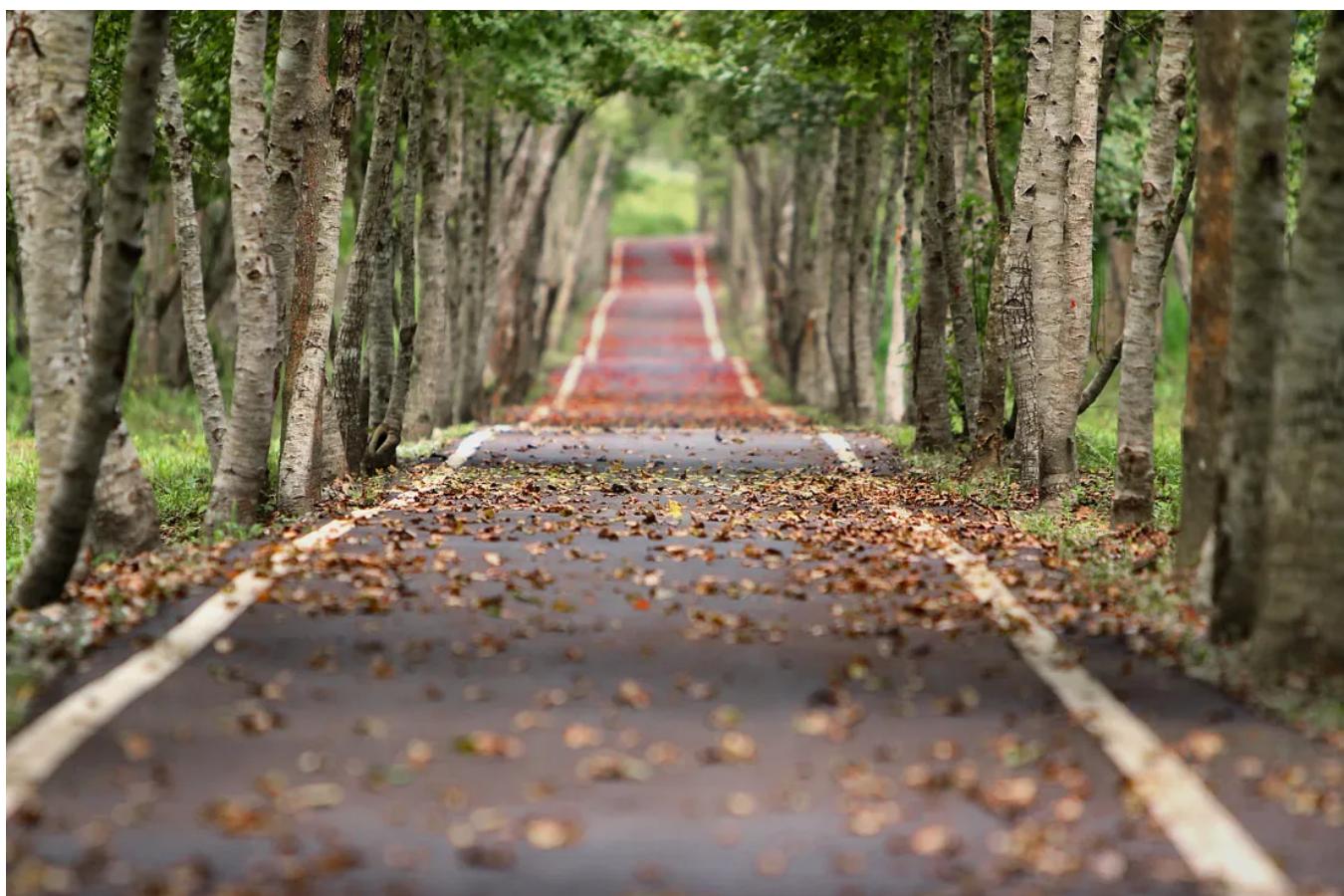




Advice for New PhD Students: Your Research Career is a Long Game

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Update: I have started a [YouTube channel](#), and the first video is based on this post!

