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Starting your PhD and finding your feet

At the beginning of a new chapter in your life, starting a PhD can be daunting. You've got your undergraduate degree, and maybe even a Masters, but how does this step up differ? Find out more and get some great advice from someone who's been there.

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It can seem stressful and demanding, but remember to enjoy your time as a PhD student

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So you're starting a PhD. You feel nervous, lost, confused and worried. The majority of PhD students will already have an undergraduate degree and a Masters degree, therefore you could be forgiven for failing to see why anyone would feel nervous going onto yet another degree.

But anyone who is doing or has completed a PhD will know that embarking on Doctoral research is quite a different journey to an Undergraduate or Masters. Undergraduate and Masters programs often have large bodies of other students on the course, for the most part completing the same class based exercises and modules.

Whereas, with the PhD, for at least the next three years you're the only one on the planet doing this specific research (at least you hope – the original contribution race is a blog for another day).

The PhD journey

Every PhD journey is slightly different. Your journey will be constructed not only by your research, but by your supervisory team, your peers, your institution, your working pattern, and so on.

This independent journey is known to be one of the reasons why a PhD can often be somewhat challenging and isolating. However, a PhD would not be the 'gold standard' of education if it was stress-free, undemanding and straightforward. Who wants an easy life? Certainly not anyone in academia!

As a PhD student (especially at the beginning) you feel confused and worried that everyone else seems to know what they're doing and you don't. Fret not! This is normal and is likely the same thing your peers are thinking too.

Talk to fellow students

Speak to other PhD'ers, speak to others who have completed their PhD. You'll likely find that they had similar anxieties and fears. The beginning of your PhD and finding your feet will be tough enough, so don't carry even more weight on your shoulders than you have to by feeling worried that you're not good enough or that you don't have a clue what you want from your research, what it means, how you will carry it out, or produce a thesis so huge that it reminds of you of James and the Giant Peach.

I recently spoke to a third year PhD student, in the write-up stage, with only 12 weeks to go before submitting the thesis. They told me that even now they still have periods of perplexity while writing up.

A fear that the work is simply not good enough, despite supervisors and peers telling them how well they are doing. As academics (and especially as Brits) we are often too pessimistic and cynical about ourselves and our work. Perhaps this culture of being self-critical and quite demanding on ourselves is why we are one of the [top countries in the world](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/) (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/>) for Doctoral graduates.

Don't fret, have fun

Enjoy this time. Enjoy the first few weeks. Welcome meetings, getting to know some of your department and your PhD community. Also, try to use these first few weeks to establish how you work best.

Everyone is different, so try not to compare yourself with others. Just because someone works well by hitting the library solidly for eight hours a day doesn't mean that will work for you. I know students who have worked in crowded, noisy open-spaces such as coffee shops and common rooms where the exchange of conversation and ideas with others helps them to be productive.

In contrast, I know Doctoral graduates who have worked in isolation, burying themselves away from all human life for a few hours each day – these people are still often social and active within the post-graduate community, but simply cannot work on their research unless they are in an environment without any distraction. Do what works for you and for your research.

The years will fly by. Remember how quick your undergraduate went! Remember how sad you felt leaving the University and your fellow peers when you graduated. Enjoy your time and your journey. Try to remember the big picture.

To quote Ronald Azuma (<https://www.cs.unc.edu/~azuma/hitch4.html>). "Being a graduate student is like becoming all of the Seven Dwarves. In the beginning you're Dopey and Bashful. In the middle, you are usually sick (Sneezy), tired (Sleepy), and irritable (Grumpy). But at the end, they call you Doc, and then you're Happy."

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