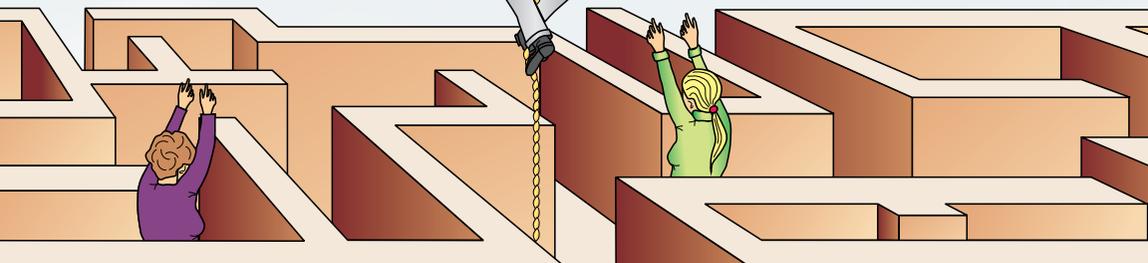


# The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.

200 Secrets from 100 Graduates



To Your Ph.D.  
→

Dora Farkas, Ph.D.

## **Praise for *The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.***

“*The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.* is a wonderful new resource. There’s great down-to-earth advice here for every stage in a graduate school career. Easy to skim, re-read and understand, it is enlightening and informative for faculty as well as their students.”

–Erich Ippen, *Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“*The Smart Way to a Your Ph.D.* is a thoughtful and thorough guide for graduate students already in a Ph.D. program or those contemplating joining one. Dr. Farkas effectively deals with a range of topics (such as time management, writing and defending one’s thesis, and finding a job), and bases her suggestions on interviews with former and current graduate students. The book is packed with friendly, accessible, and practical tips and suggestions. I am happy to endorse the work and recommend it to doctoral students and even their mentors.”

–Brinda Charry, *Assistant Professor*,  
*Department of English*, Keene State College

“During graduate school, students can get ‘stuck’ or feel demoralized about how their work is going, or about their relationship with their advisor. *The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.* provides easy-to-use information to help graduate students identify how and why they’re stuck and offers strategies to help them move forward.”

–Robin S. Rosenberg, Ph.D., *Clinical Psychologist*

“After reading all the stories, I was surprised by how many of the situations seemed familiar to me and how much of the advice rang true, despite differences in fields, institutions, and degree programs. I would recommend this book for all prospective, current, and recent graduate students. Adding this book to every graduate school library and office of student affairs would go a long way toward giving the students the resources they need to progress and succeed in graduate school and beyond.”

–Heather Mernitz, *Assistant Professor of Physical Science*,  
Alverno College

“This is a great resource for prospective and current graduate students and their families. Dr. Farkas emphasizes that a Ph.D. requires significant dedication and vision for the future and that graduate school should not serve as a default option for indecisive individuals. However, the book also makes the doctoral degree sound “within reach” and deals with common problems that can arise during graduate studies, such as bad advisor, bad project, lack of motivation, staying organized, and staying healthy. I wish I read this book before I started my own graduate school adventure!”

–Natalia Tretyakova, *Associate Professor,*  
*Department of Medicinal Chemistry, University of Minnesota*

“For many, aspects of the doctoral process can seem to be a big, black, highly-charged vortex that, once in motion, seems to present an optionless path. *The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.* shares the many experiences, words of wisdom, and possible solutions from others who have tackled this rocky road before you and presents them in a well-organized, easy to read format. I only wish that this guidebook had been available when I was in the midst of the doctoral path.”

–Ann Yelmokas McDermott, *Associate Professor,*  
*Kinesiology Department, California Polytechnic Institute*

THE SMART WAY TO YOUR PH.D.  
200 SECRETS FROM 100 GRADUATES

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200 SECRETS FROM 100 GRADUATES

*Dora Farkas, Ph.D.*

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### **Disclaimer**

This book is not a substitute for academic or medical advice. All decisions regarding your doctoral dissertation should be discussed with your thesis supervisor. Consult with your physician if you experience any symptoms of anxiety, depression or repetitive strain injury. Furthermore, any changes to your diet or lifestyle should be made under the supervision of a health professional. The author and Your Ph.D. Consulting are not liable or responsible for any loss or damage allegedly caused by the information in this book. We have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book was correct and updated at the time of publication, and assume no personal responsibility for any inaccuracies, omissions or typographical errors.

