

How to Be a Good AI Researcher

Tao LIN

September 15, 2025



1 Course Logistics

2 Recitation

3 How to Do Research

- The Illustrated Guide to a Ph.D.
- 10 Easy Ways to Fail a Ph.D.
- Introduction to the Research Workflow (a CV Perspective)
- How to Make Steady Progress?
- How to Keep Track With the Literature?
- How to Read Papers?

4 Concluding Remarks

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Course Schedule

| Week | Date | Topics |
|------|---------------|---|
| 1 | 2025. Sep. 02 | How to communicate |
| 2 | 2025. Sep. 09 | How to do presentation |
| 3 | 2025. Sep. 16 | How to be a good AI researcher (I): doing research I |
| 4 | 2025. Sep. 23 | How to be a good AI researcher (II): productivity and career |
| 5 | 2025. Sep. 30 | How to be a good AI researcher (III): academic paper writing and peer reviews |
| 6 | 2025. Oct. 14 | Sharing the experience of writing excellent academic papers and rebuttal |
| 7 | 2025. Oct. 21 | Practice course I |
| 8 | 2025. Oct. 28 | Practice course II |

Acknowledgement

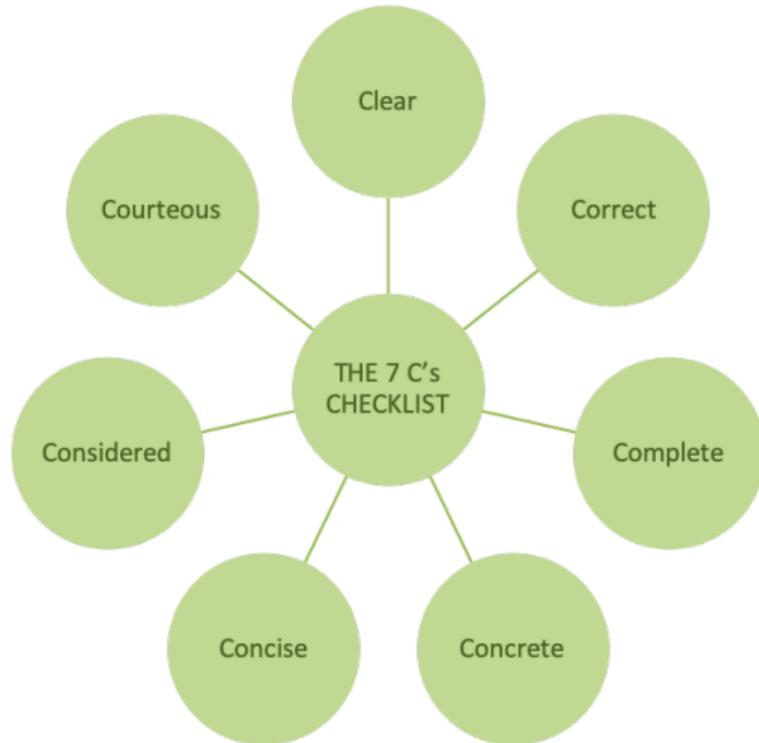
- The 7 Cs of Communication, World of Work Project
- Awesome Tips, JiaBin Huang
- The illustrated guide to a Ph.D., Matt Might
- 10 easy ways to fail a Ph.D., Matt Might
- GAMES003

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In the previous two weeks...

We learn how to communicate: the 7 C's of communication



Please revisit our previous lecture when necessary.

We learn the principles of presentation

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- ⑤ Guide, highlight, and interpret the key results for your audience!
- ⑥ Practice almost makes perfect. Rehearse your presentation from the aspect of your audience!

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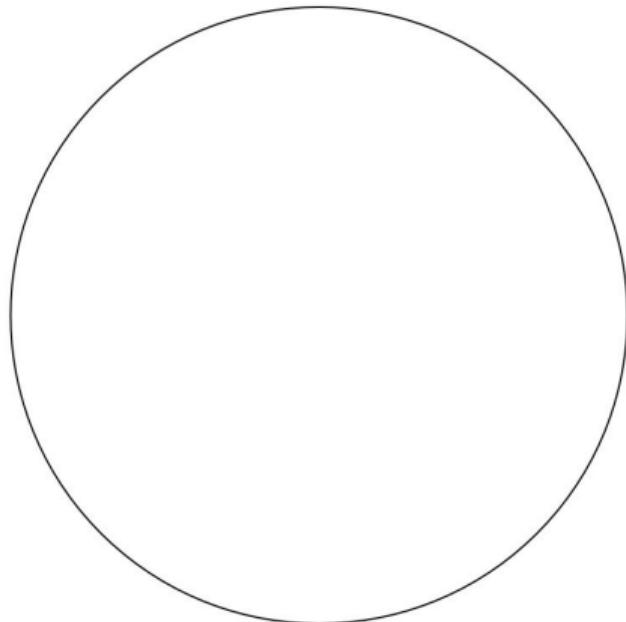
What a Ph.D. is?

¹<https://matt.might.net/articles/phd-school-in-pictures/>

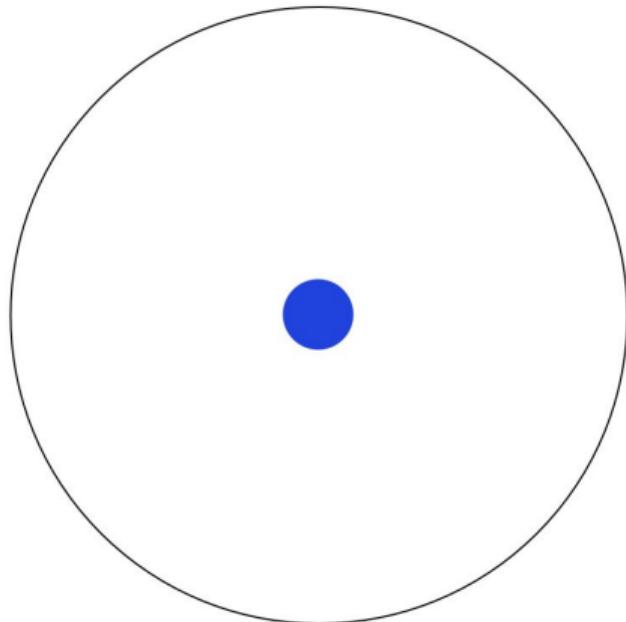
What a Ph.D. is?

Let's get started with a famous example¹

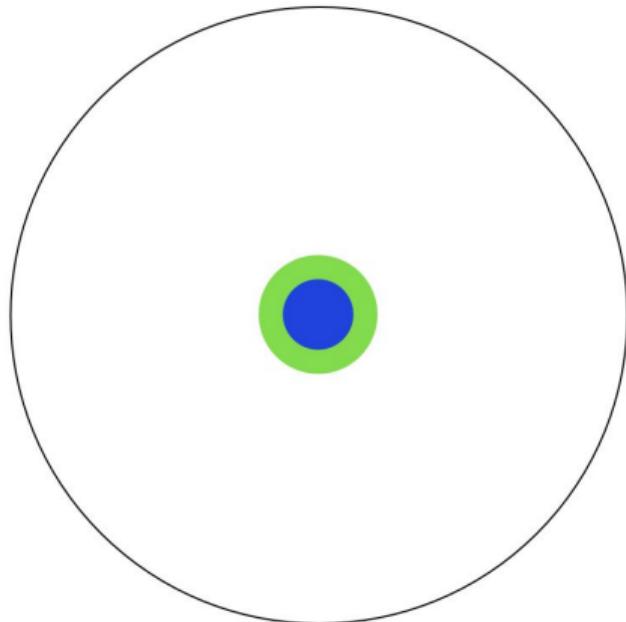
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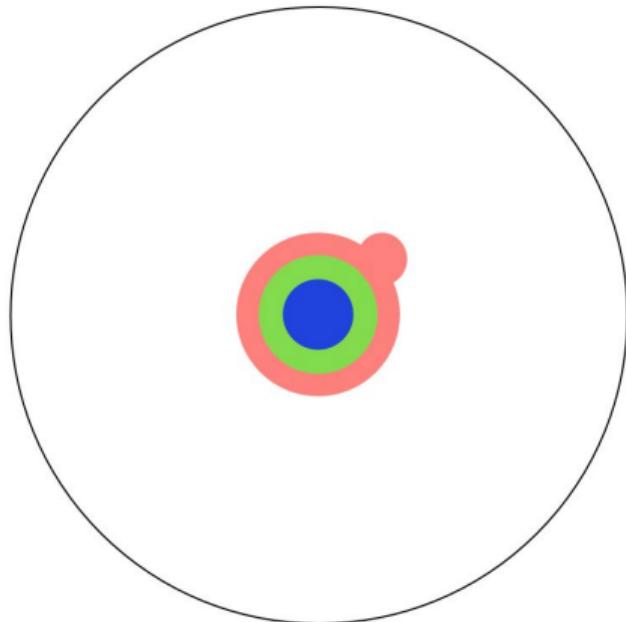
Imagine a circle that contains all of human knowledge



