

# Reading in Tutorials and Seminars

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We have described the ways in which you should analyse philosophy texts in private reading; and we have outlined some of the ways that you might be asked to engage in discussions in seminars. However, there might also be times when you are asked to directly use your reading in a seminar or tutorial; and sometimes structured reading can be part of tutorial activities.

This section sets out some of the different techniques that are used in philosophy teaching when use of texts forms the basis of the learning experience. We start by exploring some of the basic aspects of reading for any tutorials or seminars based around the use of specific texts; then we look at some different possible arrangements for looking at reading for yourself; finally we turn to presenting your own ideas around structured reading you have undertaken.

The use of structured reading that includes aspects of feedback and discussion is increasingly common in philosophy. Effectively, as with the use of structured essay questions, feeding back the story of your understanding as you go along helps you to express and explore your own thoughts in a clear and logical way, helps others to contribute to a shared interpretation of the texts and enables your tutor to better tailor their support for your learning.

The easiest way to highlight some of the ways that reading can be used in this way is to look at an example.

## Example from an introduction to philosophy course

This term we will be looking at Descartes' Meditations, taking one Meditation per seminar. Please prepare to answer the following questions for the seminar discussions. Prepare a short (under 250 words) written response to these questions with reference to what Descartes says; be prepared to present to the seminar if asked to. During the seminars we will be referring to the text so please bring a copy of the Meditations with you to each session.

Meditation 1. Why does Descartes want to find a foundation for knowledge? Do you think it is possible to be completely free from the possibility of error?

Meditation 2. What does Descartes say the mind is? Why exactly does he think he is a thinking thing?

Meditation 3. It is sometimes said that Descartes' argument for the existence of God is circular. Is it? What reasons could there be for saying that it is not?

Etc.

The questions here are clearly designed to open up discussion of the key topics in each Meditation. However, note carefully that you are asked to *prepare written answers* that you might be called upon to present to others. The reason for doing this is to encourage you to think systematically about the issues in the Meditations. Although you may think you can hold all of your ideas together without notes, it is highly likely that the deeper structure of the arguments used will only become clear if you write them down.

A second reason for a linked tutorial series around reading is that it is designed to build on your reading and discussion at each meeting. That is, the tutor is looking for you to deepen your understanding of the text and this cannot occur if you only read superficially.

Take, for example, the topic of the second tutorial here, the nature of the mind. The reading here covers the core of the method of doubt and the emergence of Descartes' theory of a thinking thing's being a radically different part of the

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world than extended matter or bodies. However, to really grasp this theory and to gain from the discussions, you will need to have understood the basis of Descartes' search for clear and distinct ideas as the foundation of knowledge from the first Meditation.

*The tutorials and the reading for each one do not stand alone. You will need your notes from earlier sessions that inform your reading in future tutorials or seminars.*

Finally, the third tutorial sets up a learning context in which deep reading is essential. It is relatively easy to find a superficially circular argument for the existence of God that assumes the very concept of clear and distinct ideas that Descartes has set out to prove. However, it is possible to find other ways of interpreting what Descartes in fact says in the Meditations, and you are encouraged to find them. In other words, this is an exercise in exploring an argument you might not choose to make yourself. When reading and discussing philosophical issues in tutorials, acquiring this skill from a close reading and analysis of the real arguments made by established philosophers will stand you in great stead. There is nothing wrong with saying in a tutorial, 'this isn't quite what I think, but it is possible that someone could argue . . . because it says in the text . . .'. You do not always have to set out what you actually believe yourself, so long as you have evidence and arguments to hand to support the position: another very good reason for writing down what you find as you read!

In this example the tutorial series is based around one book. However, when there is specified reading for tutorials from a range of articles or extracts the same advice applies, because there will be linking philosophical themes and an expectation that you have built on the reading you have undertaken previously.

## Reading groups

Although many tutorials and seminars take a traditional form in philosophy, that is, a tutor guiding your reading and discussion, other approaches are also

used by some philosophers. These different techniques are designed to encourage development of your ability to direct your study for yourself and engage in collaborative argumentation.

Reading groups are one way of doing this. They might take a variety of forms but on the whole you will be encouraged to get together with other students to read through a set text or texts.

Reading groups can be quite liberating because you have the opportunity to explore other interpretations of philosophy with your fellow students, away from the tutor. While the same standards of rigour and careful analysis should still apply, you have the chance to take greater creative risks in thinking through the implications and connections between ideas.

For example, you could be looking as a group at the allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*. As this is a metaphor to illustrate the nature of the shadow-like aspects of our everyday experience compared with the reality of ideal Forms, it offers scope to really delve into what Plato might be trying to say. It can spark some very fruitful discussions in groups. However, this can only occur if you are willing to undertake a careful reading of the text set.

Your tutor will offer guidelines on how to conduct a reading group but these basic points will always apply:

1. Everyone is expected to do the reading set before the group meets.
2. Everyone should turn up on time and keep to the agreed time slot.
3. Everyone has an equal right to be heard.
4. Only one speaker at a time should speak.
5. Offensive language and personal attacks are unacceptable.
6. There are no right or wrong 'answers'.

Sometimes you might be asked to report back as a group to the main tutorial group. There will be guidelines on how to do this, but it is important that a reading group agrees on what is reported. If there is disagreement within the group

then this should be noted and included in the report. This can be an important point, because if writing the report falls to a different person each time, it can be tempting for the authors to put their own spin on a summary of the debate that occurred. It is a skilful philosopher who can represent fairly the views and arguments of others even when they do not agree with them, and this is something that should be encouraged.

Reading groups may also take place in an online environment. Although the discussions here may be more spread out in time, the same basic points about being respectful to participants apply.