

Making the Most of Philosophy Tutorials

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Active vs. Passive

Far too often, students approach philosophy tutorials rather *passively*—that is, as though they are there merely to be lectured to, or to benefit from the preparations of other students. As a result, students tend not to prepare for tutorials, since they do not expect that there will be any particular need for them to have done so. Perhaps this is how tutorials operate in other disciplines, and so a passive approach is appropriate in such cases. But this strikes me as bad practice in philosophy for several reasons.

First, since philosophical understanding requires more than rote memorization or a surface-level understanding of the various points made, students should reflect on where they don't understand (or, better yet, object to) the arguments or ideas being made. Tutorials offer an excellent environment in which to raise such issues, since your TA and fellow students will be able to help organize your ideas and point to some ways of resolving them, or perhaps sorting out what more needs to be said to make the objection or worry clearer. A passive approach to tutorials precludes this.

Second, since tutorials offer an environment in which to discuss these finer-grained issues at greater length, they offer a great opportunity for students to work on ideas that often find their way into their papers, whether directly or indirectly. Thus, an active approach to tutorials means students tend to write better papers—which, of course, generally means better grades.

Finally, your tutorial participation forms part of your course grade. Nearly all TAs in philosophy look for *quality* and not *quantity*, which means that merely having something to say is not sufficient for a good participation grade. Rather, you should show that you have carefully thought about the issues, which generally requires preparing your thoughts and ideas before tutorials. Again, a passive approach to tutorials precludes this.

Strategies

I hope I've persuaded you that an active approach to tutorials is important. But you may be asking yourself:

What should I do to make sure I'm prepared for tutorials, so I can get the most from them?

Let me share a few general suggestions. On top of these, remember that you can (and should) always ask your TA for ways you could improve your participation.

1. *Be an active reader and note-taker:* When you're reading for the course and taking notes in lecture, implement a system whereby you signal to your future self what you found

unclear, unconvincing, wrong, or otherwise puzzling. Since lectures generally aren't the best time to raise such questions, make sure to raise them in tutorials.

2. *Give yourself at least 15 minutes before tutorial to review their notes:* In my experience, students grossly overestimate how much they've retained from lecture—if you don't believe me, I'd be happy to give you a quiz the day after lecture to prove it to you! While tutorials often begin with a brief recap, it is not the goal of such meetings to rehash everything from that week's lectures. Thus, students should be sure to review their notes prior to tutorials, which will allow them to dig into deeper issues (and thus, providing them with the benefits of active tutorials mentioned above).
3. *Always ask for clarifications, try out ideas, respond to others' questions and points:* Part of the general phenomenon of passivity in tutorials is that students tend simply to move past things they found confusing, to hold onto ideas they might have, and to tune out when their classmates ask questions. All of these strike me as bad ideas, for reasons related to the ideas of the previous section. Thus, you should be sure to focus in on the conversation, and raise any issues you have along the way. (Remember the old line: if you have a question, you should be pretty confident that someone else has it too.)
4. *Write down questions before class; read them directly from your notes if necessary:* Some students find it challenging to keep up with the conversation, which often goes in various directions and can be hard to follow. In order to make sure you get your questions asked and answered, you should either raise them at the beginning of class, or otherwise ask them whenever you feel comfortable. Some students find it helpful to write questions down prior to class. If you're nervous about your wording or speaking in front of your classmates, feel free to read them directly from your notes.