



Rod Pitcher

**Advice to a Troubled
PhD Student**

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Advice to a Troubled PhD Student

*This book is dedicated to all PhD students,
past, present and future,
wherever and whatever they might be researching,
with my best wishes for success in their chosen field.*

*And to my PhD Supervisory Panel
for their support through the good times and the bad,
and who never gave up on me despite the vexation
I must have caused them at times.*

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1. Introduction

This is the book that I wish that someone had written before I started my PhD. It would have made my journey much less stressful and worrisome.

The book is about the way I experienced my PhD. It tells my personal story. If that can be useful to you then you will gain from it. If not, you will have to work out your own strategies for coping with the PhD.

However, if you are looking for a step-by-step how-to-do-it book, this one isn't for you. It doesn't give detailed instructions on what to do when things go bad, it just offers ideas, based on my own experience, that might help you.

I hope that you can take my ideas and develop your own personal way of doing your PhD. I hope that this book will help you in that development. That is why I wrote it.

This book consists of a number of chapters dealing with various topics of interest, and I hope of use, to PhD students. As each chapter is separate from the others you can use it in different ways.

First, you might like to read it all the way through to see what's available and what each chapter offers.

Then, you can refer back to the book and read the relevant chapter any time you feel the need for that information.

It is my hope that you will refer back to the book often. It's not that I hope that you have lots of problems about which you need advice, but rather that you will use the book as a guide or comfort when things get you down or aren't going well. More than anything, I hope that the book will show you that you are not alone. I think that I can say without fear of contradiction that every PhD student has worries, suffers depression and feels like giving up at some time during their candidacy. I hope that, in those times, this book will help you to get over it, get back to work and, most importantly, finish your PhD.

I cover a lot of area in this book, from what to do about your depression to dealing with your supervisor to some of the problems in getting published and personal relationships. Most

are meant seriously to help you, but at least one is meant to be humorous. Perhaps the humour will help you as much as the serious stuff. It all depends on you and how you are feeling at any particular time.

The Chapters

Chapter 2 gives you some background of where I am coming from. It is a somewhat philosophical chapter about what research and the PhD mean to me. It is intended to provoke you to think about and understand your own situation.

Chapter 3 is about ways of dealing with the depression that attacks most PhD students at some time during their candidacy. I discuss some of the ways that I have found useful in combating my depression.

Chapter 4 is about persistence. Persistence is what you need most to finish your PhD. This chapter makes that point.

Chapter 5 is about that all-important matter, not giving up. Every PhD student feels like giving up at some time. I hope that this chapter will help you to cope with the feeling and keep going.

If these two chapters (4 and 5) appear to have a very similar focus it is because the topic needs to be strongly emphasised due to its importance in completing your PhD.

Chapter 6 gives a few ideas about how you can avoid meetings with your supervisor. This chapter isn't meant to be taken seriously. After all, your supervisor is there to help you get your PhD. Read this chapter for a bit of a break from the seriousness of the other chapters.

Chapter 7 suggests a way of overcoming the inability to start work. I suggest approaching the job in hand by breaking it down into small steps and then doing them one at a time.

Chapter 8 is about writing – something that we all have to do a lot of. In this chapter I suggest keeping a PhD journal, both for its value as a record of your PhD and also as a place to practice writing.

Chapter 9 is about that all important exercise – publication and some of the problems I've found in the process of getting my work published.

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Chapter 10 is about public speaking. At some time in your PhD you will be required to present a seminar or other talk. Here are some of the lessons I've learnt.

In Chapter 11 I discuss the sources of ideas that might be useful to you and what to do with them.

Chapter 12 is about personal and family relationships, something which affects all PhD students.

I hope that this book helps you, and convinces you that you can complete your PhD, if only you don't let the stress and worry build up until it destroys you. Persist – it's the only way to get finished and be awarded your PhD.

Good luck!

2. Doing a PhD and Living to Tell the Tale

There have been some great and important changes to me over the time of my candidature. I have learnt a great deal about the meaning of research, both as an activity within itself and in its effect on the person doing it. I now believe that it is not possible to do research without being changed by it. That does not only mean that the knowledge gained by doing the research will change the person acquiring it but also that the person will be changed in their outlook by being involved in doing the research. Thus research is a process that changes the individual doing it because it changes the researcher's conceptions of themselves and their world..

At this stage, nearing the end of my candidature, I conceive research as being a process of growth, not only in the knowledge produced but also in the researcher. I believe that no-one can pursue research for any length of time without growing and developing as a person. That, I would like to think, is one of the most important features of research, that it effects the observer as well as the observed. I believe that my research has caused me to develop as a person.

I have learnt that research is a painstaking process. It must be pursued diligently and with care, as well as honestly and with an open mind. That is the only way to achieve the required level of objectivity and validity. The researcher must always have those factors in mind lest s/he succumb to the temptation to 'massage' the data to give the required answers. There can be no justification for falsity. Only complete honesty is good enough.

Research as Building and as a Story

I conceive of research as a process of building knowledge. Most researchers simply add a tiny bit to the overall edifice, but some, the geniuses, will add larger pieces to the building or even help to redesign it. Each piece of data gradually helps the whole edifice develop. One small bit might seem unimportant at the time of discovery, but might become vitally important at some

later date when others have either added to it or built up the structure around it.

Knowledge develops like a building. First the ground floors must be built and reinforced to support the load of the upper storeys as they are added. Then the upper storeys (and stories) can be added. The result will be like a building with different rooms and storeys devoted to different ends and subjects of research. Each room and storey will have its own story of how it was started, developed and grew to be accepted as part of the network of knowledge. Sometimes part of the structure will collapse because the foundations are weak or haven't been built properly. Maybe part of the structure will have to be rebuilt due to faulty or inadequate workmanship, but the growth is ever upward. Weeding out the weak parts is also good research as it strengthens the whole structure. In my work I have taken the initial form of MIP, the Metaphor Identification Procedure that I am using for my research, and developed it further than the originators did. In that way I have, at least partially, replaced the original MIP with a more sophisticated version. That is part of my contribution to the building that is knowledge, that I have replaced a useful tool with something better. My contribution is not a new storey nor even a new room, it is more like a cupboard in the room about metaphor analysis that someone in the future might open in search of new ideas. Perhaps then my story might stimulate them to produce a further development.

Research is also the construction of a story, and a never ending one at that. Each researcher adds or revises chapters and develops the story further. Some will completely rewrite the book on a particular subject or throw away the old book and start a new book by means of a revolution as described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Even when a new book is started some of the old knowledge will remain as a core on which the new knowledge can form. The chapters will be the separate research projects, the characters are the researchers and the participants in their research.

It must be remembered that the people who provide the data in the form of survey or interview transcripts are as

important as the researcher. They are like the lesser characters in a story who are important for the development of the plot. Without the relatively minor players there would be no story: Without the people being interviewed or surveyed to provide it there would be no data for the research. Therefore the interviewees are also an important part of the research story and must be treated with respect and courtesy, both in the gathering and the use of the data they provide.

When I started my candidature I had a very simplistic view of research from my reading as an undergraduate. Due to my background in anthropology I thought that it was only necessary to observe a group of people for a short time to be able to understand their actions and motives. I imagined that most of the data would be gathered by simply sitting talking to the people and forming ideas about what motivated them. This understanding was then used as the data for giving an account of the people involved. It came to me as something of a surprise when I had to arrange gathering my own data by planning the nature and delivery of my survey. It became plain that the planning part of data gathering is much more involved than simply asking a few people a few questions.

The Need For Planning

As part of the planning for my survey I had to obtain ethical clearance for my research. Answering the questions about who I would survey, what information I would elicit, and what I would do with the data after, brought home to me the ethics involved in research. I realised then that research was more than just fronting up to the participants and asking questions.