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine it is a warm, sunny day in late spring. You are standing in a long line with your peers, all of you dressed in caps and gowns, when suddenly, you hear the music: It is time to go. Your pace is slow, and you walk tall, in unison with the drums. Your friends, colleagues and professors nod with respect to you, and you know that your family is smiling proudly. Stretching your neck allows you to see piles of diplomas on the stage, and a faint smile sweeps over your face at the thought of your recent accomplishment: You finished your Ph.D. thesis. It is now on the shelf of your university's library, bound in shiny black leather with golden lettering on the front. Recalling your challenges from the last few months, you still sigh at the relief you felt when you realized that the journey was over, and that you did it. You earned the highest degree offered by an academic institution. You have earned your Ph.D.

Did this scenario bring you a momentary state of bliss? If you are thinking about going to graduate school—or if you are already there—you are probably wondering how some students complete their Ph.D.s in a short time, while others struggle for many years. Your field of study, financial situation and access to mentoring certainly will influence how long it will take you to earn a Ph.D., but they are not the only factors. During the time I was a graduate student at MIT, I noticed that even within the same research groups, there were significant differences in terms of the length of time necessary to complete doctoral dissertations. It quickly became clear that the graduate school experience is not influenced solely by funding, field of study or guidance from a thesis advisor. What other factors can influence how long it will take you to finish your Ph.D.? One of my surprising observations was that the students who graduated relatively quickly did not necessarily work the most during graduate school. In fact, they usually worked

reasonable hours and enjoyed hobbies on the weekends. They knew how to work *smarter*, not just *harder*.

What does it mean to “work smarter”? Are these “smart” doctoral students the same ones who had perfect grades in college? The answer to this question came to me during graduate school, when I was a resident tutor in an undergraduate dormitory. One of my responsibilities was to advise students who were having personal or academic problems. I held group sessions to help them organize their time, study efficiently and learn test-taking skills. Having been an undergraduate just a few years before, I empathized with their difficulties: studying volumes of books for exams, solving challenging problem sets, writing lengthy essays and fighting sleep deprivation from the overwhelming workload.

Although college life is busy, most undergraduates know what they need to do to graduate. Graduate school, however, will present you with an entirely different set of challenges. Your job is to propose and complete an original research proposal and to defend your work in front of a committee. Unlike in college, where you might have felt overburdened by deadlines, in graduate school you need to be your own boss and decide what to do and when to do it. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that an undergraduate education usually does not instill all of the skills needed to earn a Ph.D.

During the time I worked on my own dissertation, I realized that one of the pitfalls of the graduate school system was that students often had to face challenges without the benefit of an organized support system. In college, there were between 20 and 100 students in most classes, and sometimes as many 400. When the homework sets were impossible, we commiserated together; when the tests difficult, we all received poor grades. As one of my professors said, “There is protection in numbers.” Such protection is not available in graduate school, however. Your project is yours alone; you can make it or break it. If you fail, you fail alone. Fortunately, it does not have to be this way. What if you could learn from former doctoral students about the skills necessary to succeed in graduate school?

In order to write this book, I interviewed 100 individuals who had earned Ph.D.s, to find out what they considered the most important elements of success in graduate school. I asked them questions such as:

- ◆ What was your biggest challenge, and how did you cope with it?
  - ◆ Was graduate school what you expected? If not, what were the biggest surprises?
  - ◆ How did you deal with your advisor being unsupportive (in cases where they had indicated a difficult professor)?
  - ◆ How did you motivate yourself to work on your thesis?
  - ◆ What strategies did you use to become more efficient in your research?
  - ◆ How did you choose your career path?
  - ◆ What is the number one piece of advice you would give to prospective graduate students?
- (See the appendix for the complete list of questions.)

I was amazed by how eagerly former graduate students contributed to this book. Some of them had finished in three years, while others had struggled for many more; all of them, however, had learned important lessons about what it takes to earn a Ph.D. and become an independent researcher. In fact, I collected over 200 pieces of advice and sorted them into appropriate chapters. These “secrets” of success are shown in bold throughout the book (next to the diploma icon shown on page xxii), and also collected under the headings “From the Ph.D. Secret Archives.”

I interviewed Ph.D.s (or equivalents thereof)\* from 46 universities across the country, in nearly 40 fields. (See the appendix for the list of majors and schools.) In order to protect the identities of the interviewees, I use fictional names throughout the book. There were 70 interviewees from the sciences, engineering and mathematics, and 30 Ph.D.s from the humanities, social sciences and arts. These numbers reflect the approximate ratio of Ph.D.s awarded in these fields: two-thirds from the sciences, engineering and mathematics, and one-third from the humanities, social sciences and arts. Given that some of the challenges are specific to men or women, I balanced my pool by including 51 men and 49 women.

