

# DOING PHILOSOPHY

a PRACTICAL GUIDE  
for STUDENTS



Clare Saunders | David Mossley  
George MacDonald Ross | Danielle Lamb  
WITH Julie Closs



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## Doing Philosophy

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Clare Saunders, David Mossley,  
George MacDonald Ross  
and Danielle Lamb

Edited by Julie Closs



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# Contents

Preface	viii
Introduction	1
1. <b>Studying philosophy</b>	3
What is philosophy?	3
What philosophers think about	5
Why study philosophy?	8
What does studying philosophy involve?	10
Summary	13
2. <b>Reading philosophy</b>	15
What to read	15
The reading list	15
How to read	27
Reading philosophically	27
What makes reading philosophy challenging?	48
Summary	66
3. <b>Taking notes</b>	69
Why is note-taking important?	69
Recording what you have learned	69
Engaging with the material	70
Content – what should I write down?	70
Summarizing material	70
Evaluating material	71
Recording your sources	72
Method – how should I go about taking notes?	72
Use your own words	73
Use quotations carefully	73
Leave plenty of room on the page	74
Distinguish between different types of information	74

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Find ways to relate different pieces of information	74
An example of effective note-taking	75
Tailoring your methods to your context	77
Making notes in lectures	77
Making notes from your reading	78
Making best use of your notes	82
Reviewing your notes	82
Comparing your notes	83
Storing your notes	85
Summary	86
4. <b>Discussion</b>	87
The value of discussion	87
Active learning	88
Contested subjects	88
Roots of philosophy	89
Discussion seminars	90
Preparation	91
The discussion itself	94
Other forms of discussion	98
Presentations	98
Electronic discussion	99
Summary	100
5. <b>Writing philosophy</b>	101
What to write	101
The essay question list	102
Preparing to write	107
How to write	107
What is philosophical writing?	107
Structuring the essay writing process	109
Planning your essay	112
How to avoid plagiarism	115
Writing your essay	122
Example essay questions	125
Example essay A	126
Example essay B	131
Example essay C	135
Example essay D	144
Example essay E	150
Assessment and feedback	157

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The purpose of assessment	157
Why bother with feedback?	157
Sources of feedback	158
Understanding your feedback	160
Using your feedback	163
Summary	165
6. <b>Resources</b>	166
Library resources	166
Books	167
Journals	169
Copyright	170
Referencing	171
Internet resources	172
Support systems	175
Student centres	175
Careers centres	175
Disability services	175
Philosophy societies	176
Subject associations	176
Some useful philosophical terms	177
Metaphysical terms	177
Epistemological terms	178
Semantic/logical terms	179
Index	181



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# Preface

In compiling this book, we have relied not only on our own experience and expertise, but have also benefited from the advice of numerous philosophy staff and students from a wide range of universities and colleges across the UK and internationally – to name them all would be a book in itself. Nonetheless, particular thanks are due to the following individuals and organizations.

First and foremost, we must thank our colleague Julie Closs, who acted as our in-house editor in compiling this book, and has borne much of the responsibility for transforming our disparate musings into a unified guide. This book would not have been possible without her insight, expertise and hard work – not to mention her patience with our various individual authorial quirks.

We have also benefited hugely from the helpful comments, suggestions and criticisms provided by the philosophers who reviewed earlier drafts of this book: Keith Crome (Manchester Metropolitan University), Betsy Decyk (California State University, Long Beach), Edward Grefenstette (British Undergraduate Philosophy Society) and Dave Leal (University of Oxford). We are also grateful to numerous undergraduate philosophy students in the University of Leeds who likewise provided us with invaluable guidance on both the content and style of this volume. Of course, any remaining flaws are the sole responsibility of the authors.

We hope that you will find this book useful, and we would welcome your feedback. Please send any comments to: [enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk)

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# Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide a practical guide to studying philosophy for undergraduate students. We focus on introducing you to the methods and techniques of philosophy. It is not a 'how to' manual, as this would imply that there is only one method of doing philosophy, and there are many. Instead, it presents a variety of practical strategies for tackling tasks that the majority of first year students will inevitably encounter.

There are many generic study skills guides and introductions to the subject matter of philosophy, and you can read more about these in Chapter 6, 'Resources', at the end of the book. We do not aim to replicate any of these, but rather to provide a structured look at the process of doing a philosophy degree. This book is unique in that it aims to equip the reader with a range of tools to deal with the often problematic transition from A-levels or Access or other courses to studying philosophy at undergraduate level.

