



FINISH YOUR THESIS FASTER

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR TIME
AND BECOME MORE PRODUCTIVE
IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dora Farkas, PhD, is a thesis and career coach and the founder The Finish Your Thesis Academy, www.FinishYourThesis.com, and helps graduate students become more confident, productive, and focused so they can finish writing their thesis and prepare for their careers.

Dora earned her PhD from the Department of Biological Engineering at MIT, completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Tufts Medical School, and has several years of experience in the pharmaceutical industry.

Since she launched www.FinishYourThesis.com in 2009, Dora has written nearly 300 articles and contributed to several graduate student and postdoctoral community sites.

Dora has provided personal coaching to hundreds of students in over 20 countries to help them finish their thesis, and get attractive job offers in industry and academia. Dora is also a speaker and has given workshops and seminars about academic writing, communication skills, productivity, and job searching.

The simple strategies in this book are based on success stories from hundreds of students, and will help you to make progress on your thesis more quickly, while reducing stress and finding the right balance between your work and personal life.



Dora is an excellent coach, with a style that is compassionate as well as no-nonsense. She helped me set concrete goals that were achievable and meaningful, and held me accountable, making the last semester of my graduate school more productive and less stressful.

— Jessamine Price



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THESIS WRITING DOES NOT HAVE TO BE PAINFUL

Let's face it — writing a PhD thesis is a huge undertaking. In fact, it may be one of the most ambitious projects you'll ever take on. (Let's hope so — right?) But now that you've made the commitment, you have an important question to consider: how much do you want to suffer? You can agonize at every step of the way, or you can navigate the turbulent waters wisely and strategically. Choosing the wise, strategic path will allow you to complete your thesis with less stress, and ensure a greater sense of mastery, and quality attention to both your academic commitments and the rest of your life. I wrote this e-book to help you do just that.

Students who are working on their thesis typically face one or more predictable challenges. How many items on this list apply to you?

- **They watch their motivation slip away to the same degree that they feel overwhelmed or disorganized.**
- **Their confidence suffers and they become increasingly isolated because they compare themselves to fellow students and assume everyone but them “has what it takes.”**
- **They get so fed up with the conflicts and frustrating communications with their supervisor that they lose sight of their original vision and shift their sights to the path of least resistance or fall into chronic avoidance.**
- **They stare at their computer screen for weeks at a time with rising panic, baffled at how they're ever going to get past writer's block.**
- **They get increasingly discouraged as they watch their PhD program grow longer and longer, and they wonder just how many years of their life they'll have to sacrifice to this torturous process.**
- **They become increasingly disheartened as they see their lives get eaten up by their thesis while their health, relationships, and other priorities suffer.**





I'm here to tell you that none of these challenges is insurmountable. Furthermore, the students who are the most successful in graduate school usually have balanced lives that include exercise, healthy nutrition, fun hobbies, and quality time with loved ones. These students are no more intelligent than you — they just have a success-oriented mindset, organize their time efficiently, and communicate assertively with their supervisors.

These are learned skills that anyone can pick up and apply immediately. With just a few minor changes to your work habits, you can also be the productive and outstanding researcher you dreamed of becoming when you entered graduate school. You can regain the confidence and motivation you may have lost over the years as a result of multiple dead-end projects, self-doubt, writer's block, or conflicts with your supervisor.

Approximately 50% of doctoral students drop out of their PhD program, and the majority of those who stay struggle unnecessarily for years because they have not been taught the communication, productivity, and writing skills that are necessary in order to complete a graduate-level thesis.

I was one of those students, and I worked for 12–15 hours a day for years without measurable progress. My body was under so much stress that I developed a chronic inflammatory condition in both of my arms by my 5th year.

My condition became so severe by my 6th year that even with high doses of prescription-strength pain relievers, I could only type for 15 minutes at a stretch before I had to take a break. As a consequence, my time at the computer (and the lab bench) became very limited.

In order to make progress, I had to manage my time in the lab and at the computer very deliberately and prioritize the most important experiments, data analysis, or writing each day. Ironically, I developed more effective work habits and became more productive than I had been before developing this condition. In fact, I finished my thesis by the end of my 6th year (at the same time as most of my classmates) and published 3 first-author publications. Thankfully, I was able to completely recover from this condition within a year after graduation through a combination of Western medicine and alternative therapies.





While I was feeling frustrated and hopeless during my last 2 years of graduate school as I battled my medical condition, I did not talk to my peers about it. I assumed that the other students “had it together” and that I was the only one who was anxious and stressed. I was embarrassed to tell my friends (or supervisor) how much I struggled because I was afraid that they would think I was not smart enough to get a PhD.

It was only during my postdoctoral fellowship that I realized that most graduate students felt the same way I had just a few years earlier. By their 3rd or 4th year, many students were burned out from working long hours and wondered whether they would ever graduate — and they, too, were embarrassed to talk about it!

At that point, I began to informally coach students to help them finish their thesis using the time-management skills I had developed during my last year of graduate school. I coached students in my department as well as friends in other schools. Surprisingly, students in different fields struggled with the same types of issues: lack of motivation, difficult supervisors, and the writing process taking way longer than they had expected.

