

Graduate School Skills

Margaret Edsall, former GSAS Associate Dean, has summarized the very best information from a variety of resources on graduate school success. These resources are listed at the end of the summary. Read the information below, discuss with your graduate school colleagues, and ask questions of your graduate faculty – the first steps to success!

Adjusting to Graduate Life

Graduate school is an academic universe that has almost nothing in common with the undergraduate experience. Whereas the undergraduate student's academic progress and choices tend to be supported by active faculty interest and advising, graduate study progresses within the context of a much less proctored learning environment. Thus the ability to work unsupervised is crucial to a successful career in graduate school. You will be expected to choose a course of study, an area of specialization and your research topic(s) independently. You will also need to manage your teaching responsibilities and secure your funding with little or no guidance. You will not be subject to the same pats on the back and encouragement that you may have received as an honor student in college. In graduate school, everyone is a former college honor student and is expected to be self-directed and self-motivated. You are being trained as a pre-professional and as such, are more akin to the university's faculty than to its students. The sooner you realize that you need to work autonomously, the faster you will acclimate to and succeed in graduate school. Following is some advice as to how to make the transition to graduate school and most benefit from your tenure there:

Set the stage for productivity

In his book *Getting What You Came For*, Robert L. Peters offers the following advice for how to set yourself up to work productively in graduate school:

- Buy a good computer.
- Set up a calendar system that establishes weekly, monthly and yearly deadlines and goals in advance. This will orient you towards your goals from the outset. You should include self-imposed deadlines for paper publication and conference talks so as to adopt a professional attitude towards your work. Post it where you can see it.
- Set up a filing system in which to keep track of research topics, bibliographies, calls for papers, conference and lecture notes, contacts, teaching materials, articles, financial aid data, etc.
- Set up a good workspace that is free of distractions
- Keep a log of the hours you consecrate to your research so that you can get a true picture of your working time and adjust it accordingly.
- Stay abreast of and apply for fellowships. Make sure to post relevant deadlines in your calendar system so that they don't sneak up on you.
- Set up regular meetings with your advisor and stay on track with your research. Set deadlines for yourself and stick to them.
- Set up or join a graduate student support group.
- Join departmental committees immediately in order to get to know people and understand the departmental culture.
- Start thinking about and researching a thesis topic as soon as possible.
- Make your work the center of your life in order to get through graduate school as expeditiously as possible.
- Set up a good workspace that is free of distractions.
- Maintain daily progress on your thesis. Work steadily every day even if for short periods of time rather than in inconsistent bouts.

- Think about getting a job from the moment you begin your graduate work, no matter how remote your entry onto the job market may seem. Evaluate everything that you do in terms of whether it will improve your chances of getting a job.

Acquaint yourself with the university infrastructure

Before your first semester of coursework begins, try to take the time to understand how to best use the tools upon which you will be relying to do your work.

- Visit the library and take a tour of the various resources available to you. Find out if there are specialized indexes or other resources specific to your field of interest.
- Find out if there are special borrowing privileges for graduate students at the library.
- Find out about and take any courses the university might offer to enhance your computer or research skills.
- Set up a university-based email account. It is free and affords you access to announcements and discussion groups otherwise unavailable.

Understand the departmental culture

- Realize that university departments are inevitably political and must be navigated with savvy.
- Pick the brains of the more seasoned members of your department to find out how things work in the department.
- Develop a good working relationship with the administrative staff in the department. These individuals will be helpful not only in providing you with administrative information, but are also responsible for expediting important paperwork pertaining to your financial aid and degree requirements.
- Get involved with the graduate student association if your department has one. This will help you to get to know other members of your department and initiate you to some of the ins and outs of your department and university.

Picking an advisor

When choosing an advisor to direct your research, it is important to identify which professors are known for working well with and for their students. The most famous professors are not necessarily the people that will be most committed to promoting your academic and professional goals. Since the advisor with whom you associate yourself will dramatically influence not only your graduate school experience but also your postdoctoral prospects, it is crucial that you find a suitable one.

