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STUDENT NOTEBOOK

Publishing in Graduate School: Tips for New Graduate Students

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If your career goal is to become a research psychologist, there are few more worthwhile endeavors you can undertake than writing an article or two while you are still in graduate school. Publishing quality research not only can let you contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge, but also can form the basis for a future program of research, providing the groundwork for a successful career as a research scientist. In addition, potential employers often appreciate a demonstrated ability to conduct and publish research.

But how can you balance conducting and publishing research with the competing needs to do well in classes, write your thesis and dissertation, pass your comps, and have a social life outside of academia? As a beginning graduate student, you may have doubts that you measure up when it comes to the skills required to produce original research. The following is a list of twelve suggestions, distilled from my nearly seven years in graduate school, to help you realize your full research potential.

1. START RESEARCH EARLY

It is a fact of the research world that significant amounts of time – sometimes years – elapse between the inception of a study and the day it finally sees print. Most of this time may pass during the data collection phase, but sometimes it takes several months for the review process to reach its conclusion, and articles are almost never accepted the first time around. I once submitted an article and was obliged to wait more than two years before I was finally notified of rejection. Another article I co-authored was rejected by three different journals before finally being accepted for publication, three years after

it was written. Getting articles into print can take a long time, often for reasons quite outside your control, so it pays to begin working on research projects early in your graduate school career.

2. WRITE DOWN IDEAS

I have found that it can be difficult to come up with ideas for good research projects. Developing good research ideas becomes easier as you advance in your graduate school career, because you will learn to recognize the frontiers of research in your field and come to know what unanswered questions may be worth investigating. Sometimes you may have a glimmer of an idea, but may forget about it because something else comes up. That is why it is important to write your ideas down, perhaps in a lab book or in a file you keep on your computer – that way, you can come back to your ideas when you have time to think about and develop them more carefully.

3. KEEP UP WITH THE LITERATURE

Staying up-to-date on the latest developments and findings in your field is extremely important. One way to keep up with research without having to read every publication is to skim article abstracts online (abstracts are typically freely available online, even if the articles are not). If any of them seem interesting or relevant to your work, you may want to retrieve the full article. It is also useful to subscribe to the top journals in your particular corner of psychology early in your graduate career. It is important to keep up with the literature so that you (a) know the most interesting questions that have yet to be answered and (b) don't repeat history. Very few ideas are entirely new, and often graduate students will propose studies that have been published years earlier.

4. WORK ON SEVERAL PROJECTS SIMULTANEOUSLY

I have found that it pays to work on several research projects at once. That way, if some of them do not work out for whatever reason, you have others to fall back on (in other words, don't put all your eggs in one basket!). If you become stuck in one project, you can simply pick up work on another that has languished for a while. If you encounter problems regarding sample availability, consider planning future studies while you collect data for the current one, or try getting the most out of your participant pool by "piggybacking" data collection (perhaps the filler task in your study can be used as data in a different project). The number of projects in which you can be involved simultaneously will of course depend on, among other things, the number of

collaborators and your role in each project. That said, it is also important to avoid overcommitting. It is best to start slow and not get involved in too many projects until you know your limitations; otherwise you may not get anything done!

5. LOOK FOR COMMON THEMES EARLY

It helps to form a common thread or theme to link all your research, and then use those themes to develop future research ideas. This will help you later when you are asked to identify your “program of research.” Try to start thinking in terms of overarching themes as early as possible, so that the themes guide your work rather than the other way around. You will find that it is easier to work simultaneously on several studies related by a guiding theoretical framework than on several projects with only a few commonalities. Also, on the practical side of things, leaving graduate school with ten publications on completely unrelated topics is not as impressive as leaving with ten publications on two topics. Psychology is a field in which knowing a lot about a little makes you more marketable than knowing a little about a lot.

6. RESERVE TIME TO WORK ON RESEARCH

Research is time-intensive. If you are like most graduate students, you have a hard enough time juggling classes and a social life, let alone collecting data and writing and submitting papers for publication. That is why it is so important to plan ahead and reserve time every week to work exclusively on research – not an hour or two here and there, but significant blocks of time. I usually set aside Sundays for research and writing, because on Sundays I have several uninterrupted hours during which I can buckle down and get some serious work done. For you, that time may be on Saturday, one or two evenings during the week, or the day you have no classes or other pressing responsibilities. You may find that you will have to rearrange your schedule and make time.