I knew that with personal coaching I could only help a limited number of people, so I launched my website in 2008 and began publishing e-newsletters with productivity tips for graduate students. I soon started receiving requests from students around the world who were looking for more help to finish their thesis.

In 2010, I began a job in the pharmaceutical industry and continued to publish articles and coach graduate students on the side. I also completed a life coach training program so I could help my clients complete their thesis while taking care of their health and personal relationships.

By 2014, I had coached over 200 students in 30 different fields, and I decided to compile all the strategies I had taught into an online course called the **“Finish Your Thesis Program.”** I launched the program in January 2015. Students from 10 different countries and all 6 populated continents enrolled in the course.

This report includes my favorite productivity tips from my private coaching practice and my





“**Finish Your Thesis Program**” that will help you shift from feeling overwhelmed and frustrated to feeling organized and motivated in just a few weeks. Most importantly, you will gain clarity on what you need to do to finish your thesis.

Are you ready? Let’s start with the most exciting part: **how to get more done in less time.**





PART I

HOW TO GET MORE DONE IN LESS TIME

If I could name 1 trait that sets productive students apart from unproductive ones, it would be this: feeling as though they are in control of their thesis and their future. If you feel as though your thesis is going nowhere, or going somewhere but you are not sure where, of course you feel frustrated. Students in control of their theses are also actively pursuing career paths to learn how their graduate degree will support their career development. In order to create a feeling of control over your project and your future, you need to continually re-evaluate your progress and ensure that your actions are helping you reach your goals.

I'll be honest with you: I was an eager-beaver 1st-year graduate student. Going straight from college to a PhD program, I thought I was maximally prepared to take on the challenges of graduate school. As soon as I started my doctoral program, I was ready to put the same strategies to work that helped me strive as an undergraduate:

- **Working long hours**
- **Making sure every assignment was perfect before turning it in**
- **Cranking through my to-do list every day**
- **Trying to do everything on my own to demonstrate to my professors that I was independent**

It did not take long before I realized that my approach to getting through graduate school was wearing me down, and I felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities of research while trying to complete my coursework. I also realized that I was not alone. Not only were some of my classmates burned out by the end of our 1st year, but some of them decided to drop out of the program because of the strain that the long work hours put on their health or personal relationships.





In this section, I will share 5 simple strategies that will help you be more productive at work so you can be productive without having to put in more hours.

TIP #1

Shift Your Attitude from Reactive to Proactive

Most graduate students “react” to the demands of their environment. They conscientiously reply to all their emails, follow what their thesis committee or supervisors tell them to do, and react to situations as they come along. Sometimes weeks or even months can go by without meaningful progress.

Successful graduate students use a proactive approach, whether or not they realize it. They take an active part in deciding the topic of their dissertation, the methods used in the research, and (most importantly) their daily schedule. Instead of beginning their day by reacting to the avalanche of emails, they know what they want to accomplish that day.

Proactive students encounter obstacles just like all other students, and many of them have other responsibilities outside graduate school, such as jobs or parenting. However, by taking a proactive approach, they are able to reduce distractions and invest their time and energy into making progress on their thesis. Shifting to a proactive mindset can save you months, or even years, in graduate school.

Bottom line: *When you adopt a proactive lifestyle, you will be able to take control of the direction of your thesis and finish it faster.*

TIP #2

Develop a Long-Term Plan with Short-Term Milestones

The advantage of setting up a long-term (1-year) plan with short-term (monthly or weekly) milestones is that it helps you break down a large project into manageable stages. You can also





use this plan to make sure you and your supervisor are in agreement about the requirements for your graduation and what you need to achieve by each of your committee meetings.

Your 1-year plan is not set in stone, because research is unpredictable and you will need to make adjustments as you get results. Students find that a monthly evaluation of their plan helps them determine what worked and where they need to modify it to make progress. While you might not reach your goals on time every month, if you evaluate your progress regularly, you will be on the right track.

Bottom line: *When you break down long-term plans into short-term (monthly or weekly) milestones, you will know what you need to do this week or even today to meet a deadline that is 6–12 months in the future.*

TIP #3

Block Time for Everything: TIP #3 Your Calendar Is Your Best Friend

Have you ever planned to do something “someday,” but somehow you never got around to it? Exercise is a great example: unless you schedule the time proactively (either 1st thing in the morning or at a set time during the day), you will probably fill the time with something else. The common saying “If it’s not scheduled, it’s not real” is just as true for research and thesis writing as it is for exercise.

Now that you have defined your short-term milestones, determine the day-to-day actions that will help you achieve your goals (see Tip #5). If you need to study to pass your qualifiers, read a certain number of journal articles, or meet with a collaborator to plan an experiment, block out specific times in your calendar to do all of those things.

While you cannot plan out everything months in advance, you can block out specific times for the actions you want to take within the next week. When you block out time for reading,





writing, or collecting or analyzing data, it will be easier to plan time for exercise and determine how much time you have for social events.