Even with changing teaching methods, you will probably study philosophy predominantly by reading philosophical texts, and be assessed mostly by writing essays or papers. The approach we have taken means that the chapters on reading and writing philosophically are by far the longest. This is because you are likely to spend most of your study time on these activities, and there is simply more to say about them.

The structure of this book is roughly chronological, based on the order in which new students will face certain tasks and challenges when studying for a degree in philosophy.

In Chapter 1, 'Studying philosophy', we set out the challenges and benefits, and how philosophy differs from other subjects you may have studied before. We address the kind of issues it is useful to think about when deciding whether to undertake a degree in philosophy.

Once you have decided that philosophy is for you and obtained a place at university, probably the first thing you will be asked to do is to read some philosophy. You may well be sent a reading list before you even arrive in the department, and this can help you to prepare for the coming year. So, in Chapter 2, 'Reading philosophy', we set out what to do when faced with a reading list, and how to go about analysing various texts.

While reading and in lectures and tutorials you will need to take notes, and we set out strategies for doing so in Chapter 3, 'Taking notes'.

You will usually be asked to prepare reading and notes before attending philosophy classes, and Chapter 4, 'Discussion', concerns seminars and tutorials. We suggest ways in which you can get the most out of your time spent discussing philosophy, both in and out of class.

The culmination of reading and talking about philosophy is usually an essay or paper, so we move on to look at the topic of writing philosophy. In Chapter 5, 'Writing philosophy', we set out the different kinds of questions you might face, and work through example essay questions to help you get a better idea of what you need to be thinking about when you write your own essays.

Chapter 6, 'Resources', contains information about books and articles mentioned in the preceding chapters, resources you might find useful during your course of study, and advice about how to find and use them effectively. It also features a short glossary of terms that should help you as you begin your studies.

We hope that in focusing on the different sorts of activity involved in a philosophy degree, and going through them in the same order that most students will face them, you will be well prepared for what lies ahead. This book can be used by people thinking about whether they want to study philosophy, in order to get a better idea of what is involved. It is mainly aimed at the first year undergraduate student, regardless of background or prior educational experience. We hope that the information and advice on making the transition to degree-level study of philosophy will be useful throughout your course.

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# 1 Studying philosophy

## What is philosophy?

Philosophy is not quite like any other subject. Even professional philosophers find it notoriously difficult to define philosophy, and often shy away from stating what ‘philosophy is’ in favour of giving examples of the sorts of things that philosophers do. The dictionary definition of ‘philosophy’ (and the literal translation of the Greek origins of the word) is ‘the love of wisdom’, which covers just about everything; and indeed philosophy encompasses the study of science, and art, and language – for just about any subject you can think of, there will be a ‘philosophy of’ that subject.

So, what sets philosophy apart from other disciplines? Although philosophy does have its own unique areas of enquiry, one of its most distinctive features is not so much *what* you study as *how* you study it – and it is this which makes the experience of studying philosophy quite different from that of any other subject. In philosophy, we learn to identify, and think carefully about, our most basic ideas and theories – those that support all the questing for knowledge we do in other subject areas. It has been characterized as ‘conceptual plumbing’ or ‘conceptual engineering’.<sup>1</sup> We look behind our everyday concerns to examine the systems and structures which support our thinking (and which ordinarily we take for granted), and to test their soundness.

Because of this distinctive approach it is often easier to capture the nature of philosophy by providing examples of ‘doing philosophy’ rather than defining its field of study. This helps us to appreciate more fully how – even when the object of our study is common to more than one discipline – philosophy has a distinctive contribution to make to our knowledge and understanding of the world.

### Case study

Liz has been caught shoplifting from her local department store, for the third time in as many weeks. The police are called; she is arrested and charged with theft. When her case comes to court, her lawyer argues in her defence that Liz is a kleptomaniac.

Why is this claim relevant, and what difference should it make to the case?

An example such as this might be discussed in a number of university disciplines:

- In law, you might explore whether Liz's kleptomania should be taken into account when deciding upon an appropriate criminal sentence.
- In psychology, you might investigate whether kleptomania amounts to a mental illness, and how it can be treated effectively.

However, in philosophy we explore the *underlying* questions raised by the case regarding human free will and responsibility.

Kleptomania is defined as 'an irresistible tendency to theft' – if Liz is a kleptomaniac, is she compelled to steal? What, exactly, does it mean to be 'compelled' in this context? How is it different from being ordered at gunpoint to steal?

