

# Notes on Learning Philosophy

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## 1 Learning Philosophy

How can we lose when we're so sincere?

–Charlie Brown

When I teach a course, I begin the first lecture by describing to the students my ideas about teaching and doing philosophy in general. I start by telling them my theses on teaching:

1. An old Russian proverb: Beat your own people, and others will fear you.
2. Thucydides: The strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must.
3. Nietzsche: It is a poor student who never repays his teacher by disproving him.

The first two are (mostly) jokes, to soften the class up and lighten the mood for what will otherwise be an intense exposition. The last one I take seriously indeed. I will say more about it below.

Most people assume they know how to think clearly and argue well. They are mostly wrong. None of you [pointing to the students, sweeping my extended index finger to encompass the group] can think clearly or argue well. I can barely do it, and I've been working at it for a long time.

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No one assumes someone can perform in a biathlon simply by putting on skis, grabbing a rifle and trying to pick off targets while crashing downhill. One must practice, practice long and hard, practice all different parts of the sport, both in isolation and in concert. So it is with thought and argumentation.

It is not enough to be able to think clever ideas up. One must be able to think ideas *through*, get inside them and analyze their internal structure, if they have any, stand back and goad them to see where they go, if anywhere, prod and question them to see where they come from. Most ideas you have are worthless—that is true of us all. The game is not to think only great thoughts all the time. That's impossible. The goal is to work through all the garbage and every once in a while, if you work hard and have some luck, you'll strike a good one. Don't be afraid of failure, of the fact that one's ideas are initially poor. Bad ideas are the only path we have to good ones.

William Blake said: "If others had not been foolish before us, we should be so." A useful corollary follows by substituting 'one's past self' for 'others'.

The point of doing philosophy is not to succeed. It is to fail brilliantly. I know of only two philosophical propositions that I can say with assurance have withstood the test of time and that I consider to be correct without qualification. They are meta-philosophical theses of Plato. First, to be a great, or even a good, philosopher, one must have an erotic attachment to thought.<sup>1</sup> Second, to understand philosophical thought and to create original philosophical ideas, one must engage in deep and long conversations with other similarly minded folk; reading and writing on one's own and passively listening to others lecture are poor, poor substitutes.

Everything I have said about students I believe about myself as well. In consequence, I expect all students to question me in class when they don't understand what I am saying, when it is not clear for whatever reason, or when they know (or even just suspect) that what I am saying is wrong. By the same token, I hope they will interrupt me when they feel that they can add something useful to the point I am making. Do not be afraid of or even diffident about asking questions. [Tell the story about Mom in college.] You will be wasting no one's time. I guarantee that if you have a question, at least one third of the rest of people in the class have the same question and the other two-thirds ought to have it, but no one's asking. Do everyone the favor and ask it.

You will not do well in my class if you do not catch me saying at least one foolish or false thing and call me out on it during class. I will say many foolish and false things, as we all do. I know it too well to blush about it. You'll be doing me a favor, because you'll be helping me clarify and correct my own thought. I know more than you do and have thought about these matters more than you have, but I feel strongly that we are all in this together: philosophy is a team sport. You will ask me questions, constantly, that I have not before thought of or about, and I will be the better for it. Likewise, you should not be embarrassed when you say foolish or false things in class. You should be embarrassed only if, finding yourself having said a foolish or false thing, you do not try to correct it by rethinking what you are talking about. When y'all point out to me that what

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<sup>1</sup>Compare Einstein's statement about physicists in his short essay "Principles of Research": "The supreme task of the physicist is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition, resting on *empfinden*, can reach them." The German word 'empfinden' is difficult to translate. It has the sense of both intimate, intuitive knowledge of and genuine affection for its object, which in this case is the physical world and its workings.

I am saying is foolish or false, I cannot promise I'll always be able to rectify it on the spot. I do promise I'll have something more useful to say about it by the next class period at the latest. I expect the same of you.

I repeat the most important of the theses on teaching I affirm, from Nietzsche: It is a poor student who never repays his teacher by disproving him.

