

Graduate School Survival Guide

A guide for entering graduate students by Wanda Pratt, University of Washington, and adapted by The Graduate School, Loyola University Chicago

For all Students

Characteristics to look for in a good advisor, mentor, or committee member:

- Willing to meet with you regularly
- Is interested in your topic
- You can trust him/her to:
 - Give you credit for the work you do
 - Defend your work when you are not around
 - Speak well of you and your capabilities
 - Tell you when your work is or is not good enough
 - Help you graduate in a reasonable time frame
 - Look out for you professionally and personally
- Has good personal and communication skills
 - Allows you to talk freely and easily about research ideas
 - Tells you when you are doing something wrong
 - Is patient
 - Never feels threatened by your capabilities
 - Helps motivate you
- Has good technical skills
 - Can provide constructive criticism of papers you write or talks you give
 - Knows if what you are doing is good enough for a good research paper, thesis, or dissertation
 - Can help you figure out what you are not doing well
 - Can help you improve your skills
 - Can suggest related articles to read or people to talk to
 - Can tell you or help you discover if what you are doing has already been done
- Will be around until you finish
- Is well respected in his/her field
- Has good connections for the type of job you would want when you graduate
- Can help you set and obtain reasonable goals
- It is unreasonable to expect one person to have all of the qualities you desire. Over the course of your time at Loyola you may have a variety of mentors, each of whom bring different strengths

Getting the most out of what you read

- Be organized
 - Keep an electronic bibliography with notes
 - Keep and file all the papers you have read or skimmed
- Be efficient. Only read what you need to
 - Start by reading only the conclusion, scanning figures & tables, and looking at their references
 - Read the other sections only if the paper/book seems relevant or you think it may help you get a different perspective
 - Skip the sections that you already understand (often the background and motivation sections)
- Take notes on every reading you find worthwhile
 - What problem is the author (or authors) trying to solve?

- Identify the approach
- How is it different from other approaches?
- Summarize what you have read on each topic. After you have read several papers covering a topic, note the:
 - Key problems
 - Where the material fits in the field's literature
 - Various formulations of the problem the books/articles are addressing
 - The relationship among the various approaches
 - Alternative approaches
- Find a community of students to spend time with outside of the classroom. Having such a community helps you cope with the adjustment to graduate school and with the more isolating research/writing period of graduate study

Avoiding the graduate school blues

- When you meet your goals, reward yourself
- Don't compare yourself to senior researchers who have many more years of work and publications
- Don't be afraid to leave part of your research problem for future work
- Exercise
- Use the student counseling services
- Occasionally, do something fun without feeling guilty!

For Students Engaged in Research: Papers, Theses, or Dissertations

Getting the most out of the relationship with your research advisor

- Meet regularly. You should insist on meeting every two to three weeks because it gives you motivation to make

regular progress and it keeps your advisor aware of your work.

- Prepare for your meetings. Come to each meeting with:
 - List of topics to discuss
 - Plan for what you hope to get out of the meeting
 - Summary of you have done since your last meeting
 - List of any upcoming deadlines
 - Notes from your previous meeting
- Email him/her a brief summary of EVERY meeting. This helps avoid misunderstandings and provides a great record of your research progress and/or advising decisions. Include (where applicable):
 - Time and plan for next meeting
 - New summary of what you think you are doing
 - To-do list for yourself
 - To-do list for your advisor
 - List of related works to read
 - List of major topics discussed
 - List of what you agreed on
- Show your advisor the results of your work as soon as possible. This will help your advisor understand your research and identify potential points of conflict early in the process. This includes:
 - Summaries of related work
 - Anything you write about your research
 - Experimental results
- Communicate clearly. If you disagree with your advisor, state your objections or concerns clearly and calmly. If you feel something about your relationship is not working well, discuss it with him or her. Whenever possible, suggest steps that could be taken to address your concerns.

- Take the initiative. You do not need to clear every activity with your advisor. He/she has a lot of work to do too. You must be responsible for your own research ideas and progress.
- Look at your advisor's dissertation - this will give you an idea for what he/she expects from you.

Making continual progress on your research

- Keep a journal of your ideas. Write down everything you are thinking about. It will help you keep track of your progress and keep you from going in circles.
- Set some reasonable goals with deadlines
 - Identify key tasks that need to be completed
 - Set a reasonable date for completing them (on the order of weeks or months).
 - Share this with your advisor or enlist your advisor's help in creating the goals and deadlines.
 - Set some deadlines that you must keep (e.g., volunteer to give a student seminar on your research, work toward a conference paper submission deadline, etc.)
- Keep a to-do list. Checking off things on a to-do list can feel very rewarding when you are working on a long-term project.
 - List the small tasks that can be done in about an hour
 - Pick at least one that has to be completed each day
- Continually update your:
 - Problem statement
 - Goals
 - Approach (or a list of possible approaches)
 - One-minute version of your research (aka the elevator ride summary)

- Five-minute version of your research

- Discuss your research with anyone who will listen. Use your fellow students, friends, family, etc. to practice discussing your research on various levels. They may have useful insights or you may find that verbalizing your ideas clarifies them for yourself.

- Write about your work

- Early stage: Write short idea papers and share them with your advisor and colleagues.
- Intermediate stage: Find workshops and conferences for submitting preliminary results. This can also help you set deadlines.
- Advanced stage: Target relevant journals.

- Confront your fears and weaknesses

- If you are afraid of public speaking, volunteer to give lots of talks.
- If you are afraid your ideas are not strong enough, discuss them with someone.
- If you are afraid of writing, write something about your research every day.

Finding a thesis/dissertation topic or formulating a research plan

- Read MA/MS papers, theses, or PhD dissertations. Especially focus on the:
 - Background sections
 - Method sections
- Pick something you find interesting. If you work on something solely because your advisor wants you to, it will be difficult to stay motivated.
- Pick something your advisor finds interesting. If your advisor doesn't find it interesting he/she is unlikely to devote much time to your research. He/she will be even more motivated to

help you if your project is on their critical path.

- Pick something the research community will find interesting if you want to make yourself marketable.
- Make sure it addresses a real problem
- Remember that your topic will evolve as you work on it
- Pick something that is narrow enough that it can be done in a reasonable time frame
- Have realistic expectations
- Don't worry that you will be stuck in this area for the rest of your career. It is very likely that you will be doing very different research after you graduate.

Other resources:

Websites

The Chronicle of Higher Education

<https://www.chronicle.com/tag/graduate-education>

Inside Higher Ed

<https://www.insidehighered.com/>

Tomorrow's Professors

<https://tomprof.stanford.edu/welcome>

Grad-Hacker

<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/grad%20hacker>

American Historical Association

<https://www.historians.org/>

Organization of American Historians

<https://www.oah.org/>

National Council on Public

History

<https://ncph.org/>

Online Articles

“What I Learned About Surviving Graduate School,” by Chuck Fidler.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-i-learned-about-surviving-graduate-school/>

“Rules for Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse or Your First Year in Grad School,” by Katy Meyers.

<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/dawn-of-the-grad-rules-for-surviving-the-zombie-apocalypse-and-your-first-year-at-grad-school/31694>

Books

“Destination Dissertation: A Traveler’s Guide to a Done Dissertation,” by Sonja Floss (2007), new version forthcoming in 2015

“How to Survive Your PhD: The Insider’s Guide to Avoiding Mistakes, Choosing the Right Program, Working with Professors, and Just How a Person Actually Writes a 200-Page Paper,” by Jason R. Karp (2012)

“Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student’s Guide to Earning an M.A. or a Ph.D.” by Robert Peters (1997)

“Demystifying Dissertation Writing,” by Peg Boyle Single, Ph.D. (2010)