How to Read an Essay

Note: this excellent process can be applied to:
- Books, chapters in books, articles, and all manner of reading.

What is the title?
- What does it tell you about what the essay is about?
- What do you already know about the subject?
- What do you expect the essay to say about it—especially given when it was written and who the author was (see next questions)?

When was the essay written?
- Do you know anything about the state of the historical literature on the subject at that time? If so, what do you expect the essay to say?

Who wrote it?
- What do you expect him or her to say?

Read the essay, marking the information that is crucial to you.
- When the text gives you crucial information, mark and note it:
  - What exactly is the subject?
  - How does it correspond to the title?
  - What are the main points—the theses?
  - What is the evidence that the author gives to sustain the thesis or theses?

What is the factual information that you want to retain?
- Is there a good description of something you knew, or did not know, that you want to remember its location? If so, mark it. If for research, make out a research note on it.
- Does the author cite some important source that you want to retain for future reference? If so, mark it. If for research, make out a bibliographic note either now or on reviewing the article for such citations.

Once you have finished the article, reflect on:
- What have you learned?
- How does it relate to what you already know?
- Did you find the argument convincing on its own terms?
- Given what you know about the subject, do you think the main point(s) might be correct even if the argument was not convincing?
- Can you think of any information that makes you doubt the main point(s), even if they essay argued it well?
- How does the essay relate to other things you have read—that is, how does it fit in the historical literature?