

FAQ: Student Questions

The following questions were asked by students that I work with, some anonymously and some attributed. Like the rest of the documents in this series, my responses are my personal opinion/advice. Others may disagree. Specific circumstantial information may also change my advice.

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How early should I know what my dissertation topic will be?

- When you applied to graduate school, you likely had to indicate your area of research interest. That forms the beginning of your dissertation topic, but no one expects you to arrive in your PhD knowing exactly what you will study and how you will study it. This initial indication of research interests is also the beginning of the covenant between supervisor and student: this is the area you will work on together. I expect that this idea will evolve as you continue to read and think about a dissertation, but very significant deviation may mean that your new topic is no longer in my area of interest and expertise. Over the course of the first year of PhD study, you will be devoting significant time to course work and comprehensive exam preparation. You should also be reading and thinking about your research topic, meeting with your committee, and starting to envision what your dissertation will look like. In most programs, this process accelerates in the second year and culminates with a thesis proposal. Your proposal should reflect your disciplinary knowledge (informed by course work) and the work you have done with your committee and the literature to identify a gap in current knowledge. The proposal is a written document that is used by the student and committee to develop a thorough understanding of the dissertation to be undertaken. It allows thorough exploration of the theoretical foundations of the work, the state of knowledge in the field, and the methodological approach to answering the identified research questions and objectives. Depending on your program, this proposal should be accepted some time within the second year of your PhD. Some programs have a formal proposal defense process attached to a certain timeline. In other programs, it is up to the student and committee to decide on when the proposal is complete and the research is ready to start.
- For MSc students, this timeline is accelerated, and the level of detail and sophistication of the proposal is lower. For instance, an MSc does not require an original contribution to knowledge. The thesis proposal should be accepted by the committee/program at some point in the Winter semester (Jan-April) of the first year of study, which leaves 1 year to complete the research.

How many conferences should I shoot for each year?

- This is an “it depends” answer. It depends on where you are in your program, the type of conference you are targeting, and your funding arrangements. National and international conferences are expensive to attend, and they look for original, completed research. It’s unrealistic to expect that you will present at multiple (or any!) national or international conferences early in your PhD, but reasonable to shoot for one or two in the latter years, when you have results from your early studies. Think about other projects you may be able to present (e.g. MSc work, side RA projects). Look for local opportunities. The expectations are lower (i.e. you can present works in progress, study proposals, literature reviews) and the cost of attending is lower too.
- Internal conferences (i.e. run by your university, department, or another program you are a member of) are a great opportunity to share your work

locally, practice putting together a presentation, and get feedback on your research. They are typically free to attend and don't cost anything- I highly recommend submitting your work to these conferences. At McMaster, you could consider the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Plenary Day, Norman Education Research Day, or the Department of Health Research Methodology, Evidence, and Impact research day.

- It's worth investigating travel funding offered by your program and department. If you don't see a formal process for applying for travel funding, make an inquiry- there are often funds available. You can also apply to the conference for travel funding. Many will offer to at least waive the registration fee for students without conference funding.
- Ask your supervisor if they have funding available to support your conference registration and travel. Research grants typically support travel to support the research results, so if your dissertation aligns with a research grant held by your supervisor, he or she may be able to support your travel fees.

[How much time should be spent conferencing versus publishing?](#)

- Publishing/completing your thesis should be your first priority. Conferences become more important near the end of your degree when you are getting close to the job market, but if you don't complete your degree in a timely fashion or if your publication record is poor, networking at conferences won't matter.

[What if I change my mind about my topic halfway through?](#)

- Another "it depends" answer. What do you mean by "halfway through"? How far away is this new topic from the work you have already done? Is your supervisor still interested and able to advise your work on this new topic? To answer the latter question, let's imagine that you are getting bored of your dissertation topic and you identify another project you are more interested in. This is normal, but you should still finish your dissertation. We all get bored of projects we have been working on for a while, and a new project seems bright, shiny and exciting. No one's PhD is their life's work, though- get it done and then you can move on to another project. The PhD is a hurdle you jump to prove you can jump hurdles (and jump them quickly and well). You can investigate the other topic on the side, as part of a research assistantship, after you finish your PhD. Your PhD topic will not be your identity for the rest of your life and sometimes knowing that makes you more comfortable just getting it done so you can move on to other topics that reflect your new passion. Have you ever heard the expression "a good PhD is a completed PhD"? It's totally true.

