

Some unwritten rules of graduate school, written down

By Amy Summerville

The following is a slightly modified version of a set of advice, expectations, and “unwritten rules” of graduate students in my lab that I prepared for 2 incoming students in the fall of 2017. (The version they got included a few things like specific expectations about managing my lab or names of our department staff that seemed unlikely to be of broad applicability or interest, though I think the former is an important conversation to have. I’ve tried to note the other things that may be idiosyncratic to me but that I’m guessing are broadly true or at least worth discussing.) I am a social psychologist; some of these norms may differ as you move farther from my discipline. Many thanks for the extensive feedback I got from Twitter, including several vastly better written pieces linked here.

Responsibilities/basic expectations:

1. Above all, I rely on your ethical judgment in conducting research. Collecting data ethically and reporting it accurately are what matter, not whether a study “worked” as we expected. Some of the most interesting papers I’ve written came from studies that didn’t turn out as I expected. Deliberately manipulating or fabricating data is never OK.
2. [Meeting schedule for our lab]
3. I expect that grad students manage data collection for the lab. This includes: [details for my lab] In general, I expect that you will program your own studies. We’ll discuss this for specific studies as we go (for instance, I may have a template that you can modify). This includes thoroughly proofreading and testing out the study to ensure there are no glitches or errors.
4. Keeping files (paper and digital) organized and backed up (ideally to the cloud, but at least to an external drive) is incredibly important. Make sure that you are using lab logs and archiving data so that both you and I can access and understand your data files (raw and cleaned) if we need them. Do NOT name things “study 1”-- the order of studies usually moves around in a paper from the order we ran them, or we’ll decide to use Study 1, 2, and 5 in one paper and 3 and 4 in another, and then it’s incredibly confusing to keep track of whether we mean “old study 3” or “new study 3”-- especially if we go back to the data years after we ran the study. (In 2017, I needed to go back to data from 2005 for a secondary analysis, and I hated grad-school me for making current-me’s life MUCH harder than it should have been.) Likewise, save files with dates rather than “final draft”-- the only time we should use the word “final” is when we go back and rename a file after getting the acceptance letter from an editor. Keep notes on how you’re doing a data analysis (ideally, using comments in syntax), so that this is easy to recreate later (we’ll re-run every analysis in the paper when we get to check page proofs, so this will save a lot of time at that step.) Figure out a system to organize PDFs you’ve read and your notes from conferences and classes-- you will eventually want to cite something in a paper or review it for comps and having a way to search quickly will be helpful.

5. Classes, brownbag, and colloquia are all valuable parts of your training. I expect you to attend and participate conscientiously in each of these. Of course, there may be times that this is impossible due to illness or extraordinary circumstances-- you are travelling to an out of town wedding during colloquium, for instance-- and I expect that you'll communicate promptly with me/other relevant parties about that, including arranging to turn in assigned work in advance if possible.
6. Time is one of the most precious commodities in academia. Don't waste anyone else's. Be on time and be prepared for meetings and classes. If possible send items you want to discuss in a meeting far enough in advance that the other person can review it (the day before for data, several days for writing).
7. Expect me to take a week to give you complete comments on written work (in some cases, this may be longer-- e.g. if you get me something right as I'm leaving town for a conference. I'll try to give you advance warning when this is likely to happen.) In general, I will think your writing is done about 6 weeks after you do. [NB: this will vary by advisor, but I imagine I'm not particularly unusually fast or slow in this.]
8. We will discuss authorship for every project fairly early on. In most cases, if something is being run in the lab, I will be an author on it. You can expect to be an author on projects where you are making decisions about the project; some forms of effort are not authorial, and it's important that we discuss our expectations about this for every project. I expect that, regardless of where I fall in the author order, you'll get my final approval (including my saying "I don't need to see it again before you submit it") on anything submitted to a journal/ funding agency/conference or that will be presented (i.e., posters & talks), as well as the versions of your MA and PhD documents that you send to your committee. This helps ensure that the quality of work from our lab is consistently high, and that we've worked through the most likely barriers to success together.
9. Get to know our administrative staff and treat them with respect. If you have questions about program logistics (e.g., how to handle an issue with registration, a question about stipend payments, how to handle a travel reimbursement), the staff will usually know more than I do.
10. Conferences are an important part of training and of building a network. I'd encourage you to go to [specific conferences our lab goes to, with details about when to start submitting posters/talks]. The department offers limited money for trips, and there are often travel award competitions from the conferences you can apply for. Talk to other grad students about their strategies securing additional funding for travel and research.
11. If eligible, you should apply for the [NSF GRFP](#) in the fall of your second year, and for [prestigious biennial summer school in our discipline].
12. In terms of personal finances, many people suggest paying interest on your student loans even if they are deferred in grad school. [NB: It does not appear our students qualify for food stamps based on current stipends/income thresholds for our state, but you should verify this for your own circumstances.]