7. SEEK OUT ADVICE

It is very important to find someone with knowledge and experience who is willing to serve as a sounding board. Graduate students, even those with plenty of ideas, often have difficulty distinguishing between good ideas and bad ones. Your academic advisor is an excellent resource for this purpose, but there is no need to restrict yourself to only your advisor, or even to people at your institution. Nearly all psychology faculty have relevant experiences they can share. Be sure to use this wonderful resource! Faculty have years of experience distinguishing between good ideas and bad ones, and they are

familiar with the gaps in the research literature in need of filling. In addition, they can give you some idea of what journals are considered high- or low-quality in your field, the turnaround time you can expect for reviews, and details about the review process itself. Do not be intimidated by senior faculty with long histories of making important contributions – these are the people likely to be the most help to you early in your career. Seek out people with whom to discuss ideas and possibly collaborate on projects.

8. VIEW EVERYTHING AS A POTENTIAL PUBLICATION

Sometimes, when I'm having interesting conversations with other students or simply working on homework, in the back of my mind I'm thinking, "how could I use this in a paper?" Thinking of things as potentially publishable can make for a self-fulfilling prophecy. A case in point is my first publication, a collaborative project which grew from a paper I wrote for a class on social cognition. My professor liked it, so I asked about its potential as an article. He enthusiastically endorsed the idea, so I found some coauthors, we conducted and wrote up the research, and our paper was eventually accepted for publication. Your masters thesis and dissertation can also probably be reframed as journal articles.

9. ATTEND CONFERENCES

Conferences are good places to familiarize yourself with new research in your field, and to build associations with individuals who may be your future colleagues, collaborators, and sounding boards (see No. 6). It is true that poster presentations are given little (if any) weight in hiring decisions, but presenting at conferences can help you in other, probably more important, ways. Attending and presenting at conferences will show that you have the ability to conduct research and share it with colleagues, the basic skills required of all scientists. However, you will probably derive more long-term benefits from simply attending conferences – meeting people, reading about current research, and trading ideas – than in presenting at them. Moreover, conferences are excellent places to introduce yourself to senior researchers in your field and follow tip No. 7.

10. COLLABORATE WITH OTHER STUDENTS

There is no reason to take on research projects alone – other students in your program undoubtedly would like to get publications themselves. What better solution than to join forces and divide the labor? This is not to suggest that you should treat collaborators as crutches, but rather as valuable resources with

whom you can trade ideas and share the workload that always accompanies research. Because your coauthors may turn out to be lifelong colleagues and collaborators, collaboration can also be viewed as an investment for the future.

11. KNOW YOUR STATISTICS AND METHODOLOGY

More often than not, research articles stand or fall ultimately on the basis of methodology and statistical analyses. Thus, it is important to become familiar with the methods and statistical techniques appropriate for your research situation well in advance of when you will need them. If you belong to a large program, it is possible that someone there serves as the designated statistical consultant. Get to know this person! He or she will gladly help you make appropriate decisions regarding methodology and data analysis.

12. FINISH WHAT YOU START, BUT KNOW WHEN TO QUIT

Potential employers want to know that you have the ability to finish what you begin. A researcher who has brilliant ideas and who conducts groundbreaking research is worth little to an institution unless he or she can bring projects to successful conclusions. Try to wrap up projects in reasonable amounts of time. I find that setting deadlines for myself (or getting others to set them for me) works well to motivate me. On the other hand, if you find yourself working forever on a project that refuses to yield tangible results, that may be your cue to abandon it and move on to one of your other projects (see No. 4). You may find yourself operating below your potential by prolonging the lives of studies with little promise. The time you spend on these dead-end projects is time that could be better spent pursuing more worthwhile studies with greater potential. Your time as a graduate student is limited, so how you use it is important.

Above all, research should be fun for you. If it isn't, then you are in the wrong line of work! Know when to say no, and don't get involved in projects that you suspect at the outset you will not enjoy. Be willing to abandon projects that get you bogged down or that last too long without producing anything useful. Quality research is important both for the advancement of scientific knowledge and for professional success in academia. I hope these tips will help you achieve your full potential early in your graduate career.
