**An Open Letter to New Graduate Students**

August 19, 2010, 11:00 am

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[](http://www.flickr.com/photos/thecroxallboys/3551319793/)

As we were wrapping up the previous semester, three different ProfHackers wrote Open Letters addressed to groups who were making transitions through higher education. Billie kicked off the series with a letter to [2010-2011′s first-time tenure-track teachers](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Open-Letter-to-2010-11s-Fi/24134/); Nels followed with a letter for the [newly tenured](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Open-Letter-to-2010-11s-Ne/24255/); and Jeff wrote to the [new department chairs](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Open-Letter-to-2010-2011s-/24482/). Today, I would like to address a new group: **those students just beginning graduate school, specifically those full-time students enrolled in a PhD program**.

As is the case with much of what we do at ProfHacker, the purpose of this post is to make explicit the unwritten rules, norms, and quirks of academia. Not that people will be intentionally keeping information from you; rather, it’s very easy to forget what it was like to be in your position and that what we take as self-evident is actually the product of specific departmental-, institutional-, or field-specific contexts. This letter cannot be a complete manual to finishing your degree in exactly four years (if it was, we wouldn’t be giving it away, that’s for sure!). Rather, it’s a distillation of what we, our colleagues on Twitter, and the commenters here at ProfHacker—a gracious lot, all—learned in our own graduate school experience.

**Expect to feel lost and out of place for a bit.** Although you might think that graduate school is just a logical extension of what you’ve done as an undergraduate, it is in fact very different. You will frequently have much less structure to your classes, and they will often meet only once a week. You might only have one assignment for the whole semester. And you will almost certainly experience [impostor syndrome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impostor_syndrome)—the sense that someone will soon discover that you aren’t as smart as your fellow graduate students. Believe it or not, everyone of your fellow students has felt this way, is currently feeling this way, or will feel this way at some point. Know that it’s okay to feel nervous and worried; if you cry in someone’s office in the first week, you won’t be the first (and neither was I). You *will* eventually acclimate more to your new program and location, even if you don’t think so. You should also familiarize yourself with your university’s mental health services.

**Recognize that graduate school is a job.** Hopefully every other job you have in your life will pay better than graduate school. But thinking about your school work as more “work” than “school” will help you stay focused. Working a regular schedule (dare we suggest 9-5?) in a regular location (your apartment, Starbucks, the library) will help you manage what will at first feel like an overwhelming load.

**“Networking” is not just a word for MBAs.** While you might think that the “life of the mind” should be played out by yourself, it’s important to know that networking matters as much between scholars as it does between business students. Get to know the people in your cohort, in your program, and in the field on a national level. When you go to a conference, use your time productively by mingling with the other participants. You’ll be amazed at the opportunities this can lead to. As I’ve mentioned in a previous post about [attending conferences productively](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/How-to-Hack-A-Conference-A/22891/), mingling has led to invitations to write a review essay, to participate in a large project archiving and cataloging electronic literature, and hanging out with senior scholars in my field.

**Recognize that graduate school should not be your entire life.** Just as you wouldn’t want to go in to work morning, noon, and night, every day of the week, for six years straight, you should learn when your “work day” is over in graduate school. Just because you’re pursuing a masters or a doctorate doesn’t mean that you should give up your other hobbies and loves. Get out and exercise; work on your yo-yo; write for a campus humor magazine; form a band; be active in your local garden co-op. What you do doesn’t matter so much as that you do something *besides* graduate school.

**Understand that you’re not locked into a particular field, project, or personality.** When you arrive at grad school, you will likely have a sense of what you want to work on. After all, this is what you discuss in your statement of purpose. You’ll hear that some people change their topics or even fields, but you might think that that will never happen to you. It might not, but it’s absolutely okay if it does. Likewise, you’re not obligated to work with the faculty members you initially thought would be your mentors. Be open to the new subjects that your coursework will provide you.