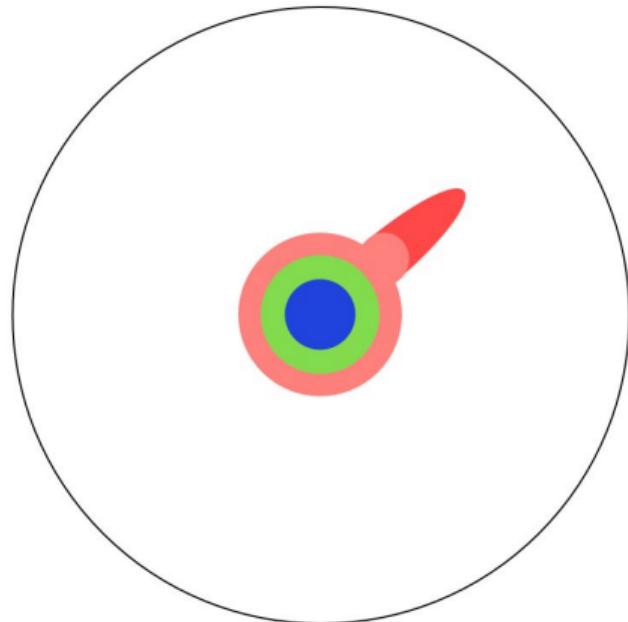
By the time you finish elementary school, you know a little



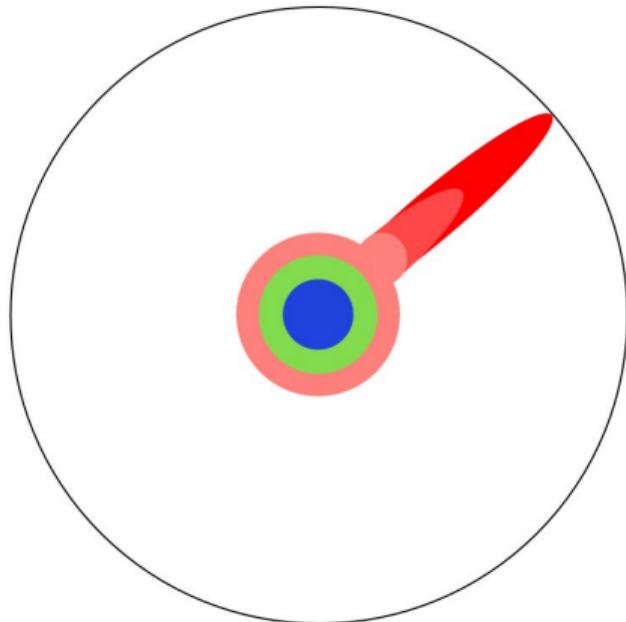
By the time you finish high school, you know a bit more



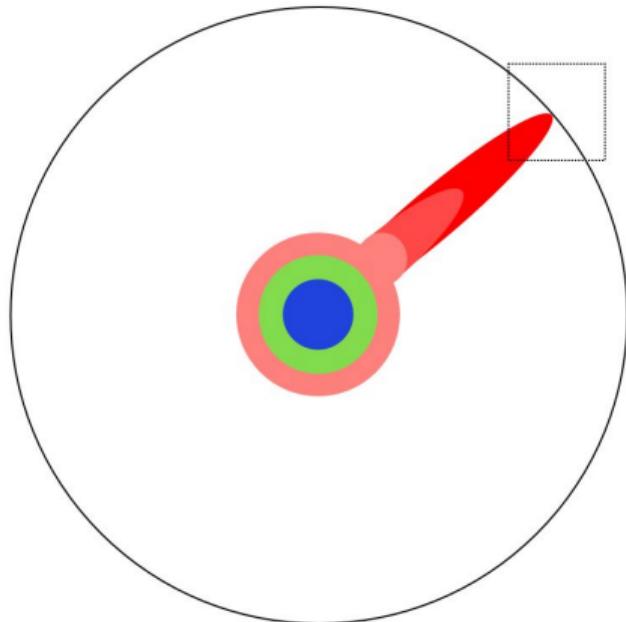
With a bachelor's degree, you gain a specialty



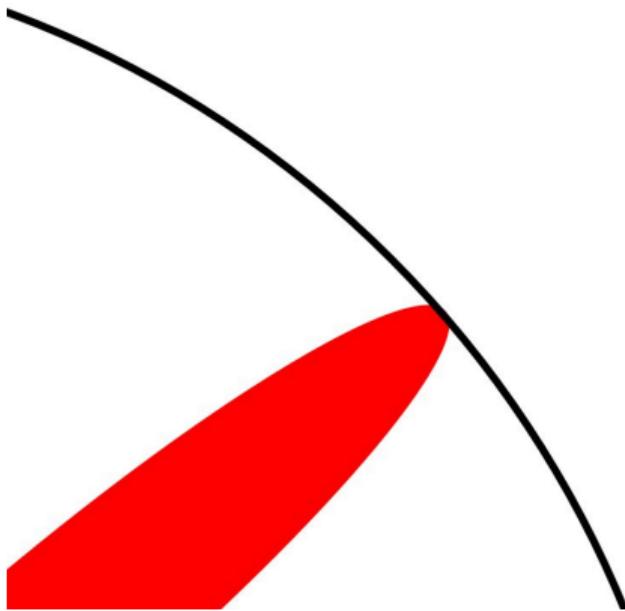
A master's degree deepens that specialty



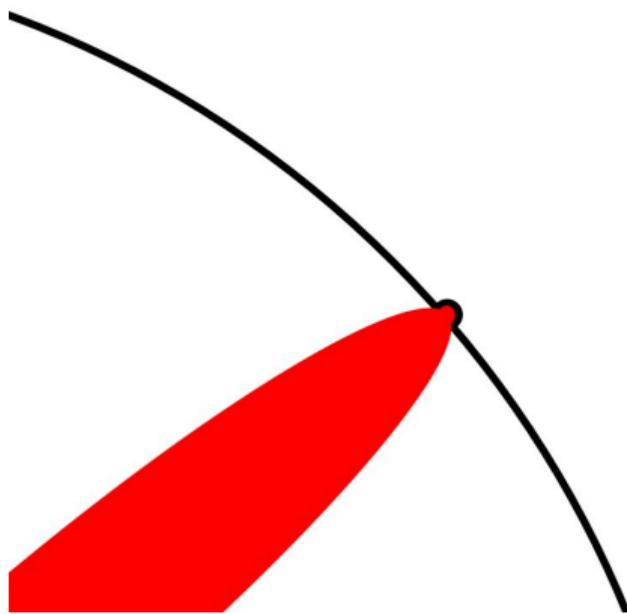
Reading research papers takes you to the edge of human knowledge