- A good research advisor will be:
 - Established:** You want to work with a scholar who is secure with their own achievements and who is not still struggling to advance and secure their own career.
 - Tenured:** Besides implying that a scholar has to some degree "arrived," tenure also insures that the professor with whom you'll be working will not suddenly leave the job and you and your research.
 - Current:** While it is important that your advisor be well established, you don't want to work with someone that is no longer abreast of current research and intellectual trends. Your advisor should be someone who is still active and contributing to their field.
 - Collegial:** It is important that your advisor be well respected in their field not only from an intellectual point of view, but also from a personal standpoint. You may quite likely need this person to place phone calls for you and make contacts. If they have many burned bridges behind them, this will impinge upon your professional horizons.
 - Intellectually and methodologically rigorous:** Job search committees generally respond to applicants whose work is built on strong theoretical foundations. Work with someone who is known for the rigor with which they support their research.
- Try to find out from the more seasoned graduate students in your department professors' reputations as advisors:
 - Who has a reputation for being easy to work with?
 - Who is known to be approachable and consistently available?
 - Who is notorious for taking months to respond to student work?
 - Whose advisees are finishing their graduate work in a timely fashion?

- What professors seem to be associated with graduate student attrition? If a student drops out of your program, find out who their advisor was.
- Whose advisees are getting jobs? The job placement of students working under particular professors attests not only to the marketability of the research topics promoted by or associated with that advisor, but also reflects upon the way in which they use their connections to secure postgraduate opportunities for their students.

Meet with faculty

You should interview different faculty members to get a first-hand sense of what it might be like to work with them. This type of meeting also allows you to introduce yourself to various members of the department, making people aware of you and your research interests. You need to cultivate your visibility within your department so that people have you in mind when looking for research assistants or deciding upon awards and positions.

- When setting up an appointment, let the professors know that you are thinking about pursuing a particular research interest and that you'd like to know if they'd have a few minutes to discuss their areas of specialization with you.
- Before meeting with a professor, obtain a copy of their CV or look up their publications in the library computer system. Try to skim some of their most recent work so that you have a sense of their style and research proclivities. This exercise will also prepare you for a more informed discussion of their work.
- Bring up the professor's work, especially as an icebreaker at the beginning of the meeting. By orienting the conversation towards the professor's areas of scholarship, you will succeed in more actively engaging them in the conversation.
- Ask the professor to point you to the best and/or most recent scholarship on a given topic.
- Unless the professor is happily expounding upon their research, keep the meeting brief to demonstrate that you respect their limited time.
- Before leaving, ask the professor to recommend the name of a graduate student or RA that might be willing to talk to you further.

Cultivate positive relationships with the members of your department and with others studying in your field

An important skill that will enhance your graduate and postgraduate experience will be your ability to work and interact positively with your colleagues. Your interactions with your fellow graduate students and the faculty in your department will go a long way in setting the stage for your post-graduate life, for these people will be the ones writing your reference letters, making contacts on your behalf, or participating in conferences with you. The other students in your program, especially those further along in their course of study, will very likely be on the hiring committees that will eventually consider your dossier. For this reason, you would be well advised to cultivate good working relations with the people around you. Following are suggestions as to how to develop good working relations with the other people in your department and field:

- **Attend conferences.** Get your name out in the field. Get to know others working in your field.
- **Initiate professional correspondences.** Correspond via email with people working in your field. When you meet people at conferences, follow up with email. Forward bibliographic information related to their work. Comment further on a presentation they may have given.
- **Organize conferences.** Offer to help with the organization of conferences that take place at your university.
- **Be on a review committee.** Participate in a committee that reviews responses to a call for papers. You will gain exposure to other people's research and to a wide sample of abstract writing, and you will get to work with faculty and fellow graduate students in evaluating abstracts for acceptance to a given conference.
- **Introduce panels/preside over roundtable discussions.** Offer to introduce a panel or preside over a roundtable discussion, especially at student conferences.
- **Participate in study groups.** Participate in or organize study or reading groups related to your field of specialization.
- **Scholarly editing.** If your department publishes a scholarly journal, find out if you can help edit it in order to gain

exposure to new ideas and to work with faculty and advanced graduate students. This work will also expose you to the norms of academic publication.

2. Coursework and Exams

Selecting classes

From the outset of graduate study, it is important to remember that your selection of courses to fulfill degree requirements will not be done according to the same standards that dictated such decisions in your undergraduate days. Interest in a particular course is not enough of a justification to sign up for that course. Your ultimate goal should be to get the degree without spending time doing unnecessary research or wasting money. Keep the following guidelines in mind when selecting your classes:

