

Advice to Graduate Students

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Below is some advice that I often find myself repeating to PhD students in economics. These apply to you if you have passed your qualifying exams, or if you have not yet passed them but are wondering what awaits you on the other side, or if you are an undergraduate student curious about what graduate studies are like.

1 Avoiding Some Common Illusions

You will be able to use your time much more efficiently if you avoid some of the illusions that people often have regarding graduate studies.

The illusion of freedom

Once you are done with your courses, it will suddenly feel like you are free to spend your time as you wish. While this is technically true, it simply means that you now have to learn one of the hardest skills in this profession, being your own boss. If you do not impose discipline on yourself (i.e., if you do not limit your own freedom), you will not graduate, and, later on, you will not publish. If you want to succeed beyond your coursework, you will have to learn that freedom simply means that you have been given the very hard task of disciplining and motivating yourself.

The illusion that research is like Art

Many students are puzzled by the research process and wonder where their research ideas will come from. Sometimes, they have the illusion that research is like Art: you mainly sit around and wait for inspiration to strike. To me, nothing shows better how wrong this view is than hearing artists talk about their work. You quickly realize that even art is not like Art.

Milton Glaser is a living legend in the world of graphic design [...]. Glaser is eighty years old, but he still works in a small studio on East Thirty-second Street in Manhattan. It's a cluttered space, the white walls hidden by old art posters, colorful prints for 1980s rock concerts, and art books stacked ten high. Above the front door, chiseled into the glass, is the slogan of the studio: ART IS WORK.

*For Glaser, the quote summarizes his creative philosophy: "There's no such thing as a creative type," he says. "As if creative people can just show up and make stuff up. As if it were that easy. I think people need to be reminded that creativity is a verb, a very time-consuming verb. It's about taking an idea in your head, and transforming that idea into something real. And that's always going to be a long and difficult process. If you're doing it right, it's going to feel like work." (J. Lehrer: *Imagine. How Creativity Works*, p69.)*

While work may come more naturally once you have a project, coming up with a project is, similarly, work. You sit at your desk, read papers, look for data, write down ideas, etc. – do whatever you can to focus on your job.

The illusion that your courses gave you all the tools you need for research

As you're wrapping up your courses, you have to shift from sitting in class to producing research. Sometimes this is misinterpreted as the end of learning. This is a mistake: no amount of coursework can teach you all the skills you need to do research. There is always the possibility that a problem that arises during your work cannot be solved using the tools you have. If you are not willing to learn new skills to tackle these problems, you won't get very far. The end of coursework simply means that from now on, you have to manage your own learning process.

The illusion that you will have a great idea on a big question

This has two parts. First of all, you will not have a great idea. Very few people *ever* have a great idea, and the likelihood that this will happen to you in the next few years is virtually zero. However, this is irrelevant: a great idea is neither necessary nor sufficient for a great paper. Mediocre ideas can be turned into great papers with enough work.¹ This means that you should not wait for a great idea. As soon as you have some question to work on, work on it. This is especially relevant given that your first idea, far from being great, is likely to be terrible. However, you won't know this until you have worked on it.

The second part of this illusion is trickier. Economics as a science has a comparative disadvantage in studying big questions. If you start with a question like "What is fairness?" or "Why are human societies organized the way they are?" you will probably not get very far. However, if you start from a small question, you are likely to realize that (i) the question is not as small as you thought, and (ii) answering it may actually tell you something about some big questions, at least indirectly.

My advice: to write a great paper, start with a mediocre idea on a small question.

The illusion that someone will tell you if you're cut out to do this

Some students go into the PhD program thinking something along these lines: "I'm interested in economics. I'm not sure if research is for me or if I'm good enough to do this, but I'm happy to spend a few hours a day on it for the next couple of years. At some point my professors will tell me whether my research skills and ideas are good enough, and if they aren't I'll look for something else."

¹ Conversely, great ideas can also become bad papers, but since you will not have a great idea, this is less of a concern.

There are at least three problems with this approach. First, “being cut out for this” (talent, etc.) is maybe 10% of what you need to be successful. Pure luck (outside factors you have no control over) has about the same weight, and the other 80% is hard work.

Second, as a consequence, nobody can give you a final approval or guarantee that you will achieve what you want. You will get lots of incremental feedback, and what you do in response will determine whether you’ll succeed. You have to be very confident in your own work (and the way to achieve this is by spending a lot of time and effort on it). Waiting for someone else’s approval is likely to lead to disappointment.

Third, the biggest problem with the above approach is that it can kill a successful career before it even starts. Think of any high level career in the private sector. When you first get started, you have to work 16 hours a day and pour everything you have into your job to be successful. If a lawyer fresh out of law school starts working with the “few hours a day until someone tells me I’m good enough” philosophy, how successful do you think (s)he will be?

Being in a PhD program is like having your first job in most other careers. To succeed, you have to give it everything you have, all day long, including weekends and holidays. Of course, as in any other profession, it’s always possible that a few years down the road you decide that this is not for you. But what’s the point of getting into this if you set yourself up to fail by doing it half-heartedly?

2 Avoiding Other Pitfalls

Here are some other common pitfalls that you should try to avoid.

Reading too much

Most students spend too much time reading others’ work relative to thinking about their own research. Obviously, you need to read and be familiar with the literature. But if this is all you do, you will not get a PhD. It is easy to spend 10 hours a day for a semester searching the literature and reading papers. You will feel like you’ve worked really hard, but this is a very unproductive way to spend your time. Keep your eyes on the ball: at the end of the day, the only thing that will count is what you have written yourself.

Ignoring the importance of presentation skills, broadly speaking

Most students do not appreciate enough the importance of presentation skills. This includes many things, from writing well in English, through typesetting your papers to make them look professional, to giving effective talks. Since there are no classes that explicitly teach you these skills, you won’t learn them unless you make a conscious effort. Depending on the student, this can include taking English classes, going to the Writing Center or working with an editor,

learning to use computer software (e.g., Scientific Word), and paying attention to how others present. The latter includes paying attention to how published papers are written and organized, and paying attention to how seminar speakers present their work.

These presentation skills, broadly speaking, can make a huge difference in your job market prospects and, later on, in your chances of publishing.

Ineffective communication with faculty advisors

The faculty is here to help you, but you have to initiate contact. It is very important that you find advisors you are comfortable with and with whom you can communicate effectively. This will require you to start talking to faculty regularly outside of class, and most students start doing this too late in the program.

Interacting with your advisors is going to be a very idiosyncratic process, but here are a few general guidelines.

- (i) Your research is your responsibility. Every result you find and every error you make is your own.
- (ii) Never do something simply “because your advisor told you to.” Think about why you were told to do it, and make sure you understand the reasons – enough to explain it to someone else. Not understanding your own work is a sure way towards failed seminars and job market disasters.
- (iii) But never simply ignore something your advisor told you to do. If you don’t understand the request, say so. If you understand it but disagree, say so. It is perfectly ok to disagree with your advisor as long as you have a conversation about it. Sometimes you may receive conflicting advice from different people and you have to decide which one to follow. That’s ok too. But nothing is more frustrating to an advisor than giving advice that is simply ignored.
- (iv) An advisor’s commitment and enthusiasm towards you will be proportional to your commitment and enthusiasm towards your work.