

Description

I was two months into the third year of my PhD when it happened. In retrospect, I should have seen it coming. My research wasn't going great, but I was feeling reasonably confident that my efforts were going somewhere. I had some preliminary research findings and a plan, and I had followed all the advice to schedule regular meetings with my advisor. And here I was, having just sat down at one such meeting when he uttered the dreaded words. "Are you sure this program is right for you?" he asked. "Maybe you'd be better suited for some other kind of work."

I felt punched in the gut. I asked him why. "It just doesn't seem like you have what it takes," he said bluntly. "I've read your plan, and it's unrealistic. Review my notes and give it some real thought." He handed me a copy of the document I had written so optimistically. "See you next week," I muttered, and then rushed out the door before I began crying in earnest.

Should You Quit?

That evening, I met a good friend of mine. I had called her for exactly one reason—she had quit the program six months earlier, and I wanted to know why. I told her my story and she nodded sympathetically. "My advisor said the same thing," she told me, "but was less kind about it." She told me how in the beginning of their advisor-advisee relationship, she was thrilled to have been assigned to his lab. But he was never satisfied with her results, and would often berate her in front of others for minor mistakes. "I know I should have talked to someone," she confessed. "But I felt so ashamed. It seemed like nobody else was having the same issues I was. He would insult me while more senior students looked on. I started to hate waking up in the mornings. And then one day, I just thought, maybe he's right. So I left."

Why Would Your Thesis Advisor Ask You to Quit?

I walked home in a fog, her words echoing in my mind. "I know I should have talked to someone," she had said. So I decided that rather than giving up at the first sign of defeat, I would find someone to talk to.

A few days later, I met with another professor in our department, whose reputation was one of a wise mentor. Over lunch with several other students in the program, I explained my story. Professor Hwang

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nodded throughout. When I finished, he asked, “Well, why do you think he feels that way? Have you looked at it from his perspective?” And I realized that I had been so busy feeling sorry for myself that I hadn’t.

Professor Hwang told us about a grad student who was formerly in his department. The student was eager, but had some habits that made him doubt her future as a scientist. She was terrified to ask questions, and had messed up some data collection as a result. While Professor Hwang tried to be empathetic, he realized she wasn’t improving. She eventually dropped out of the program. “So,” he said, “I’m not saying you’re like this. But do some self-reflection first.”

Self-reflection is the Key to Success

The next week I marched into my advisor’s office with a revised plan and a list of bullet points to address. I told him I had done some self-reflection and realized I needed to ask more questions and take more time with my work. I said I was passionate about succeeding in this field and hoped he was willing to continue working with me. Three years later, I graduated.

It turned out that I did need to do some self-reflection. At the same time, I know I was lucky in that my advisor was a reasonable, if not especially personable, guy. My friend who had dropped out was not so lucky. Grad school isn’t supposed to be easy, but it shouldn’t crush your soul. You should build a network of people you can trust and turn to when things get hard. If your advisor suggests that you quit, look at yourself and your work first and examine why he or she may have said that. Talk to your peers and other professors to see what they have to say. Bad advisors are certainly out there, so don’t be afraid to stand up for yourself—but don’t be afraid to be humble and admit what you could do better, either.

It’s every grad student’s worst nightmare—your PhD advisor suggests that you quit. What should you do if it happens to you?

Key Tips to Follow When Your Thesis Advisor Asks You to Quit

Student-advisor relationships are critical for the success of any research collaboration!

1. Communication is the key! Be very polite and patient while dealing with your advisor. Thank your advisor for giving you relevant inputs and then request them for giving you a chance to improve your outcomes.
2. Look for places where you can improve and plan your tasks accordingly.
3. Do not lose hope in your research idea or yourself.
4. Develop alternative plans to attain productive results and present them to your thesis advisor.
5. Self-analyze and find the root-cause of your unproductivity.
6. Reskill yourself with new and advanced techniques to benefit your research.
7. Consider working on another part of the research that you are more confident about.

Remember that a lot of PhD advisors ask their students to quit; however, it is important to stay motivated and not lose faith in yourself at critical parts of your PhD. You can easily combat your weaknesses if you recognize the signs early and improve your work.

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So how do you plan to tackle this difficult situation? What would you do if your thesis advisor asks you to quit? How will you instill trust in them that you can complete you PhD? Let us know in the comments section below! You can also visit our Q&A forum for frequently asked questions related to different aspects of research writing and publishing answered by our team that comprises subject-matter experts, eminent researchers, and publication experts.

Category

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