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Reading Papers: Some Tips

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At the start of graduate school, one of my professors told us that the purpose of first-year coursework (apart, of course, from building character) was to give us the tools we would need to read and understand a run-of-the-mill journal article. By that token, the purpose of second-year courses is to use your newly honed technical skills to digest and master the existing literature relevant to your research interests. But reading a paper effectively and efficiently is an acquired skill. Here are some tips.

1. Learn to quickly identify the question, conceptual basis, method, and main results. A good paper will have a "story" it is trying to tell, and understanding the basic contours of that story will make it much easier for you to follow the zigs and zags of the analysis and to notice anything that smells fishy. The "story" will inform the sample construction, choice of specification, sensitivity analyses, bounding arguments, and the sequencing of results. Keep the big picture in mind: don't lose sight of the forest for the trees.

2. Spend some time with the introduction. I do a lot of my thinking about a paper before proceeding to the body of the text: What kind of model do the authors have in mind? Is that model appropriate to the empirical setting? Is the identification strategy sensible? What kinds of threats should we worry about? Are the data up to the challenge, or do they have known limitations that will doom the empirical exercise? The more you think these things through in advance, the more you'll pick up as you read the rest of the paper. The introduction is a contract with the reader: by the time you move on, you should have a general sense of what it will take for you to believe the paper's conclusions.

3. Know what you want to get out of a paper. Read some papers in great detail, so you can learn how to structure and sustain a compelling paper-length argument. In other cases, skim, but do so thoughtfully. If your interest is in the model, focus on the model. If your interest is in the data, focus on the data. If you're trying to understand how a paper fits into the broader literature, focus on the introduction.

4. Don't get frustrated if you're a slow reader. Lots of "straightforward" papers will take a long time to read at this stage of your careers, and many important papers are long, slow slogs no matter how experienced you are. Fretting about your ability to comprehend them won't do anybody any good. (Impostor syndrome is a whole subject in itself, but this is one of many places where it can manifest.)

5. Keep a searchable library of the papers you've read. I keep papers in a Dropbox folder that is then "watched" by a reference manager, Mendeley: when I add a paper to Dropbox, it shows up in Mendeley and I fill out bibliographical information about the paper. Zotero is a popular alternative. A well-curated library makes it easy to look back at papers you dimly remember, to store annotations and notes, and to generate bibliographies for inclusion in papers and prospectuses.

6. Keep a reading list, diversified between technical/untechnical papers and between your field/other fields. Read papers when you're in the mood to be working but not in the mood for non-reading research tasks. A diverse portfolio helps ensure you'll find something you're in the mood to read. The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* and *Journal of Economic Literature* offer great primers on unfamiliar topics.

7. Use the references to decide what to read next. If you keep seeing the same papers cited, it's probably worth looking into them. Reading paper B's characterization of an earlier paper A is a great way to understand A better: seeing how the subsequent literature talks about Katz and Murphy (1992), for example, can help you understand that paper's significance, methodology, key assumptions, and so on.