Bottom line: *When you block out time in your calendar for work, family commitments, and exercise, you will be able to manage your time more efficiently and make more progress.*

TIP #4

Focus on Desired Results, Not Your To-Do List

If you always strive to cross everything off your to-do list, you are probably feeling overwhelmed. When you are trying to please everyone, you will end up frustrated, not get everything (or anything) done, and not be able to show up for the most important people in your life. Give yourself a little room to breathe. Let go of some of the nonessential projects that have been weighing you down. If a goal is not supporting your health, your thesis, or your loved ones, you are doing yourself and the world a big disservice by investing time in it.

Your 1-year plan is not set in stone, because research is unpredictable and you will need to make adjustments as you get results. Students find that a monthly evaluation of their plan helps them determine what worked and where they need to modify it to make progress. While you might not reach your goals on time every month, if you evaluate your progress regularly, you will be on the right track.

Bottom line: *When you shift your thinking from “What do I have to do?” to “What do I want to accomplish?” You will be able to prioritize your actions and do what is most important to finish your thesis.*





TIP #5

Define Your Top 3 Priorities for Each Day and Start with the Most Important One

Remember Tip #1: Shift from Reactive to Proactive? If you come to work without having a plan for the day, you will spend your time reacting to the demands of others and putting out fires all day.

A more proactive approach is to define your top 3 priorities the day before so you come to work mentally prepared for what you want to accomplish that day. Be realistic when you define your priorities. As most graduate students are overachievers, they tend to overestimate what they can accomplish, which can lead to overwhelm and procrastination — just the opposite of what they wanted to accomplish.

After you choose your top 3 priorities, pick the highest priority and schedule it for as early in the day as possible. Ask yourself, “If I could only accomplish one thing tomorrow, which one would help me make the most progress?” It is essential to determine your #1 priority each day because unexpected events, interruptions, or fatigue can interfere with your ability to complete all your priorities.

Bottom line: *When you narrow down your goals to the top 3 priorities for the day, you are more likely to meet your milestones, and you will save time by eliminating the to-do's that are not relevant to your thesis.*





PART II

COMMUNICATE ASSERTIVELY WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR EVEN IF HE OR SHE IS A DIFFICULT PERSON

Do you ever avoid your supervisor because of previous conflicts? While conflicts are unpleasant, avoiding communication with your supervisor will not resolve problems—in fact, it will probably create more. In reality, if you ever want to graduate, you need to have the “talk” with your supervisor at some point and nail down your graduation requirements.

Don’t wait until your last year to talk to your supervisor openly about your graduation plans. The sooner you clarify what you need to do to graduate, the sooner you can start working on the project that will turn into a thesis.

Some students are intimidated by the thought of approaching their supervisor. What if he or she thinks your ideas are ridiculous? What if you get more work every time you meet? What if your supervisor keeps changing his or her mind about your thesis project? These fears, which may be based on past events, can stop you from communicating openly with your supervisor and can lead to more miscommunications.

Graduate school is actually the perfect opportunity to learn assertive communication skills, which will help you develop mutually beneficial agreements. What is assertiveness?

An assertive person is able to communicate his or her ideas confidently while also considering the needs of other people. The following 5 strategies will help you become more assertive and resolve disagreements with your supervisor, even if he or she is a difficult person.





TIP #6

Clarify Your Supervisor's Expectations

Every supervisor has his or her own management style. A hands-on supervisor might expect weekly or biweekly progress reports. However, a busy hands-off supervisor might get annoyed if you schedule meetings or send updates frequently.

The easiest way to meet your supervisor's expectations is to ask up front, "How frequently would you like me to check in with you?" For a specific project, you can ask when he or she would like an update and whether he or she would like a written report or would prefer to meet in person.

The most important factor in your relationship with your supervisor is open communication. Regardless of your supervisor's management style, bring challenges to his or her attention as soon as you can. It is in your supervisor's interest that you succeed, so if you cannot resolve a problem on your own, reach out for help so you can get the support you need.

Bottom line: *Focus on developing a long-term professional relationship with your supervisor by having open and honest communication and updating him or her on your progress as needed.*

TIP #7

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare for Meetings with Your Supervisor

Supervisors are busy, and your work is just 1 of the 100 things on your supervisor's mind. When you come to a meeting with a clear agenda, you will immediately get your supervisor's attention so you can focus on the problems that need to be resolved.

If any forms need to be signed or any manuscripts need to be reviewed, bring them to the meeting and be very specific about where you need your supervisor's signature or feedback.





You know more about your work than your supervisor does. You can save yourself and your supervisor's time if you come to every meeting with 1 or more ideas to resolve your problem. Your supervisor will appreciate that you took the time to think of solutions and will be more likely to support your ideas.

Bottom line: *When you make it easy for your supervisor to help you, he or she will have respect for you, and you will get more support to finish your thesis and publications.*

TIP #8

Focus on Solving the Problem, Not Your Emotions Surrounding the Problem

Do not assume that your supervisor is familiar with the details of your work or your relationship with your coworkers. When you meet with your supervisor, describe the problem by:

- **Stating the facts about the problem**
- **Explain how the problem is interfering with your work**
- **Stating how you would like the problem to be resolved**

Avoid talking about your emotions, such as frustration or anger, because your discussion will get sidetracked, and you might create even more conflicts.

