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Twenty things I wish I'd known when I started my PhD

Recent PhD graduate Lucy A. Taylor shares the advice she and her colleagues wish they had received.

Lucy A. Taylor



Lucy Taylor received her PhD from the University of Oxford, UK, in 2018. Credit: Susanne Vogel

Starting a PhD can be tough. Looking back, there are many things I wish I'd known at the beginning. Here, I have curated a list of advice from current PhD students and postdoctoral researchers from the Department of Zoology at my institution, the University of Oxford, UK, to aid new graduate students.

- 1.** Maintain a healthy work–life balance by finding a routine that works for you. It's better to develop a good balance and work steadily throughout your programme than to work intensively and burn out. Looking after yourself is key to success.
- 2.** Discuss expectations with your supervisor. Everyone works differently. Make sure you know your needs and communicate them to your supervisor early on, so you can work productively together.
- 3.** Invest time in literature reviews. These reviews, both before and after data collection, help you to develop your research aims and conclusions.
- 4.** Decide on your goals early. Look at your departmental guidelines and then establish clear PhD aims or questions on the basis of your thesis requirements. Goals can change later, but a clear plan will help you to maintain focus.
- 5.** “I don't need to write that down, I'll remember it” is the biggest lie you can tell yourself! Write down everything you do – even if it doesn't work. This includes meeting notes, method details, code annotations, among other things.
- 6.** Organize your work and workspace. In particular, make sure to use meaningful labels, so you know what and where things are. Organizing early will save you time later on.
- 7.** It's never too early to start writing your thesis. Write and show your work to your supervisor as you go – even if you don't end up using your early work, it's good practice and a way to get ideas organized in your head.
- 8.** Break your thesis down into SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely) goals. You will be more productive if your to-do list reads “draft first paragraph of the results” rather than “write chapter 1”. Many small actions lead to one complete thesis.
- 9.** The best thesis is a finished thesis. No matter how much time you spend perfecting your first draft, your work will come back covered in corrections, and you will go through more drafts before you submit your final version. Send your drafts to your supervisor sooner rather than later.
- 10.** Be honest with your supervisor. Let them know if you don't understand something, if you've messed up an experiment or if they forgot to give you feedback. The more honest you are, the better your relationship will be. Helping your supervisor to help you is key.

- 11.** Back up your work! You can avoid many tears by doing this at least weekly.

- 12.** Socialize with your lab group and other students. It's a great way to discuss PhD experiences, get advice and help, improve your research and make friends.

- 13.** Attend departmental seminars and lab-group meetings, even (or especially) when the topic is not your area of expertise. What you learn could change the direction of your research and career. Regular attendance will also be noticed.

- 14.** Present your research. This can be at lab-group meetings, conferences and so on. Presenting can be scary, but it gets easier as you practise, and it's a fantastic way to network and get feedback at the same time.

- 15.** Aim to publish your research. It might not work out, but drafting articles and submitting them to journals is a great way to learn new skills and enhance your CV.

- 16.** Have a life outside work. Although your lab group is like your work family, it's great for your mental health to be able to escape work. This could be through sport, clubs, hobbies, holidays or spending time with friends.

- 17.** Don't compare yourself with others. Your PhD is an opportunity to conduct original research that reveals new information. As such, all PhD programmes are different. You just need to do what works for you and your project.

- 18.** The nature of research means that things will not always go according to plan. This does not mean you are a bad student. Keep calm, take a break and then carry on. Experiments that fail can still be written up as part of a successful PhD.

- 19.** Never struggle on your own. Talk to other students and have frank discussions with your supervisor. There's no shame in asking for help. You are not alone.

- 20.** Enjoy your PhD! It can be tough, and there will be days when you wish you had a 'normal' job, but PhDs are full of wonderful experiences and give you the opportunity to work on something that fascinates you. Celebrate your successes and enjoy yourself.

This is an article from the Nature Careers Community, a place for Nature readers to share their professional experiences and advice. Guest posts are encouraged. You can get in touch with the editor at naturecareerseditor@nature.com.

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