How did I find all these Ph.D.s? I started with just a handful of friends, and after each interview, I asked whether they could recommend anyone else who would like to be interviewed. The answer was

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\*Note that not all fields award a Ph.D. as the terminal degree. For example, education majors earn an Ed.D. and fine arts majors are awarded an M.F.A.

usually “yes,” and I thus gathered my interviews primarily by word of mouth. I was also curious about resources for minorities, married students and international students. To learn more about their challenges, I interviewed Ph.D.s from these subpopulations and included their advice throughout the book and in the appendix. To make this book more complete, I also asked professors about their expectations from graduate students, and how their perspective on the Ph.D. process had changed since they became advisors. Finally, I consulted with deans, counselors and librarians regarding resources and career advice for doctoral students.

After collecting information from these interviews, I concluded that there were fundamental differences, but also many similarities across the various fields of study. Students in the humanities, social sciences and arts struggled to find funding—a luxury that many doctoral candidates in the sciences, engineering and mathematics take for granted. On the other hand, students in the sciences, engineering and mathematics were frustrated by irreproducible experiments or malfunctioning modeling software, whereas humanities, social sciences and arts majors did most of their research in libraries, museums, studios, and offices, without worrying about instruments breaking down. Interestingly, however, most Ph.D.s believed that the major challenges in graduate school were not academic. As outstanding students in college, they were not intimidated by difficult research projects. Most Ph.D.s found that the major challenges of graduate school were learning how to become independent, finding ways to motivate themselves, communicating with difficult advisors, dealing with stress, and finding a suitable career path. Their stories and coping strategies are summarized in the chapters that follow.

I also sought insights from guidebooks written for doctoral students. I found advice on how to choose a department and advisor, how to find financial support, how to write a thesis and how to find a job. Most of these books, however, did not have advice on how to be more productive in graduate school. I did come across many productivity-enhancing guides written by business professionals, and I wondered whether the advice in these books would be helpful for doctoral students. After reading these books and discussing the techniques with former students, I realized that many of the strategies developed for the corporate world were also

applicable in graduate school. Therefore, in the following chapters, I will frequently refer to books written by management consultants and executive coaches, and highlight their strategies for learning how to motivate yourself, overcome worry, communicate effectively and organize your time, space and thoughts.

How should you use this book? The book is comprised of seven stand-alone chapters, which will guide you through the entire graduate school experience, from the pre-application phase to the job-searching stage. Reading the entire book and trying to master all these strategies at the same time would be very difficult, if not impossible. Many of the skills discussed might also appear nitty-gritty or even irrelevant until you reach a particular stage in your studies. Thus, it is best to skim through the entire book first and then read the relevant chapters and appendices as needed. Also, check the extensive reference section in the appendix periodically, as it will help you find funding, online research tools, ergonomic typing aids, and job-searching resources. If you are in the early stages of your graduate student career, look through the later chapters on thesis-writing and job-searching as well, so you can plan ahead for these challenges. If you read through the entire book, you will notice some repetition of “secrets” across the chapters, especially those regarding self-motivation and organization; this is no accident. There are some common threads of wisdom that are applicable throughout graduate school. In other words, the organizational skills you need during the first few years—to pass your qualifiers and write your thesis proposal—will also be relevant towards the end, when you need to do an in-depth literature search and write a dissertation. With practice, you can incorporate these strategies into your daily routine until they become second nature.

What was the number one piece of advice from former graduate students? Briefly, before you enter graduate school, really make sure you want a Ph.D. Do not commit to this long journey because your friends are going, or because you do not know what else to do. Furthermore, in order to have a fulfilling experience, you need to consider the financial aspects and logistics of going to graduate school. Thus, the first chapter of this book is about laying your foundations. I will share with you how to find funding, how to choose an advisor, and what types of questions to ask during your campus visit.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the typical challenges faced by students on the road to becoming independent researchers. How do you develop a productive daily routine? How do you stay focused throughout the day? How do you keep yourself motivated after experiencing inevitable setbacks? I have also compiled the top 10 secrets from former students, to help you design an original and realistic research project for your dissertation.

The third chapter will be particularly useful when you want to be more efficient, without having to work longer hours. As many Ph.D.s have observed, productivity comes in bursts, and you can harness this energy if you learn how to pay attention to your work habits. You will learn how to identify high-priority tasks, how to budget your time efficiently, how to organize your space and how to manage your to-do list.