Studying the responses to my survey, reading and re-reading the responses over and over again, sorting out the important parts and figuring out what they mean, brought home to me some of the tediousness of research. The result of that tediousness was a temptation to rush or otherwise compromise the work that had to be resisted.

Research requires care and attention. Sometimes that care and attention must be taken to extremes which are almost unbearable in their tediousness. However, only by persisting can

a satisfactory result be obtained. The cost of research is the sometimes hard and tedious work that must take place; The benefits which result from the work are research in which pride can be taken and which will be of value to the researcher and others.

My reading of the literature, against which to place my own research, was also a somewhat tedious process for me. I didn't want to sit reading other people's work I wanted to get on with my own. I soon learnt that a knowledge of the work done by other people is the cornerstone upon which further research is built. Only by understanding what has gone before can the researcher decide what to research next and how.

It came as something of a shock to me to see how often different researchers disagreed with each other. I wondered how I could ever make sense of the arguments and counter-arguments. That I eventually did so I put down to persistence and the pressure from my supervisors. It was a salutary lesson that I won't forget quickly.

However, I now realise that it is through disagreements over results and procedures that knowledge is built and tested for validity. If all researchers agreed on what is correct there would be no way of tearing out the errors in knowledge and replacing them with better versions of the truth. The new versions of the truth may eventually also prove to be wrong and have to be replaced, but each version of the truth will, hopefully, be better and more correct than its predecessors. It is through the discussion of differences in methods and results that progress is made.

Even when I settled on a method of analysis I wasn't finished. I found that the literature on my chosen method left much to be desired. I had to work out for myself what to do. I eventually ended up critiquing the method because that was the only way to make any satisfactory progress. In critiquing the method I learnt how to consider, add to and argue against the work of other researchers. Hopefully, in my critique of the method I have produced something worthwhile that will be my contribution to the edifice of knowledge and a better way of

analysis. If other people can use my modified method usefully then I shall be well satisfied.

Over the time of my candidature, as can be seen from the above, I have changed my conception of research and the work involved in it. Gone is the simplistic view I started with, to be replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of what research means and what it is meant to achieve. That understanding has changed me as a person, as well in that I have developed a deeper understanding of the methods of research and what it means to be a researcher. Perhaps most importantly, I have learnt that research is hard work when done properly and well. It involves much work in gathering data, analysing it and writing up the results.

The ‘New’ Me

Before I started my candidature I had a vague idea that the data could be gathered, the results written up and publication take place all within a few weeks or months at the most. Now I know better. It can be years between the start of planning the data collection and the resultant journal paper seeing publication. If I wished to be cynical I might suggest that a lot of research is well out of date (Dare I say obsolete?) before it sees publication.

The long time between research and publication has implications for the growth of knowledge. Anyone referring to other people’s work only has information that can be years out of date, unless the latter researcher is willing to share the results of her or his work privately.

Thus it would seem that to stay up-to-date a researcher needs a large list of private contacts in the field who are willing to share their as yet unpublished work. However, sharing one’s work before publication can be unsatisfactory and dangerous since some important and original idea might be stolen by an unscrupulous competitor before it can see publication. Priority of publication is so important that it is not unbelievable that such theft does go on.

During the time of my candidature I have also become more able to make decisions regarding my work. At times I have

had to make decisions about procedures and the writing up of results. Some of those decisions have been painful and worrying. However, it has all been a part of the learning process and I have gained from it in the long run. At times I felt myself unable to carry out my own decisions due to having to come to a compromise with my Supervisory Panel. Mostly I had to bow down to their superior knowledge about the PhD and follow their instructions. Sometimes it irked me not being able to go my own way, but I suppose that it's all been for the best.

When I began my PhD I thought that my Supervisory Panel would tell me what to do every step of the way in matters such as my research and writing. However, I now realise that they are more like colleagues and co-workers who are working on a research project with me. They want to see what happens and what result is produced as much as I do. They also have a vested interest in me completing my PhD as it will reflect on their abilities as supervisors and academics if I do not complete or fail my PhD. The standard of my PhD work is a reflection of the care and attention which my Panel have devoted to my development as a researcher. I have a great deal for which to thank them, for their encouragement and their devotion to duty in teaching me the ins and outs of doing my PhD.

An Ending. Or New Beginning?

It can be seen from the above that my research has changed me and my outlook. It has given me much to think about, and in so doing has changed my thinking about the processes and the results of research, both my own and other people's. It has also helped me understand better what actually goes on in research and how doing research affects the person doing it.

As well as a better understanding of myself as a researcher I now have a better understanding of my colleagues as researchers. I have some understanding of what motivates them and drives them to be academic researchers. In that way, as well as many others, my research has broadened my mind and my life. Never again will I be the same person as I was when I started my candidature as a research student. That person now appears

to me to have been very naïve about research and the nature of knowledge. He had little understanding of the academic world, the world of research and the world of the researcher. He has grown into a person who now has some understanding and wants more.

Undertaking the PhD has changed me. I'm not the same person as the one who started three or more years ago. I have more confidence in myself. I have proven myself -- at least to my own satisfaction -- as a researcher. I've enjoyed the process -- most of the time. True, there have been low spots, but they are all part of the process of growing up as a researcher. I learnt as much from the low spots as I did from the good times. Not least, about myself. There is now no way that I could go back to being the person who started a PhD all those years ago. I'm changed too much. It was all worthwhile. I'm glad that I did it and I would do it all again.

3. Coping With PhD Depression

All my life I've battled with depression. Unfortunately, I can't take medication for the complaint as it either makes me ill or more depressed. Some time before starting my PhD I had a year of weekly counselling sessions which, while not curing the depression, helped me to develop strategies that enabled me to cope with the depression better. Those strategies came in useful while I was doing my PhD.

According to the literature most PhD students suffer from depression at some time in their candidature. So, if you are suffering from depression you are not alone. It happens to most of us at some time or other. My intention here is to offer some strategies that I have learnt that might help you cope with it. Put the work aside for a while and try these strategies. Adapt them to suit yourself. Use them as a starting point in working out your own therapy. Realising that you are not alone in your suffering will help you to cope with your depression.

Depression is such a personal thing that one person's strategies to cope with it might not work for someone else. Thus, you have to work out your own strategies. That does not mean that you can't listen to other people. You never know who might make the suggestion that will help you to deal with it. The strategies described here are the ones that work for me. They might not work for you. Try them. If they don't work think of your own.

Defending Against Your Depression Getting Worse

The most important defence against the depression getting worse is not to worry about it. Worrying, together with the depression, generates a downward spiral that only makes the depression and worry get worse and worse. So the first important step is to stop worrying about being depressed and not doing any work. You can be sure that the depression will pass. It will get better. You will get over it and be able to work again. So stop worrying. Forget the work. The depression will only hold you

back for a short time and then you will be able to get back to work and finish your PhD.

Secondly, don't make any important, irreversible, decisions while you are depressed. Yes, you will feel like dropping out. Yes, you think that it's no longer worthwhile. Yes, you will think that you aren't good enough to get the PhD. That's just the depression talking. You do want the PhD. You do want to finish. Why else did you start if you didn't want the PhD? You started because you want to get your PhD and you will feel that way again as soon as the depression passes. If you drop out while you are depressed it will only make you more depressed when you realise what you have given up.

Next, you have to take your mind off your depression and your work. Find something else to do. Something that interests you, such as a hobby or talking to someone sympathetic. I know that it takes a lot of effort to do anything while you are depressed and that you have no energy for it, but try. You will find it worthwhile if you can wake up your mind.