Advice for New PhD Students | How to Succeed in Graduate School!



Video link with caption “5 Tips for New PhD Students”

Starting a PhD program really is embarking on a journey — and this is an exciting time of year, when there are so many people tying their shoes tight and getting ready to run. I recently tweeted a piece of advice about organizing your readings, but have been thinking since then about how even this very practical thing relates to something that is far more philosophical: your research career is a longer journey than your PhD.

This year I am starting year 5 (!) of my faculty job at University of Colorado, and I am co-directing our grad program in Information Science. I've been thinking a lot about what I wish I'd known at the start of my PhD and what I learned along the way. And I've realized that something that impacted the way I saw things was that I didn't often think about the long game.

You shouldn't be reading a paper so you can cite it in a paper now; you should read it like you might be citing it for the next 20 years. You shouldn't write a paper just so you can get accepted for that one conference; you should write it like it could be the start of a whole research trajectory. You shouldn't take a class to tick off a

requirement; you should learn things that will change the way you see the world forever. And you shouldn't compare yourself to everyone else around you in this moment, because everyone's career is different and takes a different path over time. I've tried to distill these thoughts into some specific pieces of advice, some practical and some abstract!

Read papers like you're going to be citing them for the next 20 years. This is a piece of advice that I would give myself if I could go back in time: **choose a citation manager (e.g., Zotero, Mendeley, a spreadsheet you make yourself, whatever!)** and keep track of every paper you read. Ideally, have a few notes about why it's important. Ten years from now when (like me) you're trying to remember that thing you read once, you will be very grateful to your brilliant PhD student self whose organizational prowess would pay off for the rest of their career. And in the short term, it will make every lit review you have to write so much easier.

Of course you don't know everything yet! That's okay. Within the first year of your PhD (maybe the first week), you will have an experience where you are talking with a group of people who seem like they know *so much more than you*. Maybe they are other students in your class. Maybe they're senior PhD students in your lab. Maybe they're a group of researchers standing around at a conference. But you will feel like a complete imposter who could never know as much as they know. I actually remember this experience very clearly for myself. During my first year, in a lab meeting we were talking about the qualifying exams that 2nd year students had just completed. My advisor told all of us the question she had written for the exam, and asked us how we would have answered. It had *absolutely no idea*. And as I listened to the really smart answers that more senior PhD students were giving, I thought *I will never be able to learn all these things*. Guess what? You're wrong. You will. Those students were all in your position once. And so was I! In fact, I *still* feel this way sometimes. **Everyone has imposter syndrome.** (For more on this, read this [Mister Rogers fanfiction](#) I wrote. ;)) Of course, the flip side of this is that **of course you don't know anything yet, so you need to be willing to learn.** And listen. Which means you don't have to *pretend* to know everything. You'll learn more if you ask questions!

If you feel like an outsider, know that you won't always be. Another early memory

of my PhD was being at once of my first conferences ([CSCW](#)) and I was mostly following around my labmates who were nearing the ends of their PhDs. I remember being completely awed and thinking “[How do they know everyone?!](#)” It was really intimidating; I’m not shy exactly, but I have a lot of trouble integrating myself into groups of people I don’t know, and [I found conferences very overwhelming for this reason.](#) I couldn’t imagine a world in which I was as comfortable with this huge group of people as my labmates were. And then... a few years later, at my last conference as a PhD student (also CSCW), when I was the oldest student, the first year student in my lab asked me, “Casey... how do you know *everyone?*” A few years later when I saw her at a conference, I thought, “Wow, now she knows everyone.” [It takes time to integrate into a community,](#) whether that’s at your university or in your research discipline. And also, it doesn’t require attending a ton of conferences; it’s amazing how well-connected we can be through social media these days!

