

Hey Jane!

Advice for First-Year Graduate Students: Picking a Topic and Committee, Finding Balance

Welcome to Column 37 of *Hey Jane!* This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions are generated by the committee and SWS members.

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Hey Jane! I just started my first year of graduate school. I'm really excited and want to be successful. What's something you now know that you wish you had known when you started?

Congratulations on the start of an exciting journey! Graduate school can be challenging, but it can also be an incredibly rewarding experience. The advice I always give incoming graduate students is to start thinking about their thesis/dissertation from day one. You don't have to have all the details ironed out yet, but if you have an idea you can begin reading and discussing your idea with faculty members sooner rather than later. You can also propose and write papers in your classes that will allow you to become familiar with the literature, and you may even end up using ideas and writing generated for class in your actual thesis or dissertation.

While thinking about the topic of your thesis or dissertation early on is important, one mistake we see graduate students make is rushing into choosing their thesis/dissertation committee. This is one of the most important decisions you'll make during graduate school and is worth serious consideration. Obviously, it is important to choose a chair who is particularly knowledgeable about the topic you are interested in researching. For example, if you are interested in researching religion, someone who specializes in sociology of work may not be the best choice, even if they're the most famous person in your department. It is equally important, however, to consider this person's personality and working style. In short, you want to choose someone with whom you can get along and work well with. You need and want them to be knowledgeable, but you also want to be able to go to them when you have those questions, concerns, and issues that will inevitably come up.

In selecting the rest of the committee, think about what each person can add. Each faculty member does not need to be an expert on your whole project, but they should bring something to the table that your chair and other committee members don't. Perhaps you plan on using a new method in which a particular faculty member in your department is well-versed. Even if this faculty member isn't an expert in your substantive area, his/her insights could prove invaluable.

In addition, your committee chair should be able to provide you with potential faculty members that can serve on your committee. You want to choose a committee that is knowledgeable and you can work well with, but they also need to be able to work well *with each other*. Unfortunately, in some departments, not all faculty work well together or are, in fact, willing to work with specific faculty members. You want to be aware of these kinds of politics to ensure that you end up with a functional committee.

In addition to rushing into committee selections, we also see new graduate students burn themselves out. It can be easy for an overzealous student to fall into a routine where s/he comes in early, stays late, pulls all-nighters, and works all weekend. Balancing academics with the rest of your obligations may be challenging, but you need to attend to your mental health and have a life outside of your graduate studies. You're allowed to be stressed and upset, everyone is! But find healthy ways to deal with stress—therapy, meditation, exercise—and prioritize these activities. Take the time to hang out with friends and family, engage in a hobby, or do something else you enjoy. This may require honing your time management skills, but it's important. And remember, dedication and perseverance is important, but slow and steady wins the race.