12 Tips for Success in Philosophy Graduate School
By Liz Jackson

I graduated from Notre Dame in 5 years. I finished my dissertation in my 4th year, and had 4/5 dissertation chapters published by the time I defended (Nov. of my 5th year). My 5th year, my first year on the market, I got both a research post doc and a tenure track job (a 2-2 load with an MA program). Here's some tips for how I did it.

1) Write regularly, on a schedule that works for you.
- Some people advise to "write every day" or even "write two hours / 500 words every day." However, better advice is to write *regularly*. On days when writing is going well, write as much as you can. On days when it is going poorly, switch over to reading, email, class prep, or some other task. Or just take the day off (see #10).
- Note that writing regularly may look different in various stages of your life. Sometimes, you might write 9-11am every day. Sometimes, you might write for 1 or 2 bigger blocks every week. Sometimes, if you find yourself super motivated or with a lot of free time, you might write a whole paper in a short period of time. Be flexible based on the season of life you're in. But also realize that getting into the habit of writing regularly will do wonders for your productivity.

2) Fight the urge to procrastinate.
- Grad school comes with a lot of freedom. No one requires you to work 9-5, you're normally not under regular, tight deadlines, and you can mostly set your own schedule. Because of this, it is easy to put things off to the last minute. I highly, highly recommend resisting this urge to procrastinate. (I think this is the #1 reason I was successful in grad school). My first semester of grad school (before I took this lesson to heart) I saved all my seminar papers to the last few weeks of the semester, and then I was forced to write 3-4 papers in less than a month. *Don't do this to yourself.* Instead, set regular, small, measurable goals. Now, I normally set weekly goals, then break those into smaller daily goals, such as "read article X" or "polish section 2 of paper Y" or "add a paragraph responding to objection Z."
- Utilize accountability groups and writing groups. These can help a lot with resisting procrastination, force you to wake up at a decent hour, and are also great for advice and social support.
- Be a chipper, not a binger. Meet your goals in small steps that you chip away at regularly, rather than doing an entire project all at once, *especially* right before a deadline. A caveat: I personally think it's fine to, e.g. spend an entire day writing then not write the rest of the week, as long as you are not doing this right before a deadline. If you like to work in big chunks, no problem, but don't save everything until right before it is due.

3) Utilize productivity tools.
- [Pomotodo](#) and [Todoist](#) (both free apps) have been life changing for me. Pomotodo breaks up your work in 25 min chunks, and then you get a 5 min break to check texts/social media/email. (I also recommend using an app that blocks social media/other tempting websites if you struggle with this).
- Todoist helps you keep track of your to-do list in "project" categories, and comes with a handy calendar. So, if a cool conference comes up on Phil events but it isn't due for 6 months, add it to your Todoist app and you'll see the CFP about a week before. It's also a great way to set daily goals.
- There are a lot of other tools out there as well; experiment and find ones that work for you, even if it's a physical calendar/planner.

4) Be involved in your department.

- It's not a waste of time to go to department functions, colloquiums, parties, talks, and events. There are several reasons this is important. One, it's part of your duty as a department member. The department is giving you support (and for many, a stipend), so you should be involved (at least to an extent). Two, these provide great learning opportunities. Department colloquium is a really good chance to learn about other areas of philosophy and practice asking good questions. You can learn so much from conversations with your fellow grad students at department events and socials. Three, being involved, asking questions, engaging in philosophical discussions, and being an active department member improves your job market letters. It will also give non-letter writers a positive impression of you, and if their friend from another department who is hiring in your area asks about you, they will have something positive to say. Four, if you never show up to anything, you are probably missing out on a lot of free food and booze.

5) Attend and present at conferences.

- Conferences are an excellent networking opportunity. Invitations (including opportunities for publication) can come out of them. Attending conferences also gives you a good sense of what topics people are interested in and working on, and helps you keep up with the literature without having to constantly be reading everything.
- The more conference experience you have, the more practice you will have for skills needed for job interviews, like job talks, talking informally about your research, and connecting with other philosophers (including asking good questions and showing and interest in them/their research).
- It's good to attend and present (or comment) at APAs, but they are large and can be overwhelming. Try to also attend some local or regional conferences, or some smaller conferences or workshops in your AOS. Graduate student conferences are excellent, and a good opportunity to get low-stakes presenting and question-asking experience (especially for more introverted people).
- Find creative ways to fund conference travel. Many departments have some money, but there's a lot more money out there than you might think. Look for sources outside your department (the graduate school, other institutes on campus—e.g. a got a few thousand dollars from the Institute for European Studies to present at an epistemology conference simply because it was held in Europe; I think they funded me because they got so few applications) and profession-wide funds for grad students (e.g. the APA travel fund for those who've attended a diversity seminar). Note also that some conferences (including APAs, for grad students) will help pay for your travel or lodging if you're accepted. Also, I utilized a lot of credit card reward points to attend conferences, an important life hack that I highly recommend.
- In addition to conferences, summer seminars are amazing. They are often a bit longer (5 days to as long as a month), so you get to know people better. They often include funding (and sometimes a stipend), and you can also learn so much from attending. Summers are often "down time" for graduate students, so I highly recommend applying to these.

6) Your dissertation is not your magnum opus.

- I thought about my dissertation as a series of 3-5 seminar papers—maybe ones for which I had a little better familiarity with the literature. This motivated me to simply sit down and write them. The chapters won't be perfect at first, and they will improve as you get feedback and present the chapters.

