The 7 Secrets of Highly Successful PhD Students

By Hugh Kearns & Maria Gardiner

ithinkwell.com.au
Who am I?

- Hugh Kearns
- Live in Adelaide, South Australia
Ben Bulben, County Sligo, Ireland
Welcome to ThinkWell™

ThinkWell™ uses the latest psychological and educational research to develop workshops and materials to help you be more effective in your daily life.

We work extensively with doctors, academics, PhD students, CEOs and many others to assist them to:
- manage their time more effectively and perform better
- set goals and achieve them
- achieve sustainability in their career
- think more clearly and make better decisions
- reduce stress
- find out what is making them stressed
- learn how to evaluate and deal with emotions
- feel more content and confident
- spend more time with their family and those who matter

Books

ThinkWell™ has put together a series of books to assist a range of professions and positions, including doctors, academics, PhD students, CEOs and many other occupational groups.

These books are available via our online bookshop.

Latest News

New book - Time Management for GPs
Billed as the ultimate time management guide, this is tailored specifically for GPs and people in private practice.

New edition of The 7 Secrets
This favourite has been given a new look and feel.

Interview on ABC 891
Hugh and Maria talk about feeling overwhelmed.

Recent media
Twitter

@iThinkWellHugh
COLUMNS

The care and maintenance of your adviser
Graduate students bear as much responsibility as their mentors for ensuring that they are well guided through their degrees, says Hugh Kearns and Maria Gardiner.

Waiting for the motivation fairy
It’s easy to give in to procrastination – but Hugh Kearns and Maria Gardiner offer some tips for getting your drive back.

Turbocharge your writing today
Before you tackle the overwhelming task of huge writing projects, you must first put aside some widely held myths, say Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns.
Introductions

I'd like to introduce you to Beth, an anthropology Ph.D. student.

Hi, how is your research going?

What's the matter with you?

Why I never...

Don't you know it's bad manners to ask a Ph.D. student that?

I-I'm sorry. Uh, so... how long before you finish your thesis?

Geez, why don't you ask her for her weight or her age while you're at it?

Thanks to Miguel...

Jorge Cham © The Stanford Daily
Overcoming Isolation!

Introduce yourself
- Discipline?
- How far into your research
- What is your research about?
- Keep it brief!
The Rollercoaster
Making it Hard!!

How could you make doing a PhD as hard as possible?

For example:

– Choose a broad topic e.g. global warming!
– Work full time
– Get married
– Choose a supervisor you hate
Making it Hard!!

- Renovate your house
- Change topic
- Leave writing till the very end
- Use data that’s hard to get
- Use a unproven methodology
- Use expensive equipment you don’t have
- Do it in another language
- Get sick – your supervisor gets sick
- Fall out with your supervisor
- Have two supervisors who don’t like each other
- Choose a topic you know nothing about
- Choose a topic you love
1

Care and Maintenance of your Supervisor
Learning Styles

People have Preferences

Thinkers
- Reflectors: It’s all about the ideas
- Theorists: Let’s write a paper

Do’ers
- Pragmatists: Let’s make a difference
- Activists: Trial and error
Learning Styles

**Student**
- Thinkers
  - Reflectors
    - It’s all about the ideas
  - Theorists
    - Let’s write a paper
- Do’ers
  - Pragmatists
    - Let’s make a difference
  - Activists
    - Trial and error

**Lots of ideas – less action**
- Reflectors
  - Thinkers

**Lots of action – less ideas**
- Pragmatists
  - Do’ers

**SUPERVISOR**
Understanding priorities

Your Priorities

A LIST
1. Check emails
2. Check Facebook
3. My research
4. ..

Supervisor’s Priorities

A LIST
1. Check emails
2. Teaching
3. Admin
4. Reports
5. ..
6. ..

B LIST
1. Research
2. Papers
3. ..
4. ..
5. ..
6...

C LIST
1. ..
2. ..
3. ..
4. ..
5. ..
6. Your research
Care and Maintenance Tips

Supervisor’s priorities versus your priorities

What you think about
What your supervisor thinks about

With thanks to Alan Kelly, UCC, Cork
Care and Maintenance Tips

It’s your research
You need to become the driver

The need to be assertive
Passive - Assertive

Gentle stalking

Cultural issues
Care and Maintenance Tips

But they’re so busy

They will always be busy

It’s a supervisor’s job
Care and Maintenance Tips

Meetings

The open door policy
Regularity v frequency

Different frequency at different stages

Even if you’ve done nothing!
AGENDA

1. What I did since last time
2. Questions/issues
3. Feedback
4. What I will do in next week(s)
5. The very Next Thing
6. The next meeting

You email before the meeting
You email after the meeting
Care and Maintenance Tips

Difficulties

Power imbalance

Co-supervisors – the carrier pigeon phenomenon!

When it’s not working out
Rate Yourself on Secret #1

![Rating Scale]

- **highly effective**
- **not effective**

The rating is marked at 7.
Write and show as you go:
This is show and tell, not hide and seek!
MYTH 1:
I’ll write when I feel ready. I’m not ready yet.

