***Reading the Literature***

Reading a technical paper for the first time is probably the most difficult thing you’ll ever do. I remember reading mine for the first time... and the second... and the third time... etc.! I think I read the thing about 10 times, and still was having a hard time connecting the dots. What I’ve learned over the years (and many, many, ***many*** papers later!) is that the best way to approach a paper is as follows.

1. **Read the abstract first.** The abstract contains a good summary of information in the paper, without gory details.
2. **Read the introduction second.** The introduction contains to a good paper contains the “elevator pitch”–the reason the paper is written, and the reason you should care. It should also give you a framework for what’s to come in the paper.
3. **Read the conclusion third.** Wait, what?!? Yup. Read the conclusion. The stuff in the middle of any paper–the experimental details, the data, the discussion–are all great, but when you’re reading a paper for the first time (and when you may not have any experience in the particular area of the paper) the stuff in the middle can be pretty dense and boring. A conclusion, though, should succinctly state what was done in the “middle stuff” of the paper, while drawing tying up what was introduced in the conclusion.
4. **Read the paper.** Yeah, you still need to read the paper, and there’ll be lots of little details that will leave you scratching your head. But now you should have an idea of what the paper is about, and can read the paper a bit differently than if you just approached it cold.