[What have been the qualities of the best graduate students you've ever supervised?](#)

- Oooh, this is a fun one. They are good writers. They are interested in knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and have a sense of curiosity and inquisitiveness about their topic (and often life in general). They know how to work when inspired but also when not inspired- they can "grind it out" when necessary until the muse visits again. They expect to work hard and they do it. They are intellectually flexible, able to see connections across disparate

- ideas, think abstractly, and make creative links. They have interests outside of their dissertation topic/academia. They cultivate good habits- time management, data organization, sleep, recreation, social support.
- I think another quality of successful graduate students is the ability to move away from a student mindset (“I am doing this to get a good mark”) and into a researcher mindset (“I am doing this to answer a question”). You can focus on doing work which meets the bar and earns you your degree, or you can focus on obtaining the best answer possible to a really important question. The latter will take you much further in research, but it often requires a switch in perspective and approach.

In your experience, what are the qualities of the graduate students who struggle the most?

- Poor writing, whether it's writing skills or writing hygiene. By writing hygiene I mean being able to sit down and write when needed, or not having good writing habits. This is the opposite of the comment I made in response to the last question about being able to “grind it out” until the muse visits again.
- Lack of social support or few interests and coping mechanisms outside of academia. Graduate school can be isolating and many graduate students find themselves at some time feeling depressed, anxious and lonely. Having something invigorating in your life that is totally separate from graduate school is important. Maybe that's family or exercise or friends or art.
- Wanting the degree for the credential and not the knowledge. It's really hard to stay motivated and work hard when all you want is the three letters after your name- this is related to the previous comment about student mindset vs. researcher mindset. If you just want to have an MSc, pick a course-based program.
- Struggling graduate students often don't make an effort to integrate themselves into a research community, and this can be both a cause and an effect of the struggle. Working in isolation is difficult; often the student or staff member sitting across from you has the answer, the resource, or the assistance that can help you move forward. Building or joining a research community can help make your work easier, better, and provides opportunities to help others do the same.

How do you find the balance between breadth and depth (topics and methods)?

- I don't feel qualified to answer this question! It's something I struggle with myself, being way too broad and having too many interests. It benefitted me in my PhD, because I was involved in many different Research Assistantships and published a lot. I secured a postdoc that was quite far away from my PhD program/topic in part because of this breadth and then later in my career when the soft funding for my first faculty position ended, I was able to use my breadth to jump fields again to secure another faculty position. So the breadth has worked out for me, but we are told over and over in academia that we need to develop a niche, deep knowledge, concentrated expertise. It's hard to become internationally known as an expert when you publish in 5 different areas. That said, I think it is expected

that graduate students and junior faculty are a bit broader, and that research programs will narrow as you mature (and then maybe broaden again). This is also a challenge of interdisciplinary research, many of us struggle with breadth vs. depth.

How can I find out what job opportunities are available to me with my degree both inside and outside academia?

- This is a challenging question to answer anonymously. So much depends on your interests, your strengths, your experiences and skills outside of your graduate degree. What kind of professional life do you want to build for yourself? How do you want to spend your work day? If you know people who are doing jobs you might be interested in, ask if you can shadow them for a day, or take them for coffee and talk about how they identified this potential career path.
- There are lots of career counselling options out there. McMaster offers services through the Student Success Center (<https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/personal-growth/career-exploration/>). There are also lots of popular books and websites geared to helping individuals identify and explore potential career options, from classics like What Colour is Your Parachute? To websites like the Versatile PhD (<https://versatilephd.com/>) and Inside Higher Ed (<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice>)
- It can be hard to be surrounded by people who seem to have their path carved out while you are still wondering what direction to travel in. We're all at a different stage in our career journeys and comparing yourself to others likely isn't productive or confidence-building.

