

Tips for Reading an Academic Paper

You probably won't have time to use all of these techniques for every paper you read—indeed, you can't use all of them all of the time if you want to get your reading done!—but some of them might help you with your reading in this class and beyond. This isn't a definitive list, just some techniques that have worked for me as I've tried to read papers from different academic traditions.

1. Consider **when the paper was written and its historical context**. What else was going on in the world at the time the paper was written, what other disciplines or people might have influenced the writing? If it doesn't take too much time, find a short **biography of the author** and his or her contemporaries. Consider *why* he or she may have written the paper. What academic department (if any) does s/he belong to? Does s/he work for a university or a company? What is their academic training, live experience, or work history? Who do you think the paper is intended for?
2. Before reading the whole paper, **read the abstract and skim** it to get an idea of its structure and what the author's overall argument is. *E.g.*, look at the names of the subsections, glance at the figures, and note who's cited or even just the titles of the books/articles the paper cites.
3. **While reading:**
 - a. Note keywords, keep a list of them and draw a diagram of how you think they relate to each other.
 - b. Note which statements are definitive and take a stance and which are more cautious or equivocal.
 - c. Consider which statements you immediately agree with, which ones you immediately disagree with and which ones you find confusing or debatable.
 - d. When authors provide examples, consider whether they illustrate the point they're trying to make.
 - e. Consider the methodology the author is using; is this a theoretical piece, an empirical piece, a mix of the two? What traditions are the authors relying on and what do they seem to assume about their audience?
 - f. Are the hypotheses, theories and empirical methods consistent among each other? *I.e.*, does the author do what s/he sets out to do?
 - g. What research methods and rhetorical stances does the author use? *E.g.* quantitative, qualitative, explanatory, predictive? What are their limitations (*e.g.* dealing with artifacts of quantitative work versus the challenges of replicability and the voice of the author in qualitative work)?
 - h. What (if any) operationalizations does the author use? What are their limitations and strengths?
 - i. Who does the author cite and what clues does this give you about his or her argument?

- j. Is the author making empirical claims (how the world *is*) or normative claims (how the world *should* be)? How do the two kinds of claims relate to each other? Is one type of claim more believable than another?
 - k. Write on the paper, underline, highlight, draw pictures and diagrams – do whatever you need to do to make the paper your own.
4. Develop a **“lens”** for the paper:
 - a. Come up with your own examples when the author doesn’t provide any, or think about whether the author’s examples explain the concept.
 - b. Think about how the paper relates to projects you’re working on or ones you’d like to work on.
 - c. Think about how someone else (your roommate, sister, best friend) might react to this paper and how you’d explain its core idea to them.
 5. **After reading:**
 - a. write a 2-3 sentence summary of the paper with what you think are its most important points;
 - b. trade the summary with a friend, talk about how they differ, and use these differences to write questions that you can bring to discussion section.
 6. Take note of when the paper **evokes these reactions:**
 - a. **Wow!** I’ve never thought about that before.
 - b. **Huh?** I don’t understand what that means.
 - c. **Hmm...** The author makes an interesting point that needs to be expanded.
 - d. **Ho-hum.** The author belabors the obvious and doesn’t really say much new.
 7. Come to the discussion section with **specific questions**; chances are you’re not the only one who has them and it would be great to discuss them as a group.
 8. Skim the paper and your notes again **two weeks after your first reading** to keep its ideas and your reactions fresh.

Think about whether these strategies work for you. Change them and make more of your own.