And I hope that the import of the epigraph from Charlie Brown is now clear: Charlie Brown *did* lose, all the time—but he was sincere in every attempt he made, never gave up, never lost faith in the fundamental importance of his sincerity, and that matters more than success.

## 2 Reading Philosophy

Unconcerned, mocking, violent—thus wisdom wants *us*: she is a woman and always loves only a warrior.

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*  
epigraph to the third essay, “What Is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?”  
(quoted from his own *Thus Spake Zarathustra*)

To read well is hard. To read philosophy well is very hard. There are (at least) 11 different, but inseparable, jobs one must perform to read adequately, much more well.

1. Read every word.
2. Read every sentence.
3. Read every paragraph. (And so on.)
4. Not infrequently, go back and read them again before continuing.
5. Ascertain the starting place, the goal and the means of progress for every part of the work.
6. Keep in mind the context of the current part, its place in the work as a whole.
7. Look up every word whose meaning you are not sure of. (Keep a dictionary by your side as you read.)
8. Get straight on every concept and idea you do not understand.
9. Try to sympathize with the author.

The last two rules are far and away the most important; as one should expect, they are the hardest to follow:

10. Understand what the author means, not what you think he or she likely means or what you want him or her to mean or something in the neighborhood of what he or she means.
11. Criticize a point, an argument or a work as a whole—if at all—*only* after you understand it. (The same goes for praise.)

The following are not rules, only suggestions. Use them, ignore them, adapt them as you see fit:

1. Underline key passages.
2. Make notes in the margin: remark on important points, or on the role a passage plays in the over-all argument; record questions you have; express delight or dismay; and so on.
3. Keep a running outline of the work on a separate piece of paper (or in a computer file, or etched into clay tablets, or inscribed on duchsustus—whatever feels right).

I recommend a pencil to write in a book or an article—you may want to emend or erase later what you wrote.

Practicing the task of learning to read with care the writing of a great thinker, with an eye only towards comprehension, not agreement or controversy, is one of the most effective ways I know of to exercise one's own capacity for cogent philosophical thought.

As an example of how terribly understanding can fail when one ignores these rules, consider the quotation from Nietzsche at the beginning of this section. In my experience, most people who read Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, when they arrive at the third essay—an essay, mind you, on the meaning of asceticism—and come upon that epigraph, do not look up its context in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. And so they misconstrue it, and having started out the essay on the wrong foot never right themselves. It appears in Part I of *Zarathustra*, §7. That section is called “On Reading and Writing”. It deals with the difficulty of writing so as to be understood and reading so as to understand, and in particular with the sort of joy in understanding itself one must have to be able to do this and so come to wisdom, *contra* the ascetic ideal. Could anyone get that from the quote in isolation, without having looked it up?

This is an extreme example. Nietzsche booby-traps his writing with diabolical ingenuity to guard against easy understanding, to ensure that the reader works hard to get him. Almost no writers are so cruel as Nietzsche. (A corollary: almost none are as fun.) I trust, however, that it drives the point home better for all that: reading takes work and practice, and like all the best that is hard, it will come to be a joy the better one gets at it.

### 3 Writing Philosophy

Know how complicated it is, then state it simply.

Ernest Hemingway  
*The Garden of Eden*

Writing is, for the most part, not the simple reporting of clearly articulated, organized thoughts, but rather itself constitutes an important step, often the most important, in the articulation, in the organization—in the *explication* and *clarification*—of those thoughts for oneself.

Language is a poor vehicle for communication, especially when written and on its own, absent the give and take of discussion; words on their own, on an isolated page, express little—do we have here a page from a serious essay on philosophy or a draft of an article for “The Onion” (a satirical

American news magazine)? It would sometimes be difficult to tell. Is this remark in the email a whimsical attempt at wit or a nasty jibe? Without having the benefit of having heard the tone of voice it would have been delivered with in conversation, and having viewed the speaker's facial expressions and bodily attitude as he or she spoke it, it can sometimes be difficult to know.

