

'I wish I'd been told earlier...'

*Advice from final-year graduate students in the Humanities to new graduate students at Oxford
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[Editorial note: Whilst this advice was written with the experience and needs of Humanities students in mind, the principles represented are potentially applicable across the disciplinary spectrum – you will see many ways of applying the advice in your own situation.]

<i>Contents</i>	<i>Page</i>
RESEARCH AND DPHIL WORK	1
EMPLOYABILITY AND ACADEMIC PRACTICE	2
TEACHING	3
FACULTY AND COLLEGE LIFE	5
CHALLENGES	5

RESEARCH AND DPHIL WORK

Skills for research

Research skills are acquired through a mix of trial and error, supplemented by supervisors' guidance and training sessions provided by the Faculty and Division and by OUCS, OULS and the Language Centre.

Three years can seem like an age when you start on your DPhil project – it flies! Get a solid plan and bibliographical survey from your first year as a good foundation. Get on with developing your skills as soon as possible – second year is particularly good for that.

'I have improved my IT skills by doing an ECDL and improved my bibliographical skills using electronic databases'

'I took a Latin course for beginners to enable me to read Virgil which I needed for my thesis'

'My study skills or indeed 'project management' skills have improved as I have learnt how best to carry out my research'

'My DPhil research has developed conferencing, oral history interviewing, project management and travel planning skills'

Every DPhil student should consider having:

1. An 'ideas' journal or computer file
2. Reading lists organised by priority: 'immediately crucial' – 'generally useful' – 'might be interesting'
3. A sensible filing system
4. A system for recording your own particular thoughts on a text/article/source
5. A regular writing schedule
6. A diary or day-planner
7. A plan for career development

Planning ahead in research

The DPhil is about stamina and patience. It's very easy to be disheartened by slow weeks, when you can't motivate yourself to work, and think that you'll never finish. The truth is that these weeks tend to balance out against those weeks when you're enthused and the work is developing by leaps and bounds. Keep an eye on the average number of hours you work per day over the course of the month and that'll give you a much better assessment of how hard

you're working. Also, it's better to work efficient than it is to work long. Five solid hours are better than eight with much Googling thrown in.

You will have different phases – creating bibliographies, reading, writing and then re-writing phases. Be sensitive to your work patterns, everyone is different!

It is very important to have both long and short-term goals. Keep them in mind as a structuring device for your work but don't be afraid to adjust them at times. Falling one or two weeks behind on your reading schedule in one term won't change your overall progress, it's often just a case of readjusting the boundaries. Research is, in its very nature, unpredictable – some weeks will go better than expected and others you may fall behind. Keep the bigger picture constantly in mind and be prepared to shift back and forth between the two at all stages of the project.

Our tips:

1. Define what 'doing research' means for your thesis topic. It's much easier to answer specific research questions than it is to sit down and 'do the DPhil' on a daily basis.
2. Value all parts of research. You can't make breakthroughs all the time and if you don't spend the dull but necessary time learning how to use programmes like Endnote or Word; creating bibliographies; doing background reading, etc, you won't have a strong basis for more advanced work.
3. Identify the skills you need to gain for a) the thesis and b) your future career. Prioritize the first list, but as soon as possible move on to the second. Your success rests on being self-aware and working out what you need to do to develop.
4. Even if you haven't managed to get ready the 'perfect draft chapter' that you were hoping for, keep your scheduled meeting with your supervisor and use the meeting to go over what material you have managed to write/collect, even if it is to talk through the difficulties you are having with that chapter.
5. Setting daily and weekly word targets is an excellent way to generate material and can be a very effective way of creating a self-imposed personal deadline.
6. "Mulling Time" can be useful; one doesn't always need to be actively working per se.
7. There is a big difference between good enough to publish and good enough to submit.

EMPLOYABILITY AND ACADEMIC PRACTICE

We are, and should consider ourselves 'research professionals in training' not just 'eternal students'. Seek out/take advantage of opportunities to develop your skills or to gain teaching or presenting experience – be assertive.

Look to your career from day 1! There's so much that young academics need to accomplish in order to stand out in a crowded job market. If you're going for a teaching job, you'll certainly need experience of teaching, but also of academic administration and pastoral duties. If you're going for a research job, you'll need to have some publications, such as journal articles, and to have spoken at conferences.

There's a lot to get on to the CV in three years. Trying to cram it all in during the second or third year is a lot less manageable - and more dangerous for your thesis progress - than spreading it over the course of the DPhil.

Doing presentations is an essential part of preparing yourself for an academic career and indeed is an indispensable transferable skill for the wider world of work. You can use them as an opportunity to test out/refine parts of your thesis or to look at something completely different/or a section that doesn't fit in your thesis. Faculty Work-in-Progress seminars are the ideal place to start.

You should take advice from your supervisor as to which kind of conferences might be most suitable for you.

Join an international academic mailing list (e.g. JISCmail) which aids networking and will keep you informed of conferences. Find out which are the professional bodies in your field and join them.

You could try a national/international Postgraduate Conference as a next step – you could give a couple of papers and then consider organising a postgraduate conference.

Go international – if you are at all thinking of a career across the pond, get yourself known over there – conferences are great for this. The top of the pile is then a large-scale national or international conference where you would be presenting alongside the experts in your field. This kind of event is very important for making a name for yourself and will push you to write a really tight and exciting paper.

