

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.

1) 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.

2) 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.
- 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.

3) 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.

4) What if I change my mind about my topic halfway though? (Or find out I'm more passionate about another topic)

- 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, if you find out you are more passionate about another project- well, no one's PhD is their life's work. 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.

5) 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.

6) In your experience, what are the qualities of the graduate students who struggle the most? Or is it a case of the Anna Karenina principle: “Happy families [Successful graduate students] are all alike; every unhappy family [unsuccessful graduate student] is unhappy [unsuccessful] in its own way”?

- Poor writing, whether it’s writing skills or writing hygiene. By writing hygiene I mean being able to sit down and write when needed, a lack of 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.

7) How do you find the balance between breadth and depth? If you want an academic position, is it worth having several parallel research streams? How many methodologies should you master during your PhD?

- 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 RAships 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.

8) Most of my classmates have professional degrees are using the masters program to advance their existing careers. I do not have a professional degree and don't yet have a career since I am coming from undergrad. As a non-professional, 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. 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](#) and [Inside Higher Ed](#).
- 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.

9) 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.

10)What is the job market like for PhDs with a focus on social science/qualitative methods? (Both inside and outside academia)

- 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.

11)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. 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.

12) 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 while away 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.