

Transitioning From Undergraduate Student to Graduate Student: Tips and Resources

Three Tips for New Graduate Students

Be Your Own Guide

As an undergraduate, college/class policies are spelled out for you. Graduate school is different in that the student is responsible for finding their own way. You will be taking your education into your own hands. Take the initiative to become familiar with policies, ask questions, and develop relationships with faculty and fellow graduate students. In graduate school, no one cares as much about your success as you do. You are often the only person who will ensure that you are making progress towards your degree.

Protect Your Time

As a graduate student you will use your time differently than you did as an undergraduate. You'll spend more time on academic activities outside the classroom. Keeping a calendar and to-do list will help you manage your time efficiently. Many graduate students devote large amounts of time to studying but neglect their personal lives. Schedule in play time, rest and relaxation, and social time to maintain your physical and mental health.

Take Initiative and Be Tenacious

Because the majority of the work you do as a graduate student is solitary – reading, writing, and analyzing data – initiative and motivation will be key to your success. Successful graduate students use their initiative to carry out their academic responsibilities and new ideas. Always exercise the initiative to ask for help when you need it and before things get out of control. Experiencing setbacks can be common in graduate school and successful students are tenacious when facing adversity. Direct your energy towards working through problems instead of complaining. Determine what went wrong, ask for assistance if necessary and go back to the drawing board if necessary.

Organization Tips for New Graduate Students

Graduate school offers you the opportunity to develop a variety of essential scholarly skills. However, you receive very little advice on the one skill that can make or break a new graduate student: organization. Being unorganized is a time waster because you'll spend valuable time searching for papers, resources – whatever it is you need to get your work completed. So how do you get organized? Try these tips:

- Use a to-do list to free your mind for the work at hand.
- Set up a filing system. Don't skimp on file folders or you'll find yourself doubling up on files and lose track of your most important papers. Maintain files for:
 - research/thesis ideas, thesis references
 - exam material (as you prepare for comps, you will have copies of old exams and study materials)
 - professional credentials (vita, sample cover letter, research statement)
 - reprints and professional articles
 - teaching materials
- Organize your study space. It should be free of distractions, well lit, and have all supplies and files nearby.
- Splurge on office supplies. Though supplies can be expensive, it's easier to get organized when you've got the right tools. Purchase a quality stapler, paper clips, binder clips, stick on notes in several sizes, sticky flags for marking important pages in texts, etc.
- Use binders to organize class notes, with dividers to separate your notes from assigned readings, handouts, etc.

Time Management Tips for Graduate Students

It's easy to feel overwhelmed during those first few months of graduate school. How do you find time for all of the work? The best advice for avoiding burnout and getting bogged down is to keep track of your time: record your days and maintain daily progress towards your goals. Time management is essential to your success in grad school. Learn how to manage your time with these tips for time management.

Use a Calendar System

By now, you probably use a calendar to keep track of weekly appointments and meetings. Grad school requires taking a long-term perspective on time. Use a yearly, monthly, and weekly calendar.

- **Year Scale.** It's difficult to keep track of today and remember what needs to be done in 6 months. Long-term deadlines for financial aid, conference submission, and grant proposals creep up quickly! Plan at least 2 years ahead with a yearly calendar, divided into months. Add all long term deadlines on this calendar.
- **Month Scale.** Your monthly calendar should include all paper deadlines, test dates, and appointments so that you can plan ahead. Add self-imposed deadlines for completing long term projects like your thesis or dissertation.
- **Week Scale.** Most academic planners use a weekly scale of measurement. Your weekly calendar includes your day-to-day appointments and deadlines. Have a study group on Thursday afternoon? Record it here. Carry your weekly calendar everywhere.

Use a To-Do List

Your daily to-do list will keep you moving towards your goals on a daily basis. Take 10 minutes every night and make a to-do list for the next day. Look over your calendar for the next couple of weeks to remember tasks that need to be planned in advance: searching for literature for that term paper and preparing submissions to conferences and grants. Your to-do list is your friend; never leave home without it.

- Prioritize your to-do list. Rank each item by importance and attack your list accordingly so that you don't waste time on nonessential tasks.
- Schedule time to work on classes and research each day, even if it is just a few 20 minute blocks. Think you can't get much done in 20 minutes? You'd be surprised. What's more important is that the material will stay fresh in your mind, enabling you to reflect on it at unexpected times (like on your ride to school or walk to the library).
- Be flexible. Allow time for interruptions and distractions. Plan just 50 percent or less of your time so that you'll have the flexibility to handle unexpected interruptions. When you're interrupted, ask yourself, "What is the most important thing I can do right now? What's most urgent?" Use your answer to plan your time and get back on track.

Five Tips for Coping with Grad School Stress

Throughout graduate school exams loom, papers hang over us, and nagging deadlines keep us awake and stressed. How can you manage it all? Follow these 5 tips for coping with graduate school stress.

- **Start studying now.** Don't wait. Procrastination will perpetuate feelings of helplessness -- you'll feel more stressed and out of control if you put off your work. The same holds true for papers. Begin as early as you can.
- **Don't cram.** Psychological research shows that repeated exposure to your course material over several sessions is better than what psychologists refer to as "massed practice" -- cramming. You're more likely to understand and retain material that you've covered several times over a period of days or even weeks than material crammed over a 1-2 day period.
- **Prioritize.** Make a list of all that needs to be completed. Then prioritize your list, noting due dates as well as rating the overall importance of each item. Use this list to organize your study time.
- **Sleep.** Though it might seem like a good idea to pull an all-nighter to get that paper finished, you're better off getting some sleep and returning to it in the morning. Research shows that we need sleep in order to function.
- **Exercise.** "Why should I spend precious time on exercise?" Exercise is one of the best stress-relievers around. Really. When we're stressed we experience elevated levels of stress hormones that keep us wound up. We experience tightened muscles and short tempers. Exercise permits us to release the pent-up energy.

Adapted from <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/new/a/studentstress.htm?p=1>, retrieved on 3/18/10.