- Start writing up ideas before they are well-formed, and don't stop writing something just because you start to feel like you've been preempted or the idea is not as brilliant as you thought. Many papers end up having you feel your way toward your actual argument as you write.
- Your dissertation *topic* is important—you will utilize it to market yourself in your job search. But the dissertation itself doesn't have to be flawless perfection—no search committees will actually sit down and read your dissertation. (They will read your writing sample and publications that come out of your dissertation, but not the dissertation itself.) The best dissertation is a finished dissertation.

7) Write your dissertation as a series of stand-alone papers, in the form you'd send to journals. Send the chapters to journals early, as soon as they are ready.
- Don't write a book. Don't have the chapters reference each other as dissertation chapters (if you need to, cite the other chapters as you would other papers). Include in each chapter the background necessary to understand that chapter, and don't presuppose things you've written in previous chapters. Then you can send it to journals without re-writing. (Note: this advice may be subfield specific, but it definitely applies to M&E and other core areas.)
- Aim for the top 15 generalist journals, or a good specialist journal. In most circumstances, I'd strongly advise having at least one publication before going on the job market. (There are some exceptions, e.g. you're invited to apply for a job, you're a perfect fit for a job, etc.).
- Once you're a few chapters into your dissertation, aim to have at least 2 things under review at all times. 3-5 under review is better. Once you send a paper off, plan ahead for the next 3-5 places you will send it if is it rejected, in order. (I have a spreadsheet to track all of this.) If your paper is desk rejected, send it to the next journal within 24 hours. If you get referee comments with a rejection, read over the comments, but don't make changes unless a referee's point really resonates with you, or a paper is rejected several times on the same basis.
- If you get an R&R, put it at the top of your to-do list. Aim to complete it within a month. Answer each referee comment thoroughly and concessively. Thank the referees for their feedback and the time they took to engage your work, and add footnotes thanking them in the paper, too. If you strongly disagree with a referee's comment or suggestion, you don't necessarily have to follow their advice to a T, but it's often good to make at least a small change (e.g. "This comment helped me realize that I was unclear; I've re-written that paragraph to clarify in light of X"). If you don't change anything in response to a referee comment or objection, you need a strong and respectful argument in your letter for why you didn't. Remember, your fate normally lies in the referee's hands. Especially for your first few R&Rs, have someone experienced with publishing look over your letter outlining the changes you made to the paper.
- Your advisor or others on your committee can help on this—both in terms of when a paper is ready, where to send it, and how to deal with R&Rs. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Another small piece of dissertation advice: *before* they are written, send the chapters of your dissertation to abstract conferences. If they're accepted, you'll be forced to work out the ideas for the presentation, and this comes with a built-in deadline. Once you've presented the chapter and gotten feedback, it's significantly easier to sit down and write it, and the result will likely be higher-quality and more publishable. (I think I did this with every single chapter of my dissertation.)

8) Don't see your program's requirements as "hoops to jump through." Rather, utilize the requirements—to the extent that you can—for professionalization opportunities or resources that will be useful to you later.

- Present your seminar papers at conferences (even graduate conferences). If you have a literature survey chapter of your dissertation, send it to *Philosophy Compass*. If you have a competence exam over a certain philosophical literature, try to pick a topic that will be helpful for your research/dissertation, and write notes to yourself for the exam that you can refer to later.

9) Get a sense of what kind of AOCs are common in job ads, and aim to teach a course on one of those topics.

- Topics I've seen a lot include non-western philosophy, feminist philosophy, philosophy of race and gender, ethics, applied ethics.
- Not only will this really help you on the job market; it's also an opportunity to learn about a new area of philosophy that you might end up really enjoying!

10) Take time off.

- Set aside a certain part of the day for working (for writing, probably not more than 2-4 hours per day, and then you can use other work time for email, reading, teaching prep). Don't work more than 8 hours a day. Probably even less. Make yourself actually work when you're working, and actually rest when you're resting. Many grad students halfway-work constantly, and this is less productive than setting time aside to actually work, then putting the computer away and doing something else.
- Work out. Running, weights, walking, yoga, classes at your school's gym, sports, biking, rock climbing, whatever. This will make you feel better, make your mind clearer, and probably make your work in philosophy better, too. "When your mind is tired, work out your body; when your body is tired, work out your mind."
- Socialize. Go to social events in your department (see #4) but it's also really good to have friends outside of your department. Get involved in a local club or activity, go to school-wide events to meet grad students in other fields, or get involved in the community. Volunteering is great. Definitely take weekends off, too. (I recommend taking two full days off per week.)

11) Don't lose your love for philosophy.

- Almost all of us go to grad school because we love philosophy. We believe that doing philosophy is intrinsically valuable. In grad school, it's easy to start viewing your work as a means to getting a job, a publication, or whatever. Resist this mindset as much as you can. Cultivate the love for learning that you had as an undergrad. Enjoy doing philosophy because it is intrinsically good.

12) Don't be too hard on yourself.

- You can't do it all. Graduate school is really, really hard. Life often throws unexpected challenges our way. It's okay if you have an off week (or off month).
- Take your mental health seriously. Therapy is great and can benefit us all.
- It's okay if you don't always meet your goals. Keep your head up and do what you can, taking things one day at a time.

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