You may never feel ready
You have to write before you feel ready
That means NOW
Readitis

The belief that reading one more article will solve all your research problems.
Problems with Readitis

Time consuming
You get confused
You forget
Experimentitis

The belief that doing one more experiment will solve all your research problems.
MYTH 2:
I’ll get it all clear in my head first and then write it down

Writing is not recording
Writing is a creative process

Writing clarifies your thinking
Write and Show Tips

Write early and often

Bingeing versus snacking
Write for 2 hours preferably in the morning

Nail feet to floor
It’s very hard to write final copy from scratch

Drafts

- Zero draft
- First draft
- Second draft
- Etc

As you write you develop your ideas
Unlike wine, writing doesn’t mature in your cellar (or hard disc)

You have to get feedback

– Your supervisor
– Posters, conferences
– Papers
– Peers

Ask for specific feedback
Rate Yourself on Secret #2

The graph shows a rating system with the x-axis labeled from 1 to 7, representing different categories such as supervisor, write, realistic, saying no, job, help, and persistence. The y-axis is labeled from not effective at 1 to highly effective at 10. Two red 'X' marks are placed on the graph, indicating a rating of 2 and 7, respectively.
Be realistic: It’s not a Nobel Prize
Perfectionism

It’s not a cure for cancer

Adding to the body of knowledge

You are learning how to do research
My best selling thesis

It's not a cure for cancer

Adding to the body of knowledge

You are learning how to do research

My best selling thesis
Selective Perfectionism

Some things 100%

Some things 80%

Some things 50%
The Imposter Syndrome

That feeling that you’re just one step away from being found out as a complete fraud!

www.impostersyndrome.com.au
Being Realistic Tips

Get evidence
Try it out
Look at what’s real

Just because you feel bad DOES NOT mean that it is bad!

“The Best is the enemy of the Good”
Rate Yourself on Secret #3

- Supervisor: X
- Write: X
- Realistic: X
- Saying no: X
- Job: X
- Help: X
- Persistence: X
Say no to distractions:
Even the fun ones and the ones you think you must do

Newton’s Third Law of Distraction
For each and every action towards completing your research
there is an equal and opposite distraction.
The Secret Life of the Researcher
Distractions

Why is housework so much fun?

Displacement activities

– Tutoring, marking
– Grants, tangential projects
– Endnote, formatting
– Emails, Facebook, Solitaire
Emails

Number one excuse for not doing work

Don’t check first thing in the morning

Email can make you dopey!
Rate Yourself on Secret #4

![Graph showing ratings for different factors such as supervisor, write, realistic, saying no, job, help, and persistence.](image)
It’s a job:
That means working nine to five, but you get holidays
Guilt!
Yes, You’ll Get Holidays!

If you know when to work, you know when not to work

You will get more done

Two real/golden hours a day
Parts of a job

A Plan
Timeframes
Accountability

A place to work

The equipment to do the job
Rate Yourself on Secret #5

![Graph showing ratings](image)

- 1: supervisor
- 2: write
- 3: realistic
- 4: saying no
- 5: job
- 6: help
- 7: persistence

The graph indicates ratings from 1 (not effective) to 10 (highly effective) for each category.
Get help:
You are not an owner-operator single person business!
What’s Okay?

- Editing – speling, gramar, structure
- Formatting? – tables, figures, references
- Statistics consultant?
- Transcribing?
- Collecting data?
- Entering data?
- Technology?

At home – cleaner, gardener, babysitter
Get Help

Your supervisor
  – advice
  – where to go (to get resources)
  – finance

Researcher development programs

Find out what is available
Rate Yourself on Secret #6

![Graph showing ratings on a scale from 1 to 10 for various factors including supervisor, write, realistic, saying no, job, help, and persistence.]
You can do it:
A PhD is 90% persistence and 10% intelligence
The Life Cycle of a PhD

Positive Feelings

Negative Feelings

Time

Things aren’t going well
This is very hard

This proves that
I am STUPID
Your Worst Fear – It Rarely Happens!
Rate Yourself on Secret #7

highly effective

not effective

supervisor  1  2  3  4  5  6  persistence  7

write  realistic  saying no  job  help
Now Do Something!

now do something:
Pick one thing you could do right now to increase your success
(hint: this is likely to be in the area with the lowest effectiveness score)
The Seven Secrets

1. Care and Maintenance of your Supervisor
2. Write and show as you go: This is show and tell, not hide and seek!
3. Be realistic: It’s not a Nobel Prize
4. Say no to distractions: Even the fun ones and the ones you think you must do
5. It’s a job: That means working nine to five, but you get holidays
6. Get help: You are not an owner-operator single person business!
7. You can do it: A PhD is 90% persistence and 10% intelligence

Newton’s Third Law of Distraction
- For each and every action towards completing your thesis there is an equal and opposite distraction.
Most Useful

What was the most useful thing?
And Finally Remember it’s …

JaFPhD
And Finally Remember it’s …

Just a PhD
THE SEVEN SECRETS
of highly successful research students

Maria Gardiner & Hugh Kearns

www.ithinkwell.com.au

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