

15 Rules to Help You Make it Through Grad School

Laura Blattner

November 2017

1. **Remind yourself how much you have been given.** Most likely your arrival at grad school is in no small part due to the support and opportunities you have been given by your family, teachers, mentors and many other helping hands along the way. Recognizing this will help you let go of the sense of entitlement that can creep up on you and instead allow you to feel grateful that someone is paying you to learn more about the thing you love.
2. **Manage your inner demons.** Grad school is an exercise in learning how to hold your inner demons at bay. Nobody goes through 5 or 6 years of grad school without at some point being consumed by self-doubt, insecurity, fear, or jealousy. Don't try to push the demons away, resisting those feelings will only make them more powerful; but don't let yourself succumb to them either. Establishing a healthy relationship with your inner demons will require hard work but it will be some of the most important work you do in grad school.¹
3. **Don't compare yourself to your classmates.** The satisfaction of doing 'better' than someone else will turn out to be fleeting and shallow. Feeling like you are doing 'worse' will only fuel anxiety and self-doubt. Everyone is following their own path. You don't know yet what yours will look like.
4. **Treat grad school like a team sport.** Your classmates are some of the most intelligent and inspiring people you will meet. Some will become your best friends and many will become your colleagues for life. You will learn more from them than you will from your professors. Learn to be proud of the clever and important research your classmates do. Your classmates will be one of the main reasons why you too will produce clever and important research.
5. **Practice self-care.** Self-care doesn't mean you have to meditate for an hour each day or go on silent retreats. It simply means making sure to schedule something each day that you will enjoy and that allows you to get some distance from your work. It can be exercise, a coffee with a friend, an afternoon walk, or playing with a puppy. Self-care should scale up with the level of stress in your life. Beware that for many people the opposite happens.
6. **Do not attach your sense of self-worth to your work.** No, you probably won't have a Nobel prize winning paper, be the star on the job market, or the best student your advisors ever had. That's ok. It does not mean that you have failed in life or that you are not a human being worthy of praise, respect, and love.

¹Credit: Dr. Kitty Wheeler, Mindfulness Researcher at Oxford University

Recognizing that who you are does not depend on what other people think of you is a big step to a healthy grad school experience.

7. **See the bigger picture.** We tend to get so wound up in the minute details of our work that every small obstacle we encounter seems fatal. Remember that the untold stories of every published paper are countless dead-ends, regressions that didn't make sense, ideas that you discover had already been published by someone else, bugs that seemed to be everywhere and nowhere. Keep a diary of those stories so you can tell your future advisees when they come to you dejected and ready to give up.
8. **Stay curious.** Remember what brought you to grad school in the first place. Most likely it was something akin to curiosity. A question you wanted to answer, a topic you wanted to learn more about, a desire to push the frontier of knowledge a little bit further. Your best research moments will be those when you can re-awaken that curiosity. In those moments of flow, you don't work because you are panicking about a deadline, because you are desperate about graduating, because you want to impress your advisor, or any of the other reasons that can make research feel like a burdensome chore. In those moments, you are coding, calculating, or composing away; truly curious about what the result will be.
9. **Beware of the curse of knowledge.** Often, when we finally understand something, we immediately think that this piece of knowledge is trivial and everyone else must have long arrived at this insight. This is the curse of knowledge. The curse of knowledge is the reason we give ourselves too little credit for the hard work it took to create a deeper understanding of a complex subject matter. It is also the reason that, assuming our knowledge in others, we are continuously puzzled why in meetings, presentations and papers, people don't get what appears obvious to us.²
10. **Be your biggest cheerleader.** Many people will tell you to be your biggest critic. You probably already are. Grad school requires the ability to relentlessly critique and improve your own work. But do not forget to give yourself credit. Credit for showing up in the office in the morning even though you didn't feel like it. Credit for not giving up on a piece of difficult analysis. Credit for having understood something you didn't understand at the beginning of the day. Celebrate the small steps because research is a succession of small steps.
11. **See the shared experience.** Seeing the shared experience gets you out of your 'everyone but me' funk. Depending on how far along in grad school you are, variants of this funk include: "everyone but me can solve this problem set", "everyone but me can find an interesting research topic", "everyone but me is capable of writing high quality research papers", and "everyone will but me will be able to get a job". We are all under the eternal spell of the imposter syndrome. Even the rising superstar professor that just got hired at your department; *especially* the rising superstar professor that just got hired at your department.
12. **Re-write the stories about yourself.** We all carry around narratives about ourselves. We are good at x, bad at y, not the type of person that does z. Rec-

²This is inspired by Steven Pinker, *Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. 2014 Penguin Books.

ognize them for what they are: stories. Stories that may have been etched into our consciousness when we were too young to even realize (remember that middle school teacher who told you would never be able to write a decent essay?). But stories can be re-written. Go ahead and re-write yours — who knows, you may be a Pulitzer prize winner in waiting.

13. **Don't play the stress game.** Grad school can sometimes feel like a competition in who is stressed the most, slept the least, eaten the largest number of take-out meals and spent the most hours at their desk. Don't play the stress game. In that game, we all lose. Your work is not any less important if you are well rested, took the evening off to cook dinner with a friend or went for an afternoon run to clear your head — in fact your work will be better for it.
14. **Lean into the discomfort.** A lot of the things you do in grad school are hard. Doing research is hard. Clearly and concisely communicating your research is hard. Facing your advisor when you are stuck is hard. Giving a good presentation is hard. Your instinct will be to run away from the discomfort of facing things that are hard (popularly known as procrastination). Instead try to lean into the discomfort. More often than not resisting the urge to immediately numb the discomfort with your phone/email/Facebook/news allows you to push through the discomfort.
15. **Reclaim your agency.** Sometimes grad school can feel like a rat race. An endless succession of deadlines and demands where you always seem to be a step behind. In those moments, realize that you have a choice. A choice of how much power to grant those deadlines over your well-being. A choice to prioritize what matters most to you. A choice to step out of the rat race when you need to.