

## **Tips for Graduate School**

- Revised by Dr. Judy Fudge

These are some informal notes to help you with some of the issues that graduate students face. These remarks have been cribbed from Mark Leier, who teaches history at Simon Fraser University, and they have been modified to reflect my experience both as a graduate student and supervisor as well as my discussions with graduate students, supervisors, and, most importantly, graduate secretaries.

Graduate school is what you make it. A successful program of study requires a great deal of initiative and self-motivation. It is challenging and it is a full-time occupation. Graduate school can be the best time in your life. You will make life-long friends and you develop and hone skills you will use the rest of your life.

### **Rules and Regulations**

You, and only you, are responsible for knowing the rules that govern your program of study. Read the website, the university calendar, and university policy for the official regulations and requirements.

You are responsible for meeting all deadlines and meeting all requirements.

Your interpretation of a rule or requirement may not be the only one, and the graduate committee, chair, and dean make decisions based on the rules, precedents, and equity.

Be self-sufficient. When looking for a form, current submission deadlines, or program guidelines check the Program website first. The website has been designed and written to help you find answers. If you're still not sure, then ask the graduate secretary for assistance.

Read the emails you receive. While not all external forwards sent through the listserv may be relevant to you, if an email is written by the Director or graduate secretary the information contained is highly likely to pertain to you.

If you have questions or problems, you should first talk with your supervisor and the graduate secretary. They will be able to resolve many difficulties quickly and easily.

You will learn more from the students in the Program than from anyone else. Take advantage of this and be reciprocal.

### **Some General Tips for Grad School**

Be gracious in your public praise and criticism.

Take criticism graciously. You are being judged by your ideas, analytical skills, and writing ability. Don't be afraid to disagree with colleagues and professors. Develop and defend your ideas and critique those of others. Ask questions and push for good answers. Read everything

you can.

Learn to read quickly and effectively. Skimming is often essential, but bad skimming is always obvious. Make sure you understand the general argument. Be prepared for classes.

Be on time for classes, meetings, etc. Don't get into the habit of showing up late or cancelling appointments.

Go to as many thesis defences as you can as soon as you can. They are public events. It's good to give each other moral support and you will be less nervous if you understand the process.

Back up your work on your computer. Make hard copies, early and often.

Worship the graduate secretary. Show your appreciation to the graduate secretary.

Gifts to your professors are a bad idea.

Attend the department colloquia regularly.

### **Research**

Check to see if there are already theses on your topic. Refer to the following:

<http://www.proquest.com/en-US/products/dissertations/>

Library and Archives Canada Theses Portal

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/thesescanada/index-e.html>

UVicSpace

<https://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8443/>

Get to know the librarians at UVic. Talk to reference librarians in the law library and in McPherson. Find librarians who are knowledgeable and compatible. Try several.

Get to know the library. Do not rely only on material available on the Internet. Go to the library stack; check out monographs and edited collections. Get to know the leading journals in your field and read them.

### **Writing**

Know and use the accepted style for footnotes, bibliography, serial commas, numerals, newspaper, book, and article titles, ships' names, italics, quotation marks, and the rest. This knowledge and good practice will save everyone considerable time.

Your professors will be very unhappy if you are sloppy with citation style, grammar, and spelling. These are skills you are expected to have. Showing them sloppy work is a mark of disrespect. However, if you are having problems with citation, spelling, and grammar – or writing generally – tell your supervisor so that your supervisor can direct you to the Writing Centre or to books.

Consult style and writing guides. There are several in the library and program office. Ask other graduate students, your supervisors and professors for suggestions.

If you have problems writing, go to the Writing Centre.

Read your work out loud. Your ear will catch things the eye will miss.

## **Basic Grad School Stuff**

### **Registration**

You have to register for every semester you are in the program. If you are not registered for a course or on leave, you have abandoned your program.

On-leave status requires the permission of your supervisor and the graduate committee. Check the regulations about obtaining leaves.

### **Supervisors and Committees**

The first person you should speak with if you have questions is your supervisor. You had a supervisor appointed when you were accepted, but you can change this. Usually your nominal supervisor will be happy to stay on, but it's always good to make sure. It is your job to determine who should be your supervisor and to approach professors and inquire if they will supervise you and serve on your committee.

Talk to other students about potential supervisors. It is important to find a supervisor you can work with. The trick is to find a balance between expertise in your subject and compatibility.

Find out what your supervisor's schedule looks like over the next couple of years. For example, are they planning to go on sabbatical?

You need to discuss co-supervisors and members of your thesis committee with your supervisor. Ideally, the committee members will complement the supervisor with their expertise in an area, approach, or editing.

You need to select your committee by the beginning of the second semester at the latest. The rule for selecting a committee is the sooner the better

Each supervisory relationship and committee works differently. Some committees have a lead supervisor and a secondary supervisory. Some take equal responsibility. Work this out with your initial law supervisor and confirm it with your non-law supervisor/member. Meet early with your entire committee in a joint meeting. You are responsible for taking the initiative in arranging meetings.

