General tips for reading scholarly articles

Note: I put this handout together for an undergraduate course when some students expressed frustration about trying to read a research article. You may already have your own strategies for reading difficult material; if they are successful, don't feel you have to follow these suggestions. They come from my own experience and from a nice—though repetitious and finicky—book:

Van Doren, Charles & Mortimer Adler (1972 revised edition of 1940 original). *How to Read a Book*. Touchstone.

- Before you read, *pre*read.
  - Can you guess from the title what the article will be about? What position it will argue for?
  - If there is an abstract, read it carefully.
  - Read the introduction carefully, then skip ahead and skim the conclusion or summary, if there is one—this will help you know where the body of the paper is going when you go back to read it.
  - Often, the introduction ends with a preview of how the paper will be structured—take note of this, and flip through the paper to see all the section headings. From what you learned in the abstract, introduction, and conclusion, try to predict how each section will fit in with the main argument.

- Engage with the article.
  - When prereading you're trying to form an idea before you really start reading the article of what it will be about, what problem it tackles, what it will argue, and how each section will contribute to the argument.
  - While you're reading, keep checking against your expectations. For example, say that a section of an article is arguing that Arabic epenthesis is postlexical and therefore invisible to stress. Then the author says that some more examples will be given that argue for epenthesis coming late. As you look at each example, try to see what the problem would be if epenthesis came early and whether the problem goes away if epenthesis is late.
  - When you see a set of data, before you read the author's analysis try to see what's going on for yourself. Sketch out as much of an analysis as you can and note what the tricky aspects are. Then compare what you got to what the author says.
  - After each example, each subsection, and each section, consider what its importance has been to the article's main argument.
  - You should always be experiencing (and aware of) some kind of reaction to what you're reading: *Ah yes, that's just what I expected she'd say. Wait, I thought she was arguing the opposite of that. Whoa, where's this going—is it a new topic or further support for what we just saw? Aha, so that's what she meant above by "..."; I'd better go back and re-read that paragraph now that I see what it's talking about. Wow, that's a bold claim, and I wonder how it's going to be backed up—maybe if there were a language with the following properties...*
  - It helps to write on the article (if it's your own copy!). Some things to try:

        - Underline the major points or use a vertical line in the margin if the passage is too long to underline.
        - Circle key words or phrases, or new terms.
        - Put asterisks in the margins (with a brief note) to mark the 5 or so most important points.
        - Put numbers in the margins to mark a sequence of points in developing an argument. For example, if an author says "There are several [or even better, 'five'] reasons to believe this," note with a number each reason as you get to it.

- Many people like to take notes on another sheet of paper or on a computer (though some of the following will fit in the margins).
    - You can note the main point of each section and how it fits in to the overall argument. When you're done you'll have an outline.
    - You can also note questions that occur to you while reading and keep track of whether they get resolved later in the article, or on a second reading. If not, bring them up in class or section!
    - You can note cases you've seen before that the one you're reading about reminds you of.
    - You can note research ideas that you get (you should probably copy these to a separate place later—you should always have a notebook for your research ideas, or a file folder that you can throw scraps of paper with ideas into).

- Read through again if necessary.
    - Some articles are easy enough that one reading suffices. But if you're having trouble, write down what your questions are, which parts you don't understand, etc. Put the article aside for a day and then come back and read it—or just the hard part—again, searching for the answers to those questions and checking whether you still agree with the outline you made, or still find that the points you underlined before are the important ones. You will probably find the article much easier on the second reading.

- How to figure out what terms mean
    - Sometimes the author uses terminology you don't know, or very fancy words, or unfamiliar idioms and constructions (if the paper isn't in your native language). Mark the passages that give you this kind of low-level trouble—where you can't figure out what the actual sentence means.
    - Look for explicit discussion of special terms—see if the word is introduced anywhere with 'quotation marks', *italics*, or SMALL CAPS.
    - A dictionary may help, but not always—you may need to use context, ask other people, or even search for a word or phrase on the web to get an idea of what it means.
    - If you practice the suggestions above for pre-reading and engaging with the article, you will already have an idea of what the author is going to say at each point, which will help you figure out what an unfamiliar term must mean.

- Getting through the tough parts
    - I find that reading difficult passages aloud sometimes helps. Reading aloud is also helpful when my attention is wandering or my environment is distracting (e.g., jury duty).
    - It also helps to talk with someone else who is reading the same article (or try your T.A. or me).
    - If you find that it's taking you too long to read things, perhaps your reading environment needs to be changed. For difficult reading, most people need to be alone in a quiet room, with the door closed. (I know from personal experience that this is hard to achieve if you don't have your own room or a private office. A good substitute is the desks on the upper floors of the Young Research Library.) Some people (including me) find that sitting alone in a parked car on a quiet residential street is the ultimate; this works best when the car is free of other reading material or distractions.