

PHILOSOPHY: INTRODUCTORY READING

- The best way to begin Philosophy is by *talking*, not reading.
 - In the more advanced stages of the subject reading becomes essential, so you need to make a start.
 - If you find a book too difficult, give it up and try something else.
 - Don't be frightened to skip sections of a book.
 - Eventually you must develop the sort of determination found in mountaineers and Olympic athletes.
 - I don't like recommending books I haven't read, and there are a lot of introductory books around.
 - The school library has a good selection of introductory books.
 - The best strategy is to go to a good bookshop and carefully examine what is on offer.
 - Ottakar's have a good selection of philosophy books for beginners.
 - The best bookshops are Blackwell's in Oxford, and several big shops in London's Charing Cross Road.
 - Book sellers on the web, such as Blackwells and Amazon, are useful, but it is best to examine the goods.
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My first recommendation is **Dictionaries of Philosophy**. There are a number around; the best one is probably the **Penguin**, but the **Oxford** (by Simon Blackburn) is also excellent. These give you short, compressed summaries of hundreds of key ideas. Use them for reference, but I suggest you read one from cover to cover.

Philosophy Made Simple covers the whole subject in short simple sections, and is a good quick way of getting an overview. There are two or three other similar books around.

An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis, by John Hospers, has been the most admired introductory book for many years. It is longer, but it is very clearly written, and is an excellent way of gradually immersing yourself in the key ideas.

Sophie's World, by Jostein Gaarder, is a novel which centres on the history of philosophy. Its explanations are beautifully clear, and this way of approaching the subject may be more appealing to you than dry dictionaries.

Think, by Simon Blackburn, and **What Does It All Mean?**, by Thomas Nagel, are two short books written by two of the world's leading philosophers, both of which give quick glimpses of what they think they are doing, and which aspect of the subject really matter.

Once you have begun to make progress in the subject, **Modern Philosophy** by Roger Scruton is an excellent survey of philosophical thinking in the last hundred years. Scruton (an RGS old boy) is an outstandingly clear writer, and I recommend all of his books, particularly **A Short History of Modern Philosophy**, and **An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy**, and (if you are interested in politics) his wonderful **Dictionary of Political Thought**.

The best book on ancient Greek philosophy that I have found is **Classical Thought** by Terence Irwin, which surveys very clearly the main schools of thought during the first thousand years of the subject.

The fascinating early development of philosophy (which is only known to us from fragmentary evidence) is excellently covered in **The First Philosophers**, by Robin Waterfield. The intellectual heroes who created philosophy are quoted where possible, and explained very clearly.

The two books that take you to the heart of Greek philosophy are **The Last Days of Socrates**, by Plato (Penguin book), which covers the discussions of Socrates before his execution, and **The Republic**, by Plato, which is probably the greatest surviving text from the ancient world, and is very readable.

The AS set text, **Meditations**, by René Descartes, is included in a Penguin book (along with 'Discourse on Method'). The first of the six meditations is straightforward, and you could go on and read the rest.

Julian Baggini and **Stephen Law** are authors of several good basic introductions to philosophy.