

# 10 Things Every Student Should Know Before Applying to Graduate School

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By Annie Rose Stathes, May 13, 2013

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*Graduate school* will challenge you mentally, emotionally, and physically, in ways you never imagined possible. You will realize exactly how much there is to know about your field of study. At times you may feel completely inadequate, and at some point in the process you might believe there is actually no way you will be able to complete all of your work, without cutting out activities like going to the bathroom, eating and sleeping. Beware a complete meltdown may be unavoidable!

Then after a few weeks or months or years of being in melt-down mode you will suddenly realize you are smarter and more capable, than you were when you first began your graduate program, you may even start to think completing your graduate degree could be possible!

While the transition into a graduate program may be intense, you can help save your sanity by being mentally prepared for the challenges ahead, accepting at some point you are likely to fail, while acknowledging your ability to pick yourself up, always keeping in mind the goals you had at the start of your journey.

## **(1) Taking time to take care of yourself during graduate school is critical to your success.**

Graduate students bogged down with coursework, research, writing, and teaching often fail to take care of themselves. It is incredibly important to slow down, take a deep breath, and set aside time for self-care during your program. This includes exercising, sleeping, and eating well. Create healthy habits: devote 30 minutes to walking or running while you listen to a book about your subject; stretch while you talk to a classmate or friend about your work; buy groceries at the beginning of the week and plan your meals in advance. Your body and mind will thank you. And it may help you do better work.

## **(2) Your advisor is your friend**

Ok, maybe not your friend, but at least someone who is rooting for you. Your advisor's job is to push you to succeed. This means he or she will be critical of your work, and challenge you to do better every day. Your advisor may or may not make you feel warm and fuzzy while supporting you, but keep in mind their primary objective is to push you to succeed.

## **(3) Your relationship with your defense committee counts.**

Your defense committee will ultimately determine whether or not you're ready to complete your program. Therefore, it makes sense to connect with your committee as much as possible. Ask for their guidance and support, and learn about their values, interests, and objectives. Get to know them as academics and as people, and utilize their expertise. Also, select committee members who seem to be a fit for your personality, goals, and objectives.

## **(4) Your academic and scholarly inadequacies will become perfectly clear to you.**

In graduate school, you'll likely discover you know even less than you thought. You'll realize you're a shoddy researcher or your writing is subpar. You'll probably acknowledge (and initially deny) there are lots of people who are smarter, wiser, and stronger than you mentally, emotionally, and physically. Try to view this as a good thing. Recognizing your weaknesses is the first step to improving upon them. Being in an environment where numerous people are better students, researchers, and academics will push you to improve your own thinking, researching, and writing. It will encourage you to have more meaningful and insightful conversations, to view things in new and expansive ways, and to improve upon your own strengths and abilities.

## (5) Begin work on your thesis project or dissertation immediately and don't ever stop.

You can stop when you graduate (unless you become a professor - then you'll never stop). Work with your final project as you would a work of art: begin with an idea, add details, and allow the work to evolve and solidify over time. Start developing ideas for your final project as soon as you start school. Work with your advisor to flesh out ideas and structure your project. Begin identifying and collecting sources, brainstorming, and writing as soon as you have a solid subject.

## (6) Develop relationships with faculty members and professionals in your field

Doing so will help you create a final project that has depth, substance, and relevance. Use your relationships with faculty members and academics to develop your ideas, discuss faculty research, and present a project that adds meaning to your field. Creating these connections is also good for networking, and it can also be stimulating and fun.

## (7) Treat the administrative staff, the person who's photocopying your sources, and everyone else you encounter with kindness and respect

This may seem like an obvious one, but many graduate students get so caught up in the hustle and bustle they forget there is a whole team of people indirectly helping them complete their projects. Take time to recognize the people who make your work possible and support you in crossing tasks of your list. It takes a village to support a graduate student.

## (8) Clearly define your research goals and objectives, create a plan for meeting them, and follow your plan

Doing so will help ensure you make it through and even have a bit of fun along the way. Knowing where you're going and why will pull you through those difficult moments when your research seems inadequate and pointless. It may help inspire you on tough days and motivate you on productive ones.

## (9) Do your best

You will be in graduate school for 2-8 years—make the most of it! Enjoy your time! Challenge yourself. Push yourself. Transform yourself. Never give less than you know you can. Allow yourself to fail (it's inevitable in graduate school), but pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and get back to business.

## (10) Be proud of yourself

Whether you are laughing or crying, be sure to give yourself proper credit for all your accomplishments, large or small. By attending graduate school you are engaging in a process that's improving the amount of knowledge available to the world. It is a difficult task, but one that is worth every drop of devotion.

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