Some Strategies That Might Help

To break your depression you have to shake up your mind and start thinking clearly again. I know that you can't just choose to do that. People will tell you to pull yourself together and snap out of it. We sufferers of depression know that that isn't possible. We can't just choose to get out of our depression we need help to break the cycle. The trigger that breaks the depression might be a comment from a colleague, a paper accepted for publication, an experience that brightens your day or simply a kind word from a friend. But I have found that it needs to come from outside you. You can't do it yourself. Don't refuse help.

If you have neglected a hobby during your candidature due to pressure of work, now is a good time to go back to it. Thinking about your hobby will take your mind off your depression and worries. It's not wasted time, it's time well spent on making you better. Doing something you are interested in will brighten up your mind and help to chase off the depression.

If you can find someone to talk to about something that interests you, that will help, also. The topic needs to be

something away from the work which is causing of your depression. You might find that, at first, you have difficulty holding up your end of the conversation because you can't think straight or don't want to be bothered, but persevere. It will come and your mind will wake up. But you need a sympathetic person who can talk to you while you are withdrawn and draw you out to start you talking. Unfortunately, such people are not easy to find. If you do find one, treasure that person.

There are other things that you can do that might help. When I'm depressed I have a craving for chocolate so I buy myself a large chocolate cake and pig out. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't, but it's always worth a try. Perhaps you have a favourite meal that someone might cook for you. Is there a particular place that brightens you up every time you visit it? Now would be a good time to pay another visit. Give yourself a treat. The small things help. Sometimes it is something small that will suddenly make your depression go away so it is worth trying. Even if it doesn't cure the depression it will help you feel a bit better which helps in the long run. Maybe a number of small things will all add up to a cure.

Getting Back to Work

When the depression disappears you will be able to start work again. Try to find something interesting to start with. You don't want to get depressed again due to jumping straight into something boring or worrying. Those jobs you can leave until you feel better.

I've lost a lot of time to depression during my candidacy, but I've always managed to bounce back and continue on. You can, too. It might take an effort to make up for lost time, but that is better than giving up. If you have got behind in your work, explain why to your supervisor so that you don't get hassled too much. I've found that supervisors can be very understanding of depression. After all, they probably suffered from depression at some time when they did their own PhDs.

The important thing is to get back to work when the depression goes. You will probably have a lot of work to catch up. Getting on with it and producing some useful results will help to

dispel any last traces of the depression that might be still sitting in your head waiting for an opportunity to reclaim your thinking.

Keeping Depression at Bay

The best strategy is to keep the depression away, as much as you can. Many people suggest hard work will help. Keeping interested in your work is always a good strategy. Working on different things at different times, thus stopping you from getting stale, will help. Read what other people say about keeping away depression. Adapt and adopt other people's strategies if you think that they will help you. Try anything to find the strategies that work for you and then use them to make your life better. Fight off the depression as much as you can. The best cure for an attack of depression is to not let it happen in the first place.

However, it is likely that, at some time, the dreaded depression will descend upon you, whatever you do. Then you will need to know how to fight it off. When it happens try some of the above strategies or think of your own. Work on it – don't give up.

Getting Professional Help

A final point. If your depression continues for a long time, or you are seriously worried about it, see your doctor. It's always worth having a check up and seeking some professional advice. Your doctor might be able to arrange some counselling that would help you. Also you should check with your university's counselling centre. The people there are used to dealing with troubled students. Never refuse help from anyone. You never know who will light the spark that breaks your depression. Talking to people who might help can't do you any harm, and it might do you a lot of good.

4. Persistence and the PhD

You don't have to be super intelligent to get a PhD. If that was necessary a lot of people who have one would never have made it. If you have completed an Honours degree and maybe a Masters, then there no reason why you shouldn't succeed at the PhD. What you need more than anything else is persistence, persistence and more persistence.

Persistence means not giving up no matter how hard it is to keep going. It means keeping going whenever things seem hopeless. It means never saying "I give up!"

If once you give up then your persistence has gone. Once it has gone, it can't be replaced in the context in which you gave it up. You can only give up once, then it's too late to change your mind. Once you give up you won't be able to start again. The university probably wouldn't allow you to start again. But even if they did you probably wouldn't want to admit that you had been a failure and re-apply. You just wouldn't be in the right frame of mind to resume where you had left off. So the important thing is not to give up in the first place. Persist with it, no matter how hard it is to keep going.

The PhD as a Marathon

In a survey of research students that I conducted as part of my PhD research, one of them described the PhD as 'a sort of three or four year marathon'. Like any marathon the important thing in completing the PhD is to keep going until the end. If you fall over you must pick yourself up and get back into the race. If you don't persist you will not succeed in finishing and getting your degree.

The PhD has many similarities to a marathon. Both are a test of your stamina and refusal to give up. Both require persistence and hard work and are stressful. Both seem never ending when tiredness and loss of energy threaten to overwhelm you. In both cases you only receive your reward when you get to the very end. Participating in just a part of the race and dropping out before the end earns you nothing in both cases.

If you are a marathon person than you need to settle down to work regularly. You need to make steady progress, producing a certain amount of new work each week. You will probably need to plan ahead the work you are going to do over your candidature with a timetable and checkpoints so that you know that you are making the required amount of progress week by week.

Your method is to work steadily towards your goal of finishing your PhD. You will no doubt take pleasure in adding up each weeks progress, maybe charting them, so that you know that you are keeping up.

If being a marathon runner works for you, go for it, don't let anyone put you off. Whatever works for you is the way to go.

But I'm a Sprinter

If you don't like the idea of the PhD being a marathon because you work in short bursts rather than at a steady pace, then you can still persist. You will have to make sure that you keep coming back to do the short bursts until you complete the race.

There's no reason why the sprinter can't achieve as much as the marathon runner. I'm a sprinter and I seem able to keep up the level of work required, even though I work in short bursts and take a lot of breaks.

My supervisor told me that when I do get down to doing some work I do a week's work in a few hours. Consequently, I don't get hassled too much when I take a long break as she knows that when I do start work again I'll soon catch up.

The way to get on if you are a sprinter is to work hard when the mood takes you to work. In the short bursts you have to achieve as much as the marathon runner achieves by steady effort. You have to make sure that all the short bursts of work add up to satisfactory progress over the term of your candidacy. In between the bursts you must rest and recover your energy and drive for the next step just as a sprinter takes a rest and builds up her or his strength after one race in preparation for the next one.

This is the way I like to work. I'll sit around doing little apart from thinking for weeks and then sit in front of my

computer and write a journal paper or thesis chapter in a few hours. Whether it's a good method or not I don't know, but it works for me. If it works for you, then use it. It's the result that matters not how you get there.

If you are a sprinter you should explain to your supervisor how you work so that you don't get told off when you pause in your progress for a rest. As long as you are making enough over all progress you shouldn't have too much trouble, but it's a good idea to let those who supervise you that you are working and keeping up the output. Most supervisors would, I assume, recognise the way you are working and make allowances for it, but it's best to be sure.

Keeping Going

I have found that, like a marathon, the PhD is long and tedious at times and like any race it is tiring. There have been many times when I have felt like giving up, that the degree was just not worth the tediousness and stress, but, so far, I have always managed to pick myself up and get back to work. I have made up my mind that I'll persist until the end and get the degree that I have worked so hard for.

Keeping going is hard work whether you are a marathon runner or a sprinter. It's just that the effort and outcomes are differently arranged. As a marathon runner you will see a steady progress towards your goal, the end of the race, over time. If you are a sprinter the gains will come more sporadically but should also add to up to steady progress towards completion. Whether the progress is steady or comes in burst makes no difference. Both will get you there in the end, and neither need be quicker nor slower than the other.

