

Annotating Texts in Philosophy Classes

Perhaps more than any other discipline, philosophy requires students to be critical of its source material. Being critical of source material requires careful, thorough, thoughtful and dialogical reading. Philosophical texts resist casual skimming and do not yield much to being read in English class while discussing poetry (poetry is inherently philosophical, so trying to do philosophy in English results in a double loss!) Reading philosophy texts, or reading non-philosophical texts philosophically, requires focus and effort. To the extent that there is daily homework in this class, it will consist of taking detailed notes on and reacting to the readings assigned in the class. These notes are called annotations and will count as part of your participation grade, but the grade is the least important reason to do the annotations and do them well. Why?

- Documents form the basis of discussion.
- Documents will be the source of evidence, examples, counterexamples for your written work in this class and for the formal IB assessments completed next spring.

In both cases, the documents give you the raw materials to form arguments and ask questions, and these arguments and questions are the bread and butter of both the discussion and the formal writing you will do in this class. In short, all the reading you do in this class is for a purpose. Ignore this at your peril!

Annotation is note taking, but note taking is not all it is. Through annotation, your goal is to understand the basic arguments contained in a document and to analyze and critique those arguments.

Here are some questions that will help you focus your annotations (many of these ideas, and some of the wording in the questions were borrowed from “How to Annotate a Philosophy Text” by Bill Anelli, 2011). When I approach a philosophical document, I find it is often useful to read it twice (or with two sets of eyes). Once to determine its basic structure and argument (questions one and two), and a second time, more critically, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the claims made by the author and to think about specific issues that might be raised in discussion (questions three through seven).

1. What is the author’s argument (To put it in more formal logical terms, what is his or her conclusion)?
2. How does the author support this argument (again, in terms of logic, what are his or her premises)? Try to break down (analyze) the various elements of the argument so that you understand how they work together.
3. What is the issue raised by the document? What is the context of the document? How does it fit into the themes we have been discussing in class?
4. What is the nature of the argument that the author is making? On what grounds is the argument based? Look for evidence of any, or all, of the following:
 - Empirical (*a posteriori*) evidence from the human and life sciences
 - “Self evident” (*a priori*) truths that the author takes for granted (and sees no need to support.) All author’s make certain assumptions. It is always a good idea to identify what an author’s “givens” are.
 - Cultural biases or assumptions.
 - Appeals to emotion or feeling.
 - The immediate evidence of sense perception (sight, hearing etc.)
 - Logic (either inductive or deductive).
 - The way the author uses language (rhetoric, elegance, structure).
5. How does the author respond to the ideas of others? Who does he or she agree and disagree with? What is the basis for his or her support or rejection of the other’s ideas? Be very careful to

distinguish between when an author is speaking in their own voice and when they are paraphrasing the ideas of someone else (this is a very important distinction to make).

6. What knowledge questions arise from this source? Remember the three characteristics of knowledge questions: knowledge questions are questions about knowledge, not content, knowledge questions are open ended and contestable (no one right answer) and knowledge questions are expressed in general terms, rather than using subject specific language.
7. What is your personal assessment of the author's ideas (note that this is a different question than "do you agree or disagree with the author?")
8. What are your reactions to the author's ideas? This involves some self monitoring. Are you:
 - Confused and exasperated? If so, can you identify the area or areas of the document that you don't understand?
 - Blindly gullible? Are you uncritically accepting everything the author writes? If so, imagine what counterarguments someone who disagrees with the source might make
 - Blindly critical. Are you judging the source negatively because you can't stand the author or find his or her ideas viscerally stupid, distasteful, sacrilegious or counter to the way you imagine the universe to be? If so, try applying the principles of charity and fidelity. Charity is the principle that all sources are given the benefit of the doubt (not pre-judged), and fidelity is the idea that we will understand the author's arguments as he or she intended them, before setting out to critique the work. Have you met the argument on the author's terms or only on your own?

Ok Mr. Haydock, that's all very well and good, but what do you want us to do? This is for a grade, right?

Yes, your annotations are part of your participation grade, but remember, that's not mainly why you are doing them. Meaning is everything, meaningless annotations done for the sake of a grade are fairly close to intellectual heresy (kind of like being accused of being a witch in the Middle Ages, and we all know what happened to witches!)

That being said, here is what I want:

First, for each article you annotate you should generate a page (roughly - longer articles will generate more and shorter ones a bit less) of notes that are driven by your interaction with the text and the questions provided above. These notes should be keyed to the document using numbers so that it you can use your notes to quickly find key quotes and ideas that you wish to use in discussion or your writing.

Second, the documents themselves should be marked up. You should place a key number that corresponds to your notes next to the related passages in the text. You should also underline or highlight key ideas and quotations and include marginal notes if you choose.

Third, if I have provided any guiding questions with the document, those should be answered in writing.

Finally, as part of your notes, you must identify at least two knowledge questions (#6 above) arising from the source. These should be circled or highlighted in your notes so that they are easily identifiable.

When I check your annotations, you must have both a page of notes and a marked up document to show. Lack of either will result in no credit for that annotation.

Here is an example of an annotated document on my website: