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FIRST PERSON

A Letter to Past Graduate-Student Me

Graduate school is an exercise in people not telling you things

By Rachel Herrmann

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PETER SAMOW / CREATIVE COMMONS

ear Past Graduate-Student Me,

D Almost a decade ago you were preparing to move to Texas to begin a Ph.D. program in history, where you would also earn a master's degree along the way. First up was the M.A. coursework. You felt pretty confident about this foray into academe — after all, you were coming straight from college and thought you knew how things worked.

Well you got some things right and some things wrong, and Future Me — who has taught her share of master's students — is writing you this letter to tell you what I wish you'd known about graduate study back in 2007. Here's where we start.

Your grades. I know you're pretty pleased with yourself for earning an A- on your senior thesis, but you need to learn that grades mean something different in graduate school. Nearly everyone gets an A- or an A in every history class, and after a certain point everything will be pass/fail. Sure, if you decide to change programs, you'll want a high GPA. But you should stop stressing over the outcome of each semester because your grades are no longer the yardstick by which your successes will be measured.

It's also an exercise in learning when to ask questions, and whom to ask.

What your professors expect — more than anything — is for you to want to learn because you're passionate about a topic, not because you're passionate about doing well. Stop trying to figure out grading criteria, and start wrapping your head around new trends in your subfield. "Success" is measured, in part, by your ability to identify omissions in current scholarship, and to win funding to write about them and why they matter.

Your seminars. Another thing your professors will want you to be enthusiastic about is their seminars. The hours we spend teaching graduate students are when

we as faculty are most able to draw upon our own research.

Go to class regularly but remember that, at this level, professors are not here to chase you about attendance. If you have to miss seminar for a reasonable reason (you're legitimately sick, you have a job interview, or you have a childcare or family crisis), let us know, as most of us will be sympathetic. But if you need to miss seminar because you're hungover, didn't do the reading, or planned a vacation without looking at the semester's calendar, don't explain any of that to your professors. Just take the absence, and assume that it reflects poorly on you as a student.

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We offer here a mix of essays from The Chronicle's Advice columns (often focused on trends in academic work and life) and from Vitae (focused on practical, how-to advice for early-career academics and administrators). Now in its fourth year, with more than 840,000 members at more than 4,000 institutions, Vitae continues to offer free career-management tools and the best job openings.

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When you do come to class, it won't be the same as your senior-year seminars. You'll encounter more challenging readings. Many professors use graduate courses to both run through established, canonical texts, and to catch up on the newest

scholarship in the field. So get ready for some easy readings, some articles that will make you want to throw things, and some texts that will prompt you to question why you were asked to go through them at all. As you read, remember that graduate school should transform you into a good scholar and colleague. It's OK to be critical of a book, but you need to learn *how* to be critical in a constructive, respectful way. (Keep in mind: The professor might be friends with the author.)

Our teaching style might also surprise you. If it does, it's because we are thinking of you as colleagues-in-the-making, rather than students. That means: Expect less guidance on what to make of the readings, and minimal stretches of time when we seem to feed you information. Don't count on being told whether your comments on the reading are on track or not — you may even find that you're expected to lead discussion and to tell fellow students whether their assessments of the reading seem convincing.

Perhaps the most significant change is that you and your fellow students' contributions are expected to fill almost the entirety of the seminar time. You are our peers-in-training, and we expect to hear you speak more than we do during these meetings. Don't use class time to try to have an extended conversation featuring just you and the professor. Think of seminar as a conversation between you and the other students, with the professor there to moderate discussion.

Is there someone in class who always seems to have grasped the author's argument and the book's significance? You should be picking up tips for strategic reading from them, rather than wondering why no one else besides you had a problem with the footnote on page 394. And while we're at it, learn to skim (and no, Past Me, "skimming" does not mean putting the book on your lap and turning the pages faster than usual), and become best friends with book reviews.

You should be getting the sense that graduate school — starting with the master's —

is about strategic study. Spend the most time with the texts and sources that interest you. But be smart about how what you're reading will help you write your M.A. thesis, how it will help you study for comprehensive exams, or how it will aid you as you conceptualize the dissertation (if you plan to go that far).

Be deliberate about your end-of-semester research papers. Many professors will be willing to let you bend the chronological and geographic scope of our classes if it means you will write the seminar paper that is most useful for you in the future.

Your work versus your life. So, Past Me, that's a lot of advice about coursework — but graduate school should have work/life balance.

Most of all, take responsibility for your graduate-school experience. It's going to be tough; but it's going to be fun, too.

You'll need to curtail your competitive nature in graduate school. Don't get me wrong: You can and should be aware of what other people in your cohort and the cohort above you are writing and planning to publish, and you should have a sense of the significant grants in your discipline and who's recently won them. But do not try to write "better" or faster than other people. Figure out your writing and reading styles, do what works for you, and remember that a few of your fellow students might be future colleagues. Save your competitiveness for your department's intramural sports teams, which will provide excellent opportunities to pursue work/life balance and to get humiliated by undergraduates who are in much better shape.

You should also be a good citizen. Turn up to departmental seminars, and, if graduate students are invited, to job talks. Seminars and university lectures are good opportunities to take the pulse of a given field, and sitting in the audience might

spark research ideas you hadn't considered for your own work. Attending job talks will give you an excellent opportunity to see what works — and what doesn't — as A.B.D.s and new Ph.D.s try to sell themselves on the job market.

Finally, banish the following phrase from your vocabulary: "No one told me that ..."

Graduate school is an exercise in people not telling you things. It's also an exercise in learning when to ask questions, and whom to ask. Make it your job to be informed. Read your graduate school's handbook, and go speak with your department's amazing administrators if you have initial questions. They will not say no to chocolate. Read [The Professor Is In](#), but also ask people who were recently on the job market whether her advice worked for them in your discipline. When senior scholars come to give talks, take the opportunity to go for drinks with them if that option is available to graduate students, and seek their advice about research and publishing. Read [The Chronicle's](#) forums. Meet regularly with your adviser, but keep in mind that you are the one who should request those meetings.

Most of all, take responsibility for your graduate-school experience. It's going to be tough; but it's going to be fun, too.

Hugs, caffeine, and work/life balance,

Future Me

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