**Plan ahead for more than one job.** Graduate school is for the most part designed to prepare you for a tenure-track job at a university. But we hope we’re not the first to let you know that finding a job in academia is very, very difficult. We want to wish you the very best in this pursuit but simultaneously want to suggest that you remain as open as possible to other paths of employment. Such positions could include what [Bethany Nowviskie](http://twitter.com/nowviskie) and others have taken to calling “[alt-ac](http://nowviskie.org/2010/alt-ac/),” alternative academic careers that include, as Bethany puts it, “administrators with varied levels of responsibility for supporting the academic enterprise; instructional technologists and software developers who collaborate on scholarly projects; journalists, editors, and publishers; cultural heritage workers in a variety of roles and institutions; librarians, archivists, and other information professionals; entrepreneurs who partner on projects of value to scholars, program officers for funding agencies and humanities centers, and many more.” And you need not feel bound to the academy by your degree; there are many people with advanced degrees in any number of fields outside of higher education.

Unfortunately, graduate schools are not yet very good at preparing you for these alt-ac or “non-ac” positions. So to keep your options open for the future—and since it is *your* future, you have every right to keep as many options open as possible—we suggest **pursuing internships or part-time jobs outside of your program**. Working part-time in administration as a graduate student can help get your foot in the door for a post-graduation position. Interning for a non-profit off campus can help you show that you have “real world” experience working in teams and outside of the university structure. Take opportunities where you can find them to build transferable skills. Furthermore, we’d suggest **seeking out alt-academics on your campus and graduate-degreed non-academics** in your wider world to get their perspectives on other things one can do with a graduate education outside of the tenure track.

**Build an online profile.** Whether you pursue jobs on or off the tenure track (or both), you can count on the fact that people will be Googling you (or Binging you—who knows what will happen in 6+ years?). For this reason, you want to start now in building an online profile so that you’ll like what they find. You can start by [Googling yourself](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/How-to-Google-Yourself-Effe/23035/) to see what information is out there already. Then work to grab your own space on the web, whether it’s a blog, wiki, static website, or space on Twitter (or all four). In these spaces you should keep your updated CV, materials related to courses you’ve taught, first drafts of your work, or anything else to help colleagues and potential employers understand your research, teaching, and skill profiles. As [guest ProfHacker](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/WordPress-a-Better-LMS/23050/) and friend Dave Parry wrote in a post on [academic branding](http://academhack.outsidethetext.com/home/2009/academic-branding-and-portfolio-control/), you want your profile to “demonstrate to the world what type of scholar you are, and what you do.” I personally recommend [using your real name](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Being-Yourself-Online-of-u/22658/), as it will establish your online foothold that much more strongly.

Once you’ve established your own foothold, follow Julie’s advice on [surviving graduate school via social media](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Mentoring-Graduate-Students/22731/) and “immerse yourself in the academic community.” Become an active participant on blogs in your field. Knowledge production moves fast today, and it’s just as important that you know what is being said on blogs as in journals—seriously. Being present on blogs, Twitter, and other places where scholars of like mind congregate is an important method for networking. And as Amy wrote previously about [using social media to network](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Using-Social-Media-to-Netwo/22726/), you’ll likely be surprised what opportunities will present themselves.

**Build a personal research library.** As a graduate student, one of the things you are most likely to be doing at any given time is reading (although you’ll note that @j\_l\_r below recommends not doing all of what’s assigned!). You will read articles, book chapters, and entire books much faster than you would have ever thought possible. And unless these articles fall into your area of interest, you might be inclined to forget about them as soon as the seminar meeting is passed. But we’d like to suggest that you begin as early as possible in your studies to build a personal research library. A personal research library is a record of what you’ve read and what you thought about it. It can be as simple as a citation, a few keywords, and a brief abstract. We’d recommend using [Zotero](http://www.zotero.org/) (see Amy’s posts on Getting Started with Zotero, parts [One](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/ProfHacker-101-Getting-sta/22829/) and [Two](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/ProfHacker-101-Getting-sta/22845/)) or [EndNote](http://www.endnote.com/), but even a box of 3×5 cards is better than trying to remember that really great essay from your first semester in grad school five years down the road when you’re writing your dissertation. A little extra work now will pay big dividends in the future, especially if you change your research project.

**Meet your subject librarian.** In your first few weeks on campus, you might not want to add one more person to your list of people to meet. But getting to know your subject librarian can be invaluable. Your librarian will be the person who best knows the university’s entire collection of databases, journals, and books in your field; consequently she or he will be able to help you find the things you didn’t even know were there but are necessary for your scholarship. Plus, the subject librarian is the person who controls library acquisitions in your field. Get to know ‘em and they will likely buy the books you need. (My subject librarian easily bought me 30 books.) Your subject librarian can also teach you how to most effectively use your library’s catalog. As easy as that might sound—how hard can a search box be?—we’re here to tell you that your catalog is idiosyncratic and you’ll be much faster if you get some quick tips. Finally, your subject librarian likely has an advanced degree in your field. Consider him or her another mentor, even if s/he is in a different building.

