

A Few Tips for Being a More Successful Graduate Student

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Below are a few notes that I've put together on being a graduate student in economics. They are culled from advice that I've gotten in the past, my own experiences as a graduate student, and from my observations working with graduate students over the past few years. Some of these you've undoubtedly discovered on your own. Some may seem obvious, but a gentle reminder can't hurt.

1. Talk to professors early and often about your research interests and work. Your advisor and committee members are valuable tools for the development of your thesis. Use them to get regular feedback; a meeting every one to three weeks is ideal. Advising students is part of a professor's job. You aren't intruding on their time when you speak with them. At the same time, be careful not to abuse their time -- more on that below. If you are not making satisfactory progress towards completing your degree, you should immediately discuss the matter with your advisor.

2. It is difficult to make a contribution to a field while you learn the literature and econometric tools at the same time. **For your own sanity, keep your research goals reasonable and start small.** Don't pressure yourself to come up with a great paper right away. You don't need a home run paper to get a good job. But you do need a solid single.

3. The ability to come up with answerable research questions is a crucial skill. Unfortunately, it is a difficult skill to teach and is most easily acquired through experience. A good research question is one that is interesting, has not been answered already, and is answerable. Young researchers typically do not have the experience to easily identify a good topic quickly. A very good second-best strategy is to come up with a lot of ideas and, through some trial and error, figure out which ones are the best. **Try to write down a new paper idea every day or two and save your ideas in a file somewhere** (just a sentence or two about each is fine). This "idea bank" will come in very handy when it comes time to start working on a new project. Naturally, most of the ideas won't work out. But hopefully there will be a few good ones there when you need them.

Some people complain that it is too difficult to come up with ideas. It certainly is difficult to come up with ideas that meet all three criteria above. But it is not difficult to come up with questions that meet the first criteria, those that are interesting. After all, most people get into economics because they find the questions and topics interesting. Some good places to get inspiration are by reading newspapers and magazines, and other places where the "big issues of the day" are discussed. Workshops and journals are also good places to gain exposure to new ideas.

Your advisor is crucial in this process because he or she has some experience in identifying answerable questions. You aren't expected to do everything yourself. Bring a list of paper ideas to your advisor, talk through them, and figure out which ones have the most promise.

4. Form a dissertation group with three to five people in your field and have regular meetings to discuss each others work. One way to structure this is to have weekly meetings, with one person responsible for presenting each week. A person's first presentation might discuss a couple ideas they are thinking about. Next, each person presents a review of the literature in the area they are thinking about

pursuing. At subsequent meetings people present part of their own research. This process is especially useful at the beginning research stages. At the later stages you might find that you want to meet once every two or three weeks (which corresponds to each person presenting their work every two to three months).

Graduate students tend to underestimate the value of presenting their work (see below). A dissertation group has the advantage of providing a forum to get some of the advantages of giving a presentation, but with less pressure than a full seminar. It also facilitates students asking questions during a presentation.

You also want to circulate written drafts of your work among your group members. Your advisor and committee members are not the only people who should read your work. The more people who read it, the better. Finally, it is best to have people in the same field in a dissertation group since they are best equipped to give useful feedback.

5. Be a research assistant for a professor. Doing research is a skill best acquired through experience. This is especially valuable if you plan to write an applied dissertation and can get an assistantship in which you learn applied skills, such as how to choose, handle, and clean data, write code, estimate models, and make decisions about alternative model specifications.

An assistantship also gives you a good opportunity to interact with faculty. Ideally, you'd like to work with someone whose research interests are close to yours, which will generate spillovers to your own research. Finally, it is important remember that most faculty don't have the financial resources to hire more than one research assistant, if that. Don't take it personally if you cannot get a position immediately.

Being a teaching assistant can also be valuable. It teaches you presentation skills and hones your understanding of the material. My view, though, is that, if you want a research job, you can get most of these benefits from teaching once. An important exception is that if you want a teaching job when you graduate, you will need to have more teaching experience and positive reviews of your teaching.

6. Present your work. Graduate students tend to underestimate the value of doing presentations of their work and also tend to be perfectionists when deciding when to present. The process of putting together a presentation is a valuable part of the research process. It forces you organize your ideas, communicate them clearly, and in many cases, simplify your ideas. Committing to give a seminar may also be a good motivational device to keep you on schedule. Finally, you can't underestimate the importance of your job talk in helping you get a job. You put a lot of time into writing your dissertation. Why ruin it with a poor presentation? Your first job talk should not be the second presentation you've ever given.

I'd like to write a guide to giving a presentation at some point, but for I'll just mention one thing: have a pad of paper handy when you present and write down the comments you get. You might also want to have a friend take notes on all of the questions and comments that come up in a presentation. One point of giving a talk is to get feedback on your work. You won't remember people's comments if they aren't written down during the talk. Writing down comments also shows your audience a good deal of respect by letting them know you take their comments seriously.

Good places to start presenting are in your dissertation group and in the informal labor lunch. Be sure to give a labor lunch in the spring before you go on the job market and also give a practice job talk between August and mid-October before you go on the market.

