

5 secrets to surviving (and thriving in) a PhD program

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A PhD candidate shares the lessons he's learned preparing his dissertation and publishing research along the way

By Aijaz A. Shaikh Posted on 25 June 2015

Over the last three years, I have been progressing steadily through my doctoral studies program. I have found the path to success is never very simple or straightforward. In fact, pursuing a doctoral qualification requires absolute devotion, consistency, organization and, above all, a systematic approach that advances or contributes to new knowledge. I have drafted my own *how-to* handout to convey a set of secrets that, if followed properly, might increase your chances of surviving your doctoral studies.

To put it simply, these practical secrets are aimed at reducing fear and discomfort, helping you complete your course work on time, and guiding you to produce a set of good scientific publications that will secure funding and ensure a productive future career path. These suggestions might also be applicable to you if you're working on a master's thesis.



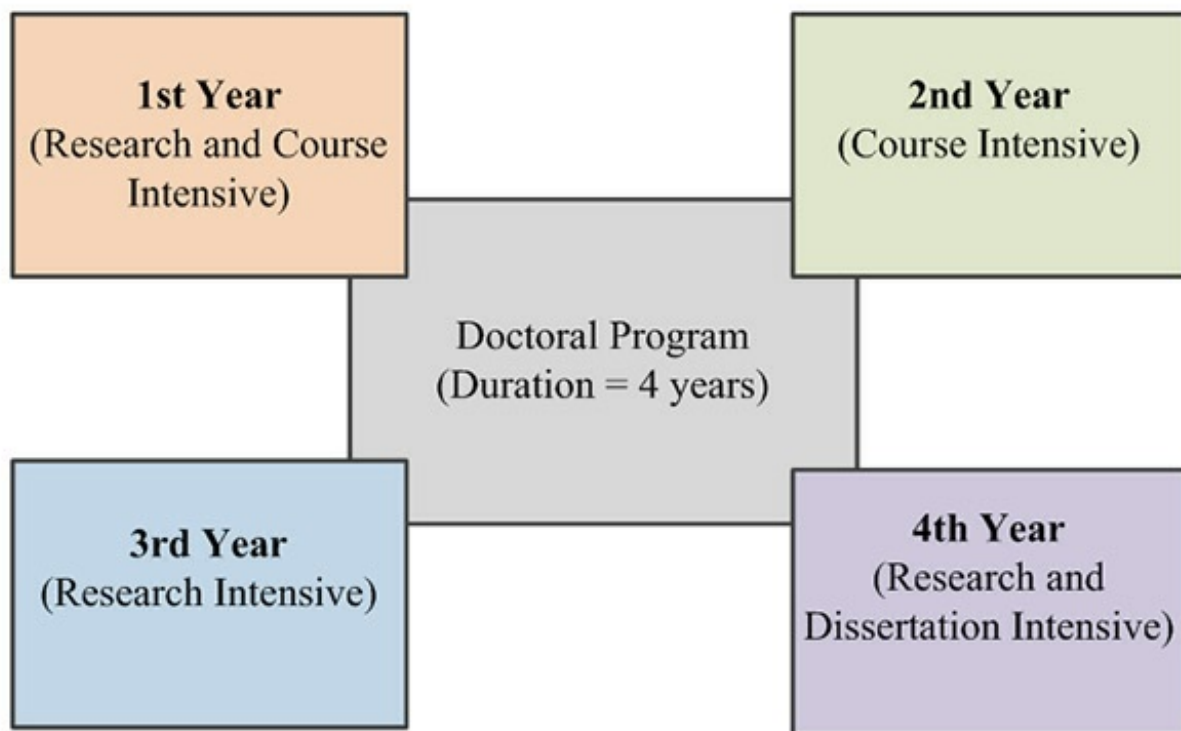
Before I present my suggestions, it is important to reinforce to newly admitted and aspiring doctoral candidates that doctoral study plays a significant role in improving scientific research. Another important point is that the primary responsibility for the management of a doctoral dissertation project lies with the student. The supervisor should be considered a facilitator, motivator or guide. Nevertheless, the supervisor (or your research advisor) is a person with whom you need to interact regularly for four or five crucial years of your life and who will have a critical influence on your research design, output and almost everything you do.

Secret 1: Start writing during the initial stages of your doctoral program.

A well begun is half done — Aristotle (Politics, 350 BC)

The essence of every doctoral program is to produce a few high-quality manuscripts for publication. Doctoral students should start writing their first dissertation article as soon as possible after finalizing their dissertation plan. Different avenues are available where students can explore and write without leaving the comfort of their university. For example, a qualitative method approach will help save time and also deliver a manuscript for publishing more quickly. After all, a dissertation can follow a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed approach.