Bottom line: *Always keep in mind your desired results for every meeting (e.g., feedback on your manuscript, resolving conflict with a thesis committee member) and strive to resolve the problem during the meeting.*





TIP #9

Listen to Your Supervisor without Becoming Emotional or Defensive

Your supervisor will not agree with all your ideas, but he or she probably has good reasons for it. Do not take your supervisor's criticism personally or get defensive. Look at the problem from his or her viewpoint and brainstorm solutions that will meet both of your needs.

When you want to resolve a problem, a good rule of thumb is to talk for 20% of the time and listen for 80% of time. If your supervisor says something you don't agree with, get more information by asking questions rather than openly disagreeing with him or her.

When you ask open-ended questions, your supervisor will have the opportunity to explain his or her viewpoint so you can brainstorm solutions that are beneficial to both of you. If you cannot come to an agreement, ask for a follow-up meeting to give you time to think about additional solutions.

Bottom line: *If your supervisor feels heard and respected, he or she is more likely to listen to your side of the story and offer you constructive feedback.*

TIP #10

Put Important Agreements in Writing in a Follow-Up Email

One of the most frequent sources of conflict is miscommunication. For example, you might misunderstand your supervisor's suggestions during a meeting and take your project in the wrong direction. The best way to avoid miscommunication is to follow up after every meeting with an email that summarizes what you have agreed upon and your action items. This will give your supervisor a chance to review what you have discussed and add suggestions if needed.

Also make sure that you follow through on your end of the deal. When you meet with your





supervisor, prioritize your action item list and set timelines. If for some reason you are unable to meet your deadlines, let your supervisor know as soon as possible. In order to build trust between you and your supervisor, you need to demonstrate that he or she can count on you to follow through on your commitments.

Bottom line: *Always make sure that you and your supervisor are on the same page regarding decisions and action plans established at a meeting.*



PART III

OVERCOME WRITER'S BLOCK AND FINISH YOUR THESIS AND MANUSCRIPTS

Do you ever struggle with writer's block — those days when you stare at the computer screen and the words just aren't coming? Most writers have experienced writer's block at some point in their lives, and some writers need to contend with writer's block on a daily basis. Here are 2 quotes from prolific writers:

“A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.”

– *Thomas Mann*

“Every writer I know has trouble writing.”

– *Joseph Heller*

In order to overcome writer's block, you first need to become aware of it. How do you know you have it? Symptoms include:

1. You fill the time you set aside for writing with other activities such as cleaning, Internet surfing, or shopping. Some of these may be important. You need to clean and shop, but do you have to do them during the time you assigned for writing?
2. You are not producing any writing; either you stare at the screen blankly without writing much or you hastily put something together right before the deadline.

The root cause of writer's block is fear (typically, fear of imperfection, overwhelm, or success). The following strategies will help you overcome or reduce your fear so you can get words on the paper.





TIP #11

Set Your Timer to 45 Minutes and Turn Off All Distractions While Writing

Have you ever devoted an entire day to writing but made very little progress and felt burned out by the end of the day? You may feel overwhelmed or not know where to start, or the topic may seem so unpleasant that you just don't want to work on it.

The hardest part about writing is the beginning. If you don't know where to begin, or if you are in the middle of editing a paper and feel burned out, the best thing to do is to get a timer and type for a predefined amount of time. The problem is that many students type without taking a break, which can really lead to burnout, not to mention pain in your neck, shoulders, and back.

I usually recommend alternating 45 minutes of typing with a 15-minute break. During the 45 minutes, turn off all distractions and type without stopping. If 45 minutes is too long, set your timer to 25 or 10 minutes and take a 5-minute break before returning to work.

One thing that really helps me is to write ANYTHING — without caring if it's good or bad. It's like revving up a car to get over a speed bump; the momentum gets me past the beginning, and I can come back to it a bit later with a critical eye and a better sense of what the next step is.

I think of free writing like rowing in a river, letting the current take me where I need to go. When I approach writing with such a relaxed attitude, ideas come to me naturally and I discover ideas I did not know I had – it is quite a wondrous process.

Bottom line: *Writing in short sprints and doing free writing will spark your creativity and help you write a high-quality thesis faster.*

TIP #12

Take Your Breaks Seriously

I have no doubt that you take your work seriously. But do you give your body the rest it needs





during your breaks? Or, do you check email, text messages, and social media when you say you will take a “break”?

While Internet surfing may “seem” or “feel” relaxing, it is actually not restoring your mind and body. The best way to regain your focus during breaks is to get up from your desk, disconnect from all electronics, and get your body in motion. A 15-minute break is enough for a short walk or to do some work around the house if you work from home.