If Liz's kleptomania is truly a compulsive behaviour, then she could not have acted otherwise – but if this is the case, then she did not choose to act as she did. Are we responsible for actions we do not choose? I do not choose to suffer from influenza and thus to drain resources from others (my family and friends, the health service) during my illness – and I am not held to blame for this. In what ways, if any, is Liz's situation different?

By asking, and seeking to answer, these underlying questions, philosophy helps us to understand Liz's case differently; but it also does much more. Philosophy encourages and enables us to explore the bigger picture behind the particularities of Liz's situation – to examine the ideas and principles which underpin this case: about

human freedom and responsibility for our actions, and the connection between these two notions.

It is from the philosophical perspective that we might ask (for example): ‘If I am genetically predisposed towards risk-taking, aggressive behaviour, should I be held responsible for this?’ – or, at the limit: ‘If science will ultimately be able to provide a complete explanation of all my behaviour, then am I truly free?’

These philosophical questions are also crucial for us to address in order to provide a basis for tackling the practical issues raised within our other investigations. We need to develop our understanding of what it is to be responsible for our actions before we can make informed judgements about many issues – for example, regarding who is able to make autonomous decisions: children, adults with learning disabilities, those under the influence of drugs?

So this case study helps us to capture how philosophy is not just concerned with grand abstract theories; it also has real implications for everyday living.

### **What philosophers think about**

While the study of philosophy and the skills it entails can be applied to any subject area, there are some philosophical questions that drive a great deal of enquiry. These questions are:

- What is there?
- What can be known?
- How should a life be lived?
- What is good reasoning?

As you might expect, this list is not uncontroversial and some philosophers would say that we should include other questions, or that we should dismiss some of those proposed as meaningless. However, most philosophers working today would recognize the value of these questions as being at the core of what philosophy is about, and they provide a basic overview of the kinds of issues you will study as a philosophy student.

#### *What is there?*

This is the basis of a branch of philosophy called **metaphysics**. While a physicist could tell us something about the nature of physical reality, and a sociologist about the nature of human

societies, a metaphysician looks at the fundamental concepts and theories that inform how we can even ask questions in physics and sociology, or even in day-to-day life for that matter. What is an individual thing? How do parts make a whole? What are the properties of things? What is an event? How do causes work? But we can ask metaphysical questions about other fields of enquiry. What are numbers? What is a person? Do theoretical unobservable entities like quarks really exist? Are parts of a society real? Can a universe of only empty space make sense? These are all metaphysical questions too, when posed in the context of philosophical enquiry.

Some philosophers have asked about the very nature of being itself, trying to discover whether there is anything meaningful to be said about how we, as enquirers capable of reflecting on our own existence, relate to reality. Others have asked why there is something rather than nothing; while others have used metaphysical concepts to probe the concepts and nature of God and gods, minds, time, art, history and anthills, indeed all aspects of human experience and enquiry. Finally, there have been philosophers who have argued that metaphysical musings are meaningless, or at best of little value, while others have sought to demonstrate that *all* enquiry requires a metaphysics. The history of metaphysics is rich, and a lifetime's study in itself.

#### *What can be known?*

This is a core question for **epistemology**, the study of knowledge. Other basic questions are: What is knowledge? How is knowledge different from belief? Can we know anything without experience? Can we even be said to know anything at all? This is the great problem of scepticism that has arisen many times in the history of philosophy in different guises. As with metaphysics, we can ask about the status of knowledge in other fields. What is the nature of scientific knowledge? How do we have knowledge in mathematics? What is religious belief? What knowledge can we have of other minds? And so on. We can turn this line of questioning in on philosophy itself and ask about the status of philosophical knowledge. Epistemological questions have also been at the heart of philosophy for the vast majority of its history. Technical treatments of epistemology abound in philosophy, and once the surface is

scratched, getting to grips with epistemological issues can be extremely fruitful and engaging.

*How should a life be lived?*

The problems raised by **ethics** are, perhaps, more familiar to us in everyday life than those of metaphysics or epistemology. We might ask ourselves whether fighting a particular war is justifiable, or if lying is always wrong. We may have personal experience of very difficult moral choices over euthanasia, abortion, social and political equality, the treatment of non-human animals, what to eat, sexual behaviour and so on. Philosophy addresses itself to these questions of value to try to find frameworks that could help us to make better choices, and it also looks at the deeper issues of morality in itself. What should constitute human flourishing overall? What is the basis of ethical behaviour? What is it to be virtuous? Does the good of the many outweigh the good of the few or the one? Do we have moral duties to others? What is the relationship between secular and religious values?

