How To Read Philosophy

1. First Rule: Take Notes! Philosophical works contain theses and arguments for these theses. Your aim in reading should be to identify the theses and the arguments. To do so, you must take copious, careful notes.

   Corollary to the First Rule: Read ever so slowly and carefully. You can't help doing this if you're taking careful notes.

2. Second Rule: As you read outline. Number the theses and the arguments in the best form you can. Put each argument in premise-conclusion form.

   An outline is successful to the extent that it reflects the organization of the text. Continually ask yourself: what is the main point the author is trying to convey in this work? What is the point of the work? Then: what subsidiary points is the author trying to make, and how do these contribute to the main point? Try to focus your outline on what the author is ultimately and centrally trying to say.

   Corollary: You will have to put the author's ideas in your own words. To outline is to think through the author's work in your own style--to make the work your own. You need to do this if you are going to understand the work. Remember that if you are reading an author, it's probably because an awful lot of people have thought that what this author has to say is among the best that has yet been said on the topic. The author is a bigshot, and that's a reason to pay attention. But don't forget that your thoughts are important too. The words of another person are of no use to you until you make them your own.

3. Third Rule: As you read, evaluate the theses. To do this, you must evaluate the arguments. What you wish to do is determine whether the theses are true. To do this, you need to determine whether the arguments are convincing. In philosophy, the only way we find out whether a thesis is true is by evaluating arguments. There is no other way.

   Ask yourself three questions about each argument:
   (i) Are the premises and conclusion intelligible to me? If not, try to reformulate the argument in a way intelligible to you.
   (ii) Is the argument valid? i.e., does the conclusion follow from the premises? If not, try to discover premises which, when added, make the argument valid.
   (iii) Are the premises true?
   If you answer "Yes" to (i)-(iii), you must accept the conclusion of the argument.

4. Fourth Rule: Evaluate the theses. To do this,
   (a) Check whether the author offers any persuasive arguments for the thesis.
   (b) If there are none, see whether you can construct a persuasive argument in the spirit of the author's arguments.
   (c) See whether you can construct an argument that persuades you, even if it has nothing to do with what the author is trying to convey.
5. **Fifth Rule**: Evaluate the work. Ask whether the author is successful in establishing his central point. Do the subsidiary theses combine to support the central point? If not, is there any way to replace one or more of the subsidiary points so as to make the whole combine to establish the central point.

Reading philosophy this way requires energy and patience. When the going gets tough, let these words fortify you: Philosophy is like anything else in life—you get what you pay for. If you don't work hard at it, you won't get much out of it.