You should start writing quickly because doctoral course work, teaching and evaluation assignments, social and family obligations can all interfere with the writing schedule. Hence, during the doctoral program, it is advisable to engage eloquently with study, work, home and community. Figure 1 illustrates a tentative flow diagram of a doctoral studies program pursued over four years. The first year is crucial and therefore reserved to progress both research and course work. The second year is, however, considered course intensive. During the third year students are advised to concentrate fully on their research work. The fourth and final year is also research intensive with a balanced focus on completing the research work and the finalization of the dissertation before the public defense.



Another important aspect of early writing that I found is the selection of a possible outlet or target journal for your paper. An early selection will benefit you in different ways. For instance, you should try to include citations from the papers published in the target journal.

Secret 2: Build networks and collaborations.

Of the many paths to success, none can be walked alone — Boris Groysberg and Robin Abrahams (Harvard Business Review, 2014)

Doctoral studies, especially in the field of management and social sciences, are increasingly considered to be interdisciplinary and cross-cultural, which means that a doctoral candidate is most unlikely to make progress and effectively complete a doctoral program alone. A healthy set of networks, associations, and research collaboration with other individuals and professional organizations is key to success. These personal and professional networking and collaboration opportunities provide several benefits, such as facilitating information sharing, identifying new research opportunities, and enhancing your understanding of the developments and innovations taking place in their field of specialization. Ask yourself, “How can I create effective networking or research

collaboration to facilitate publication and the completion of my doctoral program on time?”

There are different avenues available to your personal network. Among the most productive is attending conferences and doctoral courses outside the university or the country of study. On research collaborations, I would suggest both intra- and inter-institutional collaborations — that is, fostering research collaboration across sectors and among individuals, universities, and groups; or through joining university-based interdisciplinary research groups. Collaboration initiatives like these can be advanced by working with researchers on co-authored publications.

Secret 3: Realize the importance of theory and literature.

Significant research projects cannot be performed without first understanding the theory and literature in the field. — David N. Boote and Penny Beile, Educational Researcher, 2005)

It is essential for doctoral students constructing their research paper to develop a sound theoretical knowledge. In my opinion, the importance of theoretical expertise in the field of specialization is indispensable. Consequently, having a thorough, sophisticated and sound theoretical knowledge is the foundation and inspiration for substantial useful research. Therefore, any doctoral student who ignores the central role of the literature review will weaken the quality of their research and disadvantage themselves. In their 2005 article [“Scholars Before Researchers: On the Centrality of the Dissertation Literature review in Research Preparation,”](#) Dr. David N. Boote and Dr. Penny Beile provided a highly useful prescription. The authors argued that “good” research is good because it advances our collective understanding. Therefore, in order to advance collective understanding, a doctoral student needs to understand the historical aspects of theory and research (i.e., what has been done before), the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies, and what is and what is not within the scope of the investigation. In essence, a doctoral student may not be able to deliver good research without first understanding the theory or literature in the field of specialization.



Here, doctoral students must understand that a review of the past literature is an essential part of every empirical research assignment and it is also the main focus of the peer review process. That process (read Secret 5 for details) occurs when the manuscript is submitted for publishing and it is reviewed by at least two reviewers for the target journal. The feedback provided by the reviewers usually decides the fate of the manuscript, although they may on occasion be overruled by the editor-in-chief of the journal.

In short, a literature review summarizes and evaluates the state of knowledge or practice on a particular subject (Knopf, 2006) and normally includes books published by academic presses and articles published in academic journals. In addition, popular market reports, feeds, and analysis can also feature in the literature review.

Secret 4: Understand the chemistry of the “scholarly search.”

Given the importance of understanding past theory and literature, the search for the scholarly or scientific articles is obviously very important. My secret for an effective literature search is based on the very simple principle of the “3Rs” — Recent, Relevant and Reliable.

Considering the pace of innovations and developments taking place across various disciplines, the growing interdisciplinary nature of the field of the specializations, and the huge volume of English-language scholarly papers (and other documents), it is vital to understand the importance of searching for and selecting the most recent, relevant and reliable scientific articles for your research projects. According to an estimate (Khabisa and Giles, 2014), more than 114 million English-language scholarly papers are accessible on the web, of which Google Scholar cites nearly 100 million. Of these, at least 27 million (24%) are freely available (open-access articles) that do not require any subscription or payment. What is more intriguing here is that more than 1.5 million peer-reviewed articles are published every year in more than 27,500 peer-reviewed journals across all disciplines.

Broadly speaking, academic search engines have been divided into two major parts; the vertical search and the horizontal search. A vertical search is normally specific journal or scholarly database specific such as ScienceDirect, Wiley, JSTOR, ACM, IEEE, ABI/INFORM, SAGE, Palgrave, Emerald, Inderscience, Springer and so forth. In contrast, a horizontal search is conducted using a single platform such as Google Scholar or the recently introduced [Windows Live Academic Search tool](#) to search for peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts, and so forth across different journals and databases. In summary, a good literature review consists of recent, relevant and reliable articles with a high number of citations.

Secret 5: Master the core concepts of impact factor, peer review, contribution to knowledge, and scientific knowledge.

