

## Advice to Incoming Sociology Graduate Students

Welcome to our sociology graduate program! Over the next several years, you'll work on a scholarly apprenticeship, learning crucial formal (algorithmic) and informal (tacit) knowledge and skills to develop into an independent scientist and active teacher-scholar within our profession. I've crafted this handout to help you navigate safely, if not smoothly, through the rocky shoals<sup>1</sup> that often characterize the graduate experience. I've tried to order my entries in a meaningful way. While most of my colleagues would likely agree with most of what I say below, please keep in mind that this is my personal advice to you. Further, please understand that this is a living document; I shall revise and update it as necessary.

### Some Things You Should Know

1. Your primary goal should not be “to get a PhD” or “to get a job.” Neither of these is ambitious enough. Simply aiming to achieve these may not put you on the trajectory you need for continued success. Rather, your primary goal should be “to earn tenure and promotion at my preferred type of college/university.” Aiming high with this latter goal means that you likely will achieve a higher level of accomplishment than if you aimed to *just* get your degree or *just* get a job. Not only will this serve you well on the job market, but it will increase the likelihood that you will earn tenure and promotion in the future.
2. You most likely were not exposed to actual science as an undergraduate. That is, most research experiences you had as an undergraduate, if you even had any, were likely stable, controlled, and predetermined to usually “work” (that is, produce a relatively clear result that made sense). In graduate school, you'll learn to conduct actual science. This learning process will demand that you navigate considerable uncertainties, complexities, and contingencies. Through this process, you'll likely experience a good deal of confusion and frustration and a feeling of failure—perhaps all at once.
3. Course grades and your GPA in graduate school are not as important as you think they would be. In undergraduate education, you were evaluated almost exclusively on your coursework. You likely felt as though your future options were determined by your GPA. Nearly all graduate students are intrinsically motivated to learn all they can from their courses; as such, most tend to earn high grades and thus maintain high GPAs. About the only time in graduate school that others will care about your grades or GPA is if you start earning 3.0s or lower grades or if you start amassing Incompletes in courses. Other than this, nobody really cares whether you have an overall GPA of 3.75 or 3.92 or 4.00. When you later apply for academic positions, you'll only rarely be asked to report your GPA.
4. To succeed in graduate school and beyond, you most certainly need talent and the typical set of skills that professors always discuss: critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, time management, communication, etc. Just as important, though, are the following. You need a high degree of perseverance and determination, you need to learn to deal with adversity and setbacks productively, and you need an ample amount of self-confidence. Over the years as a graduate student, a post-doc, and a professor, I've seen many graduate students leave their programs for lack of perseverance or self-confidence. In most instances, these were highly talented graduate students with relatively strong skillsets.
5. You'll need to deal with the “imposter syndrome.” This is the nagging feeling you'll have that everyone is smarter than you, that you are a failure, that others think you are a charlatan, and that someday some authority is going to come right up to you and tell you, “We've actually made a huge mistake. You shouldn't be here, and you need to leave right now.” We *all*—even the most seemingly (over-)confident among us—feel this at some point in our careers.<sup>2</sup> The imposter syndrome is especially prevalent among graduate students. Also, women and underrepresented minorities tend to struggle with the imposter syndrome more than do white males.

<sup>1</sup> or jagged terrain, narrow crawlspace, blinding sandstorm, fiery crucible, or whatever other harrowing metaphor you wish

<sup>2</sup> I know a few scientists who struggle with the imposter syndrome quite regularly even after 30+ years of work.

