

Graduate School Survival Guide

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Introduction

Graduate school can sometimes feel like driving to a new location without the benefit of good directions. It can be frustrating, confusing, and downright difficult to get where you are going. This guide provides numerous tips for surviving graduate school that should help graduate students navigate their way. These pieces of practical advice are divided into three sections, “For the Classroom,” “Interacting with Your Professors,” and “Social and Personal Life.” The guide concludes with a list of recommended resources for further reading.

For the Classroom

- Participate in seminar and do the readings ahead of time. Find a reading approach that works for you. You may want to bring ten points to discuss based on the reading or come up with a number of questions. Do not, however, read every word of every reading. Skim books and articles enough to get the main points, particularly focusing on the introduction and conclusion. Be aware of the discussion culture of the seminar. If interrupting is common and even the only way to get your voice heard, feel free to interrupt even if it is against your nature. If you get nervous about speaking, you may want to jot down your points on a sheet of paper first, so you can use it as a reference.
- Stay disciplined and work ahead. Keep at the work even when you don't feel like it. Persevere. Yet, if you get stuck, it can be a good idea to step away from the task, switch to a different job, or try a new approach. Avoid all-nighters. Try to get the major tasks done at least a day ahead of time. A last-minute approach can be a recipe for disaster. Working ahead not only reduces stress but also provides you with time to deal with computer glitches or other unexpected developments that may interfere with your work.
- Prioritize and pace yourself. Graduate school is often compared to a marathon, and it is important to pace yourself. It can even be good, when possible, to not work at full capacity, because such a strategy can prevent burn-out, keep you energized, reduce stress, and leave you more open to research suggestions from your advisor and professors. Find a work rhythm, realizing this can be a process of trial and error, at least at first. You may want to work a 9-to-5 schedule, or try to fit in a certain amount of hours per week at varying times. Remember that you are limited in your time and energy, so be aware of time constraints and do not be a perfectionist about everything.

Interacting with Your Professors

- Appreciate the comments and suggestions your professors have for you. Although it can be overwhelming at first to read or hear the comments that professors give you on your writing, be appreciative that they care about your work and are willing to take the time to provide you with extensive commentary. When reviewing comments from your professor or advisor, read them over and think about them for several days (time permitting) before tackling

revisions. Letting yourself “digest” the comments will most likely lead to a better draft than if you hurry through revisions.

- Recognize that academia is a contentious world of ideas. Differences of opinion with your advisor, professors, or committee members prepare you for the larger academic world in which scholars are constantly critiquing each other’s work. You must first pass the test of your superiors before advancing in your career. Take criticisms seriously, but not personally.
- Pick your battles. Sometimes faculty members may have different ideas than you do about what is best for your education. Be open to suggestions. Stand your ground on things that matter deeply to you but also be willing to defer to their advice sometimes. You don’t want to burn any bridges while in graduate school, especially over something that may be trivial in the long run.

Social and Personal Life

- The first year, and especially the first semester, of graduate school will be particularly demanding. Recognize that there will be an adjustment period in which you will need to get used to your new school, the heavy reading load, and your new surroundings (if you moved to a new location for graduate school). Don’t be too hard on yourself; you will adjust!
- Get involved. Although it is not necessary to completely fill your calendar with social gatherings and academic service work, it is a good idea to become involved in some of these activities. Attending social gatherings is an easy way to network and to get to know your peers and professors in a less formal environment than in the classroom. Academic service work, including involvement in committees, professional organizations, and graduate student groups, can build relationships that may last throughout your career and can help fill out your C.V.
- Build an academic support network. Advanced graduate students, in particular, can provide invaluable insight and advice regarding their past experiences in your program. When you are preparing for comprehensive exams, they also may let you borrow books or notes. Rely on your advisor and get to know other professors as well. It is good to have a variety of perspectives and sources of support, including professors and students in other departments and schools. For confidential issues, seek out very trusted individuals who will not spread your personal information around. Remember that people like to be helpful.
- Be balanced. Leading a balanced lifestyle can seem impossible to achieve in graduate school, but, in reality, it can aid your performance. It can help you better cope with the inherent stresses and anxieties of graduate school, avoid burn-out, keep your mind fresh, and even bring new perspectives to your work. Exercise and eat well. Sometimes the best ideas come when you’re relaxed. You may want to join a yoga or an aerobics class, take up meditation, or attend a religious service. Cultivate your hobbies or develop new ones, and stay socially connected. During stressful times, remind yourself that you are in your chosen field and that the difficult times will pass. Make sure to reward yourself for your accomplishments.

Recommended Resources

Web Sites and Articles

AHA Perspectives in History. This American Historical Association publication is available to both members and non-members online. It occasionally has articles on graduate school.
<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/index.cfm>

AHA Pages for History Graduate Students. The AHA features resources on various topics associated with graduate school.
<http://www.historians.org/grads/index.cfm>

Books

Gustafson, Melanie S. *Becoming a Historian: A Survival Manual 2000* (American Historical Association, 2001).

Goldsmith, John A., John Komlos, and Penny Schine Gold. *The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career: A Portable Mentor for Scholars from Graduate School Through Tenure* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001).

Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (N.Y.: Henry Holt, 1998).

Boldt, Laurence. *Zen and the Art of Making a Living: A Practical Guide to Creative Career Design* (N.Y.: Penguin/Arkana, 1999). Though not focused on academia, this unique career guide provides a valuable, holistic, and practical perspective applicable to our line of work.

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