

# How to Succeed in Graduate School

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Provides a brief introduction to what it takes to succeed in graduate school by summarizing the findings gathered from other papers on the topic.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While how to succeed in graduate school is clearly open-ended and can (and will) be expounded upon endlessly in future papers, this essay will concentrate on key areas of a doctoral students progression through graduate school: course work, research, and their dissertation.

## 2. FINDINGS

### 2.1. Coursework

While graduate students should start early many things their undergrad counterparts need not concern themselves with (such as seeking out a suitable graduate advisor to work with), their approach to coursework in the beginning will largely mimic that of their undergraduate degree. Mulkey [Dredze 2012] emphasizes time management as key during this time period, underscoring what many students would consider trite and obvious: students should acquire, and maintain, a calendar. Establishing good time management habits early on will lay the foundation for success in any graduate program.

It is important to know what area you wish to specialize in; better still to hold a few ideas for research projects you might like to work on; to this end, you should look for books, conference proceedings, and papers to get an idea of what research is going on in your area.

Do be aware of "inaccessible advisors", as desJardins [desJardins 1995] writes. It is important to ask questions to narrow down your choices in terms of research projects. Because it is not unheard of for graduate students to change their research topics, it is important that you choose a graduate program in which there is a "breadth ... of high-quality faculty in a broad range of subareas."

On this note, it is important that you place yourself in a school and field in which more than one professor is performing research in your desired area. This will serve to insulate you from both the cramped schedules and inevitable comings-and-goings of faculty members throughout your term in the graduate program.

It has been noted in literature that graduate school is generally considered a very unstructured environment, particularly after one's coursework requirements have been satisfied. For this reason, it is important for any student who wishes to succeed, to develop preferably through collaboration with their advisors a pre-planned "roadmap" delineating milestones by which to judge themselves and their progress as they continue past their third year in the program. This takes us into the heart of what makes working toward a Ph.D. a unique challenge: research.

## 3. RESEARCH

When getting started on research in earnest, it is a good idea to build a foundation of knowledge in your particular sub-field. It will be of great import to have studied the relevant keystone papers relevant to your area. One might go about accomplishing this by asking an advisor or knowledgeable faculty member to recommend a list of foundational works for you to engage. Secondly, it will also be important to know the "state of your art." That is, what research has been performed in the recent past, and who is currently performing research

in this area presently? It has been suggested that selectively reading relevant papers dating back two or three years can serve to fulfill this.

As stated before, you will spend a considerable amount of time reading technical journals during your schooling, and it is helpful to have a "system" for doing so. Consider reading the title and abstract first, and if interesting, continue by reading the introduction and conclusions [desJardins 1995]. Save trying to decipher the highly technical details until after deciding whether it would be worthwhile to do so. Also consider taking notes while skimming papers, as the act of self-summarizing the material will help with memory recall, as well as serving to keep you focused.

I have often heard it said that being a grad student is not for the uncommitted, due in part to the large investments of time and mental energy required to read and write volumes of research papers. To this end, consider keeping a memoir of ideas, random thoughts, as well as interesting problems and solutions, as a means to help sort it all out [desJardins 1995] and [Mulkey 2012]. If one were to occasionally read back these scrawlings, a new idea may unexpectedly come of it – perhaps even a whole research topic or dissertation.

As years pass by uneventfully, it is common that students may come to feel unfulfilled, anxious, or even bored. For this reason, it is important to set daily, weekly, and monthly goals for yourself, preferably pulling in a friend to serve as an ally, a sounding board, as well as a system of checks and balances [desJardins 1995].

Furthermore, after you have successfully published some work, it is highly advisable that you present your work at a conference or talk. This is desirable as it creates exposure for your work, making it more likely to be read and cited rather than overlooked or dismissed [Mulkey 2012].

#### 4. DISSERTATION

It is well-known the most arduous, protracted component of earning a Ph.D. in any field is the daunting task that is completing a dissertation. As has been mentioned before, researching and working with the most suitable advisor possible will go a long way toward setting oneself up for success from the start [Dredze 2012]. This task should be approached using a variety of methods, including reading research summaries published by faculty members, auditing their classes, attending their talks (if possible), and even asking other graduate students with similar interests.

It is understandable that one may become overwhelmed when confronted with the task of writing a dissertation, particularly when taken as a whole. Rather than allow yourself to be dismayed by the thought of having to write a lengthy dissertation, try setting small goals that will allow yourself to "eat the elephant" one bite at a time. For example, work toward writing a single chapter or a section of your paper at a time. Another useful technique is to write broadly on your thesis topic, successively expanding and refining the paper, rather than setting out to write it in its entirety from beginning to end [Dredze 2012].

And finally, as an aside, a helpful approach to writing suggests implementing version control for not just papers and dissertation drafts, but for all written artifacts you may produce while working toward your degree [desJardins 1995]. While it may seem burdensome to install and manage, it could prove to be a valuable tool with which to track your progress toward your writing goals, as well as an insurance policy against accidental data loss.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

A wealth of knowledge is contained in the academic literature treating the topic of graduate student success. While no one work could ever be complete, patterns do tend to reveal themselves quickly. These methods place high importance on time management, setting realistic goals and expectations, settling on both a suitable advisor as well as a research topic, and staying focused by setting small, attainable goals for oneself while working on a dissertation.

## REFERENCES

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