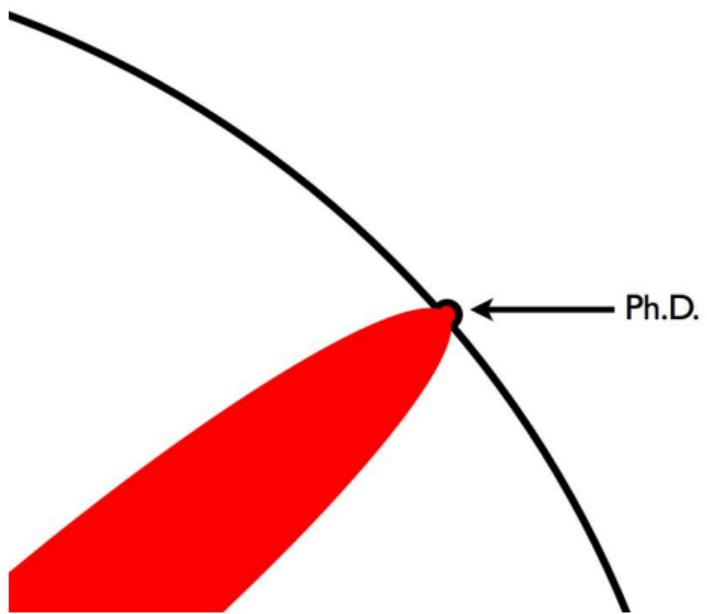
Once you're at the boundary, you focus



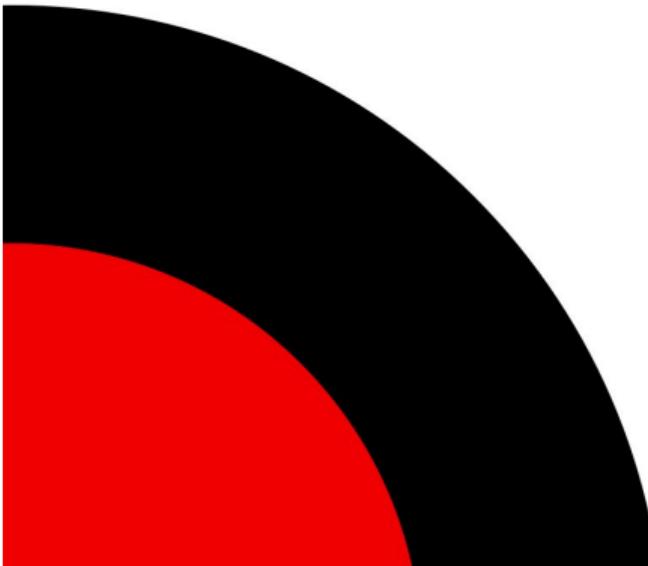
You push at the boundary for a few years



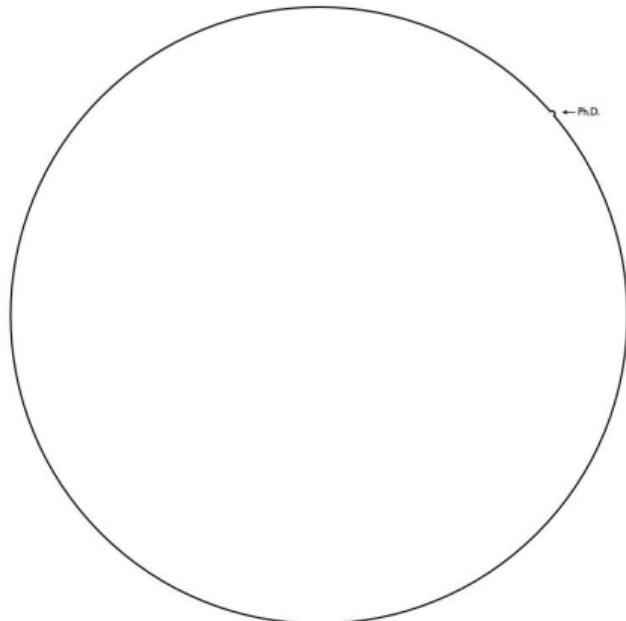
Until one day, the boundary gives way



Until one day, the boundary gives way



Of course, the world looks different to you now



Of course do not forget the bigger picture

Back to something concrete

Let's talk about 10 easy ways to fail a Ph.D.

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Focus on grades or coursework

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$$\text{Optimal GPA} = \text{Minimum Required GPA} + \epsilon$$

Learn too much

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It is important to trade off learning width and learning depth.

Expect perfection

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- it is important to get started, and improve it through an iterative process.

Procrastinate



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We will have a separate session on tips for boosting productivity.

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- once it happens, the student should start choosing the topics

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- You need much larger levels of independence

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Aiming low leaves no room for uncertainty. And research is always uncertain.

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- It is the training that counts—not the topic.

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- coursework and qualifiers

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- When you have a few good publications and can convince your committee → thesis proposal
- Once you can repeatedly conduct research to meet the standards of peer review → defense
- Once you can draw a unifying theme → thesis and dissertation

Ignore the committee (caution: it is a guide from the US school)

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- He ignored that warning.
- He was lucky: it added only one more semester to his Ph.D.

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How to Make Steady Progress?



Mentor/Advisor



Research Skills

How to Make Steady Progress?



Mentor/Advisor

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Mentor/Advisor

Please check our week2 slides on
“How to work with your advisor effectively”

How to Make Steady Progress?



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Key messages:

How to Make Steady Progress?



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Key messages:

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How to Make Steady Progress?



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Key messages:

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- Show your work (what, why, how, etc)

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- Provide contexts (maintain a detailed meeting minute and start with why)

How to Make Steady Progress?



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- Present failures
- Provide contexts (maintain a detailed meeting minute and start with why)
- Set expectation (I will do XXX by YYY)

How to Make Steady Progress?



Mentor/Advisor



Research Skills

How to Make Steady Progress?



Research Skills

How to Make Steady Progress? Imagine success



How to Make Steady Progress? Work backward

- Forward: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow E$
- Backward: $D \rightarrow E; C \rightarrow D; B \rightarrow C; A \rightarrow B$



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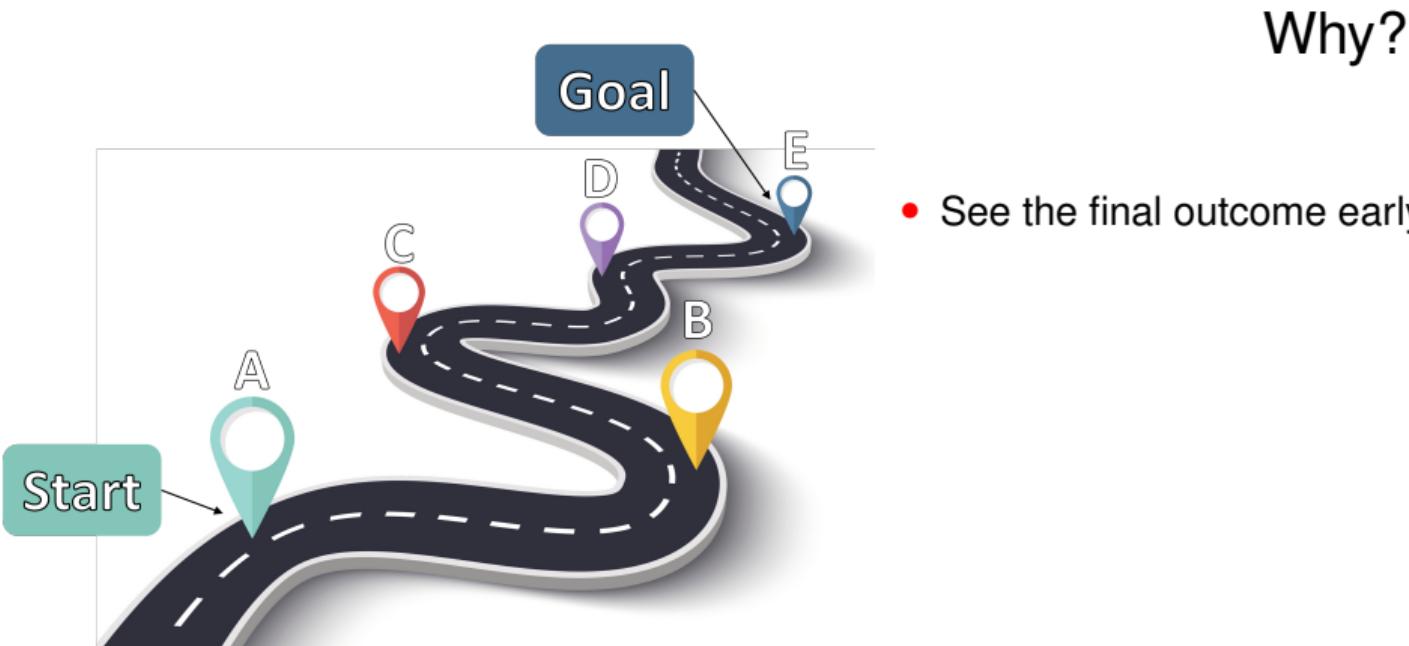
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Why?



