Philosophy Toolkit: Reading Philosophy

Reading a philosophical text is not like reading a textbook or novel. You often have to read a text <u>at least 3 times</u> before you can understand what's happening. Your goal is both to understand the main point of the text and to think about whether the author has successfully established that point.

<u>Step 1: First Read</u>
Read the whole text one time through.

When you get to the end, ask yourself (and write down!):
>   -What is the general topic of the text?
>   -What is the author's goal? What is the author trying to show/establish?
>   -What is the general argument or support for that conclusion?
>   -What questions do I have? (about the goal, the argument, etc.)

<u>Step 2: Second Read</u>
Read the text slowly, taking notes as you go.

After you read each paragraph (or in some cases, each few sentences), ask yourself (and write down):
>   -What happened in this paragraph/section?
>   -What is the author trying to show in this paragraph?
>   -How does this paragraph connect to the preceding paragraph?
>   -How does this paragraph contribute to the larger aim of the text?
>   -What terminology has been introduced? Do I know what it means? Keep a list!
>   (Remember: sometimes common words have a different or more narrow use in a philosophical
>   text)

Keep track of the argument as you go:
>   -What are the premises?
>   -What is the support (if any) for the premises? How do the premises connect together?
>   -How do the premises establish the conclusion?
>   -Is the argument valid? Is it sound?

<u>Step 3: Third Read</u>
Read the text again, and as you read, keep track of how any of your initial questions have been answered and what remaining questions you have.

As you read, ask yourself:
>   -Do I understand how the argument fits together?
>   -Are there any problems with the argument?
>   -What objections would I raise to this argument?

When you finish, think about the text as a whole:
>   -What question/issue is the author responding to?
>   -What framework (or assumptions) is the author relying on to answer that question?
>   -Is that the right framework to address the question/issue?
>   -Is the question behind the text the question we should be asking?