However, it is best to work in the way that suits you. For a marathon runner or sprinter to change his or her way of working to the opposite is a recipe for disaster. The marathon runner doesn't sprint and the sprinter can't persist for as long a time at one go as the marathon runner. You need to work in the fashion that suits you best to achieve your goal. In doing so you will have a better outcome and less chance of it all going wrong.

Don't Give Up

When the PhD gets tedious, take a break, but don't give up. Do something to take your mind off the work: Play a game, fly a kite, walk the dog. Do something, but resist the temptation to drop out. If necessary take a week off from your studies. When you feel better come back and have another try. Refuse to say "I give up!".

Persistence is sometimes hard to come by, but it mainly means not giving in to the urge to give up, no matter how compelling it becomes. There are probably times in your life when you have persisted at something because you didn't want to give up. Use that experience to inform your PhD work. Keep saying to yourself "I will not give up!", "I will persist!".

It's Up to You

Persistence is something you must have yourself. No-one else can have it for you. Your supervisors might put pressure on you to keep going but the decision, when it comes down to the crunch, is yours alone. If you persist you will reach your goal. Persisting means staying with it and not giving up, through thick and thin, to get the end result you want. Only you can decide to persist and make yourself do it. No-one else can do it for you. Decide to persist! Refuse to give up! Complete the race and get the PhD!

5. Never Give Up!

Part of persistence is never giving up, no matter how depressed you get nor how much you feel like it for any other reason. Every PhD student feels like giving up at some time, some more often than others. The only answer is to convince yourself to never give up, whatever the circumstances. If you can.

Some people can't cope with the feeling of wanting to give up, others can and can keep going. How it affects you will depend on your outlook on life. If you are the type of person who never gives up, you can apply that to your PhD. If you often feel like giving up on other things, and even worse, if you do often give up those things, then you will have a harder job persisting with your PhD.

To have got as far as doing a PhD you must have persisted with your undergraduate work and probably with Honours and Masters degrees, as well. Use the lessons of persistence you learnt there to inform your PhD: Don't give up!

Why Should You Feel Like Giving Up?

There are many reasons why you might feel like giving up: Depression, boredom, stress, not getting any work done and getting behind with it, a feeling of inadequacy. All these will make you feel like giving up because they all make you feel that you aren't getting anywhere and that the effort of doing anything is not worthwhile. As well, they will probably make you feel that you aren't capable of getting your PhD. But rest assured that we all go through those stages. Every PhD student has, and those who have got their PhDs will have overcome the urge to give up and have eventually finished successfully. Some people, like me, have these feelings of inadequacy quite often: I often feel like giving up. The important thing is not to give in to the feeling of inadequacy and to keep going.

When Will You Feel Like Giving Up?

You can feel like giving up at any time. It will most likely happen when things aren't going well. Have you just had a

journal paper rejected? Are your supervisors hassling you to do more work when you don't feel like it? Does it all seem a waste of time? We all go through those stages. The only thing to do is to find something more interesting to do. Do something to break the feeling that nothing is worthwhile.

The time when you will feel most like giving up is towards the end of your candidature. At the beginning everything is interesting and exciting so you will be keen to get on with it. Near the end you will get sick of the endless revisions to your thesis and requests for more information in your results chapters from your Supervisory Panel. Then the depression will descend upon you and you will want to give up on everything. There's not a lot you can do about feeling fed up at this stage, the important thing is not to give in to it. It happens to everyone. You just have to persist through the final stages and get the thesis finished. However, there are things that you can do to get your interest back.

What To Do About It

What can you do to stave off the feeling that you should give up? As you will have read in the previous chapter you must persist and get back to work. That is the only way to succeed.

There are some steps you can take to help you get back to work. A later chapter describes the 'taking one small step' procedure that might help you get back to work. Perhaps the other chapters will suggest to you some other ways out of the problem. Once you get back to work and produce something, be assured, the feeling of inadequacy and wanting to give up will go away.

You might find that doing something different will help. Do you have a journal paper to work on? Or a conference presentation, perhaps? Doing something different might spark your interest again, and that will give you the incentive to continue.

The important thing is to not give in to the urge to give up. Instead, keep telling yourself "I will not give up!", "I will persist and finish my PhD!"

Advice to a Troubled PhD Student

I have a cartoon with the message “Never Give Up!” taped onto the side of my computer screen. The cartoon shows a heron swallowing a too-large frog. The frog has its hands around the heron’s throat. The frog is not giving up until the bitter end. And neither should you.

I find that the cartoon helps me to keep going. It amuses me, but more importantly, seeing it all the time I am working drives home the message and helps me to pull back from the actual act of giving up when I feel down in the dumps.

There have been times when I have felt so much like giving up that I have got as far as writing my letter of withdrawal from the PhD. But each time I have resisted the temptation to submit it to my Supervisory Panel. I have always been able to convince myself that that is not the way to go. Instead I have torn up the letter and got back to work. You can too. What it requires most is the determination not to give up and to bounce back from the feeling that it’s not worth going on. That is no small thing for some people but it can be done. Everyone who has been awarded their PhD has done it at some time during their candidature: Often more than once. You can too, if you have the determination and persistence to succeed.

Whatever you do, don’t give up while you are feeling down in the dumps. Hopefully, when you brighten up and feel better you won’t want to give up. You will want to finish the job you have started.

If You Do Give Up

If you do give up you will have to live the rest of your life feeling that you have failed in an important stage in your life. I think that that is too much to bear. I know that I couldn’t bear it. Hopefully, you can’t either and that will give you the strength to fight back against the feeling that you want to give up. In the end it will be worth it. You will get the degree for which you have worked so hard.

6. Avoiding Your Supervisor

Some people enjoy seeing their supervisors. If you are one of those people you need read no further. If, however, you are like most PhD students, there are times when you will want to avoid your supervisor at all costs.

Even though, in general I enjoy talking to my supervisors and find the conversations stimulating, I have sometimes found that avoidance is the best policy. This usually occurs when I'm behind with my work or haven't finished a report that was due in two weeks ago. If you sometimes find yourself in the position where the best thing that you can do is avoid a meeting with your supervisor then read on.

The Best Excuses

One of the best ways of avoiding a meeting with your supervisor is claiming to have a doctor's appointment. Even the hardest supervisor won't argue too much about that one. But don't over use it. Save it for emergencies, such as the time you haven't done any work for a month and have nothing to report. Remember the next time that you see your supervisor to act sick and moan about how your illness is keeping you away from the interesting work you have waiting.

This excuse shouldn't be used too often or you will get the reputation of being a hypochondriac and your supervisor will ignore it when you really are. However, if you can convince your supervisor that you have some affliction that flares up at some times but is dormant at others you will have a very good on-going reason to cancel meetings whenever you feel like it.

Other Ways of Avoiding a Meeting

Other ways to avoid your supervisor include going on short courses, attending conferences and teaching. These are legitimate ways of keeping yourself busy and out of your supervisor's sight. S/he can't very well complain if you are doing something that is considered useful. It might even put your supervisor in a good mood the next time you can't avoid a

meeting if s/he thinks that you have been doing something to develop your skills.

If you can't find any courses or conferences to attend make some up. Be very careful about making them sound too interesting or your supervisor might want to attend with you. Just make sure that they sound dull and uninteresting or you might be asked for more information that you don't have.

Using this method of avoiding your supervisor is easy. Send him or her an email saying that you are leaving tomorrow for some place far away for a conference. Then you must stay away from the university for a week to give the impression that you have actually gone to the conference. When you come back you will need to avoid your supervisor even more because she or he will want to know how it went, did you read a paper, did you make any useful contacts, and so on. This complication sometimes makes this method of avoidance more trouble than it's worth.

