

How to Shave a Year off a Ph.D.

(by Donald Asher, author of *Graduate Admissions Essays*, © 2008, used with permission)

- 1. Follow your Program of Study.** Your Program of Study is the sequence of classes, milestones, and events that leads to completion. You create your Program of Study with your advisor. In graduate school, the milestones and events are more important than the classes. E.g., if you miss a deadline to file a form, it can cost you a whole year. Update your Program of Study often, and post it over your desk. Look at it every day.
- 2. Come in the door with at least a vague dissertation idea, *but do not rigidly hang on to it*.** Grad school is a transformative process, so your initial idea is a jump start, not a printed road map. Write all your papers for every class, as many as you can, on some aspect related to your dissertation interest.
- 3. Pick a mentor with a high completion rate.** This is a professional relationship. It is irrelevant whether you are “buddies” with this person. Then, let your mentor suggest other people to serve on your committee. Start shopping, casually, for committee members right from the first day of grad school. Watch out for young professors out to make a name for themselves; they can be hardasses. Watch out for old profs that might not survive your dissertation. Keep an eye out for your external reviewer; they are hard to find and hard to recruit, and be sure to check to see whether they dislike your mentor, school, topic, methodology, epistemology, or politics. In fact, check all members of your committee for reservations like this.
- 4. Think up a very narrow question that you can definitely answer with your methodology.** Very narrow. Definitive answer. Most research has these three components: population, problem, theory (or topic, problem, theory). Remember, a dissertation is a training process. This is not supposed to be the most important work you will ever do. What’s better: A perfect dissertation or a done dissertation? Duh. Do smart, good work, but most of all, get it done.
- 5. Write a paper that is a dry run of your dissertation idea in the first two years.** Ask a professor for (a) permission to do this, and (b) feedback on your idea, research question, methodology, etc.

- 6. Students who finish theses have higher completion rates for completing dissertations. If your program offers a thesis as a master's option, take it. It may slow you down for a bit at the time, but when you get to the dissertation you'll go faster. A master's thesis like this should be a one-semester project. Don't go overboard.**
- 7. Do your own research before you get to the proposal stage. This sounds obvious, but a lot of students don't do this. They work on other people's projects, and don't get their feet wet as the director of a project. Design, conduct, report, including IRB if needed (see next).**
- 8. Go through the IRB (Institutional Review Board) process before you get to your dissertation project. Same reasons. IRB is like learning a new language, and you want to get through unscathed and with minimum delays. (A smart student *expects* IRB delays, by the way.)**
- 9. Take an independent study and use it to do the entire literature review for your proposal *before* you submit your proposal. (Some proposals require lit review and methodology chapters anyway, but you'll have the whole lit review done rather than a prelim version.) You'll probably have to rewrite your proposal (this is normal), but if you're prudent you'll be able to salvage almost all of your lit review even if you have to refine your question or methods.**
- 10. Write your proposal before you take your comps. Most places you cannot submit the proposal before passing comps, but this allows you to drop the proposal the day you receive notice of passing comprehensive exams. This, alone, saves as much as six months.**
- 11. Stay on campus! If you stay on campus through your research and writing stages, you have a much higher chance of finishing in a timely manner, and you'll have access to your committee, campus resources, etc. It may be tempting to go get "a real job" and do your dissertation while you work, but that's a much higher risk factor for completing. You *don't* want to live a long life as an ABD.**
- 12. Keep your eyes on the prize! Have a life plan that requires the Ph.D. to be behind you. If you lust for that future, you will finish the Ph.D. If grad school is more attractive to you than that vision, or if you don't have that vision, you're at greater risk of not finishing.**

These tips could shave a year, or more, off your process.