All supervisors and committees have their own practices. Some supervisors will want to see regular chapters on the installment plan. Others will prefer to see the entire thesis at once. Some

committee members won't want to read your work until your supervisor has approved a draft; others will want to see chapters as you produce them. Some supervisors will assume that everything is fine unless you tell them otherwise, while others will prefer regular updates and meetings. Think about how you work best and discuss this with your supervisor and committee member to determine how you will work together.

Your supervisor and committee should comment critically on your research, your theory, your methodology, and your writing (not your spelling or grammar). Their job is to make your thesis better by correcting errors, pushing you to think harder, and suggesting ways to improve the writing. Be happy when you receive comments and corrections. If your supervisor returns your draft without significant comments, it is unlikely to mean that your thesis is perfect; it is more likely to mean that your supervisor has not given it enough attention. Find out which, and act accordingly. If you're not happy with the way you are supervised, talk to your supervisor and the Director.

Do not spring deadlines on your supervisor or committee. You should be on top of all deadlines and give your supervisor and committee plenty of notice of deadlines for final submission milestones for your thesis/dissertation, letters of reference, etc.

Do not email your supervisor or committee members when you know they are on vacation. Emailing people when you know they are on vacation means that you do not mind distracting them or you do not care about clogging their inbox. Wait and email them when they return from vacation. If you did not know they were on vacation, then there is no problem.

### **Courses**

Students may ask a professor to do a directed reading course. Professors are under no obligation to give directed reading courses; they receive little credit or reward for doing them. Some feel that it is important for students to work with other students and thus dislike one-on-one directed reading courses; they may require a certain number of students agree to take a course before offering it. In any case, few people are around to give courses in the summer semester, so plan accordingly.

If you are interested in a directed reading course you should find out which professors teach or research in the area you are interested in. Talk with them to see if they will agree to give a directed reading course. See the graduate secretary to complete the paperwork needed to register in the course.

Do some research first; outline the area and list some books you would like to read. Some professors will insist you draw up your own bibliography; others will hand you a reading list.

### **Reference Letters**

Make sure you give people ample notice when you need a reference letter. Bring transcripts, essays you have written for their classes, statements of research interest, and anything that you've been asked to submit along with your application. If you do not give your professor, supervisor etc. enough time you will either get no reference or a poor reference.

You must give your reference writer something to work with. Good grades, papers given at conferences, articles submitted or published, and good contributions in seminars are all things that make it possible for us to write strong letters.

Be aware that professors often have to write letters for several people for the same application and are often asked to rank all the candidates for whom we are writing. Late completion of courses, the prospectus, the thesis, etc., and grades lower than the "A" range will likely mean a professor cannot write the strongest letter for you.

Check to be sure the professor can and will write a good letter for you. One way to do that: "Excuse me, Professor X. I need a reference letter for my application to Yale. Would you write a strong letter that would help me get in?" It is entirely appropriate for you to ask this.

### **Progress in the Program**

It is important that you complete your course work and other requirements on time. A deferred grade will take you out of the competition for financial awards.

If you must defer a grade, talk to the instructor long before the assignment is due. Be prepared for them to refuse an extension or deferral. You are being judged on your work, and part of doing the work well is meeting the same deadlines everyone else has.

Every professor knows that students encounter personal problems, stress levels, work loads, family commitments, political activities, etc. in graduate school. Some may sympathize and make allowances, but some may sympathize and still refuse to an extension or deferral. Do not assume that a deferred grade will be given. Of course, professors and the program have a legal obligation to accommodate human rights-related issues. However, very few requests for extensions or deferrals involve matters of human rights.

Your supervisor is required to make out a progress report on your work at least once a year. If you do not submit the information needed to fill out the progress report, you will be deemed to be making unsatisfactory progress and will not be allowed to register the following semester.

Some scheduling highlights that are used to define "timely progress" in the LLM include: *finishing your course work in two semesters and having a thesis proposal by the end of your second semester. Your third semester is for research and writing the thesis, which means you need to start the work long before that third semester.*

Timely progress in the PhD includes: course work finished by the end of the second semester, candidacy exam completed before the end of the second year (earlier is better – aim for the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> semester or the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup>).

### **Presentations and Talks**

Almost everyone gets nervous before a presentation or talk. Practice and preparation will improve your presentation.

Do not go over time.

## **Writing and Submitting the Thesis**

The thesis is different from a book or an article. You are not just telling a story and making an argument. You are also demonstrating that you have mastered the craft of the academic legal profession. You need to show that you can do significant research and show that you can think critically about sources, and you need to demonstrate that you can write fluently in university-appropriate language. The thesis is not an exercise in creative writing or in experimental writing. Your aim should be to write clearly, observing formal rules of grammar and construction, and to write in ways that engage the reader.

