

Grad School Advice
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Opinions expressed here are my own and not reflective of the sociology department at CU.

General Philosophy:

1. **Trust your capabilities, not your knowledge.** You are a capable person who can get through grad school and do what you need to do. You do not, however, know everything. There is an overwhelming amount of things you will never know. Don't fret about it. Especially in the beginning of grad school, it is far better to want to learn instead of pretending to know something. It's okay to be wrong, too. Expertise will come naturally.

You will suddenly have a huge amount of knowledge on an esoteric topic because you've worked to do so. You've got this and will continue to have it. I think this mindset is one of the reasons I've avoided the dreaded imposter syndrome. Just because you don't know how to do something or don't know something yet doesn't mean you can't handle it.

2. **Do not compete.** Everyone comes to grad school with vastly different academic backgrounds, levels of maturity, levels of financial support, and skills. Each person will specialize enough (hopefully?) that you do not have to compete with people in your program. Be genuinely happy for their successes. Share tips on how you got yours. You are not in grad school to win it.

3. **A healthy amount of caring is good.** Your mental health is more important than a course assignment. Your article will never be perfect. Not everyone will like you. If you don't have a good amount of distance from grad school, you won't be able to grow. You should work hard and believe in your work, but not be so attached you can't take criticism, for example.

4. **Be deliberate.** Each choice in grad school is a strategic one to get a career later. In my case, I go to a ton of professionalization seminars, try to hit two conferences a year, and got a certificate in a related field to try to be open to jobs. Your choices should help you further your career because grad school is a job. It's okay to mess up, but this mentality will help you later.

5. **Be nice.** Be nice to everyone. You never know who talks to whom. Office staff usually have a lot of intel about grad students. When I came to grad school, I had no money and couldn't afford new clothes until about 6 months in. There were a few people who made rude comments about it. It was entirely unnecessary and brought me way more stress than I needed. Don't be that guy.

6. **Create boundaries.** Some people are very strict with this, like only working 9-5 or not checking emails on the weekend. I do this more on the fly by prioritizing stuff I need to do outside of work. This is much easier to do once you're no longer taking courses and depends on your boss.

7. **Remember why you're here.** I think everyone has at least one moment where they wonder if should drop out. I am here because I like the aspects of what I want to do and think my work is important.

8. **It's okay if stuff changes.** It's totally fine if your interests change. You may not do a dissertation on what you came in to do. It's okay if your priorities shift. A lot of the conditions of graduate school are not permanent.

9. **Be able to explain what you do and why it's important.** Elevator pitches are really important. One instance on the way back from a conference a border patrol official asked me what I studied, and I was able to answer in one sentence. People want to be interested in your work without hearing everything you've ever done. You'll also be married to a topic for a while at a certain point, so make sure you like it, and make sure you know why other people should care.

10. **If you feel like complaining, channel it.** I found a lot about graduate school frustrating. I also don't think grad students are treated particularly well. I joined the grad student government and helped advocate directly to administrators so I would feel so powerless. That might be an approach that's specific to me, though. Activism, mentorship, and other avenues might be more appropriate.

Mentorship:

1. **Always ask.** Always ask about opportunities. This can be anything from fellowships to working with faculty to co-authorship to reading a draft. The worst someone can do is say no. This is not a good job for someone who cannot handle rejection.

2. **Have more than one mentor.** Your advisor should be the captain of the ship, but it's good to have other people to lean on and learn from. You will have to build a committee after all. Plus, advisors are not infallible.

3. **Find mentors that care about you as a person.** This is a best case scenario. You want a mentor that will go to bat for you. You want one who looks out for you and asks how you're doing. I always came from a low income background, so having mentors help me navigate that was crucial. One of my advisors invited me to Thanksgiving my second year, and another found a doctor for my mom.

4. **Find "older" students.** Some of them will have very good, specific advice. A lot of them want to pass on their wisdom. Take this with a grain of salt, however.