Time management & goal setting:

1. This isn't a 9-to-5 job. The good news is that means that you don't have to get here at 9! However, I do expect that you will be here for the majority of business hours. If you are not in the building (reading articles in a coffeeshop, writing in the library, programming at home, whatever) at a time that we're running studies in the lab, it's important that you're accessible by the RAs in case of a problem during a session. I don't expect you to work during university breaks and holidays. I do expect that you'll work during the winter and summer terms, but also know that you'll likely take some time for rest and travel to see friends/family. Please keep me updated about plans that will keep you away from campus for more than a long weekend so that I can plan around them (e.g., I won't rush to get you a draft first thing Monday morning if I know you're out of town until Thursday!)
2. The bad news is that you have to figure out how much time you should be spending on work and what work to spend it on. It's also the case that how long you spend working isn't actually the best measure of "being productive". Ultimately, your CV is the "scorecard"-- you are "adding lines" (publications, teaching experience, service, awards, funding) to that, and no one will care whether a given achievement represents 50 hours or 500 hours of work. Don't confuse "spending time at your desk" with "being productive."
3. Unlike in undergrad, your course grades are no longer the scorecard. Classes matter because they are building your toolbox of ideas and skills for your research, and developing relationships with faculty who may serve as mentors, collaborators, or writers of letters of recommendation for future awards and jobs. When you write a research proposal, it should be research that you really would want to carry out. If you write a review paper, think about where you might be able to submit it, and then do it. Most students in our program use a research proposal in at least one class to build a collaboration with another faculty member.
4. Classes aren't the only place you should be learning things. Read broadly and curiously. Be prepared to teach yourself things you need that you can't get in a class (I taught myself HTML and Perl so I could run studies online; I taught myself how to use a statistical technique I knew to do time series analysis.) Better yet, find other people who want to learn those things too and form a study group.
5. Figuring out what to spend your time on is one of the hardest parts of grad school. I think [this](#) is a nice explanation of what the benchmarks are and what things are generally important to having success in meeting them ([this](#) is also helpful for the latter). One of the most important parts of our weekly meetings is to talk about your goals for the semester, how they're going, and what your next steps should be for each of them. Keep in mind that part of figuring out what to spend time on is also figuring out what to spend less time on. There's a lot where "good enough" is the right goal, and we can talk about how to identify those areas. There's a reason I have a sign in my office that says "done is the only virtue."
6. The list above assumes that you're looking for a career like mine (tenure line research faculty at a US doctoral institution). I know a great deal about how to have a career like mine, and I love what I do and think it's a great job to have. That doesn't mean that there aren't lots of other valuable and rewarding paths to have a different kind of career

at a different kind of academic institution, a different kind of role at an institution, or a non-academic path. (Not least because it's increasingly competitive to find a job like mine, and it comes with its own drawbacks.) However, there are tradeoffs in what's most helpful for different paths (e.g., a summer internship may be extremely helpful in pursuing a job in industry but make it harder to get a paper finished and under review and thus hurt your chances of getting an academic job). I encourage you to develop relationships with people with careers you may be interested in, as they can provide insight and mentoring about those paths.

7. Grad school is REALLY HARD. You will be wrong a lot. You will have beautiful ideas for studies that don't work. You will make mistakes. This is how you learn, and as [this](#) argues, how science moves forward. Keep in mind that impostor syndrome is incredibly common, and stereotype threat and the Dunning-Kruger effect (the more you know, the more you are aware of gaps in your own knowledge-- so, basically, if you're doing it right, the closer you get to taking your comprehensive exams, the less ready you will feel) are both real. Feeling like you don't know what you're doing is basically the great unifying experience of starting graduate school, and does not mean you shouldn't be here or that you're not going to be successful in the long run. Talk to other students about how they moved past these feelings.
8. Be aware of your mental health and the potential for burnout. Take breaks and have regular days that you don't work. Have a life outside work. Make time to cook and exercise and read for fun and spend time with friends and sleep. Sometimes these things will have to take a back seat during a busy period, but most of the time you should find ways to make space for at least some of these. And if you're taking time away from work, be away from work-- don't check email in the middle of game night. If you need support, avail yourself of the mental health resources on campus-- they are there because many students find them helpful at some point in their time here.

