Description

There are several things a PhD student must do to in order to succeed. There are also things a student must not do if he or she wants to be successful. Here are six things you should avoid.

Fudge Data

Suppose you have performed a reaction several times and cannot get the yield above 60%. Having a low opinion of your lab skill, your advisor tells you to write up the result for publication but change the yield to 75%. Would you do it? You shouldn't. Perhaps you could mollify him with the neutral description, "in good yield," but don't fudge the data. If nobody is able to reproduce your work, your reputation will suffer. Don't start out a career this way.

Fake Research

This seems obvious but every year there are cases of formerly acclaimed PhD students brought down by revelations of faked research. Some of these cases seem pathological, evidence of an underlying mental illness, but plenty of students with demanding advisors are tempted to make up some good news in return for a respite. Resist the temptation; the consequences will be dire.

Be Discouraged

No research program is smooth sailing. When you venture out into the unknown there are sure to be reefs and storms and changes of direction. Learning how to overcome problems is part of the PhD program. Nobel laureate Richard Feynman considered it the most important part of doctoral training. At a restaurant I once opened a fortune cookie that read, "You will gain great satisfaction in overcoming difficulties." This prophesy is the ideal if not always the reality of a PhD program.

Fear Public Speaking

The most common fear the average person has is speaking in front of an audience. The best way to overcome this fear is to force yourself to speak in public. I know since this is a problem I had early in my career. Start small, asking questions in class or responding to questions. Join a Toastmasters group. It's helpful and it's fun. I joined one group and two years later I belonged to three, was entering speech contests, and occasionally won them.

Procrastinate

In grad school you largely set your own work schedule. Procrastination is a habit that will add a year to your time in grad school, if it doesn't keep you from getting a degree. "Drive thy business," said Benjamin Franklin, "Or it will drive thee."

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Treat Grad School Like Work or College

Graduate school is not a 9-5 job where you can succeed by putting in your eight hours. And it’s not like college where the main thrust is absorbing current knowledge. In a dissertation you must advance knowledge in a field, and that is a challenge. For some such as myself, grad school was akin to a monastic existence. Others find ways to balance research and private life. But grad school is a unique experience and one has to accept this and adapt.

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