

## **“The Insider’s Guide to Graduate Education”: Advice to Grad Students Early in Their Programs**

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“The Insider’s Guide to Graduate Education” is an annual program, sponsored by Career Services and the Associate Provost for Education, in which advanced doctoral students give advice to first- and second-year students on completing their programs successfully. What follows are suggestions made from several such speakers in recent years.

### **The psychological challenges of graduate school**

- Getting a PhD is hard. There are a lot of ups and downs. Learn how to roll with the punches.
- Graduate school isn’t a sprint; it’s a marathon. Remember that your degree should be a means to an end, not an end in itself.
- Make friends who aren’t graduate students in your field.
- Have faith in yourself. Your admission was not a fluke.

### **Your classes and requirements**

- Get your class requirements out of the way as efficiently as possible.
- Know yourself and know your department. Think about how you work and how you can best complete your department’s requirements. Take into consideration that coursework is an opportunity to find a dissertation research topic.
- Be an engaging student in seminar classes.
- Don’t have incompletes.
- It’s important to be true to yourself. Pay attention to what interests you.

### **Your advisor**

- Choosing your advisor is the most important decision that you will make during the PhD. Ask other students, particularly those dissertating, for advice.
- Look for an advisor who can keep you on track and help you to focus. The best advisor sets clear limits (deadlines, etc.) and gives good, timely feedback.
- Keep an open mind about your potential advisor. You probably don’t have to decide immediately so take the time to explore all possibilities.
- Be sure that you can talk with your advisor. It is important that there be a good personality match between you two.
- Try to find someone who is in your corner. Your advisor can make things happen for you.
- Consider that the advisor you choose may have different plans for you depending on whether he or she is tenured or non-tenured.
- Keep up communication with your advisor. Ask questions. Keep them updated on your progress. Be aware of cultural differences.
- Remember that your advisor has many things on his or her plate. While you may spend a lot of time thinking about your relationship with them, they may not do the same.

### Your committee

- The earlier you begin thinking about your choice of dissertation committee, the better.
- Take courses with potential committee members to get to know them.
- Look for opportunities to get to know scholars from outside Penn.
- Your committee's scholarly interests should be complementary, rather than contradictory.
- Your committee is there to help you.
- You should have at least one senior faculty member on your committee.
- Try to assemble a committee whose expertise covers the various aspects of your subject.

### Your dissertation

- Work on a project that can help you understand your field's tools and methodologies.
- If you have confidence in your committee and your project, don't hesitate to get started.
- Set reasonable goals. How does one eat an elephant? One bite at a time.
- Become very familiar with the literature on your topic. Put your work in a broader perspective.
- Learn to write with some detachment. Failing this, learn to edit with some detachment.
- If you are not a good proofreader, find someone to help you.
- Working on a dissertation is very solitary. Create a structure that helps you work effectively.

### Your network

- Be visible. Go to department talks. Go to conferences and learn about your field. Look for opportunities to get to know scholars from outside Penn.
- An important relationship in graduate school is the one you have with your peers; an important transition, writing for your peers rather than writing for your professors.
- Find friends who can read your work and give you feedback.
- If you are planning on a career outside of academia, find a mentor outside the university who can help and support you during that job search.

### University Resources and Recommended Reading

TA / PhD Support programming at the Graduate Student Center, <http://www.gsc.upenn.edu>

Writing and time-management counseling at the Weingarten Learning Resources Center, <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc/lr/>

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Careers Section, <http://chronicle.com>

*Science Magazine*, Careers Section, <http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/>

*Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (1998) by Joan Bolker, EdD