Communication:

1. I generally expect that you'll see and respond to email within 24 hours during the week. If I send an email after 6, I assume you won't see it until the next morning. I don't expect you to respond to emails I send over the weekend until Monday morning. I send emails at off times for my convenience, not because I assume you're working then too. [NB: advisors will differ in this, but again I imagine I'm in the middle of the curve on these]
2. Fundamentally, as a lab, we study how people learn from their mistakes. That means that one of the things that's most important for us to discuss is when there's a problem or issue in the lab. I can't promise I'll never be upset if you make a mistake, but it will always be better for me to know sooner than later. More importantly, the goal of graduate training is to help you become an independent scholar/researcher. This means 2 things:
 - a. If you were totally independent right now, there wouldn't be much point in being in grad school. My job is to share what I've figured out from my own experience and help you develop a process to figure things out on your own. There are also some things where I'm ultimately the one who's responsible-- anything involving

credit for the undergrads in the lab, course grading, lab spending, or research ethics is something that I need to have the final say about. Please come to me before making any final decisions about these. (e.g., “Sam has missed a second scheduled session in the lab. I gave him a warning after the first time, so I think at this point he shouldn’t continue as an RA. Are you OK with me telling him that we’re dropping him, or do you want to meet with him yourself?”)

- b. Trying to figure things out on your own before you come to me is a good step, both as a way for you to become more independent and for us to be able to talk through the process of problem solving. “There are no consent forms in the lab, and I can’t find where they are on the lab google drive-- can you send me the files so I can print and copy them ASAP” is much better than “We’re out of consent forms, what should I do?”, because it makes it clear what process you’ve tried to use to solve the problem, and how you’re trying to solve it now, versus making it my problem to solve for you.

Relationships:

1. You can call faculty by their first names. We’re colleagues now. (That said, if a faculty member introduces themselves as “Dr. Jones”, call them Dr. Jones until they tell you otherwise. Err on the side of excessive respect.)
2. The department really prides itself on being a supportive community that helps each of us be better than we would on our own. Gossip and disrespect erode the foundations of that community. Approach others with kindness and assume good intentions. If you have issues with another member of the department, I encourage you to talk about those issues directly and privately with that person. If you need help or support in doing that, I’m happy to be a resource, as are (department chair), (associate chair), (graduate director), and (area head).
3. Develop relationships with lots of mentors-- other faculty in the social area, other faculty in the department, faculty across campus, and faculty at other institutions who you get to know at conferences or when they give talks here. We all have different experiences and strengths, and can offer different kinds of advice and support.
4. Most successful scholars in our field have built strong networks of collaborators. Treat your fellow students as resources, not competitors, and you’ll definitely be happier and almost certainly be more successful. And be careful about social comparison-- there is no one way to be a successful graduate student, and it can be easy to misinterpret a difference as a deficiency.
5. There are several academic Facebook groups and a lively academic Twitter community. These can be interesting places to see what fellow scholars are discussing and useful resources, but be mindful that posting on these channels is equivalent to shouting on a megaphone in the middle of an academic conference: be aware of what impressions you may be creating. (And, per my statement about “confusing time with productivity”, don’t mistake spending time on academic social media for actually doing work!)
6. I see my job as being like a personal trainer at the gym: fundamentally, you’re the one doing the work. It’s my job to help you direct that effort into things that help you meet the

long terms goals we've agreed on together, and to try to help you take on challenges that are big enough that they help you grow but not so big that they're impossible and will make you give up or get injured. (Hopefully the last part doesn't apply outside the metaphor...)

7. Over the 5 years we work together, we will inevitably have times that we disagree, disappoint each other, or misunderstand each other. In choosing to work with me, you made a decision that you wanted to learn from me. I hope that when we disagree, you'll start by treating it as a chance to learn why I see the situation differently. If after you listen, you think I'm misunderstanding something, or there's another perspective I should consider, I look forward to having the chance to learn from you in return-- since in admitting you, I made a decision that you were someone I'd value as a collaborator. This kind of respectful exchange is one of the most exciting aspects of science for me. I also know that every student is different, and the things that were helpful for other students in the past may not be helpful for you. (That said, try to avoid all of [this](#).) I hope you'll talk with me if you have concerns about how our advising relationship is working; again, I encourage you to talk to department leadership if you want additional perspectives or support in having that conversation. (I think [this list](#) is helpful in framing what the line is between healthy, if sometimes unpleasant, scholarly criticism versus inappropriate/abusive advisor behavior-- obviously, I hope that the latter is never something you feel that you're experiencing from me or other faculty, but it's important that we address it right away if you do think it's occurring.)