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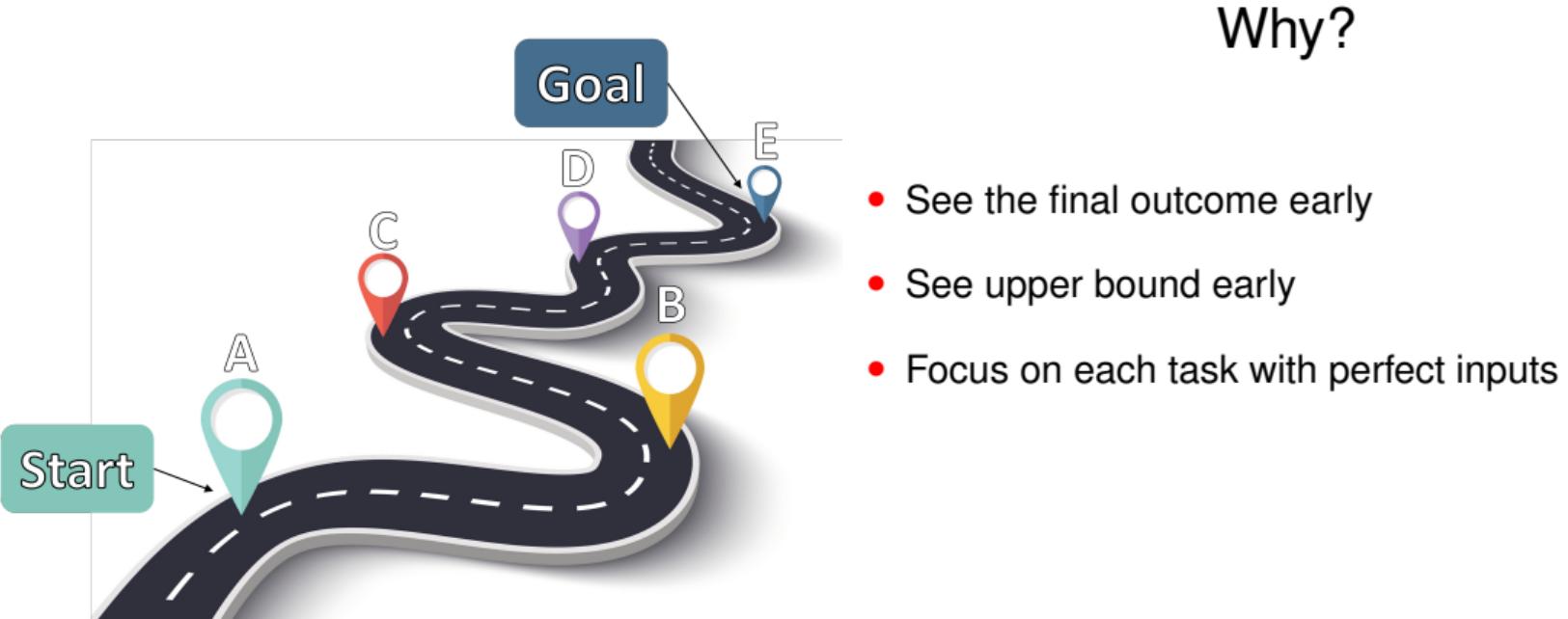


Why?

- See the final outcome early
- See upper bound early

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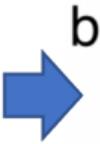
- Forward: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow E$
- Backward: $D \rightarrow E; C \rightarrow D; B \rightarrow C; A \rightarrow B$



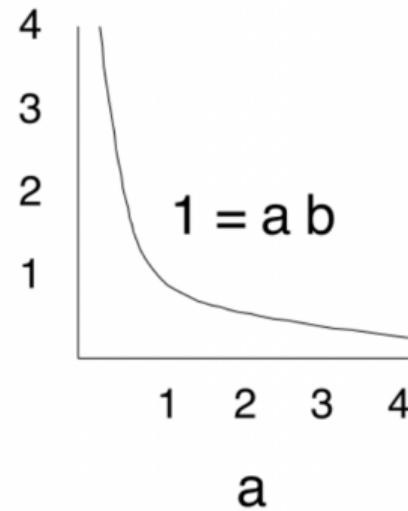
Why?

- See the final outcome early
- See upper bound early
- Focus on each task with perfect inputs
- Understand what is needed

How to Make Steady Progress? Use toy example to capture the main idea.



Color constancy problem



How to Make Steady Progress? Baselines first

Don't know where to start?



Let's build a sheep counter!

How to Make Steady Progress? Baselines first

Don't know where to start?



- Start with trying out baseline methods.

Let's build a sheep counter!

How to Make Steady Progress? Baselines first

Don't know where to start?



- Start with trying out baseline methods.
- It helps identify the limitations of STOA.

Let's build a sheep counter!

How to Make Steady Progress? Baselines first

Don't know where to start?



- Start with trying out baseline methods.
- It helps identify the limitations of STOA.
- If they work perfectly well, then??

Let's build a sheep counter!

How to Make Steady Progress? Simple case first



If your method does not work on simple/trivial cases,

How to Make Steady Progress? Simple case first



If your method does not work on simple/trivial cases,
how could you expect it to work on unconstrained, real-world cases?

How to Make Steady Progress? One thing at a time

batch_size = 4 → batch_size = 16

learning_rate = 1e-3 → learning_rate = 1e-5

use_abc_loss = False → use_abc_loss = True

When doing experiments, change exactly ONE thing at a time.

How to Make Steady Progress? One thing at a time

batch_size = 4 → batch_size = 16

learning_rate = 1e-3 → learning_rate = 1e-5

use_abc_loss = False → use_abc_loss = True

When doing experiments, change exactly ONE thing at a time.

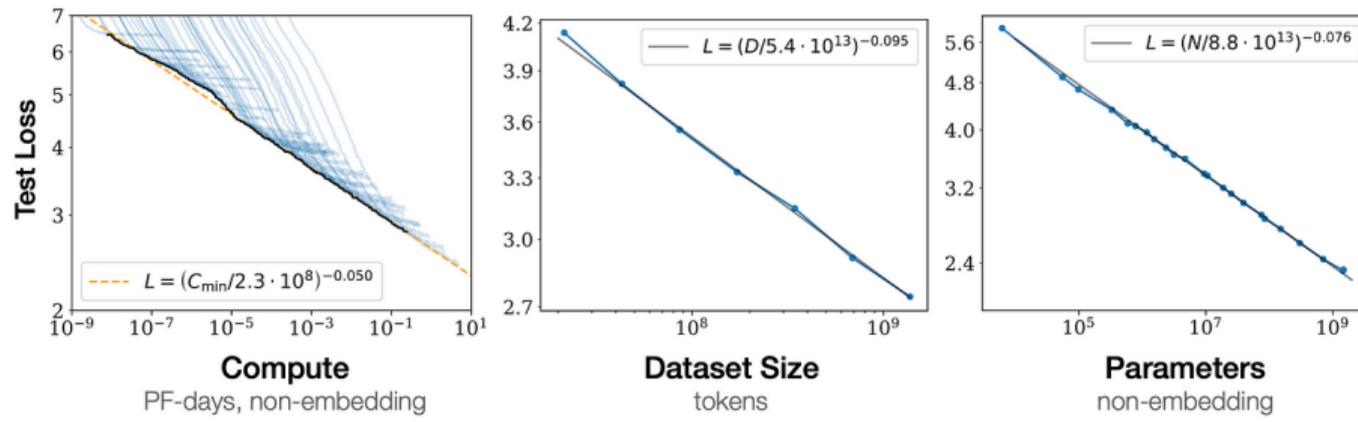
→ This helps you understand what the results mean.