Additionally, along this line of questioning we might also encounter political philosophical enquiry about the nature of society and the values we would like it to reflect. Is it more important that individuals are free to act as they would wish, or that society is ordered and fair? Should there be positive redistribution of wealth to the poor? What sort of society would we devise if we did not know the role we would have in it? What is a law?

Moral philosophy and ethics are key topics in philosophy and, it could be argued, the most likely to generate debate and controversy with non-philosophers. And looking at value more generally, we can include questions about the status of our aesthetic experiences and the nature of art in an investigation of how we should have a valuable life, a life worth living. **Aesthetics**, the philosophy of art in its broadest terms, has never been far from the concerns of philosophers. We can also ask metaphysical and epistemological questions about values, ethics and aesthetics.

*What is good reasoning?*

Clear and critical thinking is crucial to success in philosophy, so it will come as no surprise that questions about reasoning are part of the philosophical landscape too. What does all good reasoning



have in common? Is rationality something fixed in our brains? Is reasoning the same at all times and places? What is truth? These are some basic questions. **Logic** is often the first thing that comes to mind when we think about reasoning, and logic has developed into a highly specialized field that informs much contemporary technology directly or indirectly, in computer architecture, for example. But formal logic, using symbolism to represent argument forms, is only part of the story, and philosophers have always been concerned to find ways of defining good thinking more generally. Unlike psychological approaches that are descriptive, philosophical explorations of critical thinking tend to be about finding and defining the best strategies in a way that distinguishes good thinking from bad.

We can take these ideas further because there is a connection with philosophers' thoughts on the nature and role of language in our thinking. Philosophers have asked about how meaning relates to truth and the world. **Philosophy of language** is a largely modern branch of philosophy that looks at how language works, has meaning, refers to the world and limits or structures our experiences of the world – issues that touch every other question we ask in philosophy.

Of course, for any issue you address in philosophy there will be a different mixture of metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and broadly logical topics to consider. This very brief survey will give you an idea of what is to come in your studies.

## Why study philosophy?

Hopefully, in deciding to study philosophy, or even if you have just picked up this book to find out more about it, you are motivated by an interest in the subject for its own sake – the questions it addresses, the methods it uses – and by a sense that there is something special about being a philosopher. Let us look at the study of philosophy in a bit more detail, to see why we think it is valuable, and what you are likely to gain from it.

The study of philosophy enables us to think carefully and clearly about important issues. We need to be able to look beneath and beyond specific circumstances or examples (as in our kleptomania example), to examine whether our beliefs, theories and arguments

contain hidden assumptions or gaps which might lead us to jump to unwarranted conclusions, or to hold inconsistent opinions. While we can often afford to take for granted such received wisdom in our daily lives, it is vitally important to be able to examine issues critically, to spot where underlying opinions influence areas of our thinking (for good or ill), and to identify what the consequences might be if we are led to change our beliefs.

This is where philosophy comes into its own. In studying philosophy, we learn to take a step back from our everyday thinking, and to explore the deeper, bigger questions which underpin our thought. We learn to identify hidden connections and flawed reasoning, and we seek to develop our thinking and theories so that they are less prone to such errors, gaps and inconsistencies. This is a vital contribution to human knowledge. It is also a crucial life skill.

In studying philosophy at university, you will not merely, or even primarily, learn to master a body of knowledge. ‘The heart of philosophy is a set of modes of thinking’<sup>2</sup> – the focus of your philosophical study will be to learn not what to believe, but how to think. This is one of the distinctive strengths, and key benefits, of studying philosophy. Whereas the knowledge learnt in other disciplines may become outdated, due to future discoveries, for example, the ability to think critically will not. In fact, it will equip you with the tools of thought you need to react to changing situations.

Studying philosophy sharpens your analytical abilities, enabling you to identify and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in any position. It also hones your ability to construct and articulate cogent arguments of your own. It prompts you to work across disciplinary boundaries, and to think flexibly and creatively about problems which do not present immediate solutions. Because philosophy is an activity as much as a body of knowledge, it also develops your ability to think and work independently.

