

Successful Transitions: Beginning Graduate Studies

Many students find the shift from undergraduate to graduate studies to be more challenging and therefore more surprising than the transition they experienced when they moved from high school to university. There is more reading, more lab time, and more writing. The ideas, discussions, and questions are at a higher level. There's a reason that not everyone does this!

Entering your studies with a clear purpose and sense of direction, informed by a thorough understanding of new responsibilities and expectations, can help you to adapt better to the new demands of Masters and Ph.D. level research, organization, presentation, and writing.

Common Challenges in Graduate Studies

Finding Balance. It is easy to be pulled in one direction only to leave other responsibilities neglected. You may have research commitments in the lab, but you also need to complete course work, outline your proposal, and have a life! Or you may have rediscovered the beauty of an illicit afternoon snooze to the detriment of your progress on the long reading list for your comprehensive exam.

Losing Your Sense of Purpose or Confidence. A crisis of confidence or loss of direction can stall work indefinitely. Because academics are critical thinkers, they eventually stop questioning the text and start questioning their ideas and, often, themselves. Recognize it when it happens to you. Remember, you accomplished a great deal to get to where you are, and people were not wrong to put their faith in your scholarly potential.

Perfectionism. Many academics would characterize themselves as perfectionists. To a certain extent, this is a healthy trait that promotes self-awareness and hard work. However, perfectionism can also be crippling as it can make you feel as if you can't write a paper or make a comment unless it is absolutely brilliant. Remember, you are a student, not an expert. You are discovering new terms, concepts, and areas of study. Your first draft or class presentation will never be perfect, so don't put too much pressure on yourself. The Counselling Centre offers excellent support for perfectionism. For more information, visit the Centre's web site at: <http://www.trentu.ca/counselling/>

Your Key Responsibilities

Play all of Your Roles. In graduate school, you are not just a student, you are a scholar, a professional, and an instructor. You will need to put time and energy into all of these roles. For example, as a teacher, you will need to prepare for discussions, mark assignments, and respond to students. As a professional, you may be asked to assist with professors' research or to attend conferences. All the while, as a student and scholar, you will have your own research to conduct and papers to write.

Foster Academic Integrity. You are entering the professional world of scholarship, and you are a role model for undergraduates; therefore, you must maintain your academic honesty and help to foster a culture of integrity at Trent. Know the Academic Integrity policy for Grad students: <http://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/documents/GraduateStudentAcademicIntegrityPolicy-ApprovedatSenate2009.pdf>

Respect the Intellectual Process. As a graduate student, you are not only a consumer of knowledge, but a producer of ideas. Your fellow students, professors, and mentors in the field will expect you to approach ideas, data, and readings with critical rigour as well as to respect the process by which research in your field is conducted.

Communicate. Be open and clear in your communication. Respond to email in a timely manner. Discuss changes in your course of action or timeline with your supervisor or committee. Ask questions for clarity. If you aren't sure about why it is necessary to complete a lab procedure in a certain way or what exactly is expected for a literature review, ask. Rather than fumble or mumble about lack of direction, be active and ask your supervisor or another experienced student. In short, communicate.

Be Accountable. Meet deadlines and course requirements. Know and follow the policies laid out by the Graduate Studies office or your program of study. Demonstrate your commitment to and respect for the profession by adhering to its conventions.

Time Management for Graduate Students

Without a plan, it is difficult to balance the multiple roles (student, researcher, teacher, and writer) of a grad student. Rarely can tasks be accomplished without discipline, thoughtful goals, and productive routines. Below, we outline some general advice for time management, but you can find more specific strategies in the ASC publication, *Time Management for Grad Students*.

1. **Set specific and attainable goals.** Avoid vague pronouncements about upcoming goals, like “field work” or “write introduction.” Be specific and realistic in your planning: “collect 25 water samples from site A” or “part 2 of intro: explain theoretical framework,

outline key terms, and identify important research.” These are goals that can be measured because they are clear and task-oriented; you can see your progress and plan your next steps.

