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10 Tips to Help You 'Win' at Graduate School



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Being admitted to graduate school can feel like a prize — until you actually get there and have to do the work. I'm a full professor now, yet I still vividly recall those daunting first months. And I'm reminded of them each academic year, as I watch so many excellent students make the same missteps.

That got me thinking about how graduate students can better set themselves up for success. The result is this list of 10 tips.

Time management, baby. Many of my graduate students, when asked to write a self-assessment, don't hesitate to call themselves procrastinators. They are oddly unembarrassed by that admission.

We all know people who are motivated only by external deadlines and need the adrenaline boost of caffeine-fueled all-nighters. The pressure can be part of the fun, in a perverse way. But if those same people were forced to look at the work they'd produced six months later, I suspect they'd be horrified.

Keep in mind: Most of us don't do our best work when rushed or addled by stimulants. If you know that you tend to put off doing important stuff, set yourself some internal deadlines and take them seriously. Stay up all night before your self-imposed deadlines if that's what you need to do, and then let your work rest for a while. Revisit it before it's due. Some gifted few may be talented enough to produce excellent work with a metaphorical gun to their heads — but really, most of us aren't.

Embrace the three Ds. In a previous life, when I worked in college admissions reading application files, I shuddered to get letters of recommendation that stressed the three Ds: dedicated, determined, diligent. Those qualities were, I thought then, necessary but not sufficient to grant admission to a top university. They tended to be the hallmarks of plodding, unexciting applicants.

As a professor, I've come to see that the plodders get stuff done. Often they show more growth than flashier peers who have cruised by on talent. Now I appreciate the ants, and find myself annoyed by those who believe themselves grasshoppers. If you spend your summers playing while less-glamorous peers toil away, you may find yourself hungry and desperate when winter comes. Keep plodding, friends, all the way to success.

Don't be a resistant learner. There's nothing better than graduate students who are engaged, think for themselves, and speak up in class instead of silently taking notes like excellent sheep. And there's nothing more irritating, at least for me, than those who are more interested in showing off how much they already know than in learning anything new.

Resistant learners push back on everything. They complain about reading loads and refuse to do work as prescribed. We expect this from undergraduates who are understandably sick and tired of being told what to read, what to write, and how to do it. From graduate students, however, it can be grating and puerile.

As professors, we generally have a purpose in mind behind our assignments — although sometimes we forget to explain it to our graduate students. If you find yourself bristling against tasks that don't make sense to you, ask questions. Realize, though, that at some point you must put aside childish things, like petulance (even if you see abundant examples of it on the faculty).

Don't waste your time competing. When your place in the academic firmament feels shaky, it's tempting to trash everything you read. Critical thinking is an essential part of the learning

process, and we can derive satisfaction from pointing out how the work of others goes wrong. As much fun as it can be to nitpick, however, it won't keep you from making the same mistakes.

Perhaps worse than feeling competitive with published writers is dumping on your peers. While academe can feel like a zero-sum game, try to keep in mind: When one of your cohort succeeds, it takes nothing away from you. You may be tempted to throw a little shade at a friend who wins a prize you covet. That's human nature. But that student's success is making your graduate degree more valuable. The whole thing about a rising tide lifting all ships is true.

Make the faculty work for you. Haunt our office hours. Ask us to lunch. If we're not in your field, get to know us anyway. We probably won't seek you out, and unless you're working with us directly, we may not know your name. That doesn't mean you shouldn't make the first move.

Rare is the faculty member who will turn down an opportunity to talk about herself or her work with an interested student. Most of us got into this business because we like teaching, and even if you're not in our classes, we're generally happy to offer advice and mentoring. Exploit us (while being respectful of our time). We're part of your network, and personal connections can go a long way in career advancement.

Think about your career. Take advantage of opportunities for professional development, even if you don't feel that you have time. Go to lectures and workshops on publishing, writing, alt-ac jobs, productivity. If a job candidate is coming to campus, study how she delivers her job talk. If his cover letter is posted online, scour it for good moves and tricks you can steal when you need to write your own. Take opportunities to see how others apply for jobs. Find out about the workings of important corners of academe, like publishing.

You're never going to have enough time. That's the nature of the biz. But shoehorning in things that might seem extraneous can pay off. You don't know what you don't know. When you hear stories about the evils of academic politics, ask enough questions to understand how the process works instead of just enjoying salacious details of when it doesn't.

Get help before you need it. If you're struggling to get work done, welcome to the club. This is the way it's pretty much always going to feel. As an academic, you always will have more to read and more to write. You always will need more time to think.

Sometimes, though, it gets overwhelming. Sometimes the notion of finishing that paper, that journal article, that dissertation, feels as easy as running a sub-four-minute mile. It's normal, at some point in this process, to have a crisis of confidence, to want to quit. Know that. Know it isn't you. It isn't that you're not good enough. None of us feels good enough — even the arrogant jerks who mask their insecurities with bravado. Especially them.

Figure ways to cope that work for you, and lean on whatever support you can find. Don't let shame get in the way of getting help. (See above, on making the faculty work for you.)

Care about your sentences. It always shocks me to hear graduate students — and faculty members — say, "I'm a bad writer" — as if that's an immutable fact. They're making a self-fulfilling prophecy that does them no good.

Whatever your discipline, you are going to have to produce a lot of words. You may not have taken a course in writing since first-year composition, but writing is one of the most important parts of your job. Being able to produce clean prose makes everything smoother.

Mastering the basics is simple if you pay attention. You may need more help than you realize. It never hurts to pick up a writing guide. I like [Patricia T. O'Conner's](#) fun and engaging book, *Woe Is I*. She explains rules of grammar simply and without jargon, and points out mistakes we all make. There are shelves of such books. Learning to write better won't necessarily help you have big, paradigm-shifting ideas, but producing clear prose can help you get published, as well aid in snagging grants and jobs. Whatever you can do to make it easier for people to say yes to your work is worth your time.

Don't get seduced into writing badly. It's natural to want to fit in. Most people adapt to an academic culture that has long allowed for tortured syntax, inscrutable jargon, windy sentences, and no compassion for the experience of the reader.

You might be tempted to remake yourself by adopting the gestures and tics of the cool kids. You may have struggled to read the work of Very Important Scholars and found it nearly impossible to wrest meaning from their sentences. The problem isn't that you're dumb. Rather, it's likely that many of the prom kings and queens of your field just aren't good writers.

Still, you've come to believe you need to imitate them. Don't. As the academy has evolved, and tenure-track jobs become as rare as the black-footed ferret, our jobs as professors must change, and we must make strong arguments for why what we do (and write) is important. We must do so in prose intelligible to civilians. Make friends outside of your discipline. When you talk about your work, they will keep you (if they're good friends and want to understand what you're saying) from slipping into in-group mumbo jumbo.

Don't stop being yourself. Over the years, I've seen academics who give up their natural ways of speaking and writing to fit themselves into whatever their idea of a professor is. They learn the argot of their discipline and become accustomed to lecturing and posturing — even in conversations with the plumber.

Gradually, after a bit of success — articles and books published, tenure and promotion earned — they sometimes go back to expressing themselves more naturally, more like a human. That's

when they write the really good books and articles. You can save yourself a lot of time — not to mention all the muddled thinking and writing — by just being yourself, the best version of you.

Remember, you are still that good student who wanted to take on the Sisyphean task of rolling that rock up the hill of graduate school.



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