Taking a break is easy. The tough part is letting go of the ingrained beliefs that have held you back from giving your body a well-deserved break. These may include: “More hours at work lead to more results,” “Being busy is a good thing,” and “I am so behind that I do not have time for a break.” These limiting beliefs will keep you frustrated, unmotivated, and stressed, and will lead to a burnout instead of progress.

Bottom line: *When you take your breaks seriously and give your mind well-deserved rest throughout the day, you will be able to focus for longer periods of time and be more productive in the long run.*

TIP #13

Make a Small Notebook Your Best Friend

Our minds are never at rest. You might have noticed that ideas and errands pop into your head when you try to write. Your natural urge may be to take care of these chores right away. The problem is that if you interrupt your writing to send an email or make a call, you will lose your train of thought—sometimes for the rest of the day.

If you try to resist the urge to take care of these to-do's, the urge will just become stronger. Your mind will not leave you alone until you do something about it. But that does not mean you have to send that email right away or make that phone call. Why not capture the idea in a small spiral notebook that is always sitting next to you?





Instead of acting on urgent to-do's right away, write them down into a small notebook and attend to them after you have finished writing. Surprisingly, most of your chores will not seem so urgent by the time you finish writing. However, they will be out of your head and collected in one place, so you will feel on top of everything you need to attend to.

Bottom line: *When you get all your ideas and to-do's out of your head and on paper, it is easier to stay focused on your writing.*

TIP #14

Define Your Writing or Editing Goals Very Clearly

One of the mistakes that students make is to set vague goals such as "Work on Chapter 3" without being clear on what exactly they need to do. A better approach is to set very specific goals that can be completed in a few hours. Examples include: "Write 500 words in Chapter 3," "Finish introduction to Chapter 3," or "Create Figure 3.1."

Also, make sure you have all the necessary papers and data you need before you sit down to write. When you define your goals clearly and get all the necessary information you need in order to write, you are more likely to follow through on your goals and make consistent progress.

Bottom line: *When you set specific and realistic goals for each block of time, you are more likely to follow through.*

TIP #15

Start Every Day Fresh

Let's say you set a writing goal of 500 words a day, but yesterday you were too tired to write, so you took a nap instead. In this situation, many students feel as though they are "slackers," beat





themselves up, and give up the idea of a daily writing quota altogether so they won't be disappointed in themselves again.

This approach will lead to loss of motivation and writer's block. Instead, start every day fresh. Strive to meet your writing goal every day, but if you cannot because you did not feel well or something came up, be kind to yourself.

Commit to doing the best you can each day to meet your writing quota. Let go of feeling guilty about not meeting it yesterday or worrying about how you will meet it tomorrow.

Bottom line: *When you focus on doing your best writing today, you will lessen or even eliminate the fear of writing that is frequently the cause of writer's block.*





PART IV

THE 10 MOST COMMON MISTAKES IN GRADUATE SCHOOL AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Without realizing it, many graduate students make mistakes that will not only lengthen the time they are in graduate school but can also jeopardize their careers. Perhaps you will recognize some of these patterns in your own workflow.

#1

Doing what you think your advisor and PhD thesis committee want you to do and avoiding conflict at all costs

Miscommunication is the #1 reason for unpleasant surprises at committee meetings. Students think they know what they need to do to graduate, and they put a lot of work into collecting and analyzing data without communicating enough with their supervisor. The frequency of meetings with your supervisor depends on his or her management style (hands-off vs. hands-on). In either event, you need to make sure you have sufficient communication (in person, phone, email) to know with 100% certainty that you are on the right track.

Solution: Always know what your supervisor's and committee's expectations are for your thesis. In some cases, disagreements may arise. You will need to be assertive to reach mutually beneficial agreements.

Solution: *Always know what your supervisor's and committee's expectations are for your thesis. In some cases, disagreements may arise. You will need to be assertive to reach mutually beneficial agreements.*





#2

Assuming that all the hard work you do will eventually turn into a PhD thesis

Many students collect a lot of data, but they are missing the most important ingredient of a finished thesis: a central question or hypothesis. As a result, their research lacks focus, and they spend years trying to pull pieces of their research into a cohesive story.

Solution: *Always know what question your thesis is asking or what your hypothesis is. Once you have a question, you can set up a long-term research plan with well-defined milestones and deadlines. Given the uncertain nature of research, your initial plan will most certainly change. However, you always need to have a plan to start with as well as milestones to measure your progress.*

#3

Doing research that only you think is interesting

This is related to #1 and #2, but it is so common that it deserves its own category. Going off in a research direction that you think is interesting (while neglecting your actual thesis topic) is a type of “shiny object syndrome.” Perhaps you come across a paper or a new technique, and you want to try it on your own. As an independent researcher, you don’t always need to consult with your supervisor before you try something new. The problem occurs when this new “side project” becomes a significant time sink. Students invest a lot of their resources without checking whether their efforts complement their PhD thesis research.

