

General tips for reading scholarly articles

Note: I put this handout together for 165A last spring 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, easy-to-read (though repetitious and finicky) book that I recommend:

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

- Before you read, *preread*.
 - 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.
 - To repeat from above, 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.
 - Then when 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, pause to consider what its importance has been to the article's main argument.
 - It helps to write on the article (if it's your own copy!).
 - 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.
 - You can note here the main point of each section and how it fits in to the overall argument. When you’re done you’ll have an outline. (For most sets of study questions, I ask you to write this outline on the back of the sheet. Don’t worry about making that part of your study questions tidy; you can write your first draft directly onto the sheet.)
 - 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.
 - You can note cases you’ve seen before that the one you’re reading about reminds you of.

- Read through again if necessary.
 - Some articles are easy enough that one careful 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 or two and then come back and read it 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 just very fancy words. 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.
 - The dictionary may help, but not always—you may need to use context, ask other people, or even trying searching 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, so that 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.
 - It also helps to discuss with someone else who is reading the same article (or try Andy or me)