There are no no-go areas for philosophical enquiry, and philosophical techniques are universally applicable. Different schools of philosophy have argued for systems which colour every aspect of human life in highly contrasted ways. You will view the universe and the place of humanity within it differently if you are an atheist rather than a theist; if you believe that all our knowledge is derived from experience rather than from a combination of experience and

reason; or if you believe that our will is completely determined by causal laws rather than capable of its own free action. Even if you suspend judgement on such issues (as some philosophers justifiably do), your study of them will leave you enriched with an understanding of the complexity of the physical and human sciences which students of other disciplines may lack.

All these abilities will enhance your educational experience while you are studying, but they will also make a lifelong difference to your future. Such qualities are in huge demand in the wider world – employers in all fields look to recruit potential leaders who can demonstrate analysis, judgement, problem solving, influencing skills, flexibility, creativity and high-level communication skills.<sup>3</sup> Although all degree programmes seek to develop such skills, arguably no discipline grants them the pre-eminence they are accorded in philosophy.<sup>4</sup> A degree in philosophy, therefore, provides you with an excellent grounding for your future – its distinctive focus on developing your critical thinking abilities is one which has value in all walks of life.

### **What does studying philosophy involve?**

The primary focus of the rest of this book is to give you an idea of what to expect of your degree studies (and what your degree studies will expect of you); and to help you to develop the philosophical abilities which you will need to complete your degree successfully. So let us look in a bit more detail at what your study of philosophy will entail.

The first, and in some ways perhaps the most important, point to note is that studying philosophy at degree level is likely to be quite different from your previous experience of learning at school or college (however recent or long ago). Even if you have studied philosophy before, students often find that degree-level courses require you to develop and demonstrate a very different level and range of philosophical abilities – and if you are entirely new to the study of philosophy, then it is more than likely that your previous experience will not have fully prepared you for the experience of reading for a philosophy degree. Many of these differences will perhaps be predictable, once you consider what we have just said about the distinctive nature of philosophy –

however, it is worth being explicit about what to expect, as many students find the transition to degree-level philosophy study challenging.

Perhaps the single biggest difference is the premium that degree-level philosophy places upon your ability to analyse, and then to construct, arguments. As we have already discussed, philosophy is as much an activity as a body of knowledge, so factual accuracy – although important – will not alone be enough to earn you amazing grades.

Knowing about the great philosophical thinkers of the past and their theories is naturally a crucial element of your degree studies – as in any discipline, it is important to develop a thorough understanding of key topics in your field. However, degree-level philosophy is much more than the history of ideas – your philosophy tutors will typically be much more interested in how you analyse the theories discussed, and how you structure your own arguments in response. Related to this, they will be interested to hear what you think, not just how much you have been able to learn about what others have thought about the subject – you are learning to *do* philosophy, not just learning *about* it, and you can best do this by actually venturing your own arguments.

There is of course a balance to be struck here – you need to develop your ideas not in a vacuum, but informed by the philosophical theories of others – but if you want to make the most of your degree study, then you should try to philosophize, not just to learn about philosophers. This is the key distinguishing feature of doing philosophy – success consists not just in absorbing knowledge, but in developing and demonstrating your own critical understanding of, and interaction with, the issues in question. Because philosophy is only to a limited extent about transmitting knowledge, the stress is on philosophy as an activity and a process rather than just on the product. You learn the philosophical virtues of unearthing and examining hidden assumptions; of detecting conceptual confusions and clarifying them; of revealing and resolving contradictions; and so on.

In common with other humanities subjects, philosophy is essentially contested. That is, instead of there being a single body of accepted knowledge which you are taught, you are introduced to a range of conflicting theories, and expected to reason and argue

about their respective merits. Often there are no perfect solutions to philosophical problems. Some answers may be better argued for, or better equip us to deal with other issues, but none hold a permanent, fixed, uncontested place in the thinking of all philosophers. So from the outset we need to understand that philosophy has the potential to change the way we think about ourselves, the world and everything in it. You will be required to challenge your own ideas and the ideas and theories of others, to see how they work, or how they might be developed.

In order to do this, the study of philosophy requires us to think much more carefully, and using more rigorous methods of questioning, than perhaps we are used to. Although this might seem difficult at first, rest assured the skills involved in thinking and working philosophically can be identified and practised. The purpose of this book is to analyse the distinctive demands of philosophical study, and to put forward some strategies for developing the skills to meet them.

It is worth noting that studying philosophy can present a particular challenge if your degree course is a combination with one or more other subjects. The qualities that make for a good piece of philosophy are not precisely the same as those prized in work in other disciplines – you will probably need to adjust your approach according to the particular emphases and interests of each subject.

