

Take more than one pen with you! In the winter make sure you will be warm enough, as you will be sitting still in the exam room for some time.

During the Exam

DON'T PANIC. Easier said than done sometimes! Seriously though, we want you to do your best, and show us what you know and can do.

Take things calmly. Examinations are not designed to be speed tests, and a couple of minutes here and there to think, take stock and plan what to do next will often pay dividends, rather than simply rushing on writing furiously whether it is right or wrong. Do not leave the exam early in desperation! If you have been working properly during the course and during your revision it is likely that you will be able to answer further questions. Take a short time to compose yourself and then begin again.

Formulate a rough plan beforehand about how you might best use your time in the exam. You know what has worked successfully for you in the past. It is much better to think of contingency plans beforehand than to be forced into taking unprepared emergency action during an examination.

If you do run out of time part way through a question spend the last couple of minutes writing down what you would have done if you had more time. This can show that you knew how to do the question and may get some credit. Finally remember that we really do want you to do your very best.

After the Exam

Forget about it and think about the next one, or breathe a sigh of relief that they are over! If you feel that you did not do your best, or that you panicked unnecessarily, think how you might improve your examination behaviour for the next paper.