A scientific publication is considered scholarly if it is authored by academic or professional researchers and targeting at an academic or related audience. — Muktikesh Dash (Journal of Microbiology & Experimentation, 2014).

Some intriguing concepts and terms have emerged over time and are now used almost every day in every doctoral program. Among these widely used concepts and terms, the Impact Factor and peer review occupy a significant position. [Impact factor \(IF\)](#) is the traditional and most widely used method for determining the ranking of journals; a journal’s IF is based on the average number of citations its articles receive in the previous two years. Inevitably, academic journals with a higher IF will be assumed to be more important than those with a lower IF, and in academia, where you publish can affect everything from funding opportunities to job prospects. With that in mind, you should prepare your dissertation (or other articles) with an eye to submitting it to a journal with a high IF. You can find the official IF of journals in the [Thompson Reuters Journal Citation Reports \(JCR\)](#).

On the subject of peer review, this process starts after you finalize, proofread, and submit your manuscript for publication. In other words, before being considered for publication, scholarly articles are refereed, or peer-reviewed, by experts in your subject area.

The editor-in-chief of the target journal checks the manuscript to ensure its topic, quality, and relevance aligns with the journal’s aims and scope. If it passes this first test, the editor will send it to at least two anonymous independent reviewers, who will check the manuscript for originality, validity and quality. The advantage of targeting a journal with a strong IF is that even if your manuscript is rejected, the reviewers normally provide detailed feedback on the quality, context and the contents of the manuscript. Carefully incorporating the reviewer feedback into a new version of the manuscript will give it a good chance of being accepted by another journal with a good IF. In summary, it is imperative to select an appropriate and relevant journal for publication. Every journal defines its aims and scope on its official website and has a detailed guide for authors.

Another important term frequently used in the doctoral studies context is the “contribution to

knowledge.” Dissertation supervisors (and journal reviewers) generally ask an author to explain the anticipated or expected contribution to knowledge, the practical relevance, or the value added by completing the research project or manuscript. The objective is to present some new or different information or argument in your manuscript than is available from existing studies (Knopf, 2006). In my opinion, conducting a good literature review will uncover hidden patterns, and lead to the discovery of valuable knowledge and information. It should also identify specific research and knowledge gaps and consequently present useful insights and valuable findings.

Similarly, the term “scientific journal articles” is also commonplace in the everyday life of a doctoral student. The research community describes a manuscript as a “scientific work” based on the fact that a scientific research project is primarily meant to discover and report new knowledge, follow a logical sequence, be drafted in an ordinary fashion, be published in a peer-reviewed journal, and be intended to communicate with the scientific community. Clearly, an unpublished work cannot be treated as a scientific work. Scientific work includes research articles, literature reviews, case reports or studies, short communications, and editorials among others.

Dissertation forms and formats

Owing to both practical and theoretical considerations, a few international dissertation forms and formats are in use. My arguments here should not be read as validating any particular traditional form or format. The good news is that during the early stages of a doctoral program, universities allow limited refinements and modifications especially to the form of dissertations (and even to the methodology, such as the choice between qualitative or quantitative approaches) before final approval. Therefore, understanding the potential forms of the dissertation is important for those embarking on a doctoral program.

Among the widely used forms of dissertation, the *single study* (also known as a monograph) and an *article dissertation* (consisting of a pre-defined number of articles or manuscripts meeting the scientific criteria and either accepted for publication or deemed worthy of it) are widely used in several universities, especially in Europe. Here it is vital to understand that in either of these dissertation forms, quality and originality are key prerequisites. In other words, the dissertation must contain new scientific findings in the chosen area of research, and avoid unnecessary repetition of widely known textbook knowledge. The underlying goal, as argued by Knopf (2006), is to show that the individuals or the committee who read the dissertation are likely to acquire some new or different information or be presented with an argument not available from existing studies. In the last decade, a majority of universities have come to encourage the article dissertation form. Moreover, the universities have accepted co-authored publications and peer-reviewed conference papers produced by doctoral candidates.

Paltridge (2002) described four different types of dissertation formats (also commonly referred to as dissertation layouts): the *traditional simple dissertation* format presents a monograph or single study in five chapters, that is, the introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusions. The *traditional complex* format includes several studies, each presenting its own introduction, methods, results, and conclusions. However, the traditional complex form of dissertation uses a single literature review for all of the studies included; the third format is called the *topic-based dissertation*. Here the doctoral student or author divides the larger work into chapters that support the rhetorical structure and often do not use separate chapters for the literature review, methodology, results, or conclusions. The *compilation of research articles* format describes that with various articles written in the format of journal articles, framed with introductory and concluding sections. Each article is treated separately and as a complete entity, and includes its own literature review.

The article dissertation is gaining in popularity in the management and social science fields. The monograph form of dissertation, on the other hand, is generally considered easy to complete and is gaining popularity in other fields such as education. Considering the increasing popularity of the article dissertation, most of my suggestions discussed below relate particularly to that form, but they can be

equally beneficial for those who opt for other forms of dissertation.

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