Solution: *If you come across a novel idea that you think could become part of your thesis, run it by your advisor before spending a significant amount of time (or money) on it. You might need to do literature research or collect preliminary data before presenting your idea to your supervisor. Don’t assume that just because you think this research is interesting, your supervisor will, too. (Perhaps he or she has tried it in the past and chose not to pursue it for good reason.)*





#4

“Hoping” that experiments or studies turn out the way you want them to

There are few things more disempowering than “crossing your fingers” for your results to turn out a certain way. When you “hope” that you will finally get the results you need in order to graduate, you are sending yourself a subconscious message that someone else has power over your thesis. There are 2 problems with this approach.

The 1st problem is that you are stripping yourself of your self-confidence to finish your thesis. The 2nd problem is that you cannot dictate how your results turn out—your data are what they are. In fact, sometimes unexpected results are more interesting and can lead to new research directions.

In order for your committee to approve your PhD thesis, your research needs to be “solid” with reproducible results. If you doubt your own methods and data, your committee will probably pick up on your lack of self-confidence and ask you to repeat your studies until your data are more robust.

Solution: *Think about possible outcomes in advance. How will each outcome affect the interpretation of your results? When you have a Plan A, B, and C, it will give you peace of mind, so you will no longer need to “hope” for a certain outcome. You probably know by this point that “hoping” and “crossing fingers” are not effective tools to help you finish your thesis.*

#5

Jumping to conclusions or the next phase of research before rigorous data analysis

Did you ever make preliminary conclusions by eyeballing your results? Unfortunately, many students jump to conclusions, go off in a certain direction, and then realize they are back to square one.





I learned this lesson the hard way in graduate school when I had to determine whether certain conditions improved the survival of cells in my culture system. The plots in Excel suggested that 1 experimental setup was superior to the other.

When we did rigorous statistical analysis on the data, however, there was no significant difference between the 2 conditions. This was great news, as the setup that I suspected was more effective cost 10 times more than the other system!

Solution: *In order to have confidence in your data so you can move to the next phase, examine your results from different angles. For example, try plotting your results in different ways and do rigorous statistical analysis to determine whether any of them are significant.*

#6

Cramming as much data as possible into your PhD thesis to show how much work you have done

I will never forget a certain job talk by a candidate for a faculty position. The applicant had just finished his PhD thesis, and his 45-minute job talk had 149 slides. Half the audience walked out after 20 minutes because it was impossible to follow him. The problem was not only that he went through his slides at the speed of light; in addition, his talk did not have a central question or hypothesis. Your thesis needs to be a cohesive story that begins with a question or hypothesis and ends with conclusions supported by data. Due to the nature of research, a significant portion of your data may not make it into the final version of your thesis, and you need to make peace with that.

Solution: *Make an outline of your thesis, including bullet points for the data or arguments you will make in each section. This outline may change over time, but it will help guide you in collecting data and including the most relevant sections of your thesis. Share your outline with your supervisor to make sure you include all the relevant information.*





#7

Cherry-picking or massaging your data to fit your story

Cherry-picking means that you are choosing to emphasize only the data that support your story while ignoring findings that contradict your proposed conclusions.

Data massaging can refer to a spectrum of questionable analysis methods ranging from eliminating obvious outliers to “tightening” your data set by excluding all points outside certain error bars. (Some consider fabrication a type of data massaging, but I will not go into that, as the consequences of such misconduct are much more serious than just having to schedule yet another committee meeting.)

Outliers can be extremely frustrating if you have spent months or years designing your study. In some cases, outliers can be excluded for good reasons, such as an animal or human volunteer with a certain underlying condition that interfered with your study.

In other cases, there is no good explanation for the outliers, which can be even more irritating because you have no scientific reason for excluding them, and they can have a negative impact on your statistical analysis.

Both cherry-picking and data massaging are questionable scientific practices.

If your committee finds out that you were trying to “hide” your original data set, they might even take you off the project or suspend you from the program. Cherry-picking or data massaging can lead to serious (even legal) consequences in certain areas of research, particularly those involving human volunteers.

Solution: *Most data sets will not be perfect, and an outlier does not invalidate your results. If there is an outlier, make a note of it. You always need to be completely transparent about the data you collected and how you analyzed it. If you choose to eliminate an outlier, you need to be clear about your reason.*

Your supervisor’s experience can be particularly helpful here, as he or she might be able to suggest scientifically valid reasons to exclude certain points.





#8

Rewriting the same paragraphs over and over until they are perfect

Perfectionism is one of the most common causes of writer's block. Some students are so worried that their writing is not good enough that they may be afraid to put any thoughts on paper. As a result, they write a thesis with only bits and pieces, and there isn't enough material for their committee to approve their thesis.

Solution: *Get everything on paper: your data, your ideas, your references, and your proposed data interpretation. You cannot pull a thesis together while all this information is in your head.*

Rewriting the same paragraphs until they are perfect will not bring you closer to a finished thesis. Instead, focus on putting a story together, even if you don't yet have all the pieces of your puzzle in place.

During the active writing phase, put your attention on the content: the questions you are asking, the validity of your methods, the quality of your data, and any gaps in your story that you might need to fill in before handing in your thesis.

