

How To Read A Philosophy Text

(with examples from Mill's *Utilitarianism*)

1. Watch for structural elements

For example, on p. 5, Mill says that he is going to begin by disposing of some objections to utilitarianism. Mill sometimes, but not always, uses the word “objection” or a variant to mark his turn to a new objection (e.g., on p. 12 & p. 18). The first sentence of the last paragraph on p. 21 does similar work.

2. Watch for four things

Definitions of all *key terms*.

This applies particularly to the first full paragraph on p. 7 & to “competent judges” on p. 11

Keep the definition format (genus + specific difference; see the logic notes) in mind when attempting to identify a definition. (Note Mill's use of the term *specific difference* on p. 50, when he is defining justice.)

Sets of terms.

Important contrasts—e.g., mental & bodily pleasures, circumstantial advantages & intrinsic nature (p. 8)

Distinctions among closely related terms—e.g., happiness & contentment (p. 10)

Key theses connecting those terms—e.g., What thesis connects the concepts pleasure & happiness (p. 7)? of mental & bodily pleasures (p. 8)?

Arguments in defense of those theses

Ask what it is about the subject that makes the predicate apply to it. (Look for a middle term.)

Or ask what experience or testimony the author provides in favor of his thesis.

E.g., Why does Mill think that mental pleasures are higher than bodily pleasures?

3. Underline *sparingly*

Underline after reading through the section of the text.

Underline the absolute minimum necessary to make the point visible.

4. Make an outline.