Short courses or teaching are better excuses. For preference they should be somewhere away from your supervisor's normal haunts. It's best to not tell him or her what the course is or where it will be held. You don't want her or him finding you. Genuine courses or teaching are the best as they will hold up even if your supervisor does find you. But if the worst comes to the worst and you can't find one, you will have to make one up.

The Distraction Gambit

The above ways of avoiding a meeting with your supervisor can be undertaken by email thus avoiding contact completely. Under some conditions even a phone call may be risky as you might have to answer some awkward questions. Not answering a reply to your email is far easier.

However, sometimes you might find yourself in a more difficult position where you are likely to meet your supervisor unexpectedly. A different method of avoidance must then be undertaken.

If you find yourself being approached by your supervisor in the corridor or elsewhere then you can try to distract his or her attention.

If your supervisor is a woman you can try the chocolate gambit. I find that throwing a block of chocolate to one side will usually distract her and give you time to make a quick getaway. I find that dark chocolate works best, although almost any type will work in an emergency. If necessary, experiment a bit for the best effect. It might even count as research for your next journal paper or annual report.

If you want to avoid a male supervisor then a bottle or can of beer might be a better gambit, but be careful that you don't break the bottle. That would defeat the purpose of the gambit as well as causing a mess.

It will pay you to keep a block of chocolate or can of beer in your pocket just for such emergencies.

You should also be prepared to modify the gambit. Perhaps your male supervisor likes chocolate or your female supervisor likes beer. Be flexible until you find which works best for you.

Supervisors are people of simple tastes so either gambit will have the effect of making her or him ignore you in their haste to get at the chocolate or beer. Just be careful to throw the beer or chocolate far enough away that you don't get trampled in the rush to get it.

This gambit often works better if there are other people around. For one thing they will get in the way of your supervisor as she or he tries to get at their prize, and for another the other people might compete with him or her to get at the goodies. Either will enhance the value of the gambit.

While your supervisor is busy chasing the goodies you should make a quick exit down some other convenient corridor. It is important that you get away quickly. The distraction might only last for a few minutes.

Or Else Panic!

You can always try running away in a panic when you see your supervisor approaching. It's not always effective since he or

she might call you back; in which case unfortunately you must return to face the music or you will probably suffer for it later. To use the escape strategy you need to be quick on the uptake and getaway. You must make your getaway before your supervisor catches a view of you. If you consider that you might need to use this escape route be sure not to carry heavy books or bags. Carrying anything heavy will only slow you down and make your escape more difficult.

If all else fails throw a fit, or otherwise cause a scene. Supervisors don't seem to like being made the centre of attention where it looks like they are causing problems for their students. They like to give the impression of being benign and caring. A panicking student will often frighten off a supervisor. But, again, use it with care. To much use will lessen its effect when you need it most.

Caveats

Unfortunately, you won't be able to avoid all meetings with your supervisor. You will need to have some contact to show that you are progressing in your work and to avoid having your candidature terminated. The occasional meeting is necessary and unavoidable, unfortunately, otherwise some of us would manage to never ever see our supervisors. The main use of the above is for those occasions when you need to avoid your supervisor because you haven't got anything to talk about, because you haven't done any work or because you just can't be bothered. Use them with care. Most importantly, don't over use them or they will lose their effectiveness.

7. One Small Step for a PhD Student

Not being able to work is the curse of the PhD student. We all get it. Usually, there's no reason apart from the inability to settle down and work. My supervisor told me that the way to beat not being able to work is to follow the 'take one small step' procedure. She told me that to get myself working again I should take one small first step. This method also works in breaking through writers' block and similar problems.

Taking Steps

The first step might be something simple such as opening a Word file ready to write something, but without actually doing any writing. Once the first small step is accomplished, take a short break. Have a cup of tea. Then, take another small step. This one might be naming the file or putting in a temporary title. Have another break for a few minutes and then take another small step such as writing a rough abstract. And so on.

Eventually, the small steps will add up to something useful and you will have got started. Having done something useful you will be encouraged to do more. Then you can stop taking small steps and start taking larger ones like writing the first draft of the whole of the paper, revising it and finishing it. The larger steps will follow naturally from the small ones if you take enough small ones. The important thing is to recognise that you are making progress with each of the small steps and should continue on with more of them. The many small steps will build up to a big step which will help to overcome the urge not to work and break through the block.

Sometimes, you can only take the first small step. Doing any more is just too stressful. That's alright. Take a break for a few hours and then take the small step again. This time you might be able to persist and to do a little more. Don't get stressed. If the next step is too much, stop, have a break and then start again. As long as in each working spell you take at least one more small step than the previous one you will be making progress.

Advice to a Troubled PhD Student

If you are agonising over not being able to get reading then your first small step might be to sorting out the papers you have to read. The second step might be reading the abstracts of the papers to find out which looks most interesting and should be read first. Then you might read the introduction of that paper. And so on.

Whatever your problem with starting to work, try the ‘one small step’ procedure. What the small step is to be will depend on what you are agonising about, but should become plain with a little thought. The important thing is to do something. What you do isn’t as important as doing something. Try it – what have you got to lose? Nothing but your excuse to continue procrastinating. Once you have started working again it will all have been worthwhile.

I have found that this procedure is a good way of getting working again when I don’t feel like working. I have applied it in numerous situations where I couldn’t get started. If the urge not to work isn’t very strong it works well and easily. If the urge to put off working is very strong it still works but it just takes somewhat longer and more small steps.

The decision between not working and working is yours to make. Maybe this simple procedure will help you to beat the barrier and get something done. Try it – one small step at a time...

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8. On Writing

Writing is not a simple process. It depends on a number of factors, four important ones of which are knowledge, incentive, the ability to write and something to write about. I have never had any problems with writing. I enjoy writing and do it well according to my supervisors.

Knowledge

It seems a truism to say that good writing depends on knowledge, but it is true, none the less. If you don't know what you are going to write about it will be difficult if not impossible to produce anything sensible. You need knowledge to frame the paper, give an account of what it is intended to illustrate and to provide information to the potential reader. A knowledge of others' work on your topic is necessary to provide the references that put your work into its context.

If you don't know what you are writing about, how can you expect to make sense? Whether the paper is factual, biographical or speculative you need to know the background to it. You must be familiar with the topic, the background and anything previously written on the topic so that you can place your work in the context of other's work on similar topics.

Incentive

Having gained the knowledge about your topic you must then have an incentive to write. Common incentives include finishing your thesis to gain your PhD, writing a journal paper to improve your publication list, or writing an application for a job that you would like after completing your doctorate. Note that the reward for doing the writing should be important to you, personally. The personal incentives are by far the best. Working to someone else's incentive is a recipe for disaster.

It is sometimes difficult to find an incentive to write, but it is important that you do so. The more important the incentive is to you the more incentive you have to write. Writing without a

good incentive can be soul-destroying as you try to imbue some interest you do not have into the work.

Ability

Lastly, you need the ability to write. If you have that ability without being taught then you are lucky. If not, you can be taught to at least produce good quality prose. Your university probably runs courses on it. Take all the courses you can. They can't do you any harm and you might find the spark that brings out the creative writer in you. Join a writers' group to get feedback on your work – and LISTEN to the comments, don't just let them pass you by. Take advantage of other writers' experience. Finally, practice writing. The more you write the better you will get.

Something To Write About

You will find plenty to write about as your work proceeds. Writing about your work has advantages: You know a great deal about it; a lot of it has never been written about so it will all be new to your readers; writing a journal paper is good practice for writing your thesis; getting a paper published will enhance your academic reputation; and so it goes on.

