

Some Advice to PhD Students

Some miscellaneous advice, mostly from Allan Dafoe, about the life of a scholar and social scientist. Thank you to William M. Kwok and Itumeleng Makgetla for help writing it up.

How to Come up with Ideas

- Many roads to a good paper—a puzzle; fascination; gap; insight; method.
- Talk, write, look at the real world; gut distaste (reaction to leading work); talk to someone outside field; passion, curiosity, browse field and conferences, look under the hood (of a prominent paper), build off the leading works (incrementally), audits (of the literature and what's missing), read what people have been writing X years ago (what were people talking about?).
- Bring two literatures together (e.g., from economics: structural realism (Waltz) from models of perfect competition).
- Try to find a successful paper that you can “model” yours off of. Replicating work can be productive, allowing you to work through every step of an argument and inference. Likely you should have something to say after doing that carefully, though you want to go beyond a critique to making an original argument.
- Try out many ideas. Know the frontier of many areas of research and methods, so that you can spot opportunities.
 - Keep a list of: books or articles someone should write. you should have a long list of research ideas for yourself.
 - Think of it this way: you only have time to work on k projects, but the quality of those k projects will be increasing in the number of ideas (n) that you have considered (assuming you work on the best projects out of your n). The lower the ratio k/n , the better will be the quality of the ideas of the k projects that you have time to work on.
- Puzzles are a safe way to start. If you start with an argument and it's too crazy, no one will care. And even if you start with an argument, it is still helpful to motivate the argument with the puzzles that it solves.

Writing

- Prioritize writing; committing time to it; not getting excessively distracted with other things, focus.
- Establish good habits and routines for writing. It's the only way to get difficult things done.
- Writing as:
 - as a litmus test of ideas
 - a creative task
 - part of our craft
 - write daily on a topic; commit time to it; treat it like a course.
 - Keep going, don't salvage. Re-write.
 - Key to writing (and thinking) well is to sleep, eat and exercise well.
 - Some find it helps to have rituals associated with writing.

- Some find rewards help.
- Some find writing groups help.
- There are systems that you can use for tracking your work, such as a program called Rescue Time. Measurement of how much time you use.
- Your muse comes when you start writing.
- Writing as an art you need to practice. If expertise involves lots of deliberate practice, then most of those hours should be spent writing.
- Keep accountable. Either with writing groups or use computer software.
 - If you measure your writing output and time spent writing, you're most likely going to come closer to your "ideal."

Helpful Books for the Writing Process

- *Keys for Writers*, Ann Raimes
- *Writing for Social Scientists*, Howard Becker
- *How to Write a Lot*, Paul Silvia
- *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*, Joan Bolker
- *Demystifying Dissertation Writing*, Peg Boyle Single

Urgency

- You need to be working on something publishable now. You want one good pub for when you go on the market. Assume it takes 1.5 years in the review process, and it takes you 1.5 years to produce. Then you need to be starting your paper in your 2nd year if you want it to be published if you are going on the market in your 5th year.
- Turnaround time can be 3-6 months.
- It's valuable to have a piece that's a hit when you're on the market, but it takes a *few years* to get through the review process.
 - Why makes sense to start in second year.
 - It's important that you bite off a *feasible* project now, because it is almost a necessity to have a publication by the time you go on the market.

Getting Published

- An article: theory, method, data, findings, but only one or two innovations, can't have three then not enough space.
- A study that found rejection rates are about 80-90%. Authors looked at what explained whether published, found 30% due to article specific factors, 30% due to referee specific factors, and 40% unexplained. In other words, chance is a big factor.
- Submit early and often.
- Don't baby your piece.
- Don't focus on a single journal.
- You should make sure you can identify work in the top journals that you like and that you would like to respond to, build upon, speak to, etc., because if not, then it may be the case that there is not a community of reviewers for the work you want to do.

- R&R letter is important, respond in detail to every point made by the reviewers.
- Editors want to publish landmark pieces, that transform the field once they are published, so try to cast your contribution as broadly and generally as possible.
- Small mistakes can kill a good article, some reviewers have low tolerance for small mistakes.

Papers

- One, at most two innovations. The more you have, the more risky it is.
 - Focus on one or two innovations. You won't have space and it's hard to signal to all the reviewers. You'll wind up confusing people. You need to think about who your reviewers are and what they'll get.
- Think about the reviewer pool; can sometimes recommend reviewers (may or may not be taken up).
- In general there are usually rules against reviewers from same institutions, former co-authors, advisors, etc. But if you're in doubt, just ask the editors. If I'm asked to review a piece by a coauthor, if I think I can write a fair review I will disclose to the editors my relationship to the author. They often still want the review.
- At the end of the day, editors may not simply agree with reviewers (either way)

Characteristics of Papers Published in Good Journals

- an important novel point
- effective framing
- good writing
- justified point
- good data
- novel data
- valuable design
- well used methods
- careful inference
- technically sophisticated

Time and Effort

- How much effort to put into a piece?
 - Some say write up for 2nd tier journal, "pull the trigger" submit to top. It will get better through revision process.
 - Don't overinvest in a paper and don't let perfection paralyze you! Aim for 2nd tier journal when writing, but submit to the very top journals. Don't need to perfect the piece for submission. When you submit you'll get advice and know where to go.
 - Others work on their pieces for years.
- Model 1: Submit early and submit frequently, expect rejection, pitching for revise, take revisions seriously. This model especially appropriate for graduate students, because:
 - (1) you need a publication sooner than later,

- (2) you can't trust that your masterpiece won't be given poor treatment by editors/reviewers, as a more senior scholar can,
- (3) you may not know what is good just yet so it is better to just take a shot and diversify your portfolio,
- (4) you may have the perfectionist curse, and you can prove that you don't by submitting.
- Go for what you have a good intuition about. Invest because you have “insider information” that will let you beat the “market.” What do you have inside info that the “public” does not?
- Don't submit to too low of a journal. If you're piece is not getting rejected, you're not submitting high enough. A former Yale PhD student was advised by a well-intentioned, smart, prominent scholar to submit their piece to a lower journal; they submitted instead to APSR; they had a solo-APSR on the market...