**Use** [**Dropbox**](https://www.dropbox.com/referrals/NTc0NDIyOQ)**.** You’ll have enough to worry about in your first few months of graduate school that you shouldn’t have to worry about [emailing files to yourself](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Stop-E-Mailing-Files-to-You/22677/) or having to [backup your most essential files](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Back-Up-Your-Essential-File/24765/). We at ProfHacker enthusiastically recommend using [Dropbox](https://www.dropbox.com/referrals/NTc0NDIyOQ) to sync your files between any number of computers that you might use. It’s simple. It’s free. It’s perhaps our favorite tool. We promise you’ll love it too.

**Share what you know with others.** As you uncover the hidden knowledge and practices of your university, be quick to pass those insights on to others. You might not feel like you’re in a position to do this at first, but before you know it there will be a new crop of grad students arriving, and you’ll definitely know more about your program than they do. One of the most satisfying grad-school accomplishments was the creation of a wiki (with three other authors) that sought to record how to be successful in research, teaching, and living as a grad student. When you’ve found a path, in other words, leave a trail of breadcrumbs for those who come after you. Take, for example, these tweets, which come from members of my academic soccial network [when I asked them](http://twitter.com/briancroxall/status/21358650421) for one piece of advice for you, the new students (links direct to the original tweet):

