

What graduate school is about: goals and survival skills

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Redefining success

- Class performance is not as important as before
- Critical and creative thinking are essential
 - Need strong evaluation skills
 - No “correct” answer!
- Research = discovering new ideas
 - Advisors don’t know the answer either
 - BUT they have the skills & experience to help YOU find it

Outline

- How to succeed in grad school
- How to overcome common issues

Do good research

- Learn from all aspects of grad school
 - Class discussions & projects: basic research skills
 - Seminars: critical analysis
 - Peers & colleagues: sounding board for ideas
- Research is a perpetual learning process
 - a result may reveal more questions than answers
 - Inspirations for new ideas while working on current one

Manage your time

- Take charge of your time
 - Prioritize
 - Eliminate context-switching overhead
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 - Decide what is most important
 - Make time to think about and do research!
- Eliminate context-switching overhead
 - Allocate enough time per task to amortize the overhead
 - For TA duties, respond to emails in batches, rather than being interrupt-driven
 - For research, allocate several contiguous hours & eliminate distractions

Communicate technical material well

- Distill complex ideas down to a few clear, concise statements
 - Teach (TA)
 - Volunteer to present in seminars
- Learn how to make & deliver presentations
 - Practice, practice, practice
 - Prepare the “elevator pitch” (1, 5 and 15 minutes)

Select courses and profs strategically

- Choose course content to:
 - Satisfy breadth requirements
 - Get project experience similar to research projects
 - Learn about other areas you might want to do research in!
- Select professors by:
 - Taking courses with potential advisors: impress them!
 - Talking with their students to find out their styles

Plan for milestones

- Map out a timeline with your department's milestones
 - Include deadlines for completion of courses, qualifying exams, choosing an advisor, thesis completion, etc.
 - Budget extra time for reaching some milestones
- If you anticipate you won't reach a milestone, let someone you trust know *as early as possible*. If you know beforehand, workarounds can be made.

Not that you expect to, but...

- Sometimes unanticipated situations arise when working closely with others...
- Consensual relationships with faculty are risky, due to inherently unequal positions of power
 - Best case scenario:
 - not a good forum for experiencing & evaluating a relationship
 - Worst case scenario:
 - uncomfortable at best
 - may color what other faculty think of you
 - the faculty won't leave
 - may compromise your career

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- Some common issues and how to overcome them

Adjusting to grad school

- Everybody arrives with different strengths & experiences
 - But really, they are all in the same boat
- Grad school is very “bursty”
 - At times, it will demand enormous amounts of time
 - Give yourself time to recover between the bursts

Making it “click”

- Different people will “click” with different research areas, advisors, and peers
 - when it clicks:
 - you’re passionate about what you’re working on
 - you’re good at it
 - you enjoy the people you’re working with
- You might need to explore several different areas and advisors before it “clicks”
 - Don’t be afraid to change things if it’s not working out
 - Bringing in a co-advisor may be enough!

Growing as a researcher

- A major transition happens in grad school (often year 3)
 - Classes are finally done
 - Now, you have to define your own research agenda
 - Self-driven schedule
- Having a good support network will smooth this transition
 - Build relationships with mentors during first 2 years
 - Turn to them for support and inspiration
 - Re-introduce structure to your environment
 - reading groups
 - monthly social lunches to build a sense of community with peers

The advisor/advisee relationship

- Best case: life-long friendship and collaboration
 - Many success stories like this
 - Research community foundation is built on it
- Sometimes, the relationship needs work to work
 - You can and should take steps to make it better
 - Advisors are almost always willing to help -- but you may need to help them realize that it's needed
- Sometimes, it won't work out
 - Bad chemistry
 - Switching advisors is the right thing in this case

Managing the relationship

- Your advisor is as human as you
 - They have personality flaws, quirks and are over-extended
- Be proactive!
 - Meet regularly
 - Talk about process and expectations as well as research
 - Talk especially when you feel “lost” or frustrated
- Other people / places can help too:
 - Find a coadvisor
 - Discretely talk to faculty and grads to get constructive suggestions
 - Internships can give “fresh perspective” and experience with success
 - Campus counseling services

You are in charge of your graduate career...

- You need to make things happen
- You CAN make things happen
 - and if you need it, help *is* there. Use it!
- Good luck! You'll do great!