You may be inspired to study philosophy at university because you have already started thinking philosophically. On the other hand, your decision may be a leap into the unknown. One word of warning: if you are the kind of person who likes to arrive at neat and tidy, definitive answers – and/or you enter your studies hoping to discover ‘the meaning of life’ – then the chances are that you will find studying philosophy rather frustrating; although this need not mean that you will not also find it ultimately satisfying and rewarding. Once you have learned to look at things philosophically, issues which previously seemed straightforward will be problematic. You will often be able to see more sides to every story, and sharp distinctions between good and evil may become much more blurred. Philosophy often advances our understanding not so much by adding to our sum of knowledge, as by enhancing our grasp of what we do and do not know. An ability to cope with, and indeed

thrive on, these kinds of uncertainty will certainly help you to flourish in studying philosophy.

## Summary

This chapter has introduced the kinds of enquiries that form the basis of the study of philosophy as a discipline, and the skills you will be required to develop as you learn how to be a philosopher. Looking more deeply at these skills, and presenting various strategies to practise and improve them, will be the focus of the rest of this book.

## Notes

- 1 The analogy of philosophy as plumbing is developed by Mary Midgley; the definition of philosophy as ‘conceptual engineering’ is Simon Blackburn’s. Both provide very readable and engaging introductions to philosophy:

Midgley, Mary (1992), ‘Philosophical plumbing’, in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.) (1992), *The Impulse to Philosophise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 139–152.

Blackburn, Simon (1999), *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(See also Chapter 3 for further discussion of Midgley’s argument.)

- 2 This quotation is taken from the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy, which outlines what you can expect from a philosophy degree at any UK university – including the skills and personal attributes that a student should develop through their degree programme:

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000), *Philosophy Subject Benchmark Statement*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

The full text can be found on-line at the following URL:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/philosophy.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/philosophy.asp)

- 3 Further details of what qualities employers are looking for in their graduate recruits, and how a philosophy degree equips you to meet such demands, can be found in:

*Employability: Where next? Unlocking the Potential of your Philosophy Degree*, (2007), Leeds: Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, available for download at [http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/emp\\_guides.html](http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/emp_guides.html)

- 4 Some independent evidence in support of the claim that philosophy graduates have distinctive strengths in these fields is provided by a comparative analysis of graduate profiles in different disciplines conducted by the Council for Industry and Higher Education:

Kubler, Bianca and Forbes, Peter (2006), *Degrees of Skill: Student Employability Profiles: A Guide for Employers*. London: Council for Industry and Higher Education.

The full report is available to order on-line at the following URL:  
[www.cihe-uk.com/publications.php](http://www.cihe-uk.com/publications.php)

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## 2 Reading philosophy

Philosophy, in common with most humanities subjects, is a very text-based discipline, and a large amount of your study time will be taken up with reading philosophical texts. This chapter provides information that should help you to decide what to read, when, and suggests a variety of strategies that will help you to get the most out of your philosophical reading, and to develop your own skills of philosophical analysis.

### **What to read**

You may be given specific guidance on what to read each week in order to prepare for lectures and tutorials. Often, such reading is detailed in a course handout. This makes the job of deciding what to read seem easy. However, this may not be everyone's experience of starting a philosophy course. Guidance given varies hugely across different institutions.

Even if you are given directed reading for the semester ahead, it is likely that at some stage, particularly when you are preparing your assessed work, you will need to take control over your own reading, and make judgements about what to read.

### **The reading list**

When you start your first philosophy course, the first piece of paper you are given by your course tutor – perhaps in the student handbook, perhaps in your first lecture or seminar – is likely to be a dauntingly long list of famous and/or obscure philosophical texts, that might look something like this:



- [\*click Mindreaders: The Cognitive Basis of "Theory of Mind" here\*](#)
- [Secret Sects of Syria and the Lebanon: A Consideration of Their Origin, Creeds and Religious Ceremonies, and Their Connection With and Influence Upon Modern Freemasonry pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [read How to Teach Vocabulary for free](#)
- [read Be Your Own Boss](#)
  
- <http://creativebeard.ru/freebooks/Far-Fetched-Facts--A-Parable-of-Development-Aid--Inside-Technology-.pdf>
- <http://deltaphenomics.nl/?library/Olive-Cultivation-in-Ancient-Greece--Seeking-the-Ancient-Economy.pdf>
- <http://creativebeard.ru/freebooks/How-to-Teach-Vocabulary.pdf>
- <http://www.rap-wallpapers.com/?library/Be-Your-Own-Boss.pdf>