* [@clioweb](http://twitter.com/clioweb/statuses/21359259101): Do everything you can to do work you enjoy, and enjoy the work you do. Otherwise, it truly is not worth it.
* [@loriemerson](http://twitter.com/loriemerson/statuses/21359185213): assuming that [you]‘ll have to teach, don’t spend too much time grading papers! by that I mean heart&soul, ~30 mins/paper
* [@cliotropic](http://twitter.com/cliotropic/statuses/21359445094): Figure out which of yr faculty members has the widest professional network &/or shares unwritten rules well. Watch & learn.
* [@dradrea](http://twitter.com/dradrea/statuses/21359473885): Wander through the stacks and read whatever interests you. And don’t be surprised if a google search points you to your diss.
* [@kakennedy](http://twitter.com/kakennedy/statuses/21359494865): there’s no shame in finding out another path is best for you.
* [@lorenagibson](http://twitter.com/lorenagibson/statuses/21359657183): Grad school advice: a good advisor is vital; don’t be afraid to change or actively discuss/manage the relationship
* [@wynkenhimself](http://twitter.com/wynkenhimself/statuses/21359712277): Above all else, #alt-ac isn’t failure. Also listening can be more important than posturing.
* [@whitneyrettien](http://twitter.com/whitneytrettien/statuses/21359809878): treat it like a profession. find appropriate valves for anxiety. humble yourself; no one cares, make them (passion for work).
* [@whitneytrettien](http://twitter.com/whitneytrettien/statuses/21360458492): also, for pre-exam studnts: do the readings or admit when you don’t. can’t stand superficial displays. close mouth, open ears.
* [@hwhitneyphd](http://twitter.com/hwhitneyphd/statuses/21360478662): if applicable, keep records of all conversations with thesis advisers, for keeping track of to-dos and mutual obligations
* [@drnels](http://twitter.com/drnels/statuses/21360942035): Find out what the job placements rates are for your program so there are no surprises.
* [@samplereality](http://twitter.com/samplereality/statuses/21361461601): Grad advice: seek & make connections outside your department & outside your university. THATCamps, HASTAC, NEH Institutes, etc
* [@CPHarbour](http://twitter.com/CPHarbour/statuses/21362939047): Don’t pick a short timer for a chair
* [@karikraus](http://twitter.com/karikraus/statuses/21363066371): if you’re a humanities student, do everything you can to fund yourself through \*both\* teaching and research GAships
* [@karikraus](http://twitter.com/karikraus/statuses/21363534523): avoiding student loans may be a side benefit, but mostly I’m touting the experience of working on a collaborative DH project.
* [@j\_l\_r](http://twitter.com/j_l_r/statuses/21365316744): don’t do all the reading!
* [@mbtimney](http://twitter.com/mbtimney/statuses/21365871554): Grad school: Don’t push yourself too hard. Allow time for contemplation, inspiration, motivation. Cultivate friendships.
* [@billwolff](http://twitter.com/billwolff/statuses/21366758257): Have an online presence, read, experiment, and play with ideas—it’s the best time you have to do all of them.
* [@billwolff](http://twitter.com/billwolff/statuses/21366812421): And, have co-chairs for your dissertation. That way, if one flakes the other can help everything stay on track.
* [@billwolff](http://twitter.com/billwolff/statuses/21367497503): Also: push yourself through the writing that doesn’t come easy.
* [@mkgold](http://twitter.com/mkgold/statuses/21368504433): Read up on the Stoic philosophers and to thine own self be true.
* [@amndw2](http://twitter.com/amndw2/statuses/21373103783): Don’t believe the people who’ll imply that you’re not a real scholar unless you eat, sleep, & breathe your work 24/7/365.
* [@amndw2](http://twitter.com/amndw2/statuses/21373185750): Also, if grad school produces mostly angst, misery, & neurosis, that’s probably a signal to go do something else.
* [@loradawn](http://twitter.com/loradawn/statuses/21374977684): Fellow students are colleagues, not rivals. Enjoy the camaraderie, be encouraging. Collegiality makes you employable. And fun.
* [@fearv](http://twitter.com/fearv/statuses/21375180107): do something that matters.
* [@eetempleton](http://twitter.com/eetempleton/statuses/21375513832): be nice to the administrative support staff. They will pull your bacon out of the fire more times than you can count.
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384356909): Find a couple of others at same stage as you, build your own student support network = invaluable.
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384428839): eat well, sleep, exercise. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Learn to touch type. Take every opportunity offered.
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384479449): behave like a pro from day 1, in how you deal with profs and other students. Your reputation will proceed you.
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384527109): get your thesis done on time. If you take years too long, you won’t cope with the pressures of academic job.
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384598493): take holidays. Do other stuff you find fun too. You can’t work 24/7. But when u are at work, work!
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384646101): keep good bibliography of what you are Reading from day 1, and copies of online material that may vanish.
* [@melissaterras](http://twitter.com/melissaterras/statuses/21384752824): finally, if you don’t love the subject when you start, you are sunk. Everyone hates their dissertation by the end!
* [@kakennedy](http://twitter.com/kakennedy/statuses/21392816593): I started blogging my 2nd sem as MA student. Online community has made all the difference.
* [@aeguerson](http://twitter.com/aeguerson/statuses/21397880952): dont put your life on hold, take weekends off, dont hesitate to pursue hobbies
* [@miriamkp](http://twitter.com/miriamkp/statuses/21407098411): Get an internship.
* [@jasonrhody](http://twitter.com/jasonrhody/statuses/21408905077): Branch out. Learn skills that can lead to jobs outside / alongside the academy. Take alt-ac job search seriously, from day 1
* [@edmj](http://twitter.com/edmj/statuses/21414657589): don’t try to go it alone. Reach out to your fellow students. Become friends. Collaborate. No matter the discipline.
* [@triproftri](http://twitter.com/triproftri/statuses/21416068511): be prof[essional] to \*all\* faculty & avoid denigrating in pub venue. These r ppl you’ll work with.
* [@nowviskie](http://twitter.com/nowviskie/statuses/21418910221): Question any received wisdom & inherited structures that imply there’s only one valid or worthy path. #alt-ac
* [@nowviskie](http://twitter.com/nowviskie/statuses/21419022426): Related: only undertake research & projects that make you blissfully happy. Happiness will be long-term & trumps marketability
* [@escapegrace](http://twitter.com/escapegrace/statuses/21494647220): While you’re in school, teach but don’t make it a priority. It won’t get you a job. If possible, start an alternative career.

**Finally, be informed about the whole of higher education.** When you enter graduate school, it’s very easy to feel overwhelmed with all you have to read for your course work. You’ll almost certainly feel hard pressed to keep up and to show that you have what it takes to succeed in graduate study. The last thing that you want to hear is to add more to that reading list. But you should recognize that you’re joining not just a specific field but also higher education writ large. Browsing [*The Chronicle*](http://chronicle.com/) or [*Inside Higher Ed*](http://www.insidehighered.com/) on a semi-regular basis will give you a sense of what’s happening in the “industry.”

<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/an-open-letter-to-new-graduate-students/26326>