How to Make Steady Progress? Identify proxy

- Do not use full-scale experiments (that may take weeks to complete) to validate your ideas

²Scaling Laws for Neural Language Models, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2001.08361>

How to Make Steady Progress? Identify proxy

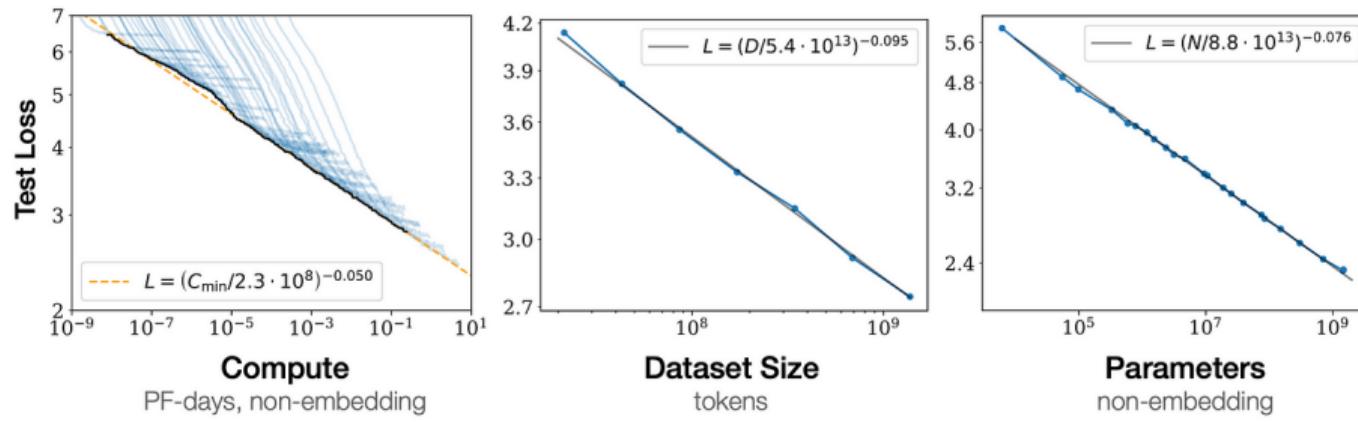


Example: *scaling rule* in Deep Learning²

- Do not use full-scale experiments (that may take weeks to complete) to validate your ideas

²Scaling Laws for Neural Language Models, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2001.08361>

How to Make Steady Progress? Identify proxy



Example: *scaling rule* in Deep Learning²

- Do not use full-scale experiments (that may take weeks to complete) to validate your ideas
- Run smaller-scale/simpler experiments with short turnaround time
→ you get to iteratively refine your ideas a lot faster.

²Scaling Laws for Neural Language Models, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2001.08361>

How to Make Steady Progress? Automate everything / make the best use of machine time

If you find that you need to do the same task twice, write a script for that.

How to Make Steady Progress? Automate everything / make the best use of machine time

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Plan your experiments → your machines work for you while you are not working.

How to Make Steady Progress? Automate everything / make the best use of machine time

If you find that you need to do the same task twice, write a script for that.

Plan your experiments → your machines work for you while you are not working.

Your future self will thank you.

Table of Contents

1 Course Logistics

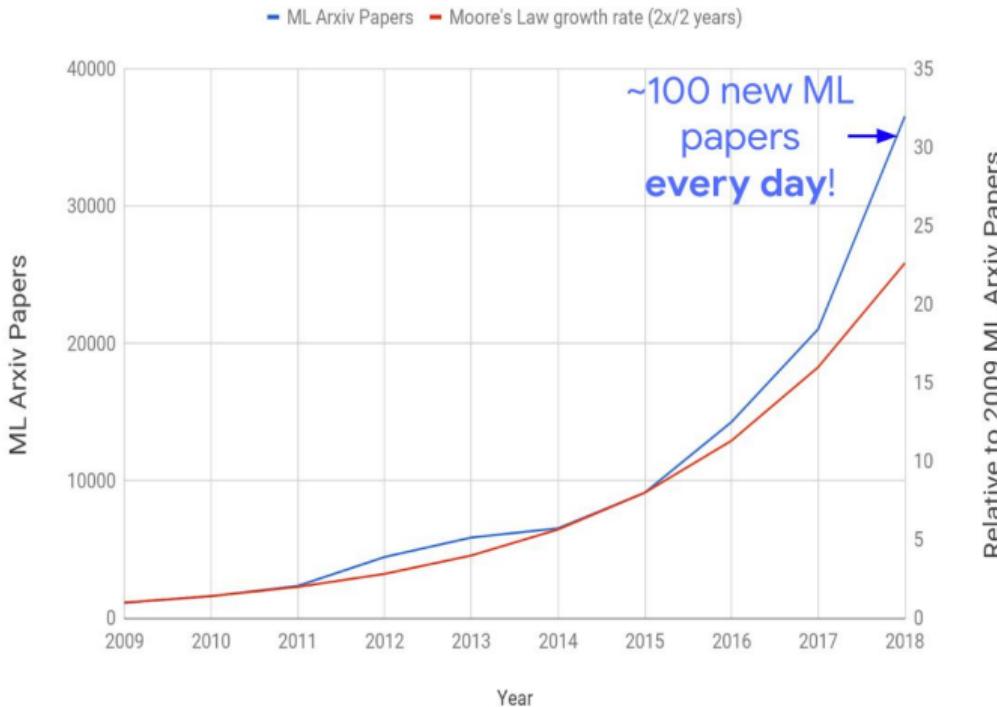
2 Recitation

3 How to Do Research

- The Illustrated Guide to a Ph.D.
- 10 Easy Ways to Fail a Ph.D.
- Introduction to the Research Workflow (a CV Perspective)
- How to Make Steady Progress?
- **How to Keep Track With the Literature?**
- How to Read Papers?

4 Concluding Remarks

Machine Learning Arxiv Papers per Year



From Jeff Dean's Twitter (Year 2018).

What should we do?

Track the people, not the papers

The screenshot shows the Google Scholar Alerts interface. At the top, it says "Alerts for liamTao@gmail.com". Below that is a list of researchers with their names and the option to view "All results" or "CANCEL".

| Researcher | Action |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Sebastian Urban Stich - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Hamed Hassani - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Nicholas Carlini - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Lingling Kong - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Tengyu Ma - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Chen Liu - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Jeff Dean - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Maseeh Bujwana - new articles | All results CANCEL |
| Martin Takáč - new articles | All results CANCEL |

- There are far fewer key people who are driving the field forward than the number of papers
- Check out who the authors are when you read papers.
- Overtime you will recognize the important ones.

Read papers with good related work

A good related work section saves you so much time by providing a clear, organized view of prior work.

Read papers with good related work

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Read papers with good related work

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Side note: please save others' time by writing a good related work.

Organize the papers

| BIBTEX | EndNote™ | Mendeley | Papers | zotero |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| BibTeX | EndNote | Mendeley | Papers | Zotero |
| Free license | Clarivate (commercial) | Elsevier (commercial) | Digital Science Research & Solutions Inc. (commercial) | Corporation for Digital Scholarship (non profit) |
| Free of charge | 274,95 USD per year (149,495 USD for students) | Freemium | 60 USD per year (36 USD for students) | Free of charge |
| Windows macOS Linux | Windows macOS | Windows macOS Linux | Windows macOS | Windows macOS Linux |
| Compatible with: (MS Word) Google Docs (OpenOffice) (LibreOffice) LaTeX | Compatible with: MS Word (Google Docs) OpenOffice LibreOffice (LaTeX) | Compatible with: MS Word (Google Docs) OpenOffice LibreOffice (LaTeX) | Compatible with: MS Word Google Docs OpenOffice LibreOffice (LaTeX) | Compatible with: MS Word Google Docs OpenOffice LibreOffice LaTeX |
| - | 7k+ citation styles | 9k+ citation styles | 9k+ citation styles | 10k+ citation styles |

Updated on 17/04/2023

Consider to use a reference manager

Organize the papers

The image shows the Zotero website homepage at the top, featuring a dark background with various icons related to research and a central text area. Below the website screenshot is a screenshot of the Zotero desktop application's interface.

