

# Things to Do the Summer Before Starting a PhD

(Disclaimer: These are suggested notes I would have loved to receive before starting my PhD – Valentina Gonzalez-Rostani.)

Preparing for a PhD involves both academic and logistical considerations. The summer before the program begins is a valuable time to recharge, get organized, and strengthen any necessary skills. Below are recommendations categorized into general preparation and specific considerations for international students.

## General Preparation

### 1. Rest and Recharge

- A PhD is a long-term commitment that requires sustained effort. Taking time to relax before the program starts can help with long-term productivity.
- If possible, take a break from intensive academic work before classes begin.

### 2. Strengthen Relevant Skills

- If there has been a gap since working with quantitative methods, reviewing foundational concepts can be helpful.
  - Recommended resource: *Moore, Will H., & Siegel, David A Mathematics Course for Political and Social Research* (Part I: Building Blocks).
- Refreshing knowledge of statistical software is beneficial. While many classes will cover their application, gaining some familiarity beforehand—especially with R, Python, or Stata—can be helpful if you have not used them before.
  - Free resources:
    - **For R:** [R for Data Science](#)
    - **For Python:** *Bruce, E., Rosenbaum, S., & Rohan, J. Scientific Computation: Python Hacking for Math Junkies* (2015).
- Learning LaTeX or Markdown can improve academic writing and formatting efficiency.
  - LaTeX tips: [GitHub Guide](#).

### 3. Optional Reading and Additional Resources

If you have additional free time, the following books provide useful background:

- **Introduction to Social Science Research:**
  - *Brancati, D. Social Scientific Research* (2018).
- **Data and Models:**
  - *Page, Scott E. The Model Thinker: What You Need to Know to Make Data Work for You* (2018).

- **Academic Writing:**
  - Birkenstein, C., & Graff, G. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (2018).
- **Note-Taking & Organization System**
  - If you are not familiar with them, it is a good idea to start using a reference management tool (e.g., Zotero) to organize academic papers efficiently.
  - Time management is an important skill. Exploring note-taking and project management tools such as Notion can help streamline tasks and research projects.

## **Additional Considerations for International Students**

### **1. Arriving Early**

- Arriving 2–3 weeks before the program starts can provide time to settle in, complete paperwork, and adjust to a new environment.
- For example, get your University ID card.

### **2. Organizing Housing and Essentials**

- Setting up basic living necessities in advance allows for a smoother transition once coursework begins.
  - Try to get in touch with previous-year students to get tips on these. For example, Google-Fi as a group can be a very affordable mobile phone solution, etc.
  - Note that the payment for the first check is usually one or two months after you arrive, so try to take this into account when planning your moving finances.

### **3. Completing Bureaucratic Requirements**

- International students may need to obtain:
  - Social Security Number.
  - State ID or driver's license (not mandatory but useful for everyday life).
  - Health insurance registration and any required immunizations (e.g., additional vaccines you may take once you arrive).

Overall, while academic preparation can be useful, the main priority should be recharging your energy and starting the program feeling well-rested and organized. Enjoy the beginning of your PhD!