What are some tips for finishing a masters or PhD early?

- I'm not sure what to say here other than do your best work and do it quickly. Be organized so that you can take advantage of opportunities that arise. Being organized also helps you work with your supervisor and committee- tell them what you need and ask when it's reasonable to receive that. (e.g., I'll send a draft of chapter 1 on Sept 1. Could you return it with comments by Sept 15? This approach will get faster feedback than when the chapter lands unannounced in their inboxes). The students I know who are proceeding faster than scheduled keep themselves on a strict schedule. They work a lot of hours, but they also work smart. They think strategically about feasibility of recruitment and design their projects to capitalize on this. They are also just good students who are quick thinkers, strong writers and very organized. There's a bit of luck involved in terms of securing strong response to recruitment methods too. Finishing your degree early isn't about luck or pure brilliance. It's mostly about hard work.

What is the job market like for PhDs with a focus on social science/qualitative methods?

- This question is a bit too broad to have only one answer. Having a PhD that demonstrates your facility with realist program evaluation would be very marketable to many organizations, perhaps less so to an academic university department. By this I meant to illustrate that employability is probably more about topic and opportunity than field or methodology. What marketable skills are you developing? Who would be interested in your expertise? The job market for PhDs is not great right now in academia, regardless of your field. Universities are not increasing their faculty complements and many universities are hiring sessional faculty or contractually limited faculty rather than traditional tenure-track faculty.

What should I consider or find out about whilst deciding whether or not to do a PhD?

- I once heard someone say “if you can imagine being happy doing anything else other than a PhD- do that”. It sounds a bit extreme but I think there is some truth there. It’s hard to get a PhD. Many don’t finish. It can be isolating. When you finish, the job market can be tough, especially if you are not very flexible geographically. The return on investment (salary you didn’t earn while a graduate student vs. salary you earn after the PhD) is not great from a financial perspective. BUT I also feel like I have won the lottery career-wise because I love my job and can’t believe that someone pays me (well) to think and talk and read about things that interest me all day every day, surrounded by bright and engaged people doing exactly the same thing. I think it would be important to know yourself, your abilities, and your personality. Ask yourself if you think you will enjoy the process of getting the PhD. Academic life just gets harder after that so if you struggled with grad school you might not enjoy a life in academia.

How do vacations work? How much time is reasonable to take off?

- I’m going to use this question to make another soap-box point. Think of grad school like a job. If you are a full time grad student, it’s a full time job. You should dedicate full-time hours to working in a focused, concentrated way. That doesn’t mean never look at social media while you are working, but it does mean don’t waste 4 hours online and then call it a work day. You’re free in many ways to decide when and where your work hours will happen, but I think that developing a schedule and routine that makes grad school feel like a job is helpful in many ways. If you’re giving a good 40 hours a week to focused and productive study, then you are definitely entitled to vacation, as well as weekends and evenings (or however you choose to structure your time) off. Of course, there will be busier times and deadlines that may require you to work more than 40 hours a week, but that should be the exception, not the norm.
- McMaster gives me 4 weeks of vacation every year. I don’t see why you shouldn’t take 4 weeks as well. Those 4 weeks include the time the university is closed (e.g. end of December) but don’t include Reading Week, when I’m expected to be working.

How important are grades in graduate school?

- While grades are important, the focus in graduate school often shifts toward research, acquiring practical skills, and professional development. Success is not solely measured by grades, but also by your ability to conduct research, engage in scholarly activities, and prepare for your future career.
- Grades are different in other ways, too. For one, thing the passing grade in graduate school at McMaster is a B- (70%). Grades will matter to your future more or less depending what you plan. If you are an MSc student planning to apply for a PhD, producing a transcript with strong grades will be important for that application. If you are a PhD student, you likely won't be submitting your transcript to a postdoctoral fellowship or faculty job, and so grades matter less. Where grades do matter is in scholarship applications, these often request the inclusion of a transcript in the application.
- I suspect you will find that professors have different attitudes to grading in graduate school. Sometimes this reflects disciplinary differences. I think it also reflects prioritizing the provision of feedback over a particular grade. Many graduate courses will be seminar style, which makes grading difficult, and most folks who engage with the material and their classmates will end up with an A in those courses.

