

## Reading Philosophy:

Philosophical writing is perhaps the most difficult to read of all types of literature. This is not surprising when one sees the point of philosophical writing - to analyze concepts, to break them down to the most basic and ultimate truths.

### Common mistakes:

1) “The author keeps changing his mind. First he says that things are one way, then he says they are another way. I don't know what he means!”

This complaint is coming from someone who doesn't understand the dialectical style of writing that most philosophy is composed in. 'Dialectic' here means, “as a conversation” that is, the author is having a conversation - a back and forth type of commentary on a concept. Who is the author having a conversation with? You, the reader, ultimately. But of course the author can't have a real time conversation with you so the author stands in for the reader, providing the critiques and questions he imagines the reader would have if the reader were sitting in front of him. So, its not that the author is constantly changing his mind its that the reader has missed the dialectical cues.

### Here are some dialectical cues:

“one might think . . .”  
“some have argued that . . .”  
“\_\_\_\_\_ have argued that . . .”  
“the problem with this line of thought is that . . .”  
etc . . .

I can't list all of the dialectical cues because I don't know them all. Perhaps there are too many to catalog. At any rate, the point of a dialectical cue is always to tell the reader “Hey, this is what someone else thinks and this is what's wrong with thinking that way.”

2) “The author just keeps repeating himself. He never really says anything important and what he does say he could have said in, like, one or two sentences!”

This complaint is coming from someone who has little patience for the careful dissecting of concepts that philosophy is about. That's fine. Everyone's different. No one else has to like philosophy as far as I'm concerned. But, if you want to understand what you are reading without too much irritation and aggravation wouldn't it be better to gain an appreciation of what you're reading?

Furthermore, you should know that philosophers almost never repeat themselves exactly. Yes, they may express similar ideas over and over again but if you think they are merely repeating themselves then odds are that you are missing important details.

The fact is, most philosophers don't want to use any more words than necessary. Why? Because the more words you use the more chances there are that someone will misunderstand you or that you will write/say something you didn't really intend. Words are powerful and philosophers, believe it or not, are somewhat scared of using too many of them and thereby tripping themselves up. Better to make economical use of each sentence so as to be as clear as possible. Yes, clarity is the philosophers goal! Amazing isn't it!

But philosophers are trying to be clear about very obscure topics. In addition, we aren't used to clarity in writing. We're used to catch phrases and sound bytes and 3 second info-bits. Society has low expectations for us and, generally speaking, we haven't disappointed it. We have grown accustomed to easy listening, easy watching and easy reading. Philosophy is not and cannot be easy reading. And I wouldn't have it any other way!

So, when it seems that a philosopher is merely repeating herself, check again for any differences in the supposed repetitions because the devil lies in the details.

3) "It takes me 15 minutes to read one page of philosophy! This is crazy!"

Indeed it is. It should never take 15 minutes to read one page of philosophy. Will reading philosophy take more time than reading other forms of literature? You bet! But anything more than 5 minutes per page tops strikes me as ludicrous.

If you find yourself in this predicament try some of these tips to help move things along:

- A) Skim the entire reading as quickly as you can. Don't try to understand anything, just let your eyes scan the words as quickly as is comfortable.
- B) Go back to the beginning and try to read the material at a normal pace. If something doesn't make sense DON'T STOP. Just mark the spots that gave you trouble and keep moving at a comfortable reading speed.
- C) Now go back to those difficult spots you marked in Step B. Look for dialectical cues, words you need to look up, references to other parts of the reading. If you are still unable to understand what the author is saying then mark the spot again, but differently than before. Now, your job is to bring this difficult spot in the text to the attention of the teacher. After all, that's what the teacher is there for - to help you understand. When learning any subject, students naturally need help with difficult concepts. That's why there are teachers in the first place. Put me to work! Ask me a question!

Above all, work efficiently. Don't waste your time beating your head against the wall. Figure out a method that works for you and use it.