1 How to Read a Paper

As you read a paper, constantly ask yourself: How does this contribute to the argument of the paper? How does this section contribute to the argument of the paper? How does this paragraph contribute to the argument of this section? How does this sentence contribute to the argument of this paragraph? Many sentences will be premises of the argument. (Some premises will be assumed, and won’t even have a sentence!) But sentences can do a lot more than this!

1. Some sentences will give examples. Examples might either clarify the argument or try to get the reader to accept a premise.

2. Some sentences will be definitions or clarifications.

3. Some sentences will explain the importance of the argument.

As you write your own paper, ask yourself the same questions. Everything in your paper should have a purpose.

I recommend reading a paper three times. It’s what I do to prepare for section. (If you are short on time, try to focus only on re-reading what seem like the most important parts.)

1. Read through the paper quickly. Get a sense of its overall structure. Mark parts that you think are important or that you don’t understand.

2. Read through the paper carefully, taking notes on it. In your notes, try to reconstruct the arguments of key points in the paper, and note what
objections or questions you have about it. Don’t take too many notes—if the author replies to an objection that you never found convincing in the first place, don’t spend all your time on it.

3. Read through the paper quickly one more time as a review before class.

2 Validity and Soundness

To understand how to make an argument, we need to learn a bit of jargon:

**Definition 1** An argument is valid if and only if, if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

**Definition 2** An argument is sound if and only if it is valid and its premises are true.

An argument can go wrong (be unsound) in two ways. It can be invalid, or it can have false premises. In each objection you raise, make clear if it rejects a premise or validity.

Your papers should not consist solely of sound arguments! (But it should make at least one sound argument for your thesis!) That would be a boring paper. You will often put forward a reconstruction of an argument in Plato, which you will then argue is unsound. You will need to make objections to your own arguments—those objections better not be sound!

3 What Else Do We Look For in an Argument?

Here we go beyond logical definitions and try to think about how to present an argument and how to make it persuasive.

1. Avoid redundant or unnecessary premises: Redundant or unnecessary premises will confuse you or the reader, and may lead you to waste time on an objection that doesn’t actually get at the heart of the issue.

2. There are many, many sound arguments to the same conclusion. Try to find an argument that explains why the conclusion is true.

3. Offer definitions of technical or ambiguous terms in your arguments.
4. For the reader to accept your argument, they will need to accept your premises. Some premises you can present arguments for, but you can’t argue for every premise, so some must be intuitive.