- **Make a good first impression.** When selecting your first semester courses, bear in mind the fact that all the work that you do will be setting the stage for establishing your scholarly reputation within the department.
- **Learn the system.** During this semester, you will be adapting to graduate school's scholarly norms. Start by taking the easier courses first so that you can adjust to the new standards while remaining in a position to prove your academic merit from the outset.
- **Tackle language requirements.** Get any language requirements out of the way during your beginning semesters. Besides the fact that such courses will probably fall into the category of easier classes, you will probably be better able to concentrate on them earlier on in your career. Gaining proficiency in the necessary languages right away will also enable you to take advantage of relevant courses in those languages.
- **Pace yourself.** Avoid taking "killer" classes with heavy work/reading loads early on in your studies. Sometimes students who begin by taking the most difficult courses first or too many courses with heavy reading lists aren't able to do as well. They must then undo the negative impression produced by mediocre grades by working all the harder in subsequent semesters to establish a good academic reputation.
- **Specialize.** Choose courses that will most expeditiously usher you along towards the completion of your degree requirements, selecting courses that feed into your area of specialization.
- **Broaden your horizons.** There is another philosophy, however, that advises against such specialization, suggesting that graduate students, especially those in the humanities, take many courses outside of their departments in order to open themselves up to other schools of thought and methodologies.
- **Build intellectual capital.** Remember that your coursework should lead you to future research topics and initiate you to scholarly methods. What is more, you will probably never have as much time to study and read as you will in graduate school. What you don't read during this time will probably go unread.
- **Develop a minor field.** Given the fact that hiring committees seek candidates who will be able to teach several different areas, and given the current trend towards cross-disciplinary studies, it is advisable to develop more than one area of interest and research. Cultivate a second "minor field" in order to expand your future teaching horizons. You may even consider venturing into other disciplines.

Coursework

Whereas in college most of your academic efforts were aimed towards receiving a grade, in graduate school, your work should be oriented towards more long-term objectives. Your coursework lays the groundwork for your future scholarship. Everything that you write and research should contribute to your progressively evolving intellectual repertoire.

- **Start work on assignments immediately.** You should start thinking about and working on any term assignments from a course's outset. Besides allowing you to procure the necessary research materials well in advance of deadlines, this forethought will afford to you a sustained period during which to think about, develop, and nuance your project.
- **Address your writing to a wide audience.** When preparing a research paper, don't implicitly address it to a particular professor, but rather to a larger imagined audience, for it will be to a broad public audience that your more advanced graduate and eventual professional work will need to gear itself. You should rid yourself as soon as possible

of the infantilizing impulse to orient your paper to an individual grade administrator. Remember that in graduate school, you should be learning to write like a scholar and expert, not a student.

- **Write for eventual publication.** While there are different schools of thought as to the amount of research and time that you should dedicate to preparing papers for course requirements, it would seem advisable to prepare all work with a view to publication. Although you won't have the time to research every topic in the depth required for publication, it is still a good idea to adopt a more professional attitude with respect to paper writing.
- **Write for conferences.** If time doesn't permit that you prepare a research paper for publication, you might want to think about preparing it for a graduate student conference. This goal will help to inspire your research and to prepare you for professional conferences later on.
- **Become conversant with scholarly norms.** Learn and become fluent with the rules and conventions governing scholarly writing in your field from the outset of your graduate career so as to be entirely facile with them by the time you've completed your studies.
- **Avoid incompletes.** Although you may have heard that taking an incomplete is okay in graduate school, it is an option to be avoided at all costs. No matter how overwhelmed you may feel at the end of a given semester, do whatever it takes to complete all of your coursework within the prescribed time limits. It never pays to take an incomplete. You will never find the extra time that you envisioned to complete it. The next semester will be just as demanding, if not more so, and once teaching responsibilities kick in, your time for research will be all the more limited start thinking about and working on any term assignments that will be required for a given course from its outset.

Stand out in class

Although you may shrink from standing out, force yourself to participate as much as possible during class. This is the primary arena in which you will have contact with your professors. Make the most of it.

- **Sit in the front of the classroom.** Not only will you be able to follow the lecture or presentation more closely, but you will also have positioned yourself in the professor's direct line of vision. He or she will be more apt to notice you and to assume that you are committed to the course.
- **Complete reading assignments before class.** Going to class prepared will enable you to actively and intelligently participate in class. By asking questions and making connections, you will stand out and make an impression on the professor, who will also be grateful for your interest and class-enlivening participation.

The classroom experience as pedagogical model

Despite the fact that research is the primary focus in graduate school, remember that you are not only a scholar-in-training but also a pedagogue-in-training. Your professors should serve as teaching models as well as intellectual mentors. Even if you are not teaching while you are completing your coursework, remember that your professors' teaching strategies can provide you with a wealth of material that you can later adapt to your own pedagogical approach.