2. **Establish priorities and set boundaries.** When trying to reach specific goals, you may find it helpful to set priorities. Consider where the tasks or topics fit in the grander scheme of your work or how the tasks rank in relation to each other; there is usually one exercise, one resource, or one question that you must resolve before working through the others. Start there. It is also important to set boundaries; otherwise, you may become caught in a continuous reading project or a never-ending set of calculations. How much time should this task require? How much time do you have? How many resources do you need? Eventually, you have to stop gathering data and start interpreting and communicating your findings.
3. **Use organizational templates and create efficient routines.** Whether you prefer electronic or old-fashioned organizers, pick one and use it. We offer weekly schedules and project management tools on our web site. Link long-term goals to short-term task lists and regular routines. Establish a working schedule that fits your life and your work. Break larger goals into smaller goals and develop a plan to make and measure progress.
4. **Reflect and adapt in real time.** A plan should be malleable; rarely will a plan work exactly as one might hope. Check your progress against your plan; adapt the plan to recognize the time required and the time remaining. Priorities will shift as your project grows.

5. ***Keep university and administrative timelines in mind.*** You may have your thesis ready for defence, but be aware that your preparedness does not translate to a date next week. According to program assistants, it can take up to eight weeks to schedule a defence, particularly when arrangements must be made for an examiner external to the university. Also note that expectations on turn-around from committee members must be realistic; they have other grad students, undergraduate courses, and university committee responsibilities as well as their own work.

Reading at the Graduate Level

Many graduate students find the reading load to be one of the most significant changes from their undergraduate years. Indeed, because they are trying to introduce you to the conventions and central texts in your field, graduate classes demand a great deal of reading, and much of this reading is dense and complex. Below, you will find some suggestions for dealing with the reading load.

- ***Read with purpose.*** Consider how the text or article fits with the themes or direction of the course; your first question should be what insight does this text offer on the current topic? Read the text for a general sense of the main argument or findings. Identify the bases for the findings or thesis and consider them in the context of your existing knowledge. When you read with a clear purpose, with questions you wish to address, you are able to engage with the text, assess it, and synthesize it with other literature.
- ***Develop context and perspective.*** As you read, consider how the text relates to other works in the field. Out of what theoretical perspective does it grow? What bridges

between fields or disciplines does it create? How does it connect theory to practice? Remember, your graduate courses are trying to give you a sense of the range of literature on a topic, so consider where in that range a given text falls.

- ***Read critically, but don't only criticize.*** It is a given that your role as a student/scholar is to question assumptions, arguments, and texts. This critical eye is central to analytical and original thinking. However, it is also essential that you make an effort to appreciate texts on their own terms. What are they trying to accomplish, and why do the authors feel these goals are important? How can the work help to build a broader understanding of the topic?
- ***Make use of book reviews.*** Important academic books are almost always the subject of numerous reviews in scholarly journals. Reading these reviews can give you background on a text and provide you with insight into how it has been received by scholars in the field.
- ***Read beyond the message.*** Consider how the author organizes and articulates the message. Understand how communication styles, report structures, and conventions of academic writing and documentation can affect the clarity and the impact of the message. Pay attention to how authors make transitions, begin sentences, and highlight major themes. Reading the work of others can be an important means to improve your own writing.

Common Graduate Assignments

Book/Article Reviews

Book or article reviews are common assignments in graduate courses. These assignments ask you to read a work with care and write a concise paper that explains and evaluates the work. Reviews vary by discipline but most include a combination of a short summary with more substantial evaluation. Reviews generally contain analysis of the work's central arguments and an explanation of how these arguments are developed. They then present an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the work as well as some consideration of how the work relates to other works in the field in terms of theoretical perspective, methodology, or general argument. Almost all scholarly journals have a section devoted to book reviews. It is a good idea to browse through and read reviews of other books to get an idea of the conventions of a review essay.

Literature Reviews

Literature reviews are not only written as separate assignments but are also included as sections within longer papers and thesis chapters. In a literature review, the author surveys a range of sources on a given topic and analyses how scholars have tended to explain a given problem. He or she also identifies areas of consensus or conflict in the literature as well as gaps that require further study. A literature review can be organized in many different ways depending on the discipline as well as the nature of the topic. A review might be organized chronologically to show how scholars' views on a topic have changed over time; or, it could be organized thematically or by methodology to group together scholars who share similar views or methods.