Not everything can be said best, or said at all, in words; *cf.* Mahler's remark on why he stopped writing programs for his symphonies: "If I could have said what I had wanted to say in words, I would have no need to write symphonies." We attempt in philosophy to use words only for what words can well express, nothing more.

Mark Twain's rules of writing, from his critique of Fenimore Cooper—a writer shall:

1. Say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.
2. Use the right word, not its second cousin.
3. Eschew surplusage.
4. Not omit necessary details.
5. Avoid slovenliness of form.
6. Use good grammar.
7. Employ a simple and straightforward style.

[Say a few words about the two Twain essays criticizing Fenimore Cooper's writing, why they are relevant to learning to write philosophy even though their explicit subject is the writing of fiction. And anyway, they're so funny they'll make you pee in your pants laughing, which is always a good thing. You can get them here:

1. <http://strangebeautiful.com/other-texts/twain-fenimore-coopers-literary-offences.pdf>
2. <http://strangebeautiful.com/other-texts/twain-coopers-prose-style.pdf>]

### 3.1 Why One Writes

One may have several purposes in writing a philosophy paper. I will assume that exhibiting your thought as clearly and intelligibly as you can, so the reader has the best chance of grasping it, is the most important one for right now. Keep in mind at all times that you are trying to communicate your thoughts to another flesh-and-blood human being, one, moreover, who may be fatigued from having read upwards of 40 papers before he begins reading yours. Ask yourself continually whether you are making yourself clear to him. It is almost certain that you will need to write more than one draft of the paper in order to do a fine job not only of making yourself clear to the intended audience, but in getting clear in the first place on what you yourself think. It is very rare to know what one will write and to know what one thinks on a particular topic with any exactitude before one begins writing about it. One inevitably is forced to write more than one draft, for the writing of the paper itself will cause one's ideas on the subject to evolve and precipitate. The first three chapters of a short, elegant book, *Writing with Style* by John Trimble, have several excellent tips and pointers for getting started with research, for planning and outlining a paper, and for writing

drafts. I urge you to look at it, if you do not already have your own system that works well for you.

For the first paper, I want you to focus on recapitulating the argument in the text as clearly, precisely and thoroughly as you can, distilled so as to fit in the space allotted. To comprehend the arguments and, even more, the intent of an author to any substantial depth is harder than most people realize, and I want to make sure that each of you knows how to do it before I ask you to be more creative and come up with your own arguments.

Indeed, most writing at this stage of one's career consists of explicating the thoughts and arguments of another. It is a funny business, writing on the views of another philosopher. If one thinks that what one is saying is "what the philosopher really thought", one must wonder why the philosopher did not come out and say it more plainly, did not draw explicitly all the conclusions one draws oneself. In most if not all cases, one is writing on the views of a person who has put far more time and effort into thinking about all the issues at hand than oneself has; one must be careful to avoid the presumption that one is making a point not already considered by the person whose thought one is writing about. One may be—but make sure before one claims it. Know the value of the point one is trying to make and the relation of the point to the work or argument as a whole before one makes it.

In writing a short, expository paper, it is near impossible to achieve the depth and subtlety of the philosopher whose work (in the best cases) one is discussing. Think carefully about what it is one does hope to achieve. Among the most salutary of attainable goals is clarification and elucidation of individual points and arguments that the philosopher, for whatever reason, did not expand on. Trying to distill the entire sweep and career of a large and complex work into outline form can also be a useful project, but this is usually more difficult to do without distortion of the original. Even the task of recapitulating another's argument or position faithfully in one's own words, lowly and simple as it may seem, is hard to master, and, more important, is important in its own right for intellectual discipline and conscience. One must be certain one understands another's position before one can with rectitude praise or censure it, or use it for one's own purposes, as platform for one's own further positive exploration or as illuminating example of instructive foolishness. The best way to be sure one understands the thought of another is to learn to explain it in one's own way, having done the hard work to ascertain that what one says captures the heart of the matter.