- **Notice and evaluate presentation style.** Take note of your professors' presentation methods and classroom strategies. Discern the logic behind their organization of the course and the readings. How do they approach grading and paper/project evaluation? Student questions? Discussion-leading? Lecturing? Assignments?
- **Learn from negative models.** Even ineffectual teaching performances are instructive. Note what works, what doesn't, and why.
- **Save course materials.** Save and carefully file all of the readings, bibliographic materials, photocopies, and exams associated with your courses. These references will provide a boon of information when you are creating your own courses.

3. Preparing for Orals

Preparing for orals or qualifying exams is for many the most difficult phase of graduate school. The task requires excellent organizational and time management skills. You will need to manage and integrate large amounts of data and adhere to a rigorous reading schedule. However, this period of study may also prove to be one of the most concentrated and rewarding intervals in your scholarly career, especially if you keep in mind that the main point of orals preparation is to lay the

groundwork for your own development as a researcher and teacher. If you read towards this end, you will find the experience fun and enriching. Try to conceive of your orals less as a trial by fire and more as the opportunity to talk about your research interests with experts in the field, a captive audience who, over the course of a few hours, will be concentrating exclusively on your ideas and on who you are as a scholar.

Logistical considerations

- **Set deadlines.** Organize your exam dates as far in advance as possible, ideally at the beginning of the academic year, before the demands on your professors' time and attention increase.
- **Compile study materials.** Organize your study materials as soon as you set a date so that you are completely prepared to begin studying.
- **Choose your committee members wisely.** Your chances for success will be greatly enhanced if you choose faculty members who are already impressed with your work. If you have a good rapport with them, you'll be freer to get a feel for potential exam questions.
- **Get to know examiners.** Take classes with the members of your orals committee in order to get a feel for their research interests and testing methods. Questions relating to faculty research have a tendency to pop up during examinations.
- **Ascertain critical biases.** Pay attention to the scholars that your committee members seem to respect and dislike and make sure you are aware of their arguments. It is probably not a good idea to continually cite researchers that you know certain committee members don't respect.
- **Determine exam structure.** Find out what the structure of and theory behind your exam will be by speaking with students who have just recently gone through the orals process.
 - Will you be tested on your ability to think creatively?
 - Will the exam test general or specialized knowledge?
 - Will you need to solve a problem or quote sources?
 - Should you be more abreast of current research, landmark research, or both?

Study Strategies

- **Study with a sense of urgency.** Don't put off studying for your exams. Even if they are scheduled a year away, begin your preparation whenever you find a spare moment. Study as if your exams are three months away.
- **Organize your notes.** If you are working with a reading list, develop a method for cataloguing and summarizing your reading. Be sure to take the time to succinctly note the main argument and most important examples from every book or article that you read immediately after you finish. You may feel like you have absorbed the material, but months and many readings later, you'll be grateful that you went through the exercise.
- **Create tables that identify major themes.** Identify the major theories, questions, and themes that predominate your field of study to develop a macro understanding of your project. Accompany each entry with a one-line summary, classify your readings accordingly, and plug in key examples or quotations.
- **Create hierarchies in your reading list.** Break your reading list down into three levels of importance, from essential, to mid-level, to background. Be flexible in your classifications. As you read, texts may shift in importance.
 - Read your essential texts first and thoroughly and then again towards the end of your study period. Your second reading of the essential texts will be vastly informed and nuanced by all the reading that you do in the interim. Document how your opinions evolved over the course of your study. Your insights will enrich your orals presentation.
 - Read the mid-level texts - usually theoretical material related to the primary texts - in clusters around the main texts. Continually check theoretical insights against your own. When your opinions and conclusions differ from the literature, prepare defenses of your positions in your notes.
 - "Gut" the least important texts by reading the table of contents, introduction, and conclusion and by scanning the index to discern what topics are most heavily covered.
- **Compile a list of hypothetical questions.** Make connections between readings and envision possible exam questions. Identify problematics and write response pieces to your readings. Periodically force yourself to reconcile a

cluster of material you've read through, noting recurring themes and patterns. Imagine that you have to prepare an exam or essay questions based on that cluster.