6. You must learn both formal and informal knowledge and skills to become a successful member of the sociology profession. Informal knowledge/skills will likely be more important to your success in graduate school and beyond than will formal knowledge/skills. Here's a fun, simplistic illustration of the difference between formal knowledge/skills and informal knowledge/skills: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgIBG8q1Gjc>. Formal knowledge/skills are “taught,” and informal knowledge/skills are “caught.” Formal (i.e., algorithmic, codified, technical) knowledge/skills can be transmitted via formal instructions, texts, formulas, and protocols. Through reading books, attending talks, and completing courses, you'll learn theories, concepts, methods, analytical techniques, and any number of robust substantive findings. Informal (i.e., tacit, indeterminate) knowledge/skills can be transmitted almost exclusively via enculturation—e.g., watching an expert or insider do it and/or having an expert or insider walk you through it. Through such close mentoring, oral culture, and trial-and-error, you'll learn insider knowledge/skills about how to perform important professional tasks (i.e., conduct a literature review, administer a survey, conduct qualitative interviews, write an article for publication, respond to reviewers, design a conference presentation, create a syllabus, etc.) and about the norms, expectations, and unwritten rules of our profession. You'll catch these tacit knowledge/skills primarily from working with your main graduate advisor, immersing yourself into their (and perhaps others') “labs,” and—to a lesser extent—integrating yourself into peer networks. I'll discuss each of these ways in turn. Students who master tacit knowledge/skills are relatively likely to produce publishable results and become successful professionals.

7. Consider your main graduate advisor (i.e., your dissertation advisor) to be the expert in charge of your apprenticeship. You likely either applied to our department specifically to work with them or you've gravitated toward them after being in the program a while. Either way, they are “your” advisor, and you are “their” advisee. You likely are working with this scientist because you want to work on their projects, extend their theory/ideas, build upon their cases, or otherwise do the sort of things they do. (If this is not the case, then you may not get what you want out of this apprenticeship.) You likely will interact with, TA for, and perhaps collaborate with other faculty (who may or may not be on your graduate committee), but you should consider your graduate advisor as your main mentor who is primarily responsible for shepherding you through graduate school and beyond. Generally, you should expect that your graduate advisor will:

- support you intellectually, emotionally, and professionally;
- convey to you the written and unwritten rules of teaching, research, and service;
- look out for your best interests in the profession (which you may not fully perceive);
- firmly steer you toward publishable studies that answer compelling research questions;
- guide you through the design, implementation, and analysis of your research studies;
- help you pre-write, write, and re-write/revise several drafts of papers before other faculty read them;
- guide you through the publication process, from framing manuscripts for targeted journals to reviewing page proofs;
- help you prepare for, perform well at, and network within professional conferences;
- promote your work in the department, college, university, and profession; and
- help you succeed on the job market and then in your subsequent tenure-system position.

In turn, your graduate advisor should expect that you will:

- meet with them frequently;
- work hard, manage your time effectively, and communicate with them clearly;
- be receptive to, and accept, constructive feedback; and
- ask questions when you are confused or uncertain.

8. Immersing yourself into a faculty member's "lab" is an effective way to "catch" tacit, insider knowledge/skills and build a promising publication record. Let me clarify three things.

- First, throughout graduate school, you may work solely with your graduate advisor, but most likely you will work—perhaps simultaneously—with a few faculty members.<sup>3</sup>
- Second, you may or may not get paid during this work. Of course, you will receive decent pay and benefits (for an apprentice!) if you work as a professor's Graduate Research Assistant, and you could also perform hourly wage work for a professor (which is somewhat common during the summer months). In both of these cases, you should expect to perform those specific tasks the professor asks you to do, because the money to pay you likely comes from an external grant to complete such tasks. If you and a professor (and others) simply agree to work together without you receiving pay, then the arrangement is usually more collaborative and reciprocal—arising out of shared interests.<sup>4</sup>
- Third, a "lab" could mean anything from a simple one-off collaboration with a single professor for several months to more long-term membership in a larger group with some degree of hierarchical structure (PI→Post-Doc→Grad Students), a formal communication network, and regular meetings in a dedicated meeting space.

So, whatever the specifics of your "lab" situation, you can expect the following with your membership and participation in a lab:

- intellectual, emotional, and professional support and mentoring from people who have survived (or are currently surviving) the graduate school experience (to help you manage personal doubts and feelings of incompetence—i.e., the imposter effect);
- identification of a "do-able," publishable project for you to perform;
- transfer of crucial tacit knowledge/skills from more senior professionals down to you;
- a collaborative setting to share problems you're having in your project(s), communicate preliminary findings, and present polished results for constructive feedback;
- a friendly audience with which you can practice giving presentations prior to conferences and on-campus interviews; and
- intensive socialization and enculturation into the scientific profession (including learning the formal rules and informal norms of scholarly publishing).

