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Welcome to Graduate School

Six key lessons to help master's and doctoral students thrive in their first year

By David Shorter

As graduate adviser in my department for the past five years, I've distilled the advice I offer each fall to new graduate students down to six key lessons. Here is my crash course aimed at those of you just starting out now in M.A., M.F.A., or Ph.D. programs in the humanities and social sciences, and at those of you running orientation programs.

1. Be grateful for this opportunity, but prepare an exit strategy. First and foremost, pause to consider that you wanted to be in this graduate program. And here you are about to receive attention and training from leaders in your chosen field. Not many professions provide this phase of directed reading, mentorship, and fostering of your creative, intellectual, and personal goals.

As many of us in the academic world come to learn, graduate school seems at times like the absolute worst; but in hindsight it was the absolute best. When else will you be asked to pursue your goals and be provided a peer group and support network to help you do so? You will look back at this phase and fondly remember the time you had to read, to read more, and then to read some more. Relish it, but don't get too comfortable, because graduate school is a stage, not the destination.

That's why you need to start planning your exit now. Literally sit down and map out when you plan to jump through the various hoops. When, exactly, will you take your language exam? And your qualifying exams? By what date will you need an outside committee member? Do you have to do fieldwork? If so, how will you pay for it? If that entails applying for grants, what are those deadlines to secure money in time for the research?

Talk about your plan with your adviser. We are better prepared to help you if we know your career aspirations early on. So tell us about your intentions with this degree and tell us when those intentions change.

Most important, use this overarching plan to structure your week-by-week scheduling and show those weekly plans to your adviser, too. It might help you to keep a simple equation in mind: Most faculty assign work that takes three times the amount of in-class time. If a seminar is three hours, I imagine the students doing nine hours of work every week on reading and writing. Now multiply that by the number of courses you are taking. You'll spend additional hours doing professional development, research, teaching assistantships, and more. Ultimately, the first couple years of graduate school may prove to be mostly about time management. And, frankly, that skill is one best learned early in the academic profession.

2. Every act is professional. If you are working with faculty members who have doctorates, you should probably start off by calling them "Dr. Smith" or "Professor Smith." If they would prefer you call them by their first names, they will tell you so.

And that simple rule of professional etiquette is part of a larger approach: Every email, phone call, and meeting is a professional engagement.

Before emailing your professors with a question, ask yourself if you could find the answer on the departmental website or in your handbook. Keep in mind that most faculty members have never registered for classes at the institution where we teach, or had to deal with its financial-aid office. The culture of our workplace has changed dramatically due to the cuts in education funding in the last 10 years, so many of us have different lives than the ones we imagined when we started in the profession. We often have to commute because we cannot afford housing close to the campus. Some of us have to make money on the side to pay off our student loans. Such activities keep us from having the long and carefree office hours that our advisers enjoyed.

So politely give us some lead time if you expect us to read drafts. Please request office appointments well in advance. Letters of recommendation should be requested up to three or four weeks before they are needed. And the same goes with university staff members. They are generally overworked and underpaid. Your consideration of them as professionals will go a long way.

3. Teachers vs. mentors vs. advisers. My relationships with my own graduate professors were instrumental in helping me to craft my own voice as a writer and skill as a researcher. You will find your professors to be a diverse bunch. Some of us are great teachers who devote too much energy to making the classroom experience a "truly magical experience." Some of us are better at research and writing. Some of us excel at advising while others struggle to know how best to train others.

Ask yourself what you need at this stage in your life. Do you need an adviser who can help you develop as a scholar? Do you need a mentor who is helping you find your voice as a writer? If you expect hugs, invitations to dinner, and close personal bonds, you may be frustrated if your adviser is simply not interested in that or good at it.

Don't expect your thesis or dissertation adviser to provide all that you need professionally and personally.

4. Prioritize the actual work. Many students arrive at graduate school with an eye toward the conferences, the journal publications, or being a great teaching assistant. I am constantly helping them understand the difference between professionalization and hyperprofessionalization.