- **Organize your research with a view to your dissertation.** Be aware of materials that will feed into your dissertation research. Create a separate file system wherein you catalogue information relevant to your thesis according to subject matter.
- **Keep teaching in mind.** As you read, ask yourself if, how, and in what context you'd incorporate the material at hand into your teaching.
- **Periodically review reading notes.** Take a day at the beginning of each month to review the notes that you have taken. Make cross-references and add any insights to their margins as you go along. Reserve the last few weeks before your orals to do a final, comprehensive review.
- **Develop your oral presentation skills.** Studying material in silence does not prepare you to organize and communicate your ideas effectively in an oral situation. Force yourself to verbally articulate your reactions to readings or responses to possible exam questions so that you get used to putting your thoughts into words.
- **Join or create a study group.** Study groups are valuable to students preparing for orals for a variety of reasons.
 - They counteract the isolation that can attend long periods of study.
 - They provide a support forum that reinforces the fact that you are not the only one going through a possibly anxiety-provoking exercise.
 - They allow for the division of labor. Many study groups carve up a given reading list so that different members of the group read and write up different parts of a given reading list, collaboratively compiling an abstract notebook.
 - They promote discussion. Your discussions of the readings will help solidify them in your memory and give you experience in talking about them.
 - They keep your thinking supple. Your peers' comments can introduce you to new ways of thinking about your material that you might not have seen studying in solitude.
- **Participate in mock exams.** Attend any orals workshops that your department might offer. Get a group of students who are preparing for their orals to meet once or twice a month to stage a mock exam, presided over by a willing faculty member. During each session, a different student will field questions prepared by the faculty member. If there is no preparatory group already organized, put one together yourself with other students and willing faculty members.

Fielding Questions

- **Be prepared to justify your research methods.** Because you probably take your scholarly aims for granted, you may not, upon being asked, be prepared to clearly and succinctly rationalize them. Clarify for yourself and practice explaining the underlying principles guiding your critical biases and scholarly approach.
- **Be prepared to critically appraise your reading list.** For each book or study that you read in preparing for your orals, develop a sense of how it fits into your overall reading list. What is its relevance? How does it add to an understanding of the field you are studying? Does your reading list betray certain biases or presuppositions? Be prepared to identify and discuss them.
- **Know the key terms in your field cold.** Be sure that you can concisely define and expand upon the key terminology and concepts in your field. Often one gets in the habit of paraphrasing jargon without truly understanding all of its meanings and implications.
- **Analyze and synthesize.** Your examiners will want to see that you can integrate specific knowledge into the larger picture. Always relate details to an overarching context.
- **Learn to answer questions succinctly.** Concentrate on answering exam questions without going off on tangents. When dealing with a specific question that asks for an opinion:
 - State your opinion.
 - Give a reason for your opinion.
 - Give an example.
 - Mention opposing views.
 - Restate your point, explaining why you maintain it in the face of opposing views.
 - Don't bluff. If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it and move on. Bluffing will only serve to undermine

you.

Online sources of advice

Association for Support of Graduate Students

4. Completing the Dissertation

One of the keys to the timely completion of the dissertation is recognizing the nature and function of this particular scholarly task. As Carlos J. Alonso reminds doctoral candidates, a dissertation is an academic exercise and not a book. While encouraging dissertation writers to be original, he also warns them against undue perfectionism that could retard completion. Beyond a certain point, every year that you spend writing your dissertation counts against you and so adherence to a schedule of completion is of utmost importance. The book will come later, but in this final stage of your graduate career, time is truly of the essence.

Choosing a Topic

- **Manageability.** Although the most difficult challenge in your field may be enticing, the fact that the field's more prominent researchers haven't yet conquered it probably indicates that the topic will prove too difficult for you to tackle within the context of a doctoral thesis. Narrow down a big idea into a manageable project.
- **Originality.** Originality can take many forms. You don't necessarily have to come up with an idea of groundbreaking importance for a dissertation topic. For example, a reevaluation of past theory would constitute an original contribution to the field without evolving ex nihilo.
- **Interest.** Make sure you chose a topic that will keep you interested and motivated over the course of several years of researching and writing about it. Foresee possible burnout when settling on the topic to which you will be married for the next few years and about which you'll thenceforth be considered an expert.
- **Capitalize on your particular talents.** Try to determine the type of research that best showcases your particular intellectual abilities and adapt your dissertation topic accordingly. For example, are you better at macro- or microanalysis? Chose a topic that will tap into your experience and expertise.
- **Experience.** If you decide to build a project from scratch, without having done any prior research in that area, be aware that you will be working at a considerable disadvantage given the fact that you may be unfamiliar with all of the necessary resources or surprised by unforeseeable problems. It may be wise to propose a project for which you already have some degree of expertise.
- **Feasibility.** Determine in advance the time and resources that you'll need to commit to your proposed project. Will you be free to do necessary travel? How will you fund your research? Be aware in advance of any potential limitations that could impede your research efforts.
- **Generating a topic.** If you know your general field of interest but are still casting about for a specific topic, the following sources may provide you with inspiration:
 - o *Recent theses.* A survey of recent doctoral work in your field of interest will give you a feel for the types of topics that the focus of current research. Choosing an "of the moment" topic can endow your dossier with more "marketability" when you begin your job search. Dissertation Abstracts International offers a good database for such a survey.
 - o *Academic journals.* Review the scholarly articles that are getting published in their field to determine the central problems that are currently being discussed in your field.

