General reading questions

As you will discover, reading economic journal articles can be challenging. I have put together a list of questions that you may find helpful in trying to work through the papers. It is almost always a good idea to read the abstract, introduction, and conclusion first. It can even be useful to see how many of the questions below you can answer in broad strokes based on only the abstract, introduction, and conclusion. Then as you read the paper, try to fill in the details and flesh out your answers to the questions more fully.

Most economics papers also include a paragraph at the end of the introduction describing the remaining sections of this paper. It can be helpful to look at this paragraph closely and decide in advance which sections you think will be most important to read closely and what you want to understand from each section. It can also be useful to follow the approach we took in class on Wednesday of working backward. Identify the main conclusions and then try to reconstruct the logic of the arguments needed to demonstrate these conclusions. Pay close attention to assumptions and decide whether you agree with them or not.

Specific questions

- What question(s) did the paper ask and answer?

- What approach did the paper use to answer the question (e.g. statistical analysis, narrative or mathematical model, numerical simulations, etc)?

- What were the main conclusions?

- Did the paper include a theoretical model? If so, briefly outline the model. What predictions did it make?

- For empirical/statistical papers:

  - What data did the paper use to test its predictions or measure the effects of interest?

  - What equations did the paper estimate?

    * Try to identify which variables are dependent variables and which ones are independent.
    * How do the estimated equations relate to the paper's research questions? For example, which estimated coefficients will help answer the question? How do those coefficients help answer the question? Does the author need to do more analysis after finding the coefficients to answer the question? What extra analysis is performed?

  - What were the econometric challenges the paper was concerned about? How did the author(s) address these? *Note: you do not need to fully understand the econometrics or the details of the solution adopted to answer these questions. You may not feel prepared to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, but you should usually be able to describe in rough terms how the paper addressed the questions/challenges.*

  - Is there anything the authors didn't consider that you think might be important?

- For theory or model papers:

  - What are the key elements of the model in the paper? (In many cases, papers will develop a basic model and then change various assumptions to see how these assumptions influence the predictions. Policy papers usually have an underlying model of behavior by consumers and/or producers and then investigate how policy changes would affect the predictions).

    * Whose behavior is modeled? What assumptions are made about that behavior?
    * What are the endogenous variables in the model (i.e. what variables are determined within the model)?
    * What are the key exogenous variables (variables whose values are assumed by the model, not determined within the model)?
    * Are there important assumptions about equilibrium conditions or other structural relationships?
    * What predictions does the model make?
    * If the model used numerical simulations to solve a model, what data was used?

- For all papers: what were your reactions to the paper?

  - Were you convinced by the paper?
  - Do you have any critiques or criticisms of the paper?
  - What is the relevance/significance of the results more generally?
  - What extensions to the paper do you think would be interesting?