Leave the editing (word choice, style, and formatting) until the very end. Some universities have writing centers that offer editing services, or you can hire someone to do a copyediting polish on your thesis if you are concerned about your writing style.

#9

Using secondary references without checking primary references

When you come across a paper by Smith et al., who cite data from Johnson et al., do you cite Smith or Johnson when you refer to this data?

It is tempting to just cite Smith et al., to save yourself the trouble of having to look up Johnson et al. However, citing secondary references (in this case, Smith et al.) is a questionable practice because you are trusting someone else to interpret the original data set, which was published by Johnson et al.

It is also not enough to just cite both Smith and Johnson, without looking up Johnson, because





some papers give incorrect citations. The journal name, page number, or year of publication might have been typed incorrectly in the bibliography, and if you just copy it verbatim, you will be held responsible for an invalid citation.

Solution: *If you refer to an original data set, you need to look at the data set yourself. Always cite the primary paper, but only after you have confirmed that the conclusions made by the secondary paper are valid. You can also cite the secondary paper if you want to refer to the authors' interpretation of the data or any follow-up experiments they have done.*

#10

“Lifting” information from other papers

When you review 50–100 papers for a literature review, it is tough to keep all your references straight. As you begin writing, the text in your literature review might sound very close to some of the papers you read. Your sentences and word choice might be so close that your advisor might question whether you “lifted” some paragraphs, or worse, he or she may accuse you of plagiarism (one of the worst offenses in an academic environment).

Whether or not it was intentional, if your paper is too close to someone else's, it will reflect very poorly on your performance and could ruin your reputation for years.

Solution: *Keep all the information from your references organized electronically. Since most of your references will be in an electronic format such as PDFs, you can highlight or box the information within each PDF itself. You can also group your references by category in different folders so you can save new papers in the appropriate folders as soon as you find them.*

This practice will ensure that when it is time to write your literature review, you can pull up the corresponding files right away and see what information you want to use. You can then paraphrase this information appropriately (and include the references) so that you avoid any chances of being accused of “lifting” or plagiarism.





PART V

THE ONE THING THAT PHDS WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

Many PhDs have regrets about their graduate school experience, especially if it took longer to complete than expected. I interviewed over 100 PhDs for my “Finish Your Thesis Program,” and one of the questions I asked was what they would do differently if they could start over again. Some of the answers were similar, and I divided them into 12 categories ranked according to how frequently they were mentioned. Perhaps not surprisingly, no one said they would have worked more hours.

If I could start graduate school again, I would:

#1

Take fewer loans

Most PhDs in math, science, and engineering had research fellowships to cover their tuition and basic expenses. Students in the humanities and social sciences whose tuitions were not covered graduated with tens of thousands of dollars of student debt. Students who had excessive loans realized that prior to entering their PhD program, they had not evaluated the career paths and salaries of PhDs in their fields or investigated whether a PhD was a good investment of their time and money or was in line with their long-term career goals.

#2

Exercise more

Most PhDs I interviewed exercised at least on a semi-regular basis. A few struggled with weight





issues or a lack of energy in graduate school. These students admitted that with better planning, they could have found more time to exercise. One student said, “Whenever I exercise I am more efficient, but for some reason I just forget about taking a break and going to the gym.”

Exercising will not happen on its own. If you want to exercise, you need to set aside time for it; otherwise it will not happen.

#3

Waste less time on social media

One student who said that this is the one change she would make recalled that her PI was not around much, but the few times he walked by, she happened to be on Facebook. As a consequence, whenever her research did not go well, he said that it was probably because she spent too much time on social media. In her opinion, she did not spend excessive time on Facebook, but it did lead to conflict between her and her PI.

A few PhDs who cited this as the #1 thing they would change said that they used the Internet as a form of procrastination disguised as relaxation. In other words, they thought they were taking a break from work, but they were actually wasting precious time that could have been used for a real break, such as a walk.

#4

Travel more

Graduate students are not paid well (and they do not have much vacation), but there are still opportunities to travel locally. One PhD went to graduate school abroad, and when he graduated he realized that he had not seen any of the major sights in the country during his 5 years there. If you do not have the budget or time for extensive travel, see if you can occasionally take some day or weekend trips to get a well-deserved break.

As an example of how you can make the trip of a lifetime possible on a graduate student stipend, one student saved up for 3 years to go to Europe. She had never been there before, and she saved between \$100 and \$150 a month while collecting information about student





discounts. When she finally had enough money, she spent 3 weeks in Europe and traveled to 5 different countries.

The PhDs who regretted not traveling attributed it to not having the courage to ask their PI for time off. It was usually not a matter of money. One student canceled a trip to China because she was worried that her 2-week trip would negatively affect her research. In retrospect, she regretted it because she later realized that taking 2 weeks off is insignificant in a 6-year PhD program.

#5

Spend more time with my significant other

A PhD program usually takes a toll on students' relationships. Spouses who are not in a PhD program sometimes have a hard time understanding how you can work 15 hours a day, 6 days a week. The situation can get even worse if the spouse has a full-time job and is supporting the student financially. I have witnessed several breakups (marriages, engagements, dating) due to the strain that a PhD program puts on a relationship.