Zotero Website Screenshot:

- Text:** Your personal research assistant
- Text:** Zotero is a free, easy-to-use tool to help you collect, organize, annotate, cite, and share research.
- Buttons:** Download (red button), Available for Mac, Windows, Linux, and iOS.
- Text:** Just need to create a quick bibliography? Try ZoteroBib.

Zotero Desktop Application Screenshot:

- Left Sidebar:** My Library, Book Reviews, Colonial Medicine, Dissertation, Science and Empire, Teaching, Mapping, Open Access, Text Mining, Visualization.
- Central Panel:** A list of bibliographic items in a table format. One item is selected: "Circulation of Medicine in the Early Modern Atlantic World" by Cook and Walker (2013).
- Right Panel:** Item details for the selected article, including Author (Cook, Harold J., Walker, Timothy D.), Abstract (The search for powerful drugs has caused people and commodities to move around the globe for many centuries, as it still does...), Publication (Social History of Medicine, Volume 26), and a notes section.

I use Zotero in my case

Avoiding reading the paper

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Two Minute Papers' YouTube channel. At the top, it displays the channel's name, 'Two Minute Papers', with a play button icon, 1.4M subscribers, and 815 videos. Below this, there's a brief bio: 'What a time to be alive!' followed by a link to their website: www.cs.washington.edu/~mrt/ and '3 more links'. A 'Subscribe' button is visible on the right.

Below the bio, there are sections for 'HOME', 'VIDEOS', 'PLAYLISTS', 'COMMUNITY', 'CHANNELS', and 'ABOUT'. A search bar is also present.

The main area features a grid of video thumbnails under the heading 'Created playlists'. Some visible playlist titles include:

- OpenAI: AI, Stable Diffusion, and more (10 videos)
- NVIDIA RTX, AI, and more (10 videos)
- VIRTUAL FINESSES (12 videos)
- Virtual Reality, Alternative Reality, DeepMind explained - AlphaFold (10 videos)
- 3D Printing / 3D Fabrication (20 videos)
- Light Transport, Ray Tracing and Global Illumination (Two Minutes...) (10 videos)
- ChatGPT, GPT4, OpenAI, Stable Diffusion, and more (10 videos)
- Updated yesterday
- View full playlist
- Fluid, Cloth and Hair Simulation (Two Minute Papers) (10 videos)
- AI and Deep Learning - Two Minute Papers (10 videos)
- LuxRender (10 videos)
- Two Minute Papers (10 videos)
- TU Wien Rendering / Ray Tracing Course (700 videos)
- Updated yesterday
- View full playlist

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Paul G. Allen School' YouTube channel. At the top, it displays the channel's name, 'PAUL G. ALLEN SCHOOL', with a play button icon, 14.2K subscribers, and 660 videos. Below this, there's a link to 'More about this channel' and the website 'cs.washington.edu'. A 'Subscribed' button is visible on the right.

Below the bio, there are tabs for 'HOME', 'VIDEOS', 'LIVE', 'PLAYLISTS' (which is currently selected), 'COMMUNITY', 'CHANNELS', and 'ABOUT'. A search bar is also present.

The main area features a grid of video thumbnails under the heading 'Created playlists'. Some visible playlist titles include:

- CSD 500: Computer Organization (3 videos)
- 2023-24 PMP Course Overview (3 videos)
- Distinguished Seminar in Optimization & Data (3 videos)
- 2022-23 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series (5 videos)
- 2022-23 Allen School Colloquia (4 videos)
- IFDS 2022 (3 videos)
- 2022 Northwest Robotics Symposium (3 videos)
- 2021-22 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series (8 videos)
- All videos (3 videos)
- 2021-22 Allen School Colloquia (1 video)
- 2021 Information-Theoretic Cryptography (ITC) Conference (1 video)
- Research Seminar: Mobile & Wireless Systems (1 video)
- UW Allen School Women's Research Day 2022 (2 videos)
- Research Seminar: Molecular Programming (3 videos)
- 2020-21 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series (10 videos)
- Q&A With RAMESH BALAN (1 video)
- Session 1 (1 video)
- Innovations in Theoretical Computer Science 2020 (11 videos)
- Research Seminar: Quantum Networking (3 videos)
- Research Seminar: Internet of Robotic Things (3 videos)
- 2020-21 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series (13 videos)
- Women's Research Day 2020 (1 video)

Instead of spending time reading the actual paper, find resources that are much easier to digest.

Avoiding reading the paper

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Two Minute Papers' YouTube channel. At the top, it displays the channel's name, 'Two Minute Papers', with a 'Subscribe' button. Below this, there's a brief bio: '@TwoMinutePapers 1.4M subscribers 815 videos' and 'What a time to be alive!' followed by a link to their website. The main area features a grid of video thumbnails under the heading 'Created playlists'. These include:

- OpenAI WRITER STUDIES**: 10 videos, last updated 8 days ago.
- NVIDIA RTX AI, and more**: 12 videos, last updated yesterday.
- VIRTUAL FINESSES**: 20 videos, last updated 20 days ago.
- Virtual Reality, Alternative Reality, DeepMind explained - AlphaFold**: 12 videos, last updated 2 months ago.
- 3D Printing / 3D Fabrication**: 20 videos, last updated 2 months ago.
- Light Transport, Ray Tracing and Global Illumination (Two Minutes)**: 10 videos, last updated 2 months ago.
- Diffusion, GPT4, OpenAI, Stable Diffusion and more**: 10 videos, last updated 8 days ago.
- Fluid, Cloth and Hair Simulation - Two Minute Papers**: 100+ videos, last updated yesterday.
- AI and Deep Learning - Two Minute Papers**: 100+ videos, last updated yesterday.
- LuxRender**: 100+ videos, last updated yesterday.
- Two Minute Papers**: 700+ videos, last updated yesterday.
- TU Wien Rendering / Ray Tracing Course**: 700+ videos, last updated yesterday.

 Each thumbnail includes a 'View full playlist' link.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Paul G. Allen School' YouTube channel. It features a purple circular logo with 'PAUL G. ALLEN SCHOOL' and a 'W'. The channel has 14.2K subscribers and 660 videos. Below the bio, there are tabs for 'HOME', 'VIDEOS', 'LIVE', 'PLAYLISTS' (which is selected), 'COMMUNITY', 'CHANNELS', and 'ABOUT'. A 'Sort by' dropdown menu is visible on the right. The 'Created playlists' section contains numerous video thumbnails from various lecture series:

- 2023-24 PMP Course Overviews**: 3 videos.
- Distinguished Seminar In Optimization & Data**: 3 videos.
- 2022-23 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series**: 5 videos.
- 2022-23 Allen School Colloquia**: 5 videos.
- IFDS 2022**: 4 videos.
- 2022 Northwest Robotics Symposium**: 3 videos.
- 2021-22 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series**: 8 videos.
- 2021-22 Allen School Colloquia**: 8 videos.
- 2021 Information-Theoretic Cryptography (ITC) Conference**: 1 video.
- Research Seminar: Mobile & Wireless Systems**: 2 videos.
- UW Allen School Women's Research Day 2021**: 2 videos.
- Research Seminar: Molecular Programming**: 3 videos.
- 2020-21 Allen School Distinguished Lecture Series**: 12 videos.
- Q&A With炳皓 BALAZS**: 10 videos.
- 2020-21 Allen School Colloquia**: 10 videos.
- Women's Research Day 2020**: 11 videos.
- Innovations in Theoretical Computer Science 2020**: 11 videos.

 Each thumbnail includes a 'View full playlist' link.

Instead of spending time reading the actual paper, find resources that are much easier to digest.

- a talk, a YouTube video, teaser results, an introductory video, or an overview figure.

Read with a purpose

Before investing time in reading a paper, think about WHY you are reading it.

You almost never need to read a paper from top to bottom.