Multi-Task Writing

One of the most important and useful things I have learnt since starting my PhD is the ability to work on more than one lot of writing at a time. I realise that this achievement might not seem like much to many people. Many people can probably already do it but for me it is a great achievement that has changed my whole way of working. It revolutionised my outlook and has helped me tremendously. Being able to work on more than one lot of writing at a time has opened up great possibilities for me.

Previously I could only work on one lot of written work at a time. If I put one aside and worked on something else I found difficulty in going back to the first one because I had lost track of where I was. Now I can put aside one writing and work on

something else and then later go back to the first one without any problems.

In the past I wasted a lot of time being able to only work on one thing at a time. I often had to put a job aside and wait for inspiration or more information before I could continue with it. In the meantime I couldn't work on anything else and so got nothing done. I found that if I tried to work on more than one thing at a time I got confused and ended up making a mess of everything or had trouble going back to earlier writing jobs because I had lost track of where I was. I often wished that I could work on more than one thing at a time so that I could keep busy and keep making progress with some while waiting to finish anything else I might be doing.

One of the advantages that came from handling multiple writing jobs was that sometimes one might influence another. Thus one job might provide inspiration for another, or suggest ways of breaking a block or just give a break and allow my mind to process thoughts about the other work in the background. Working on something different for a while can provide a welcome break when the work gets a little tedious. I've found it sometimes helps in breaking writing block as well.

I think that an important factor in being able to work on multiple jobs is to be able to compartmentalise one's thinking. It means learning to keep the thoughts about work on different jobs in different memory places so that they don't get mixed up and confused with each other.

Once I learnt how to work on multiple jobs my progress was much quicker and my production went up. I no longer have to wait to finish one paper before starting another so a lot of time waiting for information or inspiration is avoided. Thus my time is used much more efficiently and I get a lot more done.

Keeping a PhD Journal

If you want something to write about that is less stressful than your official work you might start writing a journal of your PhD. A journal has the advantage that it will (probably) never be published so no-one will see it. In a journal you can practice writing whatever you like. As well, it might turn out to be useful.

I have found that keeping a PhD journal is a very useful and profitable way to occupy my time. I note down many things that happen during the day, such as meetings, discussions, decisions and ideas that come to me. All are grist to my PhD journal mill.

Occasionally something in the journal turns out to be important such as proving that something happened at a particular time or place to satisfy an argument. But more often the journal is just a place to play with ideas.

I use the journal as a sounding board for my ideas. I ‘talk’ to it about what I’m thinking and how my thoughts surround some idea that may or may not have any relevance to my research at some later or earlier date. The journal helps me to think through ideas and clear up my thinking about them.

I keep my journal on my computer. If I try to write longhand to keep up with my thoughts I can’t read my own writing. Using the computer allows me to get the ideas down quickly. It doesn’t matter if the spelling and grammar are not the best. At least it’s readable. If the idea becomes important for some reason at a later date it can be cleaned up for public consumption. For my own use, near enough is good enough. The important thing is to get the flow of thoughts written down. As the pages fill up I print them out and put them in a folder. Each year goes in its own folder to make it easier to go back and find something when I need it. I have spent many happy and profitable hours going back and reading my old thoughts.

A PhD journal can hold your thoughts about many things. What you chose to put in it is up to you, but I would recommend that you start one if you don’t already have one going. Use it as a sounding board, a test of ideas, an archive for bits and pieces about your candidature. You never know what might be useful. If you don’t write it down somewhere you will forget it. A journal is an ideal place to put all the bits and pieces of writing that you don’t know what else to do with.

I am writing my thesis as the story of my development as a researcher. My journal is being very useful for the notes I made in the past as I sorted out particular problems with my research or played with useful ideas. It is also interesting for its own sake

as a document of my time as a PhD student. If ever I write my autobiography my PhD journal will become invaluable for the information it contains about my time as a PhD student.

There's no reason why you have to stop keeping a journal when you finish your PhD. If you go on to an academic career, keeping a journal will still be useful, for all the same reasons as keeping a PhD journal was useful.

Writing is not easy for most of us. We need help to produce our best. Even the best writers can use constructive feedback and comments about their writing. Use all the resources available to you to develop your writing skills. You will gain from it in your writing – and so will your audience.

9. Publication

Research is an emotional journey to which the good and successful researcher commits her or his heart and soul. Sometimes, as I found to my chagrin, it can end in the disappointment of the resultant journal paper or thesis being rejected. Yet, at other times, there is the great pleasure and ego boost of having one's work published and presented to a wide audience.

Before I started my candidature I had a vague idea that the data could be gathered, the results written up and publication take place all within a few weeks or months at the most. Now I know better. It can be years between the start of planning the data collection and the resultant journal paper seeing publication. If I wished to be cynical I might suggest that a lot of research is well out of date (Dare I say obsolete?) before it sees publication.

Increasing the Publication Rate

Increasing the number of journal papers I got published depended on improving my writing rate. It is sometimes difficult to find the time to work on a journal paper due to the other writing work, such as reports, the thesis and seminar presentations, that have to be produced. One of the most useful writing skills I have developed during my candidature which increased my production is multi-tasking.

Once I learnt how to work on multiple writing jobs my progress was much quicker and my production went up. I no longer have to wait to finish one paper before starting another so a lot of time waiting for information or inspiration is avoided. Thus my time is used much more efficiently, I get a lot more done and my production of journal papers has gone up.

Learning to write more journal papers more efficiently helped my development as an independent researcher as it meant that I could get my findings out into the wider community quicker and become known to my peers. It also helped with opening up avenues as a prospective academic after I complete

my PhD, since the number of publications is important for gaining such a position.

An Ethical Dilemma

However, one of my journal publications involved me in a dilemma. After some revisions the paper was accepted with publication promised at a later date some six months ahead. During the wait for publication my research took a new turn that made the research described in the paper somewhat out of date. I then had to decide whether to withdraw the paper from publication because it was out of date or allow publication because it still had some use and interest. In the six months preceding publication I agonised over that decision. In the end I found myself unable to decide and so publication went ahead. On publication I received some interesting and useful feedback from people who had read it.

Should I have allowed publication or not? I think that that is a dilemma that other researchers must face at some time in their careers. Given that there is often twelve months or more between acceptance and publication, it would seem to me that there is often a case to be made that the research is out of date at the time of publication. The author then has to decide if there is justification for the publication or whether the paper should be withdrawn. Having faced this situation I know how it feels. There is a sense that ethically the paper should have been withdrawn. On the other hand, given the ‘publish or perish’ syndrome of the modern academic’s position there is pressure to publish anything regardless of the ethical dilemma.

I have no solution to the above dilemma, but I wonder if I should feel guilty about the publication of the paper. I must admit that I don’t – because I finally decided, when I received comments after publication, that the paper did have some value to the readers and the discipline. Since it had some significance to some people then publication was justified, since the dissemination of ideas and results is part of the purpose of publication. Another part of the purpose of publication is to promote discussion, debate and further questions. If in the future my paper should do that then its publication would be more than

justified, it would have served a most pleasing and useful purpose.

I do have to wonder, though, how many researchers have allowed the publication of a questionable paper, simply to gain another publication for their CV.

Another place where some thoughts of ethics occurred was when I did some peer reviewing for a couple of journals. One of the papers I reviewed looked very interesting and was closely allied to my own work. I felt the urge, which I was thankfully able to resist, to hold back the paper while I wrote one of my own on the same topic. I had the thought that if I wrote and submitted a paper of my own before reporting on the paper I might have more chance of it being accepted and I would gain precedence. Thankfully, I was able to resist the temptation and return the paper to the journal. I have to wonder if other authors have held back a paper they are reviewing so that they can gain precedence or so that a favoured colleague can get in first. I know that some of mine have taken many months to pass the review stage and I've wondered why it is taking so long.