Oral Presentations

Academics present their work not only in writing but also through oral presentations at conferences, meetings with other scholars,

and talks to the general public. To prepare you for these talks, many courses will require that you deliver an oral presentation during class, or they may encourage you to participate in one of the many graduate student conferences or research days that take place at Trent. These oral presentations will require you to isolate the key points that you want to discuss, create a clear organizational format in which to discuss these points, create visual aids if necessary, and develop good oral communication skills. Becoming a good public speaker takes preparation and practice. To develop your skills, it is a good idea to go to conferences and listen to how others in your field present their work. The Academic Skills Centre also offers workshops on delivering oral presentations, or you can book an appointment to discuss a specific presentation.

Paper Proposals

Many professors will ask that you write a formal paper proposal in advance of a major research assignment. A paper proposal generally outlines a clear research question or topic as well as the methods and/or sources that you will use to pursue your research. You will generally also be asked to include a literature review to demonstrate your knowledge of the field and to situate your research within the range of scholarship on the topic.

Research Papers and Write-Ups

Many courses require that you engage in original research in your field. In science courses, this may take the form of writing up your experimental data from field work. In humanities and social science courses this might take the form of writing a lengthy paper that requires original research on a given topic. Regardless of the form, research write-ups and papers provide you with an opportunity to explore themes related to your thesis or major research paper and to practice the methodologies of your discipline in preparation for your thesis or major research paper.

Writing Your Thesis or Major Research Paper

Regular outlining

The outline is an essential tool; it is a foundation for organized, purposeful research and analysis. The outline is a key component of your thesis proposal, and it will take some time to consider and develop. First, an outline should conform to the standards of your discipline; reading for your literature review and course work will help you to establish what your discipline requires in the presentation of methodology or findings. Next, an outline should reflect your research questions and goals. Questions can help you to formulate an outline: what information is important to communicate and where should it fit?

Be specific and break down chapter topics. Consider and list relevant contributors, current debates, essential terminology and conceptual frameworks. An organized inventory of your current knowledge will help you to approach your work in a purposeful way. It will allow you to plan your reading, field work, or lab work, and it will offer you direction in your reporting and writing.

But an outline is not a static, unchanging document. As your work progresses, your research goals may become more refined, making it necessary to revisit and rework your outline. Regular revision of your outline can help you to see the progression of your analysis and the consistency of your message. Keep your purpose in mind as you revise and refine chapter break-downs. Be open to this change but cognizant of the many variables that may be affected by change. If the change is considerable, it is essential that you confer with your thesis supervisor to discuss it.

Journal or file for general thoughts

It can be quite easy to become focused on the minutiae of your research to the detriment of your overall message. The small

details are only pieces of your research, but they must all fit together to mean something. Keeping a paper journal or computer file dedicated to your general thoughts, questions, and inspirations is important to help you maintain a balance between the details and the big picture. It can also help you to consider new approaches or perspectives on your data sets or research.

Purposeful reading & notetaking

A focused approach to research and notetaking is beneficial because it encourages active thinking about your thesis as a whole. It is difficult to organize your research, collect your thoughts, and record your evidence without a clear sense of direction. Using your outline to consider the direction of your work-in-progress, you will be better equipped to take notes which will be useful to you. Let the final product lead you.

A purposeful approach to research will help you to prioritize reading. Maintain control of your project with a clear focus on your research questions. Plan your reading by considering a work's relevance to your questions, but also assess a work based on its importance in the field. This plan will help you to avoid jumping from text to text, which can lead to taking too many confused and general notes, distracting you from the focus of your thesis or MRP.

When reading, approach the text strategically. Briefly survey the material to identify its thesis or main findings before reading the entire work or the relevant sections deeply. Keep in mind your research questions and note new ones as they arise as you read. Taking careful notes from your reading can be a challenge, but if you take notes with a clear purpose, you will be able to confidently integrate your notes into your writing.

A two-column notetaking strategy will allow you to carefully record ideas, findings, and important details alongside your comments and questions about the text. Jotting down ideas from

the original source in one column and your response to these ideas in another column will help you to maintain academic honesty while working through large quantities of secondary literature. It will also help you to think about the construction of your argument as you research, which will make the connection between argument and evidence much stronger in your final paper. Keep all citation information with these notes and also in a complete list with call numbers or hyperlinks where relevant.