Read with a purpose

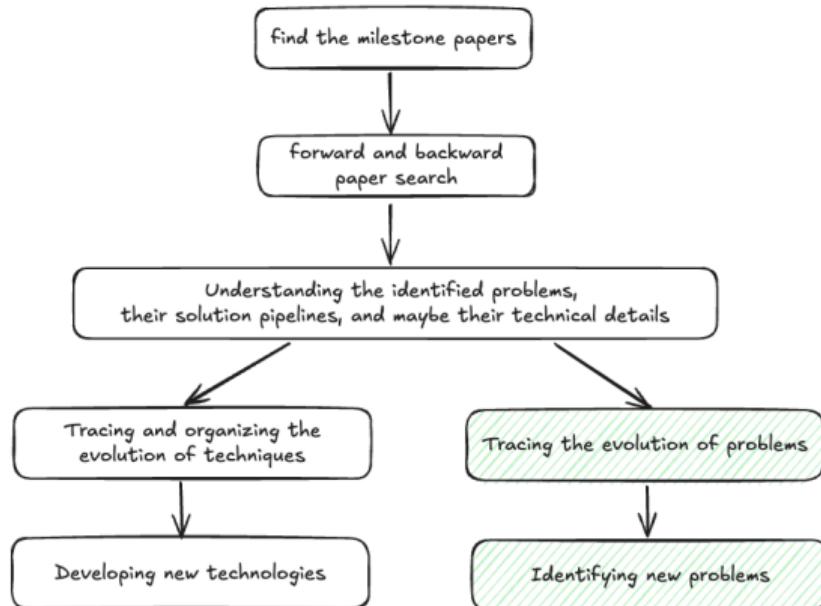
Before investing time in reading a paper, think about WHY you are reading it.

Are you reading for

- the experimental setup?
- the organization?
- the story?
- the style?
- the method?
- or the visualization?

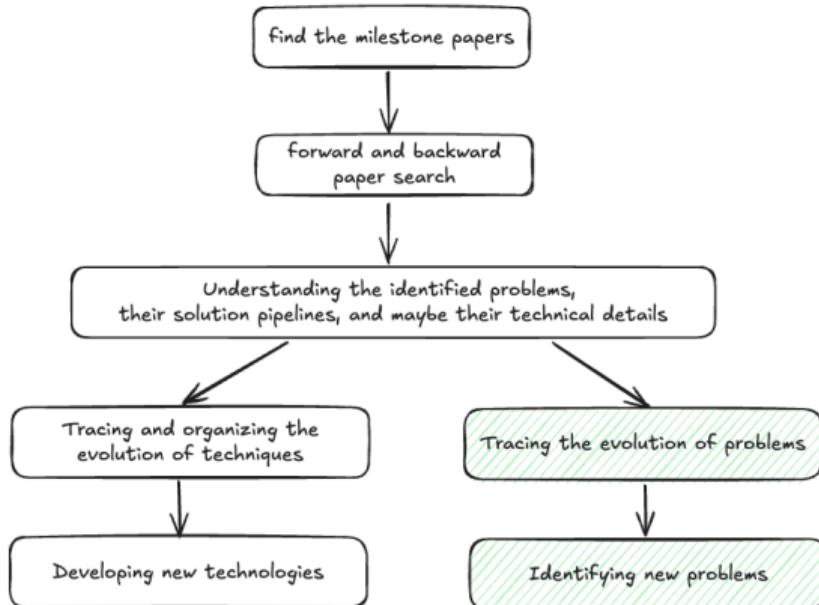
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How to be a domain expert by reading papers



How to identify milestone papers

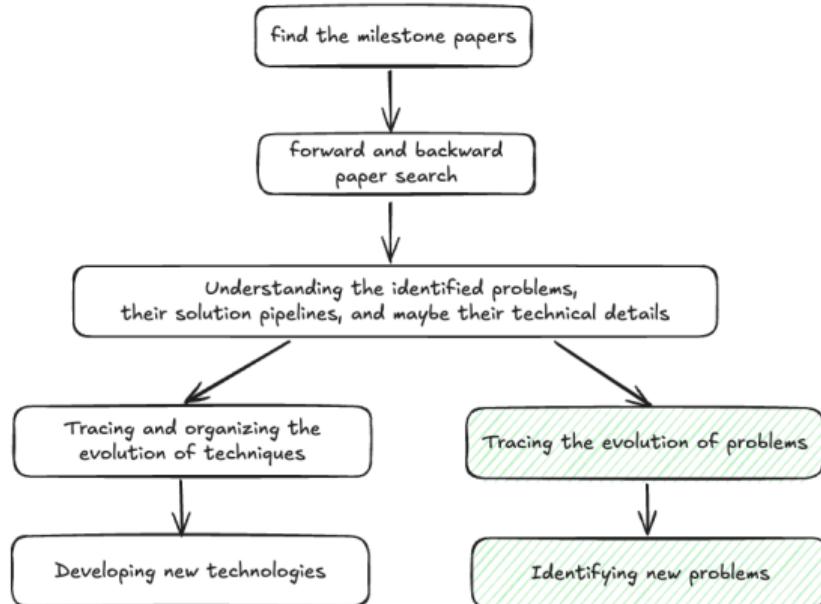
How to be a domain expert by reading papers



How to identify milestone papers

- Find the most cited papers in this field and sort them by date.

How to be a domain expert by reading papers

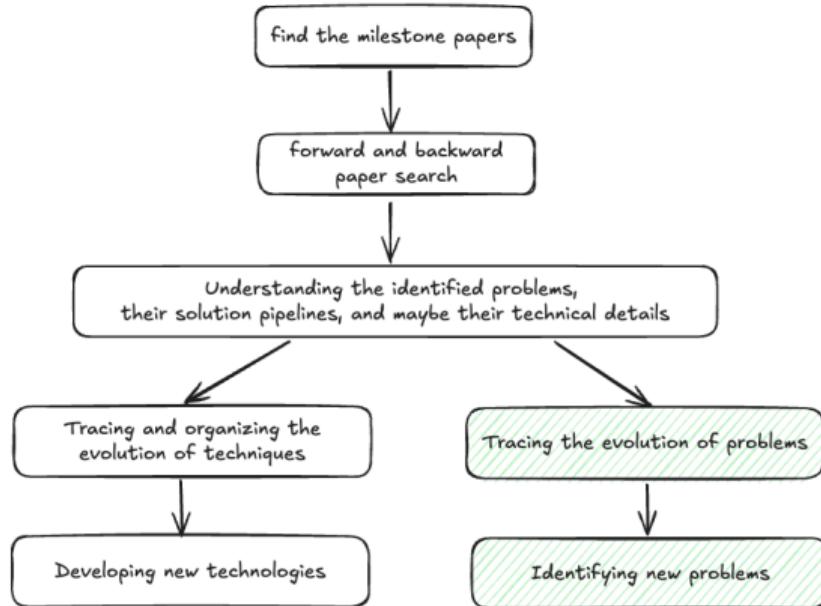


How to identify milestone papers

- Find the most cited papers in this field and sort them by date.
- Seek advice from experienced researchers.