9. Join and/or form a supportive graduate student network. Early on in graduate school, you may interact mostly with other members of your cohort, simply because you are taking much of the same courses together. Over time, you may gravitate more to those graduate students in your specific field(s) of interest. If you can, join and/or form a student network that spans cohorts and fields. In such a network, you can form writing groups, develop reciprocal relationships for performing intercoder reliability on each other's data analysis, and facilitate formal and informal knowledge/skills transfer from more senior to more junior graduate students.

10. Join the American Sociological Association (ASA) and other professional associations of interest. Within the ASA, you should join those specific Sections that align with your intellectual interests and with which you wish to professionally identify. You can join (and leave) these at any time, but most people make this decision once a year when renewing their ASA membership. Section membership usually includes access to a (semi-)regular newsletter. You'll also want to sign up for the Section e-mail listserv. Through the newsletter and listserv, you'll receive valuable information about new publications of interest, advertisements for postdoctoral fellowships and assistant professor positions, calls for proposals for workshops, (mini-)conferences, and external grant opportunities.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to my graduate advisor, I worked with two other faculty members. One of those relationships was very rewarding and quite productive (one article and one book), and the other—which also included four other graduate students—was intellectually engaging while it lasted but ended up producing no publications.

<sup>4</sup> Since I had a Teaching Assistantship all through graduate school, this was my experience—even with my graduate advisor.

## Additional Things You Should Do

Besides those suggestions that were made explicit or remained implicit in the previous section, here are some additional suggestions for what you should be doing to succeed in graduate school and beyond.

- A. Increase your self-awareness. To be successful, you really need to know who you are, what motivates you, what you want out of life, and how and why you deal with adversity.
- B. Strengthen yourself. You need to learn to do the following effectively and constructively: process stress, anxiety, and fear; maintain, and even strengthen, self-confidence through adversity; and embody perseverance in the face of perceived failure.
- C. Cultivate a healthy work/life balance. Graduate school can be quite taxing on your mind, body, family, and overall well-being. Carefully protect and promote your physical and mental health. Be sure to eat, sleep, and exercise well. Enjoy each day, have fun at and away from work, and practice “mindfulness” however you wish: yoga, meditation, running, knitting, wailing away on your drum kit, writing poetry, playing with kittens, etc.
- D. Listen closely to your graduate advisor. They are looking out for you, so try hard to follow their advice and gracefully accept their constructive feedback.
- E. Attend as many departmental brownbags, panels, and talks by invited speakers or job candidates as you can. Not only will you contribute to a strong departmental “showing” at such events, but you will gain much from such events: you’ll learn new ideas, theories, methods, and findings; you’ll learn the different ways professionals may make presentations; and you’ll see how professionals ask and answer questions. Afterwards, you can debrief about all of this with your graduate advisor.
- F. Maintain a repository (an electronic or physical file, folder, etc.) where you archive all of the “partially baked ideas”<sup>5</sup> you may have for grant proposals, research studies, conceptual papers, etc. From time to time, revisit this repository and re-think, revise, and perhaps re-prioritize its items.
- G. Write *something* every day.<sup>6</sup> This is as simple as it sounds, yet it will be extremely challenging for you to make time to do this when you are busy. But, writing well is a skill that most accomplish only after thousands of hours of practice. So, in general, the more you practice writing, the better you’ll get at it. Early on (before you get into your qualifying paper and then dissertation), you can write about a course reading, an idea that came up in a lab meeting, your reaction to a TA experience, and so on. After a while, you will be writing text for your qualifying paper, comps preparation, dissertation proposal, dissertation, and whatever additional projects you are working on.

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<sup>5</sup> Credit for this term goes to Tom Dietz.

<sup>6</sup> One of my professors in graduate school told me that his own advisor tried to write about two pages of text a day.