When you turn a draft in to your committee, ask when you can expect a response. Professors have lives that are as complicated as yours. Remember, your supervisor is doing research, teaching, writing, going to conferences, doing administrative work, and more. Supervising is only one of a faculty member's tasks. The benchmark turnaround time for a chapter is 2-3 weeks. Ask your supervisors to let you know if a longer period is necessary. If you haven't heard something by the promised time, talk to your supervisor. If you are submitting an entire first draft of a thesis, you need to make very clear arrangements about what the turnaround time for your receiving comments.

Committee members are supposed to read and comment on dissertations before a PhD oral defence is scheduled so they have some input into the final product—they are consulting and advising, not simply approving the dissertation. Examiners must be given copies of dissertations several weeks before the defence and Graduate Studies at the university level needs several weeks' notice before a PhD defence date.

It can easily take three or four months from the penultimate draft of your entire thesis being submitted to the committee to the final LLM thesis submission and four to five months from the penultimate draft of your entire dissertation being submitted to the committee to the PhD oral defence and final submission. If you leave everything to the last minute you will not make the deadlines.

Remember that we are all busy and have research, teaching, and service obligations as well as lives outside the university, which means that you cannot plan on having your supervisor and committee meet and discuss your work at your convenience. September, October, and November are particularly busy months for professors as many grant application deadlines occur at that time. We are also beginning a new teaching year. Plan accordingly.

The first draft you submit should not be the first draft you write. Your first draft is for your eyes only. Your second draft should be seen by any friends, relatives, and colleagues you can persuade to read it. Your supervisor looks forward to seeing your third draft. It is not expected to be perfect, but it should be a very clean draft, properly footnoted and formatted, cogently argued, and written in well-constructed sentences.

Schedule lots of time for editing. Good writing means reading that is easy for the reader to read, not easy for you to write. Writing is re-writing, and you need some distance from your work to

edit properly. You should schedule more time than you think you need because you should reread your work several days after you have written it and give yourself enough time to rewrite and edit it.

While editing, always ask yourself: what is my larger argument? What am I trying to do with this sentence, paragraph, section, and chapter and how does it fit into the larger argument?

As you edit, make sure you know precisely what each chapter or section is supposed to be about. Make sure the introduction makes that clear to the reader and that everything in that chapter does in fact connect to the main point.

Check with the Library Thesis Office before you print your first draft for your supervisor to make sure you know all the details and rules for the finished thesis. These include font size and margin width and many more things. The office has excellent advice and instructions. Visit the website soon and often.

### **PhD Oral Defence Timing**

Your PhD dissertation oral defence cannot be scheduled around your timetable. You need to plan around the schedules and availability of your committee and external examiner and so you need to think ahead.

People will be as accommodating as possible, but have planned their work loads several weeks, months, even years in advance, and there will be times when they simply cannot read your work for several days or even several weeks. Plan accordingly.

Planning means talking to your supervisor and committee members frequently so everyone knows what is going on. This is really important if you are not on campus regularly.

### **PhD Oral Defence Tips for PhDs**

You will be required to defend your proposal and your dissertation. People will be asking you hard questions based on what you have given them to read. The point is for you to defend your work vigorously and effectively. You are the expert on your work, and this is your opportunity to demonstrate that.

Don't waste any time before the defence trying to anticipate the questions. You won't guess the questions no matter how hard you try

Treat the questions seriously. Be polite no matter how the questioners behave.

Treat every question seriously. Don't address the examining committee, even your supervisor, by their first names. Call them Doctor X or Professor Y.

Examining committees like assertiveness, but they dislike cockiness or "attitude." Do not act as if you think you are the smartest person in the room and you are only putting up with this ridiculous ceremony to get your degree. Demeanor matters. The defence is serious.

Do not include an acknowledgement in the draft that goes to defence. Any thanks and praise you give to your supervisor, committee, external examiner, family and friends should left to the final version that is submitted to the library.

Don't be afraid to show some enthusiasm.

Try to have some fun with your defence. It is the one guaranteed occasion when everyone is paying attention to your work.

### **When there are Problems**

If you dread going to class, have to force yourself to read the books and write the papers, or find yourself ducking into washrooms to avoid your supervisor, meet the problem head on.

Talk with your supervisor. Think about things you can do, like meeting more often, improving your scheduling, planning your next steps, or changing your work habits.

If you have had problems with your supervisor and you are unable to resolve them, meet with the Graduate Director to possibly find an alternative.

If nothing helps, don't be afraid to re-evaluate your decision to go to grad school. If you're not enjoying it (given, of course, that there is an amount of toil and drudgery in any human activity), why are you here?

Graduate school is not a way to judge your merit as a human being or even your intelligence. It measures your ability to produce academic work of a certain standard and to navigate the rules and requirements of graduate school.

Writing a thesis is hard work. It requires mastery of the relevant literature and good organizational and writing skills. Do not assume it will be easy, but you should assume that it will be enjoyable – despite the hard work and setbacks. If you do not enjoy writing a thesis it is unlikely you will enjoy being a professor.