The proposal (or prospectus)

Following are some general guidelines as to how to organize a dissertation proposal, to be adapted to your particular discipline:

- **Statement of problem:**
 - o What is the nature of the problem you wish to address?
 - o Why is it important that it be addressed?
 - o How will your research contribute to its resolution?
 - o What are the main questions that attend the problem?

- o What will be the limitations of your study?
- o Abstracted summary of the above.
- **Literature review.** Who has already taken the problem on? How has the problem been addressed by others? Who has contributed? Where and why is the research still incomplete?
- **Statement of research methodology.** Upon what methods and theories will you base your research? Who are the main thinkers whose work will inform your own?
- Trial table of contents. Sketch out a preliminary outline of the shape your argument will take.
- **Short bibliography.** Offer a short but nuanced bibliography of your subject. Don't just reproduce a standard bibliography of the subject matter, but add readings that will open up different perspectives and that will show that you've already begun thinking about your subject in an innovative and interesting manner.
- **Pilot study.** One way to make your proposal stronger is to conduct preliminary research that you can incorporate into your argument. Not only will this groundwork endow your prospectus with credibility, but it also gives you an opportunity to foresee and adapt to potential problems.
- **Time line.** Provide a realistic timetable that forecasts your progress towards completion. Base your estimate on how long others in your department have taken and on time lines offered by such resources as Barbara Cheshire's book *The Best Dissertation ... A Finished Dissertation (Or Thesis)* (Portland: National Book Company, 1993).

Choosing a committee

Many of the same factors that informed your choice of an advisor earlier on in your career (see "[Adjusting to Graduate Life: Picking an Advisor](#)") will figure into your selection of the members of your dissertation committee. You most probably will have built a working relationship with a particular faculty member during your years of coursework, and this individual will be your dissertation director. In assembling the rest of your committee, keep the following points in mind:

- **Department guidelines.** Get a copy of the department guidelines in order to ascertain the stipulations governing the composition of your committee. Do all of the jury members need to be tenured professors? How many outside members do you need as readers?
- **Availability and accessibility.** No matter how much you'd like to work with a particular faculty member, if that individual has limited availability, their feedback will be less than optimal. Even if a professor who is leaving on sabbatical or moving to another university expresses interest in working (or continuing to work) on your project, the reality is that once that person is immersed elsewhere in their new activities, your work will most probably lose its primacy in their hierarchy of concerns.
- **Recommendations from your director.** It is best to follow the suggestions of your dissertation director in selecting your other readers. It is crucial that your director respect and get along with the rest of your committee. You want to be sure that your doctoral work will not be marred by political tensions. If you want to propose a committee member whose expertise would enhance your project, carefully read your advisor's response to the suggestion so as to determine whether they seem comfortable with the idea of working with that person.
- **Commonality of perspective.** Your dissertation committee should be composed of professors whose research interests and methodologies coincide with or at least complement your own and those of the other committee members. Your project can certainly benefit from alternative approaches and perspectives, but be sure that professors with differing viewpoints will not be contentious or use your dissertation as a platform from which to challenge other committee members. Otherwise your project risks degenerating into a terrain of methodological or theoretical disputes that have nothing to do with the substantive issues at its core.

Time Management

Developing effective time management skills will not only foster your progress towards completing the dissertation, but will also prepare you to assume the dual responsibilities of teaching and research once you land a junior faculty position.

- **Calendar of goals and deadlines.** Use a calendar system to post deadlines such as chapter completion dates. This schedule should reflect daily, weekly, and monthly goals.

