



The seven secrets of highly successful PhD students*

Researchers who know and make use of these seven secrets get through their doctorate more quickly, and just as importantly are happier, according to the Staff Development and Training Unit, Flinders University, Australia. <http://www.flinders.edu.au/staffdev/rhds/phdcandidate/index.html>

1. Care and maintenance of your supervisors

- Meet regularly with your supervisors (even if they think it is not that necessary)
- Discuss and negotiate your progress regularly
- Understand your different styles. If your supervisor keeps wanting you to follow up new leads and you are happy to, and you are five years into your study, it is time to get some outside perspective and guidance
- If it is not working out, do something about it. Don't just think it will get better or that you can do it on your own

2. Write and show as you go: This is show and tell, not hide and seek

- Always write and show as you go. If you are reading and not writing, after about 3 or 4 weeks you will forget what you have read
- Writing and showing your work forces you to stay on track and refine your thinking
- Writing is helpful because at the end you can't hand in your head full of lots of good ideas
- Set deadlines for your writing and handing in. People generally don't write because of issues of perfectionism, so avoid this with deadlines
- Generally it is a good idea to write journal articles (on your exact thesis topic), as you go
- Practice writing with your peers, this can be very effective

3. Be realistic: It's not a Nobel Prize

- When you are doing PhD you are learning how to do a PhD, you are not expected to know this in advance
- Original work does not mean a cure for cancer. In reality it means one small step in advancing existing knowledge
- Do not go off on tangents in the hope of answering 'The question', stay focused
- You have a cast iron guarantee right now that your thesis will not, cannot and probably should not, be perfect
- Separate yourself from your PhD. It's a bunch of thoughts on a piece of paper, it's not you. Put it in perspective

4. Say no to distractions: Even the fun ones and the ones you think you must do

- Set priorities and be realistic about what you can do
- Do the important rather than the immediately urgent
- Cleaning scum build-up from the shower may be more fun than your PhD, but it won't get the thesis done. Resist this and other urges, and keep writing!
- The golden rule to avoid over-commitment is don't let anything eat into your set study times, or as you would with a job, make the time up if interruption is unavoidable

5. It's a job: That means working nine to five but you get holidays

- You may not work from nine to five, but you definitely need fixed hours. Otherwise how should you know when you should be working?
- Set up a proper workplace. A bus station, university corridor or the lounge room with a TV on are not proper work areas
- Like a job, if you take time off, make it up somewhere else. You wouldn't just not show up to work for three days with no consequences
- Set deadlines and targets. There are very few jobs where the boss says "I'll see you in three years time with that report"
- When you stick to your work times, you get guilt-free time off in the evenings and holidays (like a job). Don't try to squeeze more out of yourself. You'll just kill the goose that lays the golden eggs

6. Get help: You are not an owner-operator single person business

- This means you are allowed to get help. Not only are you allowed, but you will greatly reduce time and effort if you do

* Extracts from "The seven secrets of highly successful PhD students" by Hugh Kearns & Maria Gardiner, Staff Development and Training Unit, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia.



- Get help from statistics consultants, editors, methodologists, academics, peers, your supervisors...
- Use any and all formal assistance in the university/institution including tutors and graduate schools, skills development and faculty staff

7. You can do it: A PhD is about intelligence and persistence

- You would not have got this far if you did not have the intelligence to do it. If you feel like impostor, be reassured that most people doing a PhD feel that way
- Persistence is at least as important ingredient; this comes from habits like meeting regularly with your supervisors, treating PhD like a job etc.
- So in fact the final habit of a highly effective PhD researcher is to know and believe that you can do it, and when the going gets tough, keep going!

If you would like support in realising your personal and professional development needs, find out what training courses are available in your own institution, or consider attending a GRADschool in the future. Details of the 2007 GRADschools can be found on our website at www.grad.ac.uk/courselist.