

Reading

I have just one central piece of advice on reading for essays: be selective. Don't read too much, and only read what you have some grounds for supposing may be worth reading and may be relevant to your essay.

One article carefully read is worth any number of articles skimmed through. Indeed, with one exception (which I will mention below) skimming through a philosophy article is generally a complete waste of time: if the material you are reading does not stretch you you probably have little to learn from it, and if it does stretch you you will learn little from it by skim-reading. As I will stress again, reading philosophy should be hard work. It involves identifying the key ideas in a piece of writing, and making sure that you have grasped the central arguments. You have only done this if, after reading the article, you are able, without further reference to it, to write down its central claims and arguments in a way that would give someone else at least the general drift of the article. (And you are unlikely to be able to do that if you have not, while reading the piece, made notes of what seem to you the most important ideas in it.)

Most things are not worth reading. Indeed, even most things in the Philosophy section of a university library are not worth reading. Given the time constraints that we are all under, there is little point in reading anything but the best. My words 'the best' there cannot quite be read as: 'the best material on one's topic' eg abortion. For it is of crucial importance that you read articles that argue on different sides of any issue on which you are working. What you must focus on is the *best* presentations of the various different viewpoints. It goes without saying that most of what is written on any topic is not 'the best'.

Finding the best takes some work. A good place to start is with any reading list that you have been given. The lecturer who has produced the list knows the literature in this area well, and will only have put on it things that he judges really are worth reading. But even with reading lists some care is needed: unless the list is specifically linked with the essay title on which you are working, you cannot take it for granted that everything on it will be directly relevant to your topic. You will need to ask yourself as you read through a piece whether it is relevant; and there may come a point at which you decide it is not worth reading further.

One final tip on reading: don't be afraid to give up something that you are reading if it is clearly irrelevant, of poor quality, or simply beyond you. Needless to say, this can call for some delicate judgement. In particular, most of what you read *will*, at least if it is worth reading, be difficult. So you must beware of the temptation to give up too soon. Some, however, suffer from an opposite tendency: a tendency to feel that they must struggle on to the end even once it has become clear that they are going to get nothing out of this particular piece of writing. You are in a better position than anyone else to judge which of those tendencies you need most to guard against.

So the general advice is: *Stick to what is very precisely relevant* and *Stick to the best*.