- **Daily activity log.** Keep a log of your daily productivity. In a weekly organizer, account for how you spent each hour of a given day. You may find that while you think you've been writing all day, many of the day's hours were dedicated to other things. Time-wasting activities will begin to stick out like sore thumbs. This hourly accounting will enable you to diagnose and correct time management problems.
- **Monthly progress report.** Once a month, assess your progress in a one- or two-page report. Summarize what you have accomplished, where and why you fell short of goals and how you plan to proceed. Relate your progress to your long-term schedule. You might want to give a copy of this report to your dissertation advisor. Not only will such an accounting demonstrate your commitment and involve them more fully in your progress, but it could also help to reveal and lead to the resolution of problem areas early on.
- **Self-imposed deadlines.** Make contracts with your advisors and with the fellow members of support groups specifying when you will have reading, presentations and chapters done. The external pressure of living up to your self-imposed deadlines will compel you to respect them.
- **Support groups.** Joining or organizing a dissertation reading-group, wherein chapters of dissertations are circulated and critiqued as they are written, will add another external structure to help keep your progress on track. Participating in such a group will force you to regularly present your work to a public not composed exclusively of your professors. This exercise not only provides a forum for your work, but also exposes you to the work of your colleagues, increasing your awareness of other realms of intellectual activity.
- **More ideas** are posted on the next page, [Time Management](#).

Writing strategies

- **Develop an outline.** As you do the research for each of your chapters, try to work within the framework of a predetermined outline so that you can neatly lodge data, intuitions, analyses, etc. in the appropriate sections of your argument.
- **Know your audience.** Although there are different schools of thought as to whom one should address one's writing in graduate school, it is perhaps advisable to write your dissertation with a view to your committee members' biases. Without compromising your own style and argument, adapt your work at least in part to the stylistic and methodological expectations of your committee (which will hopefully be relatively in synch with your own). Since these individuals will determine your fate as far as the completion of your doctoral work is concerned, it is best that your work engage them as fully as possible.
- **Cite counterexamples.** Anticipate criticism by confronting opposing arguments. It is your readers' job to find holes in your argument. One way to ready yourself to defend your position is to be aware of and contend with divergent positions throughout the writing process. Not only will you reinforce your own arguments, but the fact of having written through alternative perspectives will serve as a trial run for your oral defense.
- **Distance yourself from your writing.** After you've written a section of your dissertation, put some distance between yourself and your writing. Go back and read over passages a week or two after writing them so as to self-edit from a fresher vantage point and with a more critical ear.
- **Submit polished drafts.** Demonstrate the seriousness of your intent to your committee members by giving them well-written, error-free drafts of your manuscript. Always make a cover page and bind your chapters to make them easy to read and handle.
- **Be prepared to make revisions.** Don't become overly attached to your writing. Be ready to modify and even to cut out large sections if they don't ring true to other readers. If you receive conflicting suggestions from different members of your committee, ask your advisor to help you devise a strategy for acknowledging all of them. Often, partially incorporating faculty suggestions into your paper will be enough to satisfy them.
- **Acknowledge all comments.** Take your advisor's and reader's criticism seriously and make appropriate changes to your work. If you chose not to follow a reader's suggestions, explain in writing why you don't agree with a particular critique. After your readers have dedicated their time to carefully reading your work, it is only respectful to fully confront the resultant commentary.
- **More tips** are found on the [Writing Skills](#) page of the Academic Careers section.

The defense

If you have carefully chosen and constructively worked with your committee throughout your preparation of the dissertation, its final oral defense should not present major problems or unforeseen objections. The defense will usually begin with a short presentation by you summarizing your dissertation. After this introduction, the members of the defense jury each pose a series of specific questions. The defense usually lasts about two hours. Besides your core readers, there will normally be examiners from outside of your home institution. Following are some tips that will help you to manage the anticipatory stress you may experience as you prepare to and wait to defend:

- **Research the outside readers.** Once you find out who the outside readers will be, find out about their personalities from other students. Read a few of their publications to get a feel for their research concentration and methodology. If possible, meet with these individuals before the defense. You can often get an idea as to the slant their questions will take from a preliminary meeting.
- **Prepare a good abstract.** It is quite probable that some of the members of your defense jury will not have read through your dissertation entirely. Provide a clear presentation of your whole argument - thesis statement, procedures, conclusions, and, most importantly, how your work contributes to the profession. It is possible that some questions will come mainly from your abstract.
- **Prepare answers to commonly asked questions.** Following are some standard questions that usually come up during dissertation defenses:
 - o Why did you chose X procedures?
 - o Were there any weaknesses your approach?
 - o If you could do your study again, what would you do differently?
 - o Discuss your major findings.
 - o How does your study contribute to the field?
 - o How would your study contribute to classroom teaching?
 - o What are your plans for future research on this topic? Where do you plan to go from here?

5. Conferences and Publishing

You should begin presenting papers at conferences as early as possible in your graduate career. To orient your graduate studies exclusively towards the accrual of intellectual capital and the development of research finesse is to ignore graduate school's other (but too often disregarded) purpose: to prepare you for a career as a professional scholar. Conferences and especially publication will be your professional lifeblood and the sooner you incorporate these functions into your academic repertoire, the better prepared you will be to embark upon a successful career. Writing for presentation or publication early on in graduate school will initiate you into the academic universe that lies beyond the comfortable confines of your department. In addition, conference and publishing activity will enable you to enter the job market at a competitive advantage by bolstering your CV and introducing and establishing your name in your field.