Another Dilemma

Another place where some thoughts of ethics occurred was when I did some peer reviewing for a couple of journals. One of the papers I reviewed looked very interesting and was closely allied to my own work. I felt the urge to hold back the paper while I wrote one of my own on the same topic. I had the thought that if I wrote and submitted a paper of my own before reporting on the paper I might have more chance of it being accepted and I would gain precedence. Thankfully, I was able to resist the temptation and return the paper promptly to the journal. I have to wonder, though, if other authors have held back a paper they are reviewing so that they can gain precedence or so that a favoured colleague can get in first.

Some Implications

The long time between research and publication has implications for the growth of knowledge. Anyone referring to other people's work only has information that can be years out of

date, unless the latter researcher is willing to share the results of her or his work privately.

Thus it would seem that to stay up-to-date a researcher needs a large list of private contacts in the field who are willing to share their as yet unpublished work. However, sharing one's work before publication can be unsatisfactory and dangerous since some important and original idea might be stolen by an unscrupulous competitor before it can see publication. Priority of publication is so important that it is not unbelievable that such theft does go on.

At times I have had to make decisions about the writing up of my results. Some of those decisions have been painful and worrying. Take for instance the decision about whether or not to publish a journal paper related above. However, it has all been a part of the learning process and I have gained from it in the long run.

Since publication is so important, even to a PhD student, I have had to come to grips with the problems and try my best to get my work published. Some of it has been easy but much of it has been tough going. Publication is not easy, particularly for the beginner. On the other hand, publication is a great ego boost. Seeing one's name and work in a journal makes all the work and worry worthwhile. When people send me emails about my published material then I can really begin to realise just how much it is worth. Then I can realise that I have made a genuine contribution to knowledge in my field.

10. Public Speaking

At some time during your PhD you will have to talk to an audience, whether it be at formal seminars, conferences or just talks given to explain your research to some group of interested people.

I have never liked being the centre of attention and so disliked intensely giving talks to anyone. Having to give talks about my work was the aspect of doing a PhD that worried me the most. I almost didn't start the PhD because I was so worried about it. As it turned out, I was able to cope with the required presentations quite well.

If you aren't used to it, public speaking can be very stressful. I remember the first time I gave a seminar on my work – I was very stressed and anxious. However, it all went off well and the next time was much easier. Public speaking is one of the things that does get easier each time you do it, providing that you don't have a disastrous experience at the beginning.

I was very lucky in being given the chance to give an unofficial talk about my work shortly after starting my PhD. It was to a group of other PhD students. Since I had a lot in common with my audience it took most of the stress and anxiety out of the event. The students were attentive and obviously interested and asked many questions after I'd finished. Having that positive experience at the beginning of my PhD helped take the terror out of public speaking for me.

You should take every opportunity to speak in public. It is good practice and the audience might ask questions or make comments that are useful in your work. The questions might suggest lines of research that you hadn't considered or give you ideas that you can use in your thesis or other presentations. The more your topic is discussed in your presentations the more you will benefit from them personally. Treat your presentations as opportunities to get ideas from your audience that might further your work.

The Types of Presentations

As a PhD student you will certainly be required to give some seminars on your work. These will be generally presented to the people in your department, including your supervisors, but may be open to anyone in the university. This type of presentation should be less stressful because you will already know most of the people in your audience. As well, these people will be on your side. They will want you to succeed since you are representing the department as well as yourself. Knowing that your audience want you to succeed is a great encouragement.

You may be invited to give talks to groups of interested people. You should accept every opportunity to do so. These talks can be very good practice and may lead to interesting questions and discussion that will help you when it comes to write up your thesis or other work. I have found that these types of presentation are more relaxed and less stressful than the more formal ones.

A different proposition is the presentation at a conference. Here you will not know your audience. They are probably interested in your topic or they wouldn't bother being at your session. However, you won't know if they are going to be encouraging or hostile until you start your presentation. Answering the questions at the end can be more stressful, too, since you won't know the level at which you should aim your answers. It is best to treat your audience as interested but not knowing as much about the topic as yourself. After all, you are the expert on the topic or you wouldn't be giving the presentation.

At the end of your PhD you may have to defend your thesis in a public seminar. By then you should be well practiced at giving presentations so it should be less stressful. However, you will need to know your own material very well so that you can discuss it with confidence and answer searching questions properly. It is as well to remember that most of your audience will want you to succeed since you will be representing your university and researchers in general.

Be Prepared

The most important thing to do when you have to give a talk is to be prepared. I've always read my talks from printed sheets, since I'm afraid that my memory would fail me if I didn't have them to guide me in what to say. On the sheets I write instructions to myself, such as the timing for PowerPoint slides or pauses for breath. I've found that these instructions help me tremendously in keeping my talk under control. Also having written sheets gives me a guide to how the talk is proceeding in the way of being able to see where I've got up to and how much more I have to go before the end.

The second important thing to do is practice. Always read your talk through a few times speaking out loud. You will find that speaking it out loud will take longer than just reading it in your head. This is important since you will need to know how long the presentation will take. You will usually have a time limit that needs to be observed. As you read your text observe the instructions to yourself, such as pauses for breath and for the audience to read slides. At the same time watch your slide show so that you can see how it all hangs together and so that when the time comes to present your talk there won't be any nasty surprises such as slides out of order or with spelling errors. All these factors will affect the timing and need to be practised. If you can find a couple of colleagues to listen to your practice it will be very worthwhile getting feedback on your presentation before you actually give it to a larger audience.

Giving the Talk

On the day of your presentation try to relax and be calm. I know that it's difficult but if you can succeed the battle will be more than half won. Try to radiate confidence even if you feel a bit unsure about yourself and your presentation. Having a quiet talk with someone who will encourage you and boost your confidence before your presentation is always a worthwhile step. Don't worry; It's too late for that, you are now committed to carrying out your presentation. It's too late to back out now without losing face. To give up at this late stage of the

proceedings would be disastrous for your future development as a public speaker and probably for your PhD.

Be early so that you can be ready at the podium to start on time. Being late will only make your audience irritable. Have your notes or printed sheets ready and your initial slide introducing your topic up on the screen. The initial slide should also introduce you as the speaker, giving your name and affiliation. This is particularly important when there are strangers in the audience.

Be sure to dress appropriately. For seminars in your own department there's probably no need to dress up. More formal presentations might require some dressing up. Be tidy, whatever you wear. I always like to wear a white shirt and my university tie when I give a presentation. I suppose that the psychologists would say that I'm using it to hide behind, but it does help me to feel better and more confident.

As you talk from your notes look up at your audience often. Look around the audience. There's no need to concentrate on looking at one person, but casting your eyes around the audience does make the presentation more personal for them and they are more likely to enjoy and appreciate your presentation. Keeping your head bent down over your notes will muffle your speech and also affect your breathing. It is important to keep your breathing clear or you might get short of breath and start coughing or yawning, which will put your audience off.

If you find the presence of the audience is bothering you look at a point just over their heads when you look up. I need to wear glasses when reading my text and I find that, through my reading glasses, the audience is a bit blurred. That helps me ignore anyone who might be making faces or talking to their next door neighbour rather than listening to me. If I can't see those rude people then they don't bother or distract me.

Although I started my PhD being extremely worried about having to speak in public I eventually became able to cope with it quite well. I don't get so worried about my presentations, now. I've come to enjoy them and the discussion of my work that follows. I like the fact that many of the people in my audience

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will not know much about my topic and that I can thus teach them something. It doesn't hurt your ego in the slightest to be seen as an expert in some topic!

