

# 10 tips to finishing your PhD faster

## What they don't always tell you before you sign up for graduate school

By Rodney E. Rohde, PhD    Posted on 23 October 2013

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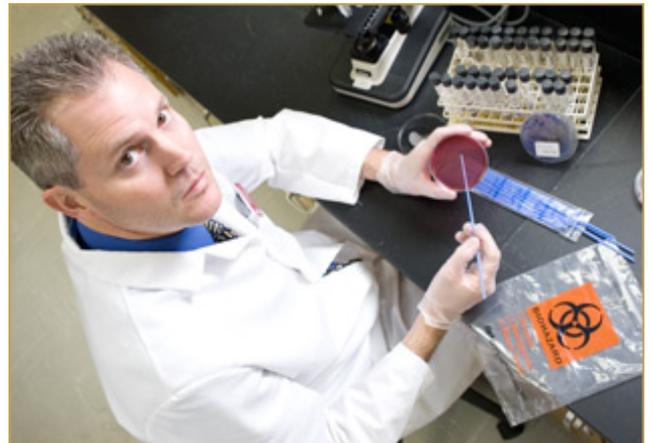
### The Author

August 10, 2010, was a great day for [Rodney Rohde](#) – he finished his PhD. And he did it in four years while working as an Assistant Professor and then Associate Professor at [Texas State University](#).

Rodney E. Rohde, PhD, in his lab at Texas State University. Now, as Professor, research dean and program chair of the [Clinical Laboratory Science](#) program in the College of Health Professions, he spends a great deal of time mentoring and coaching others in this sometimes mysterious and vague path.

Dr. Rohde's background is in public health and clinical microbiology. He has a bachelor's degree in microbiology, a master's degree in biology/virology and a PhD in education from Texas State. His dissertation was aligned with his clinical background: MRSA knowledge, learning and adaptation.

His research focuses on adult education and public health microbiology with respect to rabies virology, oral rabies wildlife vaccination, antibiotic resistant bacteria, and molecular diagnostics/biotechnology. He has published over 25 research articles and abstracts and presented at over 100 international, national and state conferences. He was awarded the [2012 Distinguished Author Award](#) and the [2007 ASCLS Scientific Research Award](#) for his work with MRSA. Recently, his work was the focus of an educational campaign regarding the important research focus of MRSA, which featured Dr. Rohde in a [video](#) by Texas State University that has been used by numerous media outlets. Learn more about his work [here](#).



Recently, I came across a very interesting article here by Andy Greenspon, a PhD student in applied physics at Harvard: "[9 things you should consider before embarking on a PhD](#)." I thought Andy gave some fantastic advice, and it reminded me of a promise I made to myself while working on my PhD. In the wee hours of the night poring over coursework, informed consent documents, data analysis, and the umpteenth version of my dissertation, I vowed that if I ever finished my PhD, I would try to help others through the quicksand of a graduate school journey.

I hope I can begin to offer some help in the