However, I also know students who were able to nurture their relationships despite the challenges of graduate school. To summarize, it is the little things that count. Even if you are working 12- to 15-hour days, you can still make the time you spend with your spouse special. Simple things include eating meals together, going out for ice cream, and committing to a few hours every week to spend with him or her, regardless of how your research is going.

#6

Make sure I was on the same page as my PI

Most conflicts between a graduate student and a PI result from lack of proper communication. As an example, one woman told her PI that she was going on vacation a few weeks in advance and he agreed. When she returned, her PI called her to his office and asked why she hadn't told him she was going out of town. She reminded him of the conversation they had a few weeks prior. "Oh, I can't remember that," he replied. "You need to tell me a few days in advance so I can plan accordingly." Obviously, this student had not realized that her





PI needed many reminders.

Another common source of conflict relates to asking for recommendations. PIs are very busy, and your letter of recommendation is just 1 of 100 things he or she needs to do. Many PIs forget that they have to write a recommendation letter, and overlooking it can jeopardize your chances of getting extra funding or a job. You can make it easier for your PI to write a recommendation letter if you send him or her a file with bullet points listing your accomplishments as well as sending him or her polite reminders as the deadline gets closer.

#7

Do lab rotations before deciding which group to join (or change groups sooner)

I remember that my academic advisor in college told me to look for 2 qualities in my PhD advisor: 1) easy to get along with, and 2) well known in his or her field. Of course, it is difficult to predict how well you will get along with your PI or whether you will like your research. But if you realize that the research or the PI is not a good fit for you, it is in everyone's interests that you change groups as soon as possible. Some departments allow (and even encourage) students to do lab rotations. I don't have enough statistics to say whether students who took advantage of this opportunity were more satisfied with their choice of PI than the ones who chose a PI without rotations. I do know that students who wished they had done rotations realized that the group was not a good fit for them in the 1st few months. It is possible that given the opportunity to do rotations, they would have found a better group and wasted less time.

#8

Stand up against my PI's bullying

Several students had micromanager PIs, and it took a toll on their health and relationships. For example, one woman had a PI who expected her to work 7 days a week. When she did not go to lab, he called her at home to remind her how urgent the project was. She was so irritated by his management style that she established new boundaries, including limited time on the weekends and no calls at home. If he wanted her to be productive, he would





need to respect her hours. She recalled that he was speechless and reluctantly agreed. Others did not have the courage to stand up to their PIs, even when the requests were unreasonable. For example, one woman wanted to leave town for a few days to attend her grandmother's funeral. She asked her supervisor for permission, and he said no because he thought that her research was higher priority. She reluctantly stayed but later wished she had gone out of town anyway. Did a few days really matter in a PhD that took over 7 years to complete?

#9

Network more with professionals

Many students in their final year or after graduation are surprised at how difficult it is to find an industry position. First, the competition for PhD-level jobs is fierce. Second, many jobs only require a bachelor's or master's degree, and employers are reluctant to hire "overqualified" candidates with a PhD degree. While your technical skills are probably in line with the jobs you apply for, you have a much higher chance of landing an industry job if someone from the company forwards your resume to the hiring manager. Another advantage of networking, especially during your early years in graduate school, is that it will give you the opportunity to learn about different career paths.

Where do you find professionals? Many universities have professional development workshops. If the topic is relevant, it is a good idea to attend because: 1) you will learn about that career path, and 2) you can chat with the speaker afterward, get his or her contact information, and follow up later with a thank-you email. Professional societies also have regular meetings and conferences. These are great opportunities to network with people in your field. Be sure to follow up with everyone soon after a meeting, either over LinkedIn or in an email.

#10

Join a thesis writing support group

The #1 complaint of former PhD students was that they felt isolated and lost motivation to do work. In college, there were support groups in the form of study groups, office hours, and the residential community. In graduate school, many students do not have any type of support.





First-year students usually start out enthusiastic but due to lack of accountability they lose track of time and fall behind on their milestones. In contrast, the students who did join a support group thought that being part of a community was one of the best ways to keep themselves motivated.

If there is no official support group in your school, find 1 friend and set up a weekly meeting to talk about how each of you progressed and the challenges you had to overcome. If you are already writing, swap your drafts and give each other feedback. It does not matter if your friend is not in your field (but it would certainly help). Simply knowing that someone else is going to read your draft by a specified time will motivate you to complete your draft on time.





HOW YOU CAN GET MORE TRAINING

Thank you so much for downloading this free guide. I acknowledge you for being so proactive about finishing your thesis.

I know you started graduate school because you wanted to make a difference, but it is easy to lose your enthusiasm and sense of direction in the busyness of day-to-day life. This is why so many students feel frustrated and lost, and forget why they started graduate school in the 1st place.

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I honor you for your commitment to finish your thesis and bring your career to the next level. I look forward to seeing you inside one of my programs, and supporting you to finish your thesis.

Best wishes and keep up the awesome work!

Dora Farkas, PhD

Thesis and Career Coach

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