Time management:

1. **The Eisenhower matrix.** I got this from my advisor (Leslie Irvine!), who is good at time management. Sort your tasks into four quadrants like so:

1. Important and Urgent	2. Urgent But Not Important
3. Important But Not Urgent	4. Neither Important Nor Urgent

Do box 1 first, and do box 4 last. 2 and 3 are more judgement calls. This stops me from checking my email 400 times instead of actually making a deadline.

2. **Use a to-do list.** I use an app called todoist because I like that it gives me daily and long term goals (also I earned cute digital animals with habitica). Some people write them. Mapping out what you actually need to do ensures you know it, even if you don't want to do it.

3. **Allow yourself to do other things.** Studies show that people who intend to work for hours uninterrupted do not do as well as those who schedule breaks. Have lunch with other grad students. Go to that colloquia. The ability to show up is provided you can spare the time, but generally you have more time than you think you do, unless you're hitting a deadline.

Reading:

1. **Reading is easier than not.** It is easier to have read and know things in a course, for example, than to pretend you know things. If you're meeting an academic, it's easier to have read some of their articles than to vaguely know what they've done. Reading is a part of your job at this point. That being said...
2. **Don't read everything closely.** Not everything will be of use to you. Focus on works in your subjects. If you need to skim, read the introductions and conclusions. Read the first and last sentences. Read enough to comprehend.
3. **Pomodoro.** I use the pomodoro method, which is 25 minutes on and 5 minutes off. This helps me quantify work I've done and makes me feel more accomplished. It also ensures I don't rush the end of pieces. I was messing up my back from sitting for long periods of time, so this forces me to get up periodically. Find a way to manage your time with breaks that works for you.

Writing:

1. **Actually write everything down.** Do you know how many times I've had a good idea while I'm in the shower and I think I'll remember it and then I really don't? It's an embarrassing amount of times. You won't always remember. I remedy this by having a word vomit document for each project.
2. **Write 30 minutes a day.** Some days you won't make it, and that's okay. However, most days you can fit that much, and you'll feel better about days you can fit more.
3. **Track your writing.** It will show you how much you're actually working and what work you've done that day. It was cool to know my third year paper took 65 hours of dedicated writing (not including data collection and analysis).
4. **Start writing term papers over breaks.** This one is a no-brainer. Breaks are not for relaxing in grad school, or at least not fully. Getting ahead is easier than trying to crank out 15-25 for three classes while grading finals. But also don't feel bad if you end up just spacing out.
5. **Use resources.** There's no shame in wanting to improve your writing; in fact it's part of your job. Looking for help is not a problem. Start a writing group with some friends. Go to the writing center. Read books. Get a software like Grammarly. Don't be embarrassed for trying to grow.

Teaching:

1. **Admit when you don't know.** Saying "I don't know the answer to that. I'll look it up and get back to you" is totally fine as an answer. Don't BS something that you don't actually know. Students aren't in your class for you to show off your knowledge; they are there to get actual answers and nuances around them and think critically.
2. **Don't reinvent the wheel.** The internet exists. Other people have probably taught the course you will. Ask for advice. I've gotten a ton of great resources like syllabi and rubrics from other grad students.
3. **No matter your annoyance with the culture, respect the individual.** I often feel negatively about aspects of undergraduate culture like skipping class and cheating. However, I do not take this out on individual students. They're adults but don't know everything. I do participation points but not attendance because my students are old enough to make their own choices. I understand that they still need background on academic stuff (they don't all know what office

hours are) or may need what feels like handholding. I send a “weekly email” with announcements, upcoming deadlines, and the readings for the week. It works wonders.

4. **Most students are not like you.** You are in grad school, which means you felt a high affinity for your field and that you were a motivated student. This isn’t the case for all students. Not every one of them wants to go to grad school or even get an A in the class. Your job is to meet them where they are and walk them to somewhere better.

