



**SDS PAGE**

**SHORT DISCUSSIONS  
FOR STUDENTS PAGE**

## How to Survive Your PhD

Beginning a PhD is an exciting and equally daunting task. Once you have settled into your new role as a PhD student, filled out all the paper work, and decided where your bench is going to be, you may sit back and think 'How can I achieve all that I want in my PhD?', 'What happens if I struggle with my project?', and 'Do I really need to work 80 hours a week?' It is impossible to predict how your project is going to take shape over the course of your studies. However, there are a number of things that you can do to actively manage your PhD. Here are some tips that we hope will help you to navigate the many highs and lows ahead of you.

### In the Beginning...

Begin your PhD with open communication, a clear plan, and enthusiasm for the days ahead. **Communication** is the key to a successful project. In the early days this will primarily be with your supervisor, however effective communication is an important skill to acquire for the future as well. Asking questions is ALWAYS a good idea!

Do you have a clear understanding of your project and how you are going to achieve the initial steps? If not, arrange extra meetings with your supervisor. Remember there are many people who can assist you, including postdocs and other students in the lab. It is a good idea to discuss the expectations your supervisor has of you, but also be prepared to communicate what you would like from your supervisor. These expectations may change as your project progresses, so try and maintain an open dialogue throughout your project.

As Winston Churchill once said, "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." This is particularly true for a PhD. Furthermore, as with many things in life, **you get out what you put in**. This is not to say that you should expect to devote every minute of your day to study, however you should be prepared to put in the extra time when needed. Putting the extra time in will pay off, just make sure to relax when the tough times have passed.

**Read, read, read!** Not only is it important to have a good

understanding of the literature in your field, but this is also often where new ideas come from. Reading also helps to expand your knowledge of experimental designs, and to keep abreast of new technologies that may be useful for your research. You may be excited to get into the lab and get your gloves wet, but preparation is the key. A PhD student who is now a successful lab head once said: 'Work smart, not hard'.

### Look After Yourself, or at Least Try

PhD students are bright individuals doing exactly what they want, right? So why are so many sad? Because doing a PhD is hard! It can sometimes seem physically and mentally draining, and the constant self-doubt and anxiety can lead to burnout. Worse still, constant failures in the lab can kill your motivation and make you question your decision to start a PhD in the first place. While it may be impossible for you to control many factors affecting you (such as your supervisor's lack of enthusiasm for your last manuscript draft, or the inability to reproduce the last western you ran), it is possible to control how you feel about the situation. When was the last time you did something active outside of the lab? Or the last time you ate something nutritious? Or felt relaxed and happy? If the answer is 'not for a while' then perhaps it is time to start looking after yourself a little bit more.

**Get outside.** We all know the benefits of exercise, so plan to spend more time being active in the great outdoors. Fresh air and sunshine can do wonders for your outlook, not to mention helping to boost motivation for the rest of the evening in the lab. See somewhere new. Conferences and workshops are a great way for you to travel the world while presenting your hard earned results. They are also ideal for forming new and lasting friendships and collaborations. Tip: many seemingly intractable science problems were solved by chatting at a conference mixer, long after the talks have ended.

And finally, **talk to someone.** Your fellow students are a great support system. In addition, all postdocs have recently been where you are, and they would be more than willing to impart their advice over a few drinks. Furthermore, universities offer counselling services to help you get through your graduate program. External support services can be found through organisations such as *beyondblue* ([www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)) and *Lifeline* ([www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)). Remember, a problem shared is a problem halved.

### Celebrate the Good Times

We often focus on the hard times during a PhD, however what if everything is going well? These times may not last, but while they do, take advantage of them. **Prepare papers.** This is a great time to step back and assess your project and prepare a plan for a manuscript with your supervisor. Start getting your figures together and present them to get feedback. Not only will this help you later when you come to prepare your thesis, but it also helps identify additional work needed for successful publication.

**Be productive.** Maintain your productivity during the

good times, as this momentum will ebb and flow over the life of your PhD. This is often the time when new ideas or research avenues will appear. Make informed decisions about what research is within the scope of your PhD, and remember that in four years you will not answer every question.

**Take a deep breath.** Take advantage of the good times to reconnect with friends and family. They may have forgotten what you looked like, but your friends and family are an important support group during your PhD. Get involved with social activities at work. You may have abstained previously due to a lack of time, but going to a football match with your work colleagues is a great way to bond and maintain a healthy work life balance. But above all enjoy the good times as they remind us why we commenced our PhD in the first place.

### At the Pointy End - Writing Up and Moving On

A PhD thesis is a cumbersome document that is unlike anything you have written before. Completing it takes time and planning.

**Write up as you are going along.** Whether it is keeping a detailed electronic record of your protocols and results or, in an ideal situation, having papers already published, writing up as you go along will save you time and pain.

**Leave ample time.** Coming in at over 50,000 words, a PhD thesis takes more time to complete than you think, so be sure to set aside enough time to get it done properly.

**Plan to finish your experiments by a given date.** Nearing the end of your candidature, plan which experiments still need to be done and set yourself a date to wrap-up your lab work. Bench work and thesis writing should be mutually exclusive, and the last thing you want is to be performing crucial experiments when you are fully immersed in thesis writing.

**Take a pragmatic approach.** Everybody wants his or her thesis to be amazing, and within reason it should be. However keep in mind that your thesis is a means to an end, in fact your peers are much more likely to read the papers that result from it. Furthermore, a concise thesis is likely to be better understood by your reviewers, so focus on clarity and avoid waffle.

**Get feedback on the whole thesis.** Your thesis will benefit greatly from being read by as many people as possible. Remember that it is not your supervisor's job to proof read what you write, so be sure to have rough drafts edited for grammar by others.

Finally, **plan for the next stage.** Preparing your thesis is the final task in fulfillment of your degree, and now it is time to plan for the next stage of your career. As such, this is a great time to read other SDS PAGE articles such as 'How to Improve your Curriculum Vitae for Future Employment or Fellowship Applications' or 'The Post-PhD Plan' that are dedicated to discussing options for your next move!

*The Students' Page is coordinated by  
Aaron McGrath ([amcgrath@ucsd.edu](mailto:amcgrath@ucsd.edu)) and  
Catherine Palmer ([catherine.palmer2@monash.edu](mailto:catherine.palmer2@monash.edu)).*