

First Part is the Hardest Part:

Surviving Grad School – Year One

There's no Easy Street in graduate school. In fact, chances are you learned pretty quickly that graduate school would be more work than you expected, perhaps even that the study habits and work strategies that earned you A's as an undergraduate just don't cut it anymore. Reading, writing, research and relationships are the four things that tend to overwhelm most new graduate students, says Richard Kiely of the Department of Lifelong Education, Policy, and Administration.

The Grad Student-Faculty Relationship

In every department there are certain norms and rituals to which graduate students are expected to adhere. Spend some time figuring out what these are in your department, either by talking to students who've been in the program longer or simply observing others. Should you call professors by their first names or use courtesy titles? Can you stop by during office hours, or do professors expect graduate students to schedule appointments for meetings?

Read your department's Web page and the University of Georgia's graduate handbook to learn the protocols, timelines and deadlines for forming committees, choosing classes, fulfilling degree requirements and submitting forms and paperwork. These things are your responsibility, and faculty will expect you to take care of them. It's OK to ask questions of faculty or staff, but not if the answers are readily available online or in print.

Develop good relationships with your faculty advisor, committee members and the office managers in your department. Keep good records of deadlines and meetings for yourself. Respect faculty members' time. When you request a meeting, include in your request an outline of what you'd like to discuss. E-mail faculty members reminders before important meetings. Act professionally; consider graduate school the beginning of your career in your field.

Reading: Map the Important Concepts

In nearly all disciplines, new graduate students have a hard time getting through the sheer mass of assigned reading – in the humanities, for example, it can be upwards of 1,000

pages per week – much less being able to extract useful concepts from it.

Every well-written book or article has a code, a way in which the information is organized to tell the reader what the author is arguing and why, to what or whom the author is responding and the problem he or she is addressing. Scholarly works are always written in response to a debate, question or issue from the academic field or to fill a "hole" in the existing literature. Rather than getting bogged down in the details, identify the author's most salient points and locate them within the larger context of the literature of your field. (If you're reading a book, search scholarly journals for a book review, which should tell you these things.)

To do that you must "map" a book or article. First, do a "skeletal map" in which you ask the questions: 1. Who is the author?; and 2. How is the book organized? (In other words, where am I going to find which types of information?) Look at the appendices: sometimes they contain summaries of important material in chart or table form. Next, do a "conceptual map." What is the thesis? (You should be able to find this in the introduction and/or conclusion.) What are the chapter headings in a book or subheads in an article? (This should outline the logic the author will use to support his or her thesis.) Finally, ask the question, "So what?" Why does argument matter?

If you know you're not going to get through all of an assigned reading, locate the thesis and most salient points and familiarize yourself with the author's logic by reading the introduction, conclusion and chapter headings.

When you encounter jargon with which you are unfamiliar, look it up and write down the definition. Buy a discipline-specific dictionary if one exists for your field. In class, ask questions about the parts of the reading you found confusing, that the author didn't define or explain well.

Find out what the major journals are in your field – ask a faculty member if necessary – and keep up with them, so you can get a sense of what scholars in your field are discussing.

Writing: Follow the Guidelines

Before writing for your classes, take a look at the journals in your field to see whether there is a format you should be following for an article, book review or literature review. Find out which style guide – Chicago Manual, Kate Turabian, APA, etc. – your discipline uses and follow its guidelines for grammar, style, punctuation and citation methods. Summaries of the major points of each style guide are available in the main library, and you can find some online as well.

When you write, edit yourself. Draft a paper, proof it, re-write it and proof it again. Develop a feedback ritual among your fellow students in which you read each other's work and offer feedback in a low pressure setting.

Research: The Elusive Topic

For some graduate students, choosing a thesis or dissertation topic will simply be a matter of negotiating with their faculty advisor over which portion of a larger research project the student will handle. For others, though, choosing a topic can pose a big challenge. Talk with your professors; ask them about the important current debates in

your field and holes in existing research or literature that you may be able to fill with your work. Once you have an idea for a potential topic, do some research to be sure no one else has already covered it. The sooner you decide on your topic, the more you can use your class assignments to work on individual pieces of your larger project; for example, a class term paper might become a thesis chapter.

For thesis or dissertation research, as well as any other research you do for your classes, be sure that you know the important search engines and databases in your field. Know how to use the Web for research. Knowing the top three journals, conferences and databases in your field will help you ensure that you're not missing any important existing research. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Surviving Your First Year in Graduate School" by Richard Kiely, of the Department of Lifelong Education, Policy, and Administration. To view this seminar in its entirety, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Must-do's for First-Year Success

It's inevitable that your first year of graduate school will involve a certain amount of stress. It's important, though, not to lose sight of the big picture: that school is just one part of your life. Keep yourself healthy and look for ways to occasionally get away from it all. Don't ignore your friends and family; they can be an important support network for you. Consider joining a support group if you are feeling overwhelmed, or look for a mentor who can help you navigate the balancing act of graduate school. Finally, follow some simple must-do's to keep your graduate experience running smoothly:

- Check your UGAMail regularly: This is where you will get registration information and messages from the Graduate School, student accounts and your professors.
- Implement a time management strategy.
- Ask questions, even if they seem dumb. If you're confused by something, chances are other students are confused, too. And your professors will know you're paying attention.
- Rely on your fellow students, particularly ones who have been in the program longer than you, for answers and advice.
- Be professional, proactive, disciplined, responsible, independent and self-directed.
- Build a support network of family, friends, neighbors and other students.
- Expect the unexpected: Life doesn't stop for graduate school, which means you will probably experience car trouble, family crises, financial concerns and/or natural disasters at some point in your studies.
- Don't be the person who is always in crisis mode. People will be far more willing to help you through the occasional, inevitable crisis if crisis is, in fact, occasional and not your modus operandi.