Conferences

Conferences and publishing serve two different purposes. Conferences provide a critical forum for research that has yet to be published. Speakers at conferences are on the whole researchers who wish to present a preliminary version of their work in the hopes of attracting and benefiting from their fellow scholars' critiques and suggestions. After having tested the waters of critical reception, they revise their work for publication in light of the feedback they've received. Following are some guidelines to entering the conference circuit:

- **First-time forays at graduate conferences.** You should probably make your public debut at a graduate student conference in order to get a feel for how conferences are run and to gain some experience in presenting your work to a larger audience.
- **Take advantage of the whole experience.** Whenever and wherever you give a paper, try to remember and exploit the many opportunities that conferences foster:
 - o They create an intellectual forum in which to field new work.
 - o Their programs attest to current questions dominating critical discussion.
 - o They offer wider, more demanding audiences. Your work will be received less partially, giving you a clearer

sense of how well it stands up to "real world" scrutiny.

- Conferences offer invaluable practice in public speaking.
- They allow for social interaction between colleagues. People working in the same field have an opportunity to meet one another and talk informally.
- They are rich in networking opportunities. The more senior people in your field, who may one day sit on the hiring committees considering your dossier, will know who you are.

- **Do's and don'ts of paper presentation:**

- *Try not to call attention to your nervousness.* Don't launch your talk with a disclaimer pertaining to your uneasiness with public speaking. This sort of apology is painfully amateurish and casts you and your talk in a negative light from the outset. Making your nervousness the centerpiece of your presentation will make your audience equally if not more uncomfortable. They are there to learn from you and want you to succeed. Capture that good will.
- *Respect time limits.* Avoid exceeding the time allocated to your paper at all costs. Even scholars' attention spans are limited and you don't want to abuse the good will of your audience. Shorter papers usually get more positive feedback. If you are one of the last speakers in a session and you see that the audience is tired, begin your talk by announcing that you will abridge it somewhat - you will earn the grateful appreciation and concentrated attention of your listeners.
- *Keep it short.* Remember that reading a paper out loud goes much more slowly than reading it nonverbally. Plan to cover no more than ten pages of text in your talk. If you fear that certain points will be touched upon too superficially, let your audience know that you are working from an abstracted version of a longer paper that is available upon request.
- *Simplify your syntax.* Whereas complex sentences can be effective in scholarly writing, they weigh down and obscure oral presentations. Make your presentation easy to follow.
- *Cut out quotations.* Quotations quite effectively bolster an argument in a written piece of work, but they lose their effectiveness in the context of an oral presentation. Audiences tend to tune out when speakers read quotations. Include only one or two short citations to show you've done your homework, paraphrasing the rest of your references to other critics. If you wish, you can distribute a handout with quotes that support your arguments, but wait until the end of your presentation to do this, as having written material in front of them will divert people's attention from your presentation.
- *Don't read.* Reading your talk verbatim from a prepared text will bore your audience, no matter how well you read, especially if that audience has already endured several such presentations. Extemporaneous speaking is a skill that you'll need not only for conference presentations but also for most other aspects of your professional life. Teaching, responding in your turn to conference papers, passing oral examinations and making a good showing at job interviews all depend on proficiency in public speaking. Hone your skills in this area as quickly and assiduously as possible.
- *Infuse your talk with personality.* Try to get away from an overly dry academic style when you present a paper. You will better engage your audience if you can let some of your personality filter into your talk. Use your voice to convey a lively personality, varying your tone and pitch and infusing it with animation.
- *See our Academic Careers section* for more tips on giving [Academic Talks](#) in both Natural Sciences and the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Publishing

One of the reasons that it is important to begin trying to publish your papers early on in your graduate career is that there is an incredible lag time between submitting an article and its eventual publication. In some fields, it can take up to three years for an article that has been accepted for publication to see the light of day. Thus it is a good idea to get papers in the pipeline so that by the time you go out on the job market, you will have a few published papers under your belt. Although conference papers add luster to your CV and provide you with important experience and contacts, published articles are the real bread and butter of the academic world. Thus you should focus your energies primarily on publication. If you give a paper at a conference, it should be with a view to its eventual publication.

6. Sources

Books are available in the Teaching Center Library, 302 Philosophy Hall

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