

The Seven Secrets of Highly Successful Research Students

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Doing a PhD or any research degree is hard work. However, there are ways to make it slightly less hard. Here are the seven secrets we've learned from working with thousands of research students all over the world.

Secret 1. The care and maintenance of your supervisor

It's your job to make sure you get the supervision you need. Supervisors are invariably busy. So if you need advice on your approach, if you're stuck, or if you need feedback on your drafts then it's up to you to get their attention. And the best way we've found for doing this is to have regular meetings. Regular meetings with a simple agenda where you discuss the work you've done, the issues that have arisen and what your next steps are.

Secret 2. Write and show as you go

You need to be writing from the get-go. Don't wait for the so-called write-up period. Get words down on paper as soon as you can. If you read some articles, write about them. If you run experiments, write about them. If it moves, you write about it. The words you write may never make it into your final thesis but they will be the grandparents of the ones that do. And once you've written the words then you need to show them to people. You need regular feedback to refine your writing and your thinking.

Secret 3. Be realistic – It's not a Nobel prize

Most PhD students start off with wildly unrealistic expectations about what they can achieve in three years. They see this as their big chance to make a great contribution. The reality is that when you are doing a PhD you are learning to do research. The purpose of a research degree is to learn how to be an independent researcher. Your thesis doesn't have to be perfect. In fact it will never be perfect. It needs to be finished.

Secret 4. Say no to distractions

There are lots and lots of potential distractions. Some may not even look like distractions. Hunting references. Doing courses. Teaching and tutoring. Housework. Pets. And the biggest of all - email and Facebook. There is nothing wrong with any of these activities but the secret is to do the thesis first and fit the other things around the edges.

Secret 5. It's a job

One of the traps in research is the flexibility. If you don't do that analysis today it doesn't really matter – there's always tomorrow and the day after. But this leads to procrastination and guilt. You need to treat your research like a job. Which means regular hours, a plan, milestones and accountability.

Secret 6. Get help

You don't have to do it all yourself. There's a lot of legitimate assistance available. This could be help with editing, statistical advice, data entry, a cleaner.

Secret 7. You can do it. A PhD is 10% intelligence and 90% persistence

Of course you need intelligence but that's not enough. You have to be able to persist. You have to be able to bounce back when things go wrong. The failure rate for submitted PhDs is much less than 1%. However one of the problems is that people don't get to the end. People often wonder if they are clever enough to get a PhD. The bigger question is are they persistent enough to get a PhD.

So there they are. They're not secret any more. Now you just have to get on and do it!

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