### 3.2 Making Arguments

There are several basic points to keep in mind when trying to write a fine philosophy paper of this sort. State clearly the position one will argue for. Before embarking on argumentation, outline the route one will take to reach the conclusion. The introduction of the paper is also a good place to say what one will not try or be able to achieve in the paper. At the beginning of each argument, explain the role it has in the overall structure of the paper and exhibit all the assumptions one will need to argue the point. Consider possible problems with and objections to your arguments, and treat them with respect. Remember: there will always be reasonable objections to any argument one makes in philosophy; ignoring them or treating them cavalierly will only make the reader suspicious that in fact you have nothing to say about them. The conclusion ought not be only

an opportunity to review your position summarily. Use it to suggest possible directions one could take with the position and arguments given more time and space; mention problems that still need to be addressed, which one did not have time to in the body of the paper. Point out possible consequences of one's position, both problematic and promising. This may be the most appropriate place in the paper to try to have a little fun, if one simply cannot resist the urge.

Keep in mind the Laws of Argumentation of the great physicist Robert Geroch:

1. Never prove something that isn't true.
2. Counter-examples are easier than proofs.

These have a corollary: always test your arguments by attempting to produce counter-examples to their conclusions.

### 3.3 Explaining Oneself

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless. . .

Wittgenstein

*Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54

Help the reader often. Start by telling the reader what to expect in the paper, where it will go. After long, involved arguments, remind the reader of the point of the argument and how it fits into the scheme of the paper as a whole. Sum up difficult passages at their conclusion. Repeating oneself a few times is often preferable to a Spartan minimality that requires the reader to go through a paper several times in order to make sense of it.

Explain what needs explaining for the target audience, for two reasons: so they themselves will understand it (if the reader is not one that should already understand the idea); and, more importantly for the purposes of writing a paper, so the target audience will understand how *you* intend and mean the idea. This will also serve the purpose of convincing the reader that *you* have thought about and through the idea, and that you adequately understand it.

Most interesting ideas and concepts in philosophy are inherently ambiguous, and that in two ways. First, the words we commonly use to denote them are themselves ambiguous—they often can mean several different, albeit possibly related, ideas or concepts, and context will not always suffice to disambiguate the word. Second, the idea or concept itself may admit of several different reasonable definitions or explications. The reader will—*should*—not know which of the options you intend, or whether you intend something new or non-standard, until you explicate it.

When introducing or describing or explaining an idea or concept that is ambiguous or complex, do not only use examples to characterize it. Examples are themselves ambiguous. What you think is the most salient and illustrative aspect of the example may not be what I focus on. Always give a precise, clear explication of the idea or concept on its own. Then it may be useful to give illustrative examples, now that the reader has an idea of what aspect of the examples to focus on.

### 3.4 Using Words

The first rule is: keep it simple. (“Omit needless words.” – Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*; “Eschew surplusage.” – Mark Twain, “On the Literary Crimes of Fenimore Cooper”.) This is harder than it sounds. The goal, by hypothesis, is to have the reader understand one’s thought easily. Fancy words and obscure grammatical constructions are fun, and they have their place in certain rhetorical contexts, but in general they distract attention from the main points.

The second rule is yet more difficult to follow, and more important to keep in mind for that reason: when in doubt, look it up. Even more distracting than fancy words used correctly are fancy words, or indeed any words, used incorrectly. Have a dictionary open at one’s side as one writes. Peruse *Fowler’s Modern English Usage* (the first or second editions only, both out of print, so you’ll need to find them used, *not* the third edition, which is lousy, edited posthumously with all the best of Fowler himself eradicated)—keep it next to the toilet, snuggle up to it at night in bed, take it for long walks in the country, become intimate with it. One’s writing will shine in its clarity, elegance and precision. (If one cannot articulate the proper difference in usage between ‘that’ and ‘which’ when used as relative pronouns, to take one important example, one needs to look at Fowler’s entry “That, Which, Who”.)