Be a student for the first year. Consume all you can in terms of the basic methods and theories. If you go to conferences, just listen and make contacts instead of rushing to write and present papers. Focus on the actual work in your first year.

So what is the "actual work"? Develop your personal research skills. When you read a book, read it intelligently. Dissect its bibliography into sources you need immediately, those you might need later, and those you do not need. Take notes by hand, and take them constantly, in class and when reading. Write down the

theories you want to explore. Write constantly as you think through ideas about your project. Determine the differences between your methods and theories; and determine why they shape each other in particular ways.

Admit what you do not know. Ask your peers about the sources they mention in class that might be relevant to your work. Show up to class fully prepared with the reading completed, questions about the texts, and with some ideas about how the texts could be applied to your particular project.

And without a doubt, if you have even a small paper due in a seminar, proofread, proofread, and proofread.

When we assign texts, we are assigning particular editions. Get the editions we list. We assign particular texts for particular reasons. We mean for them to be read in a particular order. And we hope that you are reading them closely. In my program, graduate students normally take three seminars in a semester, with each professor assigning a book and a couple articles each week. Create a life outside of school where you are able to read three scholarly books and some articles in a week, taking notes on each.

Remember, you wanted to get into our program and work with us. Be respectful of our training methods now that you are here. I am shocked by how many students could not wait to get accepted and then adopt an "I'm doing it my way" approach. Yeah, because we've never seen *that* before.

5. The secret. Why should you follow any of our "rules"? What does it really matter? Well, here's what you learn after years of being a professor: We write letters of recommendation for you for jobs, grants, fellowships, and research positions. We write those letters often to people we know and respect. We do not want to persuade a professional to work with you on false pretenses. So, more often than not, we are honest in our letters, yet careful. We have become quite good at writing and reading between the lines. When we write in your recommendation letter that we enjoyed working with you because you made homemade cherry scones, the readers know we are not talking about your theoretical rigor. We will only say you earned the "A" in our class when you actually

did. When we do not say that, the readers tend to know you did not receive an "A" or you did not earn it. When we write, "this student showed up often to class and often on time," well, you get my point.

These letters tend to have a format that begins with comparative comments. We are expected to say explicitly that "this student is among the top two of my current advisees," which means they are not "the top" or we would have written that. Are you enabling us to truthfully write, "this student always turned in professional work" or "every interaction with this student was pleasant and demonstrated their ability to work well under pressure"?

My hope is that, by understanding these letters as comparative and honest, you do not see graduate school as competitive with other students. Rather you see graduate school as a place to be professional in your interactions and in your work. The skill set of taking your work seriously is training itself for the work you will be expected to do after graduation.

6. The reading list. Because so much of graduate work relies upon the craft of writing, and because so few graduate programs have courses specifically devoted to training you to write better, please take it upon yourself to improve your writer's voice. You would do very well to buy books on writing and editing. If possible, start peer-editing groups as soon as possible to make sure that you have a proofreader for even weekly papers due in class. Keep a list of your own writing problems that you'd like to improve.

By all means, read about good writing. Here are some of the books I recommend: *Alive in the Writing* by Kirin Narayan (especially for students working ethnographically); the *Effective Academic Writing* series, by a variety of authors; *Several Short Sentences About Writing,* by Verlyn Klinkenborg; and *How to Proofread Your Own Writing,* by Sandie Giles (I haven't found another single book that covers the basics so plainly).

I have left out some of the other important aspects of graduate learning here. I would have liked to cover the importance of using grant writing as a means of thinking through your project's significance. I had much more to say about scones. I could have

written a few pages on how laptops are destroying the classroom experience.

I can't go on at length so just take it from me on a few final points:

- Be nice to your peers, for someday they will be on search and grant committees.
- Be active in campus politics; but don't complain too much about saddles when you don't even have a horse.
- And if you can fathom it, have fun. Academics are way too serious, and their writing and thinking are in dire need of humor and happiness. Figure out how to have fun while being serious about your work, and you will have learned how graduate school can prepare you for whatever lies beyond.

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