How to be a domain expert by reading papers

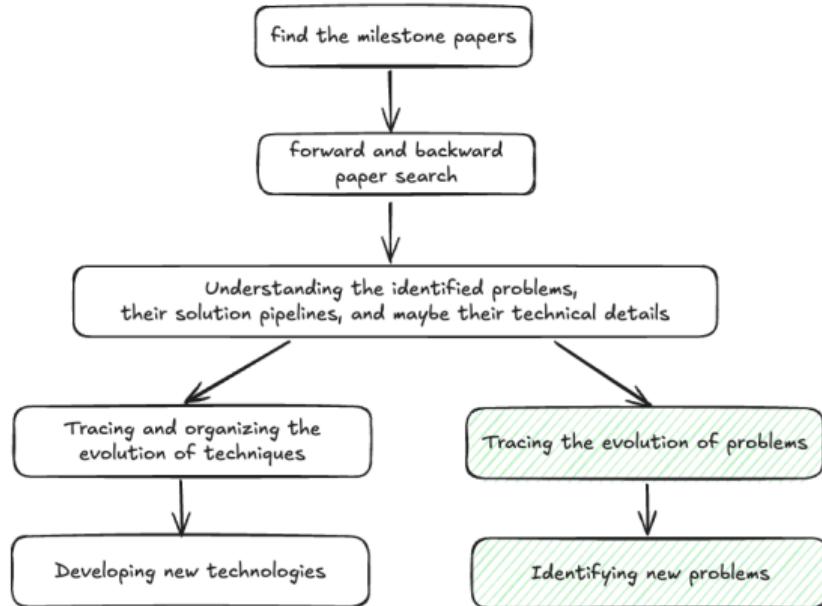
How to find papers between two milestone papers



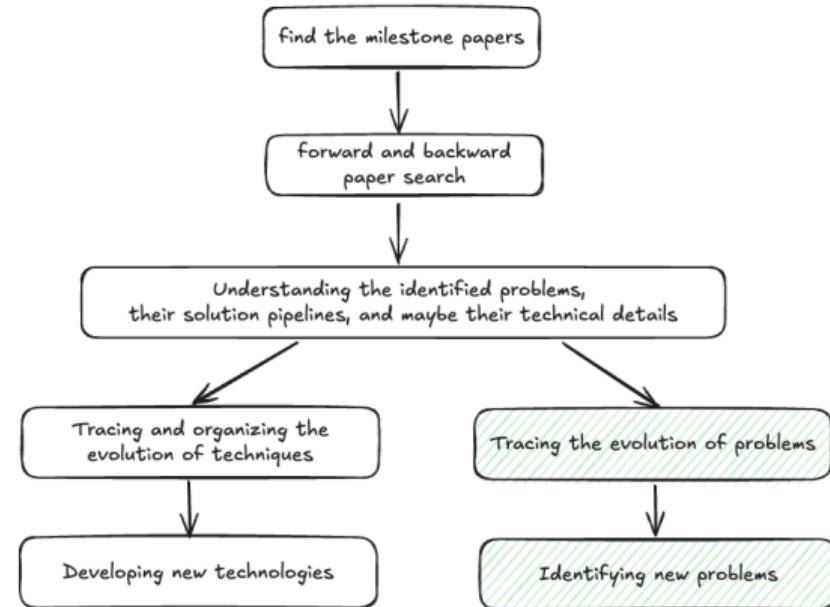
How to be a domain expert by reading papers

How to find papers between two milestone papers

- Forward pass



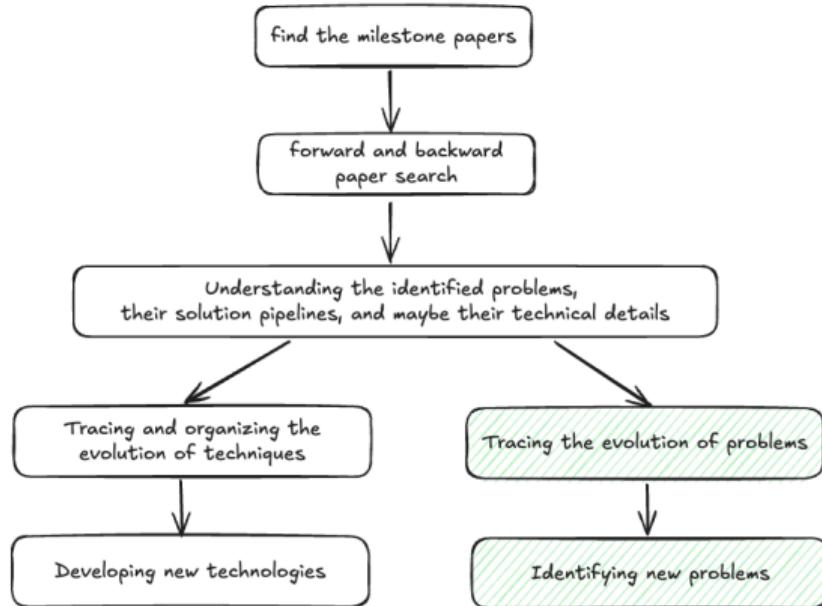
How to be a domain expert by reading papers



How to find papers between two milestone papers

- Forward pass
 - papers cited by the milestone paper
 - foundation work

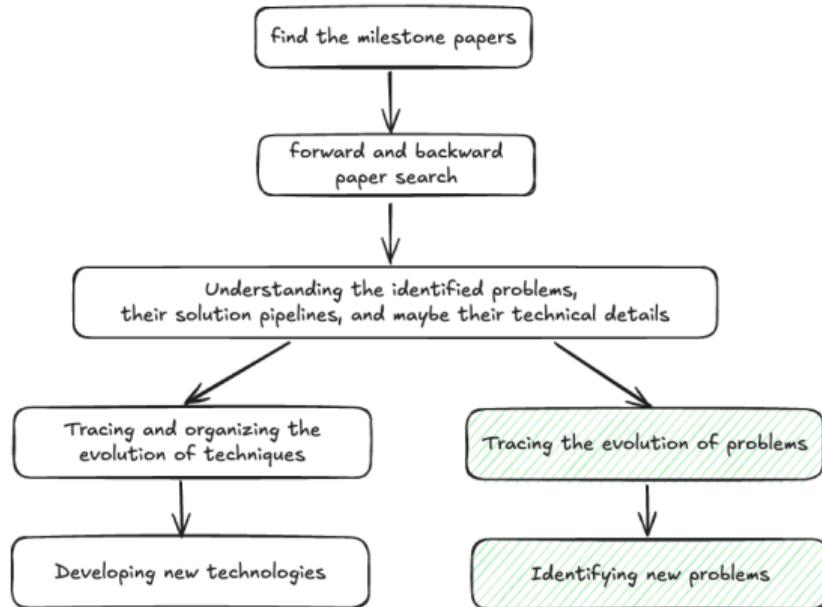
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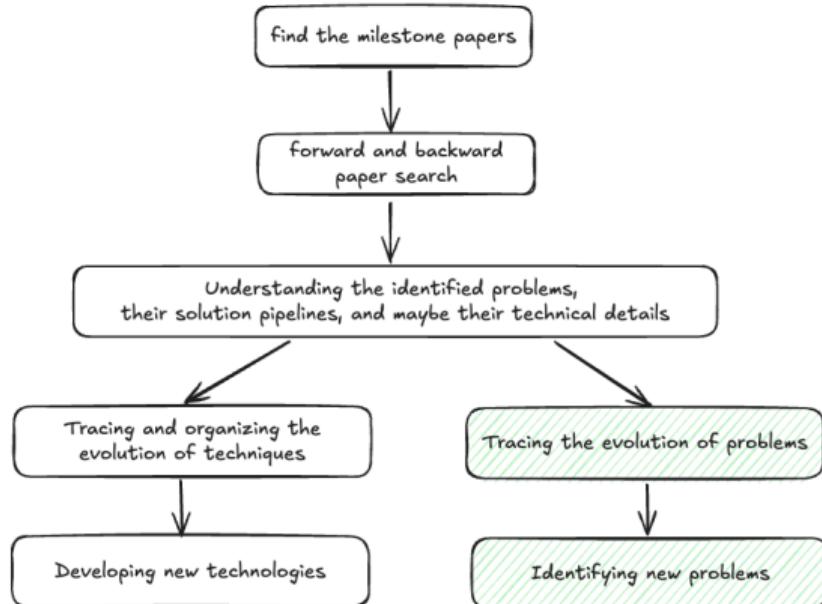
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How to find papers between two milestone papers

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 - foundation work
- Backward pass
 - papers cite the milestone paper
 - followup work

How to be a domain expert by reading papers



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Connected Papers

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2 Recitation

3 How to Do Research

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- 10 Easy Ways to Fail a Ph.D.
- Introduction to the Research Workflow (a CV Perspective)
- How to Make Steady Progress?
- How to Keep Track With the Literature?
- How to Read Papers?

4 Concluding Remarks

Template: When reading a paper, please try to answer these questions (using 1-3 sentences).

- What is the problem? / How important is it?

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- What is the takeaway message?
- Will this paper win the test of time award?
- Name one reason why this paper should have not appeared in NIPS, ICML, ICLR, etc?

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Effective communication!