Rules of grammar: priggishness in grammar can impede communication as surely as laxity. If a sentence can be stated with elegance and clarity by starting it with a conjunction or ending it with a preposition, then by all means do so. If a sentence reads more clearly with the infinitive split, cleave it and be damned. (See the entries “Fetishes” and “Superstitions” in Fowler.) As with all important matters in life, however, one must know the rules before one can know when it is preferable to break them. And it is always preferable to break them knowingly than in ignorance.

Here are a few simple rules of thumb for usage. Like all such rules, they are meant as suggestive guides, not decrees. Winnow merely intensifying adverbs; or, winnow intensifying adverbs. Overuse weakens their force. Don’t worry about repetition of a word in a sentence if use of another only to avoid the repetition would be clumsy or would lead to ambiguity (Fowler, “Elegant Variation”). Use a short word in place of a long one; as Fowler says (“Love of the Long Word”): “. . . it is a general truth that the short words are not only handier to use, but more powerful in effect. . . . Good English does consist in the main of short words.” Ensure that one’s phrasing is not ambiguous with respect to the position of adverbial modifiers.<sup>2</sup> The abuse of ‘only’, in particular, knows no bounds. Consider the following: “My argument does not rule out the possibility A. It only rules out the possibility B.” Compare this to: “My argument does not rule out the possibility A. It rules out only the possibility B.” The former says that the argument does nothing more than rule out a possibility, that of B; in particular, since it “only rules out,” it does nothing else and so can come to no positive conclusion. The latter says that, no matter what else the argument does, which may include coming to a positive conclusion, it does at least this much: it rules out exactly one possibility, that of B.

The final, most important rule comes closest to being a decree, and so naturally is the most difficult to obey: be precise and mean what you say.

Ask oneself: is it possible to construe a sentence, without strain, in a way other than how I

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<sup>2</sup>“He punched the man in the penis next to him.” Why was there a penis next to him, and how did it contain a man?

meant? Never use a vague word or formulation when one can say more precisely what one means. This means not only avoiding words like ‘thing’, but it also means, even more, avoiding words that (deceptively) appear to be narrowly focused, but in fact have usages and connotations broad to the point of inchoacy, unless one tells the reader how one is using—intends to use!—that word. ‘Reason’, as in ‘the faculty of reason’, is a good example. The word has philosophical baggage that will not fit under the seat in front of you or in the overhead bin. It has been used in history and is used in everyday language to refer to a vast multitude of different mental and metaphysical capacities, processes, relations and entities. If one begins talking in a philosophy paper about ‘reason’ with no explication of the term, the reader will (should!) have no idea what is meant by it. Try to express what one means in more precise, less loaded terms. Draw the implications of rich concepts out for the reader to see. Use the homeliest example the case will allow. Write as though you were explaining the point to a friend over beers. If one cannot do this, but is forced to rely on a word such as ‘reason’ to make a point without being able to put the point in other terms, the reader will begin to suspect that the writer does not actually know what point it is he or she is trying to make, has not thought through it adequately, and is using a slippery word to paper over the fact.

There are several terms the use of which I deprecate in a philosophy paper (without proper explication) as I do that of ‘reason’, when they are used in a technical context. I give a sample (I invite you to extrapolate from it): ‘reality’, ‘possibility’, ‘necessity’, ‘causality’, ‘natural’, ‘truth’, ‘determinism’, ‘*qua*’, ‘*a priori*’. I emphasize that I do not prohibit their use; rather, I urge that one treat them as the dangerous Quislings they are when their use is not in a casual context. Make a point of saying how it is one intends them, and then keep a careful eye on them after to make sure they stay true to your stated intent. Sometimes ‘thing’ is just the thing, when used within reason.

One of the surest methods for sticking to these rules is to have someone else read your paper aloud in front of you. The ear will almost always catch ambiguities, infelicities and outright errors that a tired eye will not. Offer to buy her a nice, inexpensive bottle of wine (I’m happy to provide recommendations) or to give him a back massage in exchange for the favor. If nothing else it’s usually good for a laugh, and, at best, it could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.