You can, and should, have a life outside of your PhD. At the end of every year, I post a list of the favorite fiction books I read that year. After one of these posts, a PhD student asked me on Twitter, “How on earth do you have time to read?!” And I thought, of course I have time to read. I *love* reading. It is a thing that I use my free time to do. [But... if you don't have any free time at all, there is something wrong.](#) We all have other things in our lives that we love — whether there’s family, or reading, or exercising, or traveling, or dungeons & dragons. Of course you’ll be busy, and you will most likely have to sacrifice things (I still haven’t finished a novel, sigh...) but [you should absolutely have time for yourself](#), you just might have to prioritize what you use it for. There also tends to be a very unsteady rhythm to a PhD. Sometimes you will have more time, and sometimes you’re on a deadline and will be completely miserable for a week. But you should *not* be eating, sleeping, and breathing nothing but PhD. **Keep yourself healthy.**

Don’t compare yourself to others. This is such a critical piece of advice, and one that I know can be so, so difficult to take to heart. But remember: everyone’s research, PhD situation, and personal circumstances are different. It took me six years to finish my PhD. One reason was that I was slow to start on my research trajectory (and didn’t really start publishing until more than halfway through); another is that I

was in a bad car accident the summer after my fourth year, and missed almost an entire semester. Maybe it seems like everyone else is publishing more or faster than you. Maybe the kind of work they do is faster. Maybe they're working on projects that were already underway. Maybe they have more collaborators. Maybe they are funded to work on that project but you are also teaching or doing unrelated research as well. There are *a thousand* reasons why what you do is unique to you. And there will always be something that you feel inadequate in. But there is also something else that others look up to you for.

Try to think about long-term impact, not numbers. In academia we are prone to bean counting. How many papers have you published? What's your H index? In the computer science world where we publish on conference cycles, we're particularly prone to "my lab has N papers this year!" And this can feel particularly critical during your PhD because you have a finite amount of time before you finish and go on the job market. There is a longer conversation I could have here (maybe the subject of another blog post) about incentive structures in academia and how I worry that bean counting can result in all kinds of bad practices, but the point here is: No one's going to remember how many papers you had in X conference that one year. And most people aren't looking at your citation count on your google scholar page. What they might know instead is the kind of work that you do and what kind of impact it's had or could have. My CV when I was on the job market was not impressive; I had two first-author publications about my own work. But one of those had won a best paper award, and they were in an area that was emerging and no one else was really delving into yet. Now, I'm not suggesting that publishing doesn't matter; it definitely can, depending on what kind of job you're hoping for afterwards. And you will face bean counters during your career. But if all you're thinking about is making sure you have N papers at X conference, you're not thinking about the long-term trajectory and impact of your work. I also think that taking the time to engage in public scholarship around your work is important, and this is writing that helps you have impact, but doesn't give you more beans.

Remember that you will have more time to do more things. A critique I often see in dissertation proposals is "do less!" It's pretty common for a student to propose doing a career's worth of work in a dissertation. It's also easy to get distracted by *all the*

research projects you want to do! Research is exciting, and we have new ideas all the time. Ideas that seem urgent! But you're playing the long game. After you finish your PhD, assuming that you embark on a career where you will continue to do research, you will be able to do more projects and to diversify your work. (And if you're like me, you'll be lucky enough to have amazing PhD students who diversify your work even more!) There will come a time when it's important for you to have dissertation tunnel vision and to stop chasing shiny ideas. But after you're done, you can start imagining what your entire *career* can be, and not just five years of it.

And finally, **talk to your mentors** and get them to help you with just this kind of thing. It can sometimes be hard to have this longterm perspective on your own work. I hope that for most of you this will be your PhD advisor, who should be your first and best advocate. For others, you might rely more on senior students in your program or on mentors elsewhere at your university or in your field. I encourage you to find these people! At least for me, one of the most rewarding parts of my job is collaborating with and mentoring my own PhD students and helping others who seek my advice as well.

I'm sure there are other small pieces of advice I could give, and not all the details in this post are going to be applicable to everyone, but I hope that this helps you step back and think of your PhD as the beginning of a long journey. **If you're reading this and are about to start your PhD: GOOD LUCK!** Every one of you is going to produce brand new knowledge that didn't exist in the world before, and that's really freaking cool.

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