

Transitioning into Graduate School Tips & Tricks

In no particular order, below you'll find some tips and tricks that will hopefully help you as you transition into graduate school. With that said, your best resources will be your mentors, directors of graduate studies, and peers. Enjoy!

Centralize your academic work

As part of your coursework you'll have many opportunities to identify topics and questions that allow you to do initial research that could later apply to your independent research projects. Utilize these opportunities to help you narrow in on a topic of interest, or even rule certain areas out.

Set some boundaries

To do this graduate school "thing" well, you'll need to learn to set boundaries well – with yourself and with others. Whether you are setting boundaries on how much time you'll spend on a certain class, television, talking with friends, or finding articles, the sooner and more often you practice setting boundaries, the better. You might shift them, but it's better to set them than not.

Cultivate your support

Graduate school is hard. You're going to need a lot of support – from your program, from partners, family members, friends. You'll likely be less available than you were before graduate school, but keeping in touch with others will help sustain you when you're having a difficult time.

Don't compare yourself

Everyone will have a game face on. But every person has a different story, different interests, and different strengths, talents, and experiences. Your experience will not be just like any other student's or faculty member's. You are here because your faculty believed you could do it – so don't get psyched out that you can't or shouldn't do it. Your journey is your own. You can use others' experiences to help motivate you to work hard, but do know that you'll never know someone's full picture. Stay in your lane and do your thing.

Be selective in picking your advisor/mentor

Select a mentor who can help you successfully navigate your graduate education and support your independent research. Your primary advisor or mentor (these terms can be confusing at first – essentially, the primary person who will be directing your thesis or dissertation research) may not be the person who is most well known in the field. Ask yourself several questions: Are their research goals aligned with yours? Are they available? Have they had other successful mentees? What kind of support or personality style do you need? Consider all these factors and more when selecting your primary advisor/mentor.

Develop a plan

You should have or begin to develop a plan for your graduate education. What classes do you need to take in what order? What areas of specialty are you interested in developing? What is your career path? What do you need to do NOW in order to be successful when you go on the job market? What gaps do you need to fill or strengths do you need to build upon? There are a myriad of resources to help you answer these questions, document the responses, and make plans. Most importantly, you'll be checking in with your mentor and director of graduate studies.

Be clear about program milestones, guidelines, and requirements

It may seem tiresome or unimportant, but you should regularly reread graduate school and program policies and information about milestones, guidelines, and requirements. And for goodness sakes, READ YOUR UNIVERSITY EMAIL. You'll miss key information if you don't.

Identify your resources before you need them (and then use them when you DO need them)

Don't wait until there's a problem before you first visit the Writing Center, the Counseling Center, Student Health, the Career Center, or other university resources. Proactively learning about these resources and visiting them before there's a crisis will make the whole process easier when you do need them.

Be open to career possibilities early on

Regardless of what you think you want to do when you finish your degree, consider other possibilities. The job market is tough, and beyond that, interests change, so it's a good idea to consider all options and how to successfully navigate the job market for all kinds of jobs.

Join your community

We know that it is vital for you to find your community during your graduate education. Hopefully, you find many different communities, but at least find one. You have a number of communities to explore: your broader professional community, a subset of that community in a specialty area, your cohort, a group of students who have a similar identity to you, a counseling center group, an Academy or Check-in-and-Connect group, or maybe a faith group or hobby group in the Louisville community. It might take some time, but keep trying!

Check your email

We said it before, we'll say it again. Check your university email. If you really think you'll have trouble, you might forward your email to your personal email address, but it's vital that you use and understand your university email.

Ask the question

While you may or may not be anxious about asking questions, it is always important that you go ahead and ask the question. Often the question that you ask is the same question another student has, but they haven't asked it. Moreover, asking the question can also both help you help yourself AND help others better help you.

Learn to skim

Not every article is created equal; moreover, not every article is what you need. You will likely be given more reading than you are reasonably able to consume, let alone digest, so the key is to learn to read effectively and efficiently. Read tables of contents first, then headings and bolded areas, identifying the most important parts. Read those first. If this becomes a regular practice for you, you'll learn how to not only read better, but *learn* better. But it does take time, so be patient with this process.

Take initiative and be persistent

There are far fewer people "checking in" with you during your graduate education compared to undergraduate education. Fewer people making suggestions or giving advice. Problems will remain problems – unfortunately they won't just go away. During your graduate education, you'll have to take the initiative – to ask questions, ask about opportunities, explain your needs, and go after what you want. Moreover, you'll have to be persistent in these pursuits. Often you'll have to take the initiative and then follow up MULTIPLE times. Try not to take it personally – see it as a challenge to learn a skill particularly useful in higher education.