Conferences are another good place to present your work. You'll have an audience that is interested in your specific topic and you'll see what other people are working on. You'll also have a chance to start building your network of colleagues. (And incidentally, you don't have to present at a conference to attend one.)

But most importantly, present early and often. Don't wait until you think your paper is perfect before presenting it.

7. Attend seminars and use them as a learning tool. In fact, seminars are one of the most valuable learning tools available. You'll get an insight into the current questions that economists are thinking about, new tools, new data, and just as important, criticism of new work.

To get the most out of a seminar, you absolutely have to read the paper ahead of time. Take some notes before you go into the seminar about what you think of the paper and what questions you have about it. Graduate students rarely ask questions in seminars. Although this is understandable, it isn't desirable. Force yourself to ask a question at each seminar or labor lunch (or every other one), and soon you'll find that it comes much more easily. You'll also find it much easier to ask questions if you've read and thought about the paper ahead of time. (See below for more thoughts about asking questions in seminars.)

8. Most importantly, write early and write often. Write early and write often. Write early and write often. Got it? (Also see David Romer's "Out in Five" Rules)

Writing is probably the most important input into your research and career. Your ideas and results don't matter if they cannot be communicated and understood. Poor writing ability is a signal to others not to take your work seriously. Don't fool yourself into thinking that people are going to fight their way through your paper to get to your ingenious results. Rather, they are going to move on to something else.

Despite its importance, writing is not taught in undergraduate or graduate economics programs. You are going to have to put effort into improving your writing (and before you think this point doesn't apply to you, the writing in nearly every graduate student paper that I've read could be improved). People aren't born as good or poor writers. Although writing ability comes more easily to some people, it is largely a learned skill.

Graduate students in most departments in the humanities tend to be far better writers than economics graduate students. If you know someone in another department, he or she might be a great candidate to read your papers and offer writing advice. They don't have to understand the technical economic issues to help.

If English is not your first language, it is even more important to ask a native speaker to proofread your work.

The adage to write early and write often improves your writing ability and also improves the quality of your research. Writing down your ideas forces you to think systematically about your ideas and research. Putting down an outline to your paper helps to guide your research.

Two very good texts for improving your writing are Deirdre McCloskey, *Economical Writing*, and William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*. Both are short and are inexpensive. In Strunk and White is free on the internet.

9. It's never too early to think about the job market. You should talk to your advisor about your and his/her expectations for the market and establish a timetable for what you want to accomplish before going on the market. A great reference is:

John Cawley, *A Guide (and Advice) for Economists on the U. S. Junior Academic Job Market*, updated periodically.

Also see the Featured Articles on the AEA website at <http://www.aeaweb.org/joe>.

Some additional thoughts on graduate student etiquette:

1. Be on time to seminars. Walking into a seminar late disrupts the speaker's flow, disrupts audience members' concentration, and signals to everyone a low level of respect for the proceedings. I realize that sometimes people are late because of unavoidable circumstances. But that doesn't excuse us from putting forth our best effort to minimize late entrances. If you do arrive late, take a seat near the door so you minimize the interruption to everyone else.

2. Don't leave seminars early. Doing so is disruptive to everyone and shows a lack of respect to the speaker. It is especially egregious to leave a few minutes before the seminar breaks. If you aren't learning anything from the talk, just sit there and hold tight. Again, sometimes people have to leave early for unavoidable circumstances. If you'd like, tell the speaker ahead of time that you must leave early (especially if you know the speaker). In any case, please sit near the exit to minimize the disruption when you leave.

3. Ask questions in seminars, but don't accuse. Pay attention to your tone. I have noticed a few graduate students who ask seminar questions with a tone in their voice that is best reserved for an interrogation room. Imagine Andy Sipowicz standing over a perp and screaming "don't you think that education is endogenous?!" or "couldn't all of your results be due to measurement error in wages?!" It is great to think critically, but an accusatory tone is not appropriate for a seminar.

Remember, we invite seminar speakers to our campus. They don't receive any financial compensation for their time and they are away from their work, their spouse, and their children for two to three days, and all for our benefit. What's more, they have probably put the last six months of their lives into the paper being presented. They almost certainly know more about the topic than we do. They deserve to be treated respectfully.

4. Pay attention to the comments that your advisors give you. Professors get frustrated when they spend a couple of hours reading a student's paper and writing up comments, only to be given a new draft months later that does not address their comments. You are the sole author of your dissertation and no one should tell you that you must include or exclude a particular analysis from it. But if a professor tells you to try a different specification or to use a different data set, odds are there is a reason for it. It is not to make busy work for you; it's to improve the paper. If you don't want to do it, talk to the professor and explain your thinking. Don't just give them the next draft without any comment because that signals that you don't value their effort. They are likely to reduce their effort as a result.

5. Value your professors' time as if it were your own. Don't assume that just because a professor is in his or her office, or because the door is open, that they can stop what they are doing to talk to you (naturally, if it is "office hours," assume away). Feel free to pop into a professor's office, but ask them if it's a good time to talk or if you can set up an appointment. By the same token, just because your advisor knows Stata doesn't mean that he or she should be the first person you call when you have a Stata question.