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Yours Transferably: Staying on Track - Time Management for PhD Students

20 OCT 2000 • BY [PHIL DEE](#)

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All PhD students should sit down and work out their own personal reasons for putting themselves through a Ph.D. Once you know what your reason is, however trivial it is, you must never forget it. It could be as simple as the desire to see 'Dr' on a letter addressed to you. When all your secondary reasons have fallen away, it's that which will keep you going.

But how do you translate this overall goal into a successful project? Scan a few job ads and you'll notice that the requirement 'self-starter' pops up with surprising regularity. To have any hope of completing your Ph.D. in 3 years, you need to have this quality in abundance. First, you need the self-discipline to plan your days, weeks, and months yourself. Second, you have to

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The Daily Grind

Just as most Ph.D. projects start off with something very easy that's more than likely to work, it's a good idea to start each day with a simple task. Doing something straightforward first thing gives your brain time to come online and builds your confidence if you can't face diving straight into a tricky experiment. However, once you've 'woken up' don't delay getting stuck-in; displacement activities can easily sneak in to fill up your entire day. You may convince yourself that you need to scan the recent journals in the library again or book yourself in for another optional course, but if you have writing or experiments that need facing up to, then face up to them you must. So knuckle down and get multitasking!

What happens next varies, but one word to the wise: Don't forget to take a few breaks. It helps if you can build some mental breathing space into your day. Time spent reflecting on your work is just as important as time spent actually working. A 15-minute walk can do wonders for your brain's oxygen levels, and it's often when real inspiration comes.

Try to finish each day with a positive outlook. If you're lucky, your day will end with a good result or a fresh new idea. This gives you an immediate boost the following morning. But the end of the day is perhaps the worst time to push your luck. The law of averages is set against too many experiments working perfectly the first time. And another word of caution: Your worst enemy is fatigue. It lowers your efficiency and makes you more prone to errors, and that's when self-doubt creeps in. So when you're getting too tired, for goodness sake go home. And, if you can, try to make your home a place of respite from work. If you wake up in the morning to see a pile of unread papers bearing down on you from the bedside table, you'll soon feel that you've had a skinful of your Ph.D.

Of course, if you find yourself truly on a roll, you may wish to shelve this normal habit of quitting while you're ahead. After all, you never know how long the results will continue to flow in. It's certainly a rare treat to watch everything you touch turn to gold! Unfortunately you can't plan for these workfests; they just happen when you least expect them! If late in the day your work does start to go wrong, change over to something that might let you end on a high. Even if you only manage to sort out your papers, you'll get the sense of achievement you need. The golden rule is do something, anything, as long as it contributes to both your thesis and your sense of positivity. Always spend a few minutes at the end of the day plotting out the next day's work.

If your daily work plan starts to feel a little stale, it sometimes pays to simply vary your routine. Try the odd late shift in the lab, or start ridiculously early now and again. This way you either earn yourself a lie-in or an afternoon off. Radical hours have a funny way of making you feel good about yourself, even though you're not clocking up any more total working time. Also, you'll be surprised how much you get done without other people around to distract you.

The Long View

All contestants in endurance events need milestones to aim for, and there aren't too many of these in a Ph.D., so you need to set them for yourself. If you're lucky, you'll have a supervisor who's keen to check up on you regularly. It doesn't matter if your deadlines are self-imposed or artificial, as long as you set ones that motivate you. Simply aiming to complete a task by Friday really helps you look forward to your favourite weekend treat. And by then you'll deserve it for knuckling down to work.

Early on in your Ph.D. comes the frustrating realisation that you can move forward only in baby steps. Research rarely happens any other way, so learn to live with this fact. This actually helps with goal setting, as you can tackle your workload only in a long series of bite-sized chunks. An experienced scientist recently told me to expect 80% of my best results in my final year. Let's hope he's right!

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To get a good Ph.D., you have to want it bad, fear bad. But most important, remember the basics. Eat, sleep, exercise, and relax. Keep yourself FRESH to keep on course, and prove to would-be employers that you are that elusive creature: the self-starter!

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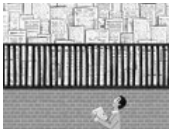


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