I divided the fourth chapter into three sections, all devoted to discussing how to take care of your mind and body. In the first section, I will show you how to deal with anxiety and minimize stress in your life. You will learn the top 12 ways to beat worry, and even make it work to your advantage. One of my observations during graduate school was that students who consumed healthy diets were also more focused and productive. In the second section, I will discuss what constitutes balanced nutrition: what foods are best for staying sharp throughout the day, and how you can incorporate a healthy and affordable diet into your busy lifestyle.

The third section of chapter four is about a common but rarely discussed epidemic: repetitive strain injury (RSI). RSI in your hands and arms can prevent you from working on a computer, and it is thought to be caused by excessive typing, pipetting, playing instruments, or participating in certain sports. Given that I had never heard of this condition before graduate school, I was surprised that 28 of the 100 Ph.D.s I interviewed (more than one in four) had suffered from RSI while working on their dissertations. Some experienced relatively mild symptoms (e.g., fatigue and aching in arms), while others had to eliminate all activities involving their hands for weeks or even months. Recovery from RSI can be time-consuming and expensive, because it involves long periods of rest and physical therapy. During my recovery from RSI, I realized that had I known more about this condition earlier, I could have easily prevented it. I

considered this issue so relevant to graduate students—as they heavily use computers—that I dedicated the third part of chapter four to this topic.

Good communication skills are an essential part of scientific research. Unless you are able to communicate your results effectively, your accomplishments will go unnoticed. Whether you want to communicate with your advisor, group members or a collaborator, you need to deliver your message clearly. In chapter five, I will discuss the principles of effective verbal communication, as well as the common mistakes you will need to avoid in graduate school. Once you learn these skills, you will no longer dread “the talk” with your advisor (i.e., when you will graduate), and you can also be sure that he or she will listen to what you have to say.

Many students are also apprehensive of another type of communication: writing. If you have little experience writing long manuscripts, pulling together a doctoral dissertation can seem daunting. Yet, you need a written thesis to graduate. In chapter six, I will show you how to develop an efficient writing process, use writing to explore your ideas and stay motivated day after day. Many Ph.D.s commented that graduate school was also an excellent opportunity to improve their presentation skills, which were essential for their career advancement. In the second part of chapter six, I will share with you their secrets for becoming better public speakers.

What happens after you defend your thesis? Do you know what you want to do after graduation? Do you know where to begin looking for a job? With the increasing number of people earning Ph.D.s, it is a challenge to find a suitable position. Many Ph.D.s also question their career paths; they are no longer sure that they want to become faculty members, or even stay in their fields of research. What are some other career options for Ph.D.s? In chapter seven, I will discuss both academic and alternative careers, and strategies and resources for exploring both paths.

To summarize, this book will show you how to:

- ◆ Prepare for graduate school
- ◆ Write your thesis proposal
- ◆ Keep yourself motivated (no matter what!)
- ◆ Increase your productivity

- ◆ Decrease stress and anxiety
- ◆ Incorporate a healthy diet into your busy lifestyle
- ◆ Prevent and treat repetitive strain injury
- ◆ Communicate with your advisor, thesis committee, and coworkers
- ◆ Write your thesis efficiently
- ◆ Become a better public speaker
- ◆ Land your dream job

Are you ready? Let's get started!



*"Secrets" of success are shown in bold throughout the book next to the diploma icon.*

Whether you are thinking about going to graduate school, or are already there, *The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.* will serve as your guide to getting your Ph.D. efficiently—from the application phase to the job searching process. Based on interviews from 100 Ph.D.'s, including professors, lawyers, scientists, and deans from over 40 universities across the United States, this book will help you to get into graduate school, find funding, choose an appropriate research group, propose an original research project, get along with your advisor, reduce stress, write and defend your thesis and prepare for your job search.

“An outstanding guide to the pursuit of a Ph.D. that lays out a map with a ‘yellow brick road’ to success. Highly recommended to graduate students and those contemplating a Ph.D.”

—Steven R. Tannenbaum, *Professor of Chemistry and Toxicology*,  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“*The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.* is AWESOME! This text MUST become a book for distribution. What a wonderful and timely piece of work.”

—Larry Sass, *Associate Professor, Department of Architecture*,  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“*The Smart Way to Your Ph.D.* has something to offer everyone—those considering or just starting graduate school, those mid-way through graduate school, those in the process of writing, and even those searching for jobs and interviewing. With both big picture goals and day-to-day tips this book demystifies the process of successfully completing graduate school, and is a tremendous resource.”

—Sarah Delaney, *Assistant Professor, Department of Chemistry*,  
Brown University



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