Prioritize

How's the saying go? You can do anything but you can't do everything? (David Allen) You'll likely find that particularly true in graduate school. With multiple projects and tasks at any given moment, taking the time to prioritize is vital to your wellness and success. Regardless of what you hear, or what others are doing, prioritizing your health and wellness should be first.

Repeat after me: Spaced Retrieval

We work in higher education, so we should be using what evidence-based practices, right? So STOP CRAMMING. If you really want to learn, you'll be better served by regularly reviewing material (the more technical term for this is, spaced retrieval). In fact, if you think you know it, you're less likely to have actually LEARNED it. Quiz and test yourself on cumulative knowledge regularly.

Be a professional and colleague from the outset

Welcome to graduate school. Now, make sure you appropriately interact with professors and peers by addressing them formally (at least until they tell you otherwise), particularly in emails. (Don't forget emails are not text messages. They should include an address, a message, and a signature.) If you're invited to attend departmental events, it's a good idea to go. Be on time. Stay the entire time. Don't check your text messages when you shouldn't (or at least make others aware if you have a good reason). Check in with the other norms in your department.

You aren't owed anything (but respect and humanity), but you should stand up for yourself

No one owes you their attention or consideration. Is it kind, polite, good practice, useful, professional, etc. for others to help you, attend to you, and be considerate? Absolutely. Is it guaranteed? Absolutely not. So, if you're not getting what you need or what you deserve, ask for it. Don't be afraid to politely and professionally question and challenge the norm. YOU have to do what YOU have to do to be successful. You ARE owed respect and humanity and you shouldn't be afraid to ask for that. Everyone else is owed that, too, so respond in kind.

You're going to read and write differently

There is a good chance that what you *think* you know about reading and writing will be flipped upside down in graduate school. From an undergraduate degree to a master's degree, and from a master's degree to doctoral degree, expectations are different about how (and how much) you read and write. Don't get discouraged if you get papers or projects back filled with feedback. Do your best to remember that a good, critical eye is helpful to improving your writing. Even (and sometimes, *especially*) the BEST and MOST SEASONED writers get feedback and criticism (and sometimes a significant amount) that helps them improve. It's just a part of the process.

You're going to fail

If this is the first time you're hearing this, then I'm happy to share the news. Part of the process of learning is failing. Making mistakes, incorrect judgments, weak arguments, experiments that JUST WON'T WORK is typical for every person in higher education (and life). In higher education, your job is to learn, and learning involves failing. It's not comfortable, but it WILL happen. Hang in there. Get better at failing. Get faster at it. It's all a part of the process. We all do it.

Get to know your professors

Did you know the Dr. So and So loves Pokémon? Or goes to Zimbabwe each summer? Or brews their own beer? Turns out your professors are just like the rest of humanity. Some are cranky before coffee, some have family problems, some have amazing hobbies that you would never consider. Take some time to get to know your professors as people, and likely they'll get to know you as a person, too.

Find the humor

You're going to have a lot of hard days in graduate school, and one of the best ways to deal with it is humor. Whether venting to a friend about a ridiculous expectation, watching comedians, reading memes, or guffawing with your cohort about an accident, as much as you can keep the whole experience of graduate education in perspective, the more resilient you'll find yourself.

Use your purpose to keep you motivated in the difficult moments

Another key to motivation is to remember WHY you're here. Whether it's to solve a problem that will change the world, give back to those who have given to you, or simply to serve others or knowledge in general, you're going to need that focus and tunnel vision when you encounter some difficult times. You might need to write it down, keep a picture nearby, or heck, even get a tattoo – just remember there's a reason you're doing this great and difficult thing.

Identify your mentoring network

Even if we don't have a mentor, most of us know that mentoring is beneficial. What you may not know, is that it's even more beneficial to have a mentoring network. A whole slate of mentors that meet all the different needs you have – content expert, methodologist, cheerleader, job finder. You need those and more – and no one person can meet all of the needs we have. So begin identifying your network of mentors. We ALL need a village.

Emotional intelligence and soft skills are key

You're going to learn a lot in graduate school – how to identify problems, learn about the problem, write about the problem, research the problem, study the problem, collect data about the problem, analyze the data about the problem, etc. But another problem, is that you need to learn OTHER skills in graduate school. Ones that are not often taught in the classroom or in formal structures of higher education. These are often called “soft” skills and involve emotional intelligence. These are the kinds of skills that will help you interact with others and get and keep a job. Don't neglect working on these as well.

Take care of yourself and let others help care for you, too

Others care about you. We really, truly, do. In fact, the whole reason I'm in my job, is because I struggled during graduate school, I had others help me, and I want to help others have less struggle than I did. I guarantee others care about you and your success. It's easy to hide how you're doing, though. So reach out if you can. Take care of your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. You are more important than your academic work. But we love having you here, so we hope you stay, and we want to do what we can to help you do that.