What are comprehensive exams, and what is their purpose?

- Comprehensive (sometimes called “qualifying”) exams are a typical component of PhD programs. The learning objective is for the student to demonstrate both breadth and depth of knowledge in their field of study, certifying them as having mastery or expertise in that area.
- Comprehensive exams are completed in the first half of the PhD, before starting your dissertation. At McMaster they must be successfully completed by month 24 of your program. The format will differ depending on your program. You may be asked to write a series of written exams, complete an independent project, orally defend your written work, or something else.

How do I find additional research or teaching assistantships?

- Research assistantships abound, typically offered by faculty members with a grant for a research project who need some assistance. You can find these by mentioning your availability and interest to any faculty member you know, as well as research managers in your department or departments doing relevant research. Being clear about what amount of time (e.g. # hrs/week) and which skills (e.g. particular methodologies, data collection methods) you can offer will help you find an RA position that is right for you.

- Teaching assistantships are sometimes coordinated centrally, and sometimes coordinated through the individual programs that are offering the courses needing TAs. It is harder to get an extra teaching assistantship because these are promised to graduate students in their offer of admission, and prioritized for allocation according to those offers. If you want to do more TA-ing, you could send your CV to the program officer for relevant undergraduate or MSc (if you are a PhD student) programs.

What are your tips for establishing a productive writing routine?

- I think the most important element here is to know yourself and know what works for you. Are you motivated by a quota system such as setting a goal of a certain number of words or hours per day? Or do you find completing a project more motivating? Ask yourself how you motivate yourself to get started on other difficult tasks, or carve out time for other activities you know you “should” be doing but sometimes have a hard time getting started with?
- Do you like having a step by step list and checking things off? Do you find the Pomodoro method helpful? Do you like to use complicated project management software? Are you someone who likes to work on an outline and then sketch things in as you go? Experiment with different techniques to design your own, individualized method for writing, and then set yourself up to stick with that.
- I think that this kind of self-discovery is one of the most important things you will learn as a graduate student. Success in academia requires a lot of internal motivation and organization/prioritization of your own time. Learning how to do this as a graduate student will set you up for success in whatever career you pursue.

What experiences, skills, or qualifications do you think are most valuable/important to gain during PhD studies in preparation for an academic career?

- One of my greatest regrets about my own graduate training is that I didn’t broaden my methodological toolkit. I went really deep on qualitative methods, found out I had a knack for it, and then went deeper. I didn’t engage in much coursework or any research projects that would develop my quantitative skills, and that is something I have been trying to do later in my career. I think when I trained this was typical- most students took methods courses that aligned with the kind of research they planned to conduct. But if I was a more versatile methodologist, it would expand the questions I could ask.
- If I could point to two things that I see help graduate students towards a career in academia over and over again it is engaging in multiple research projects that broaden their networks, enhance their methodological and topic knowledge, and build their CV. This helped me personally, and I’ve seen many others succeed through this path. The trick is to not take on TOO much extra work that it sacrifices your ability to complete your dissertation work well (and on time) or

jeopardizes your ability to do the other projects well. You don't want to build a network of colleagues who think of you as someone who can't deliver or doesn't do good work- that would be counterproductive, but could happen if you overload yourself.

- Building your network will also be important. Find good mentors, build your network of peers, get to know faculty members working in your chosen field. This will help enrich your work now and later.
- TA work and teaching will seldom be the thing that gets you a job (unless you are aiming for a teaching-track position), but often academic jobs ask for a teaching portfolio or student evaluations of teaching, or some other indication of teaching experience. My advice would be to prioritize the RA over the TA work, but make sure you do at least a little bit of teaching, even a couple of guest lectures in a course run by a faculty member you know.
- Some undergraduate programs hire "sessional instructors", or instructors for one course. This can be a great way to add some excellent teaching experience to your CV, and to make some money. This tends to be a lot of work, though, as you often have to design the syllabus and all the materials on the fly. Consider this when you are a PhD student, if your dissertation is going smoothly, and the course is on a topic you are comfortable with. These positions are typically posted publicly.