11. Where do I get Ideas?

Where *do* you get your ideas from? There's no simple answer because they can come from anywhere. Or anyone. They are out there waiting for you to find them, all you have to do is keep your mind open ready to grab them when they arrive.

In your search for ideas you should talk about your work to anyone who will listen. While you are talking your mind will be working on generating its own ideas. As well, the person to whom you are talking will also be thinking and having ideas that might be useful to you.

When an idea arrives the important thing is to write it down or record it somewhere. If you don't you will forget it. Keep a notebook in your pocket at all times and write a paragraph about each idea you have. Some ideas might seem worthless, but you don't know if they will be useful at some time in the future, so write them down. Read through your notes every now and then to refresh your mind about what ideas you've had and so that you can resurrect the useful ones. In an earlier chapter I suggested keeping a journal. That can be a good place to expand any thoughts you have. Writing about them will help you to remember them and see which ones might be worth thinking more about. Try to develop the idea until it fits in with the work you are doing. As you get each idea into some sort of usable form print it out, keep them all in a folder for quick reference. If you also keep a text file it will make it easy to cut-and-paste it into your thesis or journal paper.

In the moments when you feel that your work is becoming less interesting think about your ideas. See if you can find one that stimulates you to some new ideas that you can work on to restore your enthusiasm.

Every time I see my supervisors I come away with new ideas and a burst of enthusiasm that comes from having my mind stimulated. Going over the work you have already done with your supervisor can often open up new viewpoints or show you where a description needs more detail. These ideas are invaluable as

they come from an outsider who can look at your work from a different perspective from yourself.

You might only be talking about something trivial like the weather but there's still ideas that might be useful to you. Just because you aren't talking about your research topic does not mean that there won't be any useful ideas. It's amazing how often a train of thought that seems irrelevant at the time will sometimes divert onto another topic that proves to be very useful and worthwhile. For instance, in discussing the metaphors I found in my research into conceptions of research with my supervisor we started talking about other parts of speech, such as prepositions. At first I couldn't see the relevance to my work but I soon saw where he was heading. Our talk eventually led to an additional chapter in my thesis describing how my analysis also revealed the colour and personality in texts coming from exaggerations and pictorial words and a conference paper on that topic that was very well received. It opened my eyes to how the meanings of words such as prepositions, exaggerations and colourful words can be of interest to my audience and add colour and interest to what might sometimes be seen as a dull topic.

You might think that some of your ideas are not worth keeping as they are irrelevant to your work. However, you don't know that. You can't know what might become relevant at some time in the future. So it's best to keep them all and look at them often to see if any of them have become relevant. You never know, there might be an idea lurking in your notebook that will revolutionise your thesis and the world.

Never be too proud to use someone else's ideas. If you want to be especially ethical you should record the name of the person who gave you the idea as a reference and allocate credit when using the idea. On the other hand, it's sometimes difficult to know just who originated the different parts of an idea. They often arise as a collaborative effort in conversations or discussions.

Of course, you still have to develop your idea and explain to the world (and particularly your examiners!) what it means for your research or the development of your topic, but that's another story. After all, finding and developing your ideas is what

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doing a PhD is all about. If you weren't interested in thinking and developing new ideas you wouldn't be doing a PhD.

12. Personal and Family Relationships

Fortunately, I haven't had any problems with personal relationships while doing my PhD. That's largely due to my situation rather than me being any good at such relationships. I am single, retired, living alone and have sufficient independent income for my needs. I must also admit that I'm not good in personal relationships and have trouble getting along with a lot of people. I much prefer being on my own most of the time. You might feel that I'm not qualified to talk about personal relationships, but I'll talk about some of the problems of which I've become aware amongst my fellow students or read about in the literature.

Doing a PhD can have a devastating effect on personal relationships, particularly if you are studying part-time while working full-time. The problem is that it will be difficult to balance all the demands on your time. The problems for full-time PhD students aren't so bad but need to be dealt with carefully. On the other hand, the demands of your loved ones can cause problems with your PhD.

The important thing, regardless of whether you are full-time or part-time, is to make sure that you have sufficient spare time to show your loved ones that you haven't forgotten them. You must make sure that they don't feel neglected or less important than the PhD. It's not easy to balance those demands.

The most difficult position is that of the part-time student who is working full-time and trying to cope with a family. You need to find about 20 hours a week to do your university work in such a way that you can also fulfil your family obligations. It can be done; others have done it and survived the trauma, the family troubles and gained their PhDs. There are plenty of books on the ways to cope with the situation. The main point made in the literature is the importance of planning your time effectively. Somehow you have to juggle your time to fit in the necessary purposes. That will need planning and determination to stick to your plan once you work it out.

If you are studying for your PhD full-time and not working elsewhere you are in an ideal situation because you can treat your PhD like a full-time job. You can leave home in the morning and go to the university, fill in your eight hours and then go home, five days a week. The situation will be just as if you were working at any other full-time job. If necessary you can have a day off to solve family problems and make it up later. This situation has much to recommend it. Unfortunately, not many people can achieve it. To live this way you may need to get a scholarship of some sort which is sufficient to support yourself and any dependents you might have. Unfortunately, again, such scholarships are not easy to get. If you are on a pension or have some other sort of independent income then that problem also disappears. Your family will love this option if you can achieve it!

Perhaps you are working part-time and studying part-time as well. This situation adds up to the equivalent of one full-time job so much that has been said in the above paragraph applies here also.

While you are doing your PhD you must make sure that you have time to spend with your significant others, whether they be parents, partners or children. They are entitled to some of your time and attention. It's not fair to derive them of it completely. However, they will have to understand the importance of the PhD to you and your future and so must make allowances if you fall short of the ideal situation. Again, the importance of time management and negotiating the situation becomes apparent.

Whatever you do, don't neglect your personal relationships. They are as important as the PhD, in the long run. Some adjustments must be made, but try to make the disruptions as minimal as possible. You will have to decide for yourself which is more important, the relationships or the PhD, if an unliveable conflict arises. Only you can decide, but you should – indeed you must – consider the feelings of your significant others, and your responsibilities to them.

If you do much of your PhD work at home, rather than going into the university every day, you will need a quiet place to work at home. This may be difficult to arrange if there are

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children present. The best thing, if you can arrange it, is to have a room where you can shut yourself away from everyone else, where others are instructed not to disturb you unless it is an absolute emergency. This requirement seems to be more important for part-time students rather than full-time ones. If you are full-time you should have an office, either alone or shared, at the university where you can do most of your work. Part-timers tend to have less efficient arrangements where they might share a single computer with a number of other students, thus needing to do more work at home.

13. Conclusion

I can say that the PhD has changed me. I'm not the same person as the one who started all those years ago. I have more confidence in myself. I have proven myself -- at least to my own satisfaction -- as a researcher. I've enjoyed the process -- most of the time. True, there have been low spots, but they are all part of the process of growing up as a researcher. I learnt as much from the low spots as I did from the good times. Not least, about myself. There is now no way that I could go back to being the person who started a PhD all those years ago. I'm changed too much. It was all worthwhile. I'm glad that I did it and I would do it all again.

I hope that, in some small way, this book will help you to cope with the stress and pain of doing a PhD. I hope that it will help you to continue on until you complete and earn your just reward. If it helps you do that then it will have served its purpose and I shall be pleased and satisfied. Good luck for the future!

About the Author

I am a (very) mature-aged PhD student in Education at The Centre for Higher Education, Learning and Teaching (CHELT) at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. The focus of my PhD study is the metaphors that researchers use when describing their work.

I live in Canberra with a black cat named Dog to keep me company.

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