I’m going to take about 10 minutes to “point” to additional issues raised by the question of how scholars read, as a way of contributing to what John’s paper outlined as a possible agenda for future research on this topic. Rather than speaking about my own reading practices, I will instead share a few observations about how English professors train their students to read, since I’ve found that the classroom is an environment that forces us to modify and even compromise values of reading and writing that we proclaim elsewhere. I’m basing my comments today on my own experience teaching in a literature department, although I assume that many of these observations hold true in other humanities classrooms. Since I’m part of that privileged minority of the professoriat to be employed at a “Research I” institution, I teach only 2 courses a semester. Currently I am teaching a Freshman Writing seminar on Shakespeare to non-English majors and a Graduate seminar on Classical and Early Modern Rhetoric. The wide gap in experience and expertise between these student populations has provoked in me a more than usual amount of reflection on my own teaching methods, particularly the modes of reading I encourage in the classroom. I’m going to briefly outline some of these reflections here, by way of commenting on the notion that reading practices are distributed along an axis of speed.

My Freshman Writing Seminar aims to transform first-year students from “lay” readers into something a bit more like “scholarly” readers. In practice, this requires a deceleration of their reading, which is habitually rapid, or “extensive.” I have a variety of techniques for slowing them down. First, I don’t assign much reading. We take 15 weeks to study 3 Shakespeare plays, devoting an entire seminar meeting to each act.
Second, my classroom exercises promote a deep immersion with small pieces of text: I ask them to read aloud, perform scenes, and do “close readings” while sitting around the seminar table. The aim of these activities is to help them distinguish what Hamlet says from how he says it. To quote John’s paper, these activities “alienate” the students from their old reading habits, and while I don’t think my seminars are exercises in misery, students periodically comment that close reading “takes the fun” out of Shakespeare. I do my best to argue that these techniques are empowering—often thinking back to my own undergraduate coursework at Yale, which seemed intended to make sure that if I was ever stranded on a desert island with a book of sonnets and nothing else, I could conduct meaningful readings of the poems until my moment of rescue—but I’m not sure how many students share my own sense of satisfaction in filling their mental toolbox with strategies for literary analysis. Ideally, if the course succeeds in its aims, this initial alienation from the Shakespeare they thought they knew will be replaced by a new sense of intellectual mastery, both over the three Shakespeare plays and also over these new methods of reading and interpretation.

A small handful of these students might become English majors, and perhaps eventually apply to graduate school in English. But if any of these students were to move directly from my undergraduate to my graduate classroom, I think they would feel justifiably resentful. This is because the structure of my graduate class forces students to accelerate their reading almost beyond the point of recognition, resulting in yet another process of alienation from previously familiar reading practices. I regularly remind my graduate students that in order to survive coursework they need to learn how to “skim”—although now I think I will use the much more apt term “scan.” Even as I
deliver this paper, I suspect that my poor graduate students are at home attempting to complete the reading assigned for Monday, which includes Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, his translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and two critical essays. In class we will directly attend to a miniscule portion of this reading, as they well know, and thus an unspoken part of their assignment is to come to seminar armed with an exemplary passage culled from hundreds of pages of printed material, a passage that can then anchor our discussion. At the beginning of the semester, it is difficult for the students to sift through their reading and locate such a textual crux, and I have come to believe that my most important task as a teacher is to help them acquire a series of mental filters that will enable them to scan texts for those passages that best reward “intensive” reading. Once in place, these filters will allow them to become more efficient readers, giving them a sense of command over a previously overwhelming archive. Then, possibly, pleasure in reading might return once again.

Even as I provide strategies for reading primary texts, my graduate seminar is also instituting a series of filters that will determine the kind of scholarship that these students read. The first and most important filter is my syllabus. Five years ago I took a seminar that John taught on early modern rhetoric, and so when I sat down to compose my own syllabus I didn’t need to log onto the MLA Bibliography, enter “rhetoric” as a keyword, and start scrolling through thousands of entries in search of something useful. Instead, I opened my file cabinet and pulled out a 4-page reading list composed by someone whose intellectual authority I had good reason to trust. My syllabus will surely have the same function for my students: as a précis of the essential scholarly texts on Renaissance rhetoric. This tradition of graduate teaching insures that certain works of
scholarship do rise above “archival” status, and when I envision the widest possible readership for my own work, I don’t imagine my book landing on a shelf in Barnes and Noble, nor do I dwell on making it into one of the “big” academic journals (although neither of these would be unwelcome). Instead, I fantasize about making it onto somebody’s syllabus and becoming part of a tradition of “assigned reading.”

Now that I’ve said a few things about the forms of reading enforced in my classroom, I want to close by talking a bit about how this affects my own reading. The most straightforward thing to say is that my research is now yoked to my teaching. By this I mean that my teaching is a crucial determiner of what I read, and how I read it. John closed his essay with a confession that the only “whole books” of scholarship he reads anymore are those he must review for promotion cases. I’ll supplement this with a confession of my own—the only scholarly works I read carefully and completely are those I have to teach. Even as I lean on my graduate students to speed up their reading, I find myself having to slow down, to make sure that I have mastered the logic of a critical essay before I walk into a classroom and moderate a discussion of its arguments. I read this scholarship “intensively” because I have no choice, and I’d be a fool not to put this careful study in service of my own research and writing.

All of us have offices full of things we should be reading, but aren’t. Speaking for myself, not only is there a huge volume of scholarship I might be reading at any given moment, but it is also incredibly easy to access that scholarship. Every day I receive a mailing from a distinguished university press announcing new books in my field. I have a generous research budget and can order anything that catches my fancy. Cornell has a marvelously well-stocked library, and, moreover, has recently instituted a book-
delivery service that allows me to log on to the card catalogue and order books to be
delivered to my faculty mailbox that very afternoon. I subscribe to a dozen of listservs
that automatically email me the tables of contents of forthcoming journals, so that I am
instantly aware of the arrival of new work in literary studies. Now, it’s not clear that any
of this has increased how much I read, but it has increased the guilt I feel about how
much I’m not reading. To be perfectly frank, this is why I often find myself perversely
grateful for the administrative and pedagogical requirements of my job. Our lifestyle
and that of our students demands that we aggressively streamline our reading
practices. When I have to teach a class, comment on a dissertation prospectus, or
review a job application, I am forced to sit down and finally read something. I don’t think
this is a waste of time, time that might be spent reading something better or more
relevant to my work. I think it's time that would have been spent looking at stacks of
books, feeling guilty about not reading.