The two-column approach can also be useful for recording notes in the field or for logging results in the lab. However, you may find it more helpful to maintain a two-page system, allocating one page for results or notes in various forms (tables, lists, figures, and text) and another page for your comments, questions or connections to other literature. The two-column or two-page system is easily adapted to both paper and digital notetaking. Maintain digital organization with clear file titles, organized by folders identifying the experiment, type of evidence, or relevant chapter in your final product.

Embrace the Draft

Rather than agonize over a page, a paragraph, or a phrase, you need to just write. It doesn't need to be perfect; it is a draft. Write one section or one paragraph at a time keeping in mind how it fits into the whole. Use your outline as a guide. With a clear outline, you can write any section of your thesis or MRP with confidence that it will fit with surrounding sections. You need not start with your introduction; it is often easier to begin writing in the middle of a chapter. When revising, you can adjust your organization, refine transitions, and polish your writing.

Before you begin writing each chapter, you may find it helpful to further develop your outline by planning chapter sections, listing ideas and sources, and showing connections. With a detailed outline, you can gain great momentum in your writing as much of the work is already done.

Regular Revising

Constant editing can stagnate your writing progress, but regular revision is important as reviewing completed text can help you to build momentum. Rather than reading and re-reading your work every thirty minutes, set aside time for revision, perhaps weekly or upon completion of a chapter section.

Revision is not just reviewing grammar and composition. It is important to consider the organization of your writing, the clarity of your ideas, and the presentation of evidence. Make a reverse outline to assess the progression of your argument. Look for consistency in reporting data or integrating quotations. Use a checklist to look for your common grammatical errors. Remember that editing with fresh eyes is much more productive; avoid reading your work when you are weary from a long writing session or fighting feelings of inadequacy.

Creating and Using Support Networks

Graduate school can be a competitive place. However, academic scholarship is usually a collaborative endeavour not just an individual pursuit. Indeed, if you read the introductions to many academic books, you will find authors offering thanks not only to former professors but also to the students with whom they worked as graduate students for their feedback and support.

There are many ways you can develop and use support networks in graduate school. By viewing your peers as valued colleagues rather than as “the competition” you will gain and become yourself a crucial resource for advice and critical feedback.

- *Learn How to Plan and Work with Others.* Depending on your field and departmental resources, you may be required to share office and lab space as well as equipment

or sources with others. It is essential that you work at being a good colleague.

- ***Share Information***. Fellow students are excellent resources for information about grants, research opportunities, and places to send potential publications.
- ***Engage in Peer Review***. Fellow students in your courses and program are generally interested in and knowledgeable about the same issues that you are. They can be valuable readers of drafts, who can offer important insights into, suggestions for, and critiques of your work.
- ***Create a Thesis Reading Group***. Some students organize formal thesis reading and support groups. Such groups generally meet once a month and follow a variety of formats. Some choose to begin each meeting by having members explain progress they have made and challenges they have faced over the current month. Most focus their meetings on the discussion of one member's chapter, which each member has read before the meeting begins.

Remember, You Are Not Alone!

As you begin your graduate studies, it is important to note the various support services that are available to you:

[Academic Skills Centre](#) – The ASC is located in Champlain College and also holds office hours at Trail College on Wednesday afternoons. You can book a free, confidential appointment to discuss time management, grammar, or your writing. Instructors will review parts of your draft to discuss strengths and areas for improvement. The ASC also offers online resources and workshops for graduate students on time management, oral presentations, and revision. Call 748-1720 to book an appointment.

[Career Centre](#) – Careers is located in Champlain College. It offers individual career counselling as well as CV critiques.

[Counselling](#) – The Counselling Centre is located in Blackburn Hall and offers free, confidential individual and group therapy sessions. They can provide support with a range of issues including depression, motivation, self esteem, and peer or family difficulties. Call 748-1386 to book an appointment.

[Disability Services](#) – The DSO is located in Blackburn Hall and offers support, assessment services, and accommodations for students with disabilities. Call 748-1281 for more information.

The Academic Skills Centre

www.trentu.ca/academicskills

acdskills@trentu.ca

705-748-1720