5. **Check your own biases.** Make sure you aren’t giving more attention to the student who is like you; smart, always has the answer, passionate. Make sure you’re also engaging a spread of students; you might not notice that mostly the front row or men or major students are speaking in the class.

6. **Figure out a healthy amount of tangent.** This is especially true if you teach a discussion based course. A good amount of tangent doesn’t actually take time away from learning, and it signals to the students your game for engaging their interests. However, if there’s just one student who won’t let something go (asking about how an assignment works or really wanting to talk about the DNA basis for race or something) tell them to meet you in office hours.

7. **Switch it up.** I find my students have about a 15-20 minute attention span for one thing. Some people are such great lecturers that they can engage the class with just lecturing for the length of the class. I am not one of these people. I try to switch between lecture, discussion, group, and individual activities.

8. **Include multiple ways to learn, especially if they’re not how you do it.** My biggest mistake my first year was assuming everyone liked hands on learning, like me. I started introducing anonymous polling to start discussion, individual and group activities, and engagement with media to ensure I wasn’t just catering to myself.

9. **Look for feedback but don’t take it personally.** I put out my own mechanism for feedback, asking about topics like the length of exams or what activities they enjoyed most. My formal evaluations sometimes turn back some dumb feedback (“ur hilarious” is one of the nicer ones). Take the good and constructive and reject the superfluous (especially because student evaluations tend to be biased in terms of race, nationality, and gender). Not every student is going to like you, and that’s fine.

10. **If you’re a TA, speak up with your professor, but understand where they’re coming from.** A professor I TAed for once accidentally set a deadline for 125 short answer papers to be graded by 11 am, even though the final ended at 9 pm the night before. At first, I was worried telling him I couldn’t do it would make me look incompetent. However, trying to complete an impossible task would actually make me incompetent. Professors have a lot going on and a lot expected of them, so they may need you for many of the day-to-day operations of a class. Each professor will need different things from you, and will have a unique relationship with every TA.

11. **Give the benefit of the doubt...usually.** When students tell me they were sick but they didn’t get a note from the doctor because it was closed and now they’re better, I let them slide. Same with familial tragedies such as funerals. I also recognize a student may have something that is disrupting their lives they don’t want to tell me (break up, mental health issues, family drama) so I give them a break unless it becomes a pattern. I consider them excused and I let them choose between alternate assignments or testing them on the material. I’ve had a fair amount students ask if they can miss tests to go to parties or other illegitimate excuses. I let

them know it's their choice to miss whatever they'd like, but that I can't advise that they do. Similarly, but

importantly, I teach on what I call "tough topics." I let students know we'll be talking about violence sexual assault, for example, the week before. I let them know that they don't have to attend that day if they meet with me for an alternate assignment. I've had about 6 students take me up on it and they've done very well as a result.

12. **Try to maximize every student's experience.** I don't round someone down from an A because I want a bell curve. I want each student to get the very best out from my course. Students who don't do well in my class usually make an active choice not to. They're skipping class or not studying or trying to cheat. However, a lot of students work very hard to get that C and I try to give them the resources possible to do so. I also have several free topic days at the end of the semester so students can dig into what they are most interested in.

13. **Boundaries.** Try to email your students back within the business day and own up when you don't get back to them. Don't stay up all night answering the same question in the syllabus. Spend all of office hours with a student only if there's not other students waiting. A student once asked me why I couldn't meet at her house on a Sunday and I explained to her what my job was. You have power over these students; you can be friendly, but I don't hang out with them/add them on social media until after I'm not in charge of their grades anymore.

14. **Don't give your everything.** I give a lot to my students. I work very hard to cultivate a solid learning experience for them. I read every word of their writing, but not more. I prep slides but I don't spend more than an hour on them. I think not over-preparing gives students the space to direct their own learning in some ways. It also makes sure you're actually doing research and sleeping.

Anyway, that's how I do it. Everyone has their own path and that's okay.