From your perspective, what are the most rewarding aspects of pursuing a career in academia? What are the most challenging or frustrating aspects?

- Generally I find this career to be extremely rewarding. I love the autonomy of deciding what I want to study, and arranging my work time in the way that makes me the most productive. I love the ability to mentor students. I love the opportunity to move across topics or populations and learn something new. Interacting with colleagues across the world is enriching, and the opportunity to shape policy or consult with decision-makers makes me feel like I'm using my skills and abilities to make a difference in the world.
- I think the frustrating aspects are just the inverse of these things. Sometimes when we write a paper it feels like no one cares about that knowledge, no matter how hard you try and translate it. Sometimes you work with students who struggle to progress and have habits or inclinations that you can see are stymying their efforts. Sometimes we have a great idea for a project but can't find funding to make it happen.

How should I think about my work as a PhD student/candidate and my role as a Co-Investigator on research grants outside of my PhD?

- I would consider Co-Investigator work to be similar to other side research projects. It can be a great way to grow your network, skills, and CV, but could also be a distraction from completing your PhD well and on time.
- Negotiate your role with the PI ahead of time. What will the expectations be? On what timeline? Will you be paid? How will authorship and other academic credit be negotiated?
- You can also talk to your supervisor about these opportunities, and how you imagine them fitting in to your career plans. Your supervisor is there to provide advice, so should be helpful to you in figuring out how to most effectively allocate your time.

What types of professional development funds are available to me as a PhD student/candidate to support my learning in, for instance, grant writing or knowledge translation?

- I love this thoughtful approach to professional development. Just starting with a list like this of things you would like to learn is a great idea. CIHR has an “Independent Development Plan” and accompanying resources that can help you identify similar professional goals. <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/50516.html>. You can also pursue the online professional development planning course for researchers offered through the UK organization Vitae. <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/professional-development-planning-for-researchers-online-course-pdp-roc>
- The McPherson Institute at McMaster has a lot of professional development courses relevant to careers in academia. As a McMaster student you can also look for microcredentials, continuing education courses, or courses in other departments for more formal opportunities.
- Don't underestimate the apprenticeship model for learning these skills. If you can identify a faculty member or colleague who does these skills very well, ask them if there is opportunity to join in on the next grant they write or KT plan they design to learn about their process.
- There are many external opportunities for professional development, but these often have associated fees. There are no formal programs that I am aware of through McMaster to fund your enrollment in external programs, but your supervisor or your graduate program may have funds they could use to support your learning.

What advice would you provide to graduate students who have young children or are pregnant? How to balance PhD and family.

- Your PhD can be a good time to grow your family. Your schedule is flexible, you can do a lot of work from home, and there are many resources available to you.
- First, know the formal policies on parental leave from your program and any other employment or funding you have. For example, tri-council scholarships will fund you while you are parental leave, just as if you were active in your program. The School of Graduate Studies also provides financial support while on parenting leave.
- This page from the School of Graduate Studies provides a list of helpful resources, links to the relevant policies, and some key takeaway messages:
<https://gs.mcmaster.ca/grad-student-postdoc-families/#tab-content-managing-family-responsibilities-graduate-student-panel>
- Some students may feel nervous about informing their supervisor about their pregnancy. I wish I could say there is nothing to be nervous about here, we will all be happy for you, and your supervisor's response will be "Congratulations, what do you need"? I hope that will be the case, but different people may react in less supportive ways. University and federal policy about leaves and accommodation are in your favour though- your supervisor is obligated to abide by policies supporting parental leave and any necessary accommodation throughout pregnancy. Seek support from your program director, Department Manager, or Human Resources if you need to.
- My advice as a parent? Plan to take the maximum leave available to you, and don't commit to doing any work on that leave. If things go great, your baby sleeps well, and you are feeling good, it's easier to pick up a bit of work or come back earlier. Much harder to back down on commitments you made before you knew how it was going to go.