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The start and the middle: beginning your PhD

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The initial stages of a PhD can be daunting. Fortunately, there are a few ways you can make the transition into productive doctoral study as smooth as possible.

Whether you're starting a PhD fresh out of undergrad or after many years of employment, the decision to begin a doctorate is a significant career move. When I started, 18 months ago, I figured I had a pretty good idea of what I was getting into: I'd previously worked in industry, completed a Master's degree, and worked as a research assistant in another lab.

But I soon realized that my PhD was different — in a number of ways — from what I'd done before. Here are some things I've learnt so far, and some ways I've made efficient use of my brief time as a PhD student.

Preparing for your PhD

Do some presearch

Having some experience of the topic you're about to spend several years of your life studying will help your cause significantly. This is especially important if your PhD topic is a departure from any previous research experience at Master's level or elsewhere. Ask your supervisor how you can prepare in order to hit the ground running. At a minimum, this will include understanding the most commonly used techniques in your lab, and mastering the fundamental concepts applicable to your project.

Organize your admin

A sizable proportion of your time will be spent writing, creating presentations and generally doing work outside the lab. Deciding how you store and organize this from the get-go is essential. Backing up work to a server will, at some point, prevent a serious headache. Get into the habit of noting down everything — even seemingly irrelevant events can turn out to be important. Also, track your spending from the very beginning by keeping up-to-date records of everything you purchase; consumables, equipment, travel costs, the lot. Congratulations, you're now the scientist-accountant you always dreamt of being.

Be realistic

Enter your research with a realistic mind-set as to what can actually be achieved — it's unlikely you'll

..Undergrad

..Confidence about starting a PhD

..Surprise

..Presearch

..Topic comes from Master's thesis

..Supervisor

..Learning the basics

..Organizing writing

..Making notes

..Realistic mindset



revolutionize your field in a few years of doctoral study. Balancing this realism with a desire to make a unique contribution to knowledge helps manage your own expectations, and is the key to making continued progress. You can't do everything!

After you've started

Set clear 'no further' markers

During a PhD, time is precious. Occasionally, things just don't work, even after significant time and effort spent. It's human nature to persevere with things we really want to resolve. However, this can be dangerous — before you know it, six months have gone by and you're no closer to getting that technique to work. Consider how necessary a piece of work actually is, and try to compromise. For each project, set clear 'no further' markers — the maximum time, funding or number of attempts you'll allow for something that isn't producing. Don't throw good time after bad! Knowing when to move on is essential for long-term productivity.

Take the initiative

Undergrad this is not; no one is going to hold your hand through the next few years. Though your supervisor is there to guide you, they will not be the one doing the work, and ultimately you're responsible for driving the project. Take the initiative and make things happen.

Read

No one expects you to read every single published paper in minute detail, but it should feel like you're coming close. New work is constantly being published, and in an ever-changing research landscape, you need to be aware of any significant developments in your field. Try to read and digest two or three interesting papers per week at the least. Journal clubs are a good place for discussion. Also, read up on topics that fall slightly outside your own. It pays dividends to have a well-rounded knowledge base.

- ..Wasting time 
- ..Compromising 
- ..Keep moving 
- ..Initiative 
- ..Support from supervisor 
- ..Responsibility 
- ..Reading 
- ..Journal club 

..Declining opportunities 

..Post-PhD job market 
..Being active in the field 
..Writing a blog 
..Documenting achievements

Don't be afraid to say no

When you begin your PhD, there'll be opportunities abound. If you think that becoming involved in a new project or opportunity will distract you from your primary interest, don't be afraid to turn it down. Staying focused on what inspires you will keep your productivity high and your work at its best.

Become more than your PhD

The post-PhD job market sucks. While an impressive publication list is valuable, employers of all kinds want candidates that can bring more. Get involved in clubs at your institution, write a blog, work abroad — the possibilities are vast. Cultivate your own opportunities and set yourself apart from the crowd.

Above all, enjoy it! A PhD is the first step on the ladder to becoming an independent academic, and the unique freedom it provides is liberating. Use this freedom productively and, with a bit of luck, your results will speak for themselves.

Matthew Nolan is a second year DPhil candidate in Clinical Neuroscience at the University of Oxford, working on selective vulnerability and somatic mosaicism in ALS/FTD. Follow him on twitter: @matthew__nolan

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