Here is Dr. Cathy Stanton's handout on how to read as a graduate student:

**Reading Like a Graduate Student**
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So now you're a graduate student. Here are some thoughts about what that means in terms of how you should approach one of the central tasks of graduate study--READING.

One of your key tasks as an M.A. student is to become conversant with the outlines of your disciplinary field and whatever specialized area of it you decide to focus on. You aren't expected to master these areas as fully as you would at a doctoral level. But you should get to the point where you have a sense of knowing your way around. If your disciplinary field were a strange city and you found yourself plunked down in it at the start of your degree, by the time you finish, you should be able to find your way around the major streets, have a sense of how the main neighborhoods fit together, be able to use the transit system, and feel pretty much at home in at least one part of the city. At a doctoral level, you'd be asked to know the history and infrastructure of the whole place in much greater depth, and to be a real specialist in at least one of its areas. But for your M.A., a working knowledge, with some sense of the whole and its possibilities, are what you're after.

So what does that actually mean?

* It means reading a LOT.

You should be prepared to do a serious amount of reading over the next few months. While there's no standard number of pages that you'll be expected to tackle in graduate-level work, two to three books' worth each week is probably a reasonable average in the pre-final-document phases. As you'll see below, that doesn't mean reading every word of two or three books a week. But it means plowing through that many titles, which is what it takes to start getting that overall grasp of the field.

The good news is that your reading muscles will almost certainly strengthen and become more effective as you get into this. But as with any muscle, at first you may feel the strain! Graduate school is a time when most of us do more reading than we've ever done before or ever will afterward. It's a lot of work--but there are things you can do to make the most of your reading time. Read on…

* It means always working to strengthen your general intellectual framework.

By the time you start your graduate study, you probably have a fair bit of general and perhaps specialized knowledge under your belt. You've finished an undergraduate degree, and you may have worked in the field(s) you're interested in or done some independent learning about them. In the current educational parlance, you have a *scaffold* on which to start hanging new knowledge as you acquire it. (I call it a framework rather than a scaffold, because I resist trendy educational jargon whenever possible!)
Whenever you read, you should be asking yourself where the new book or article fits in relation to what you've already encountered. The more consciously you can do that, the stronger your intellectual framework will become. You may find yourself enlarging it—that is, adding new pieces or disciplinary areas that you didn't know about before. Or you may find that its outlines—the overall questions and areas you want to explore—are pretty well set at the beginning, in which case you can concentrate on the strengthening process. Although you're going to be working to become better grounded in your discipline and knowledgeable about your subject, remember that the framework—the questions and ideas that led you to this degree—is already in place. All this reading is just a way to make it stronger and more useful to you.

* It means not trying to read every word, or even every chapter, of most books—and knowing when you should read more closely.

There are two kinds of college-level reading: reading for depth and skimming or "gutting." You'll need to do both in this program, and to figure out quickly which is appropriate for which books.

In terms of the skimming option, one of my grad school advisors used to say, "Spend an hour with a book." Look at the table of contents, quickly read the introduction and the conclusion (or the start and finish of each, if they're long), and have a look at the Works Cited or the footnotes to try to get a sense of what the author's disciplinary orientation is. Once you've been working on your own intellectual framework for a while, you'll be able to start connecting the dots among things you've already read, theories you've heard of or worked with, and ideas that are percolating in your own brain. There are usually a relatively small number of key thinkers and foundational theoretical approaches in any given discipline, and you'll bump into those over and over again. Identifying them and getting a sense of how they fit together can give you a useful handle for comprehending and assessing a book in a relatively short time. This doesn't mean slotting every author neatly into a "schools of thought" system. It's more about noticing similarities in authors' general approaches or concerns, and looking at their sources to see whose ideas they're drawing on.

The authors that lots of people draw on are probably going to be among the ones whose books you'll want to read in more depth. Theory doesn't usually make for quick or light reading—in fact, sometimes you'll find that you need to go back to a really foundational book more than once before the ideas sink in deeply enough for you to be able to start using them in your own work.

How do you recognize those books? They are the ones that really "speak" to you and offer you something that illuminates your own project or addresses your own questions in a way that feels compatible. Not all theorists speak to all readers—we tend to be drawn to some and not to others. It's good to know who the major thinkers are in your field, but the theoretical books you'll really want to spend time with are the ones that strike a chord in you somewhere.

* It means becoming familiar with journals, academic databases, and conference papers as well as books.
Academic book publishing is a slow process. By the time a book comes out, the leading edge of thought in that field has usually moved on, and new ideas have been brought to bear on it. Academic journals are somewhat more *au courant*, and they can give you a clearer sense of what the current debates in your field are. You don't have to know all the journals in the field, but you should be able to identify some of the major ones, and any that are devoted to your particular area(s) of interest. The Internet has made it dazzlingly easy to stay up to date on this, even if all you do is skim the tables of contents for a few key journals. This is a key task in those processes of getting to know the lay of the land and strengthening your own intellectual framework.

The most current scholarship isn't in print, however--it's what is being presented at academic conferences. If at all possible, you should try to identify a conference or two that you're able to attend while you're working on your M.A., to dip a toe (or more) into the world of real-time academic discourse. Okay, it's not usually a pulse-pounding kind of experience, but it *is* the reality of how scholarship is created, bit by bit, idea by idea, conversation by conversation. Attending a conference or two can be a way to start working your way into those conversations, and linking up your emerging knowledge with what other people are thinking and talking about. You'll also find that most people at conferences are happy to share their works in progress, so you should feel free to ask for copies of papers that you find particularly intriguing. (Just make sure to ask the authors whether it's okay to cite them in your own papers.)

*A final pair of suggestions about graduate-level reading* is to develop a useable note-taking system and to keep a complete annotated bibliography of whatever you read. Both of these will come in handy when it comes time to write your final document. And both are ways to help locate all these new ideas somewhere on the intellectual framework that you'll be building for yourself throughout the course of your work on your degree.