The second year is a good time for conferences – they are great for confidence building, you are (hopefully) past the hurdle of transfer and still far enough away from 'the end' to be relaxed.

Activities that have developed our academic practice:

- Attending a postgraduate-run conference at New York University in my second year; this led to some great academic contacts and two future publications.
- Applying for research funding - Wellcome Trust application during MSc year for DPhil funding
- Abstract writing and conference presentations (4 conferences in my second year)
- Writing a book review for a journal
- Teaching observations

Finding out about conferences in your field

There are various ways to do this - ask your supervisor and more senior grads in your subject area because they will have the best info on this front. A generally useful resource is H-Net, which has all kinds of mailing lists and info on all Humanities [and Social Sciences] subjects: <http://www.h-net.org/> (click on "Discussion Networks" for a list)

Also useful is to join the mailing list of your professional bodies (e.g. Modern Language Association). Conferences generally get advertised through faculty mailing lists, so it's quite likely you'll see them. But quite often it is a bit hit and miss, so you might do well to set aside an hour or so every so often to survey the field - get your Google bookmarks up to date. For example, if there's a research centre or institute of research on your topic, visit their site regularly to see what they're doing. Just Googling your subject occasionally can throw up all sorts of interesting information. For mailing lists and discussions in all disciplines, try <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/maillinglists/categories.html>. If you don't find a group of interest, you can set up a new one.

TEACHING

It is a good idea to make the most of the teaching training programmes, available to you, such as Developing Learning and Teaching. Make your supervisor aware that you would like to teach and get the training required to get on the faculty teaching register.

Treat teaching as a way to intellectually push yourself and develop wider interests. Teaching something a couple of (hundred!) years out of your comfort zone can be rewarding and looks great on your CV.

Don't let teaching take over – it's easy to say 'yes' to every teaching opportunity or devote all your time to teaching preparation but you need to strike a healthy balance between teaching and research.

For more information about Preparation for Learning and Teaching at Oxford and Developing Learning and Teaching, see: www.learning.ox.ac.uk/support/teaching/programmes/.

FACULTY AND COLLEGE LIFE

My fellow graduates – you are not alone! Go to seminars and make yourself known in the Faculty.

Involvement in faculty and college life will not only guard your sanity but can lead to useful career development activities. Those faculty or college activities which can be put in the category of 'academic-related positions' will be the most useful for your CV. After all, every academic has to juggle administration, admissions and pastoral care as well as teaching and research.

Speak to graduates a few years ahead of you – find out who your student mentor is, if your Faculty runs a kind of peer support or mentoring scheme. These students have been there and done that – they will have wise words.

Ways we have got involved in faculty and college activities:

- President of the Oxford Linguists' Graduate Association
- Member of History Faculty Graduate Joint Consultative Committee
- Leading Graduate Research Forum
- Set up a Mentoring Scheme for Modern Linguists
- Started a writing support group
- On welfare team for my college
- Mentor to 3 first-year graduate students
- MCR Vice President, then President
- Interviewed students for admissions with my supervisor
- Worked as a research assistant on a book which had nothing to do with my thesis
- Sat on the committee for the English faculty graduate organisation and organised faculty events and graduate conference.

CHALLENGES

Be aware of the psychology of doing a DPhil. You've entered a field in which everyone is hugely intelligent and very driven to succeed, but also where there is a lack of regular feedback and approval. The lack of regular 'pats on the back' is VERY difficult to cope with - often manifesting itself in paranoia about everyone else being better and depression that you aren't good enough - so you need to create networks of support in which you can receive it from friends; fellow students; and friendly academics. Otherwise, it's so easy to become discouraged and to not see the work helpfully.

Ignore all 'robograds' who appear to be managing just fine with every single aspect of their existence as a researcher. They are lying! Everyone has times when something isn't on track or they are feeling down.

Self-doubt is a beast that will perpetually rear its ugly head. Keep talking to your friends and supervisors. Keep that copy of your research proposal in a safe place – look at it now and

again and remind yourself why you were initially so excited by this innovative and fabulous project.

Research students in the arts do not often operate on a purely 9-5 basis. We are not robots, we can't do everything and sometimes you just need to switch off. Tricky, with our lack of 'offices'. Try and create boundaries in your living and working spaces to separate the two if you can, even if it means walking downstairs and making a cup of tea every so often.

There is no one way to do a DPhil. Every student has their own rhythms. Be faithful to yours and don't get concerned if others do it all differently. It is the end product that counts.

Only in the summer of my second year did I begin to feel 'expert'. I also found it difficult to manage the great tracts of time that I had to organise myself. I found it helpful to break time down into smaller chunks (terms into weeks, weeks into days, days into hours) and use a diary to keep track of what I had planned to do. The necessity of providing annual reports to my funding agency was useful in terms of having me reflect on my progress and plan for the next year.

When another academic published what amounted to a scoop of my project – every grad's nightmare – my supervisors were hugely supportive and helped me to find and emphasise the difference between the scooping work and my own. They aided my understanding of intellectual subtleties rather than a wholesale acceptance or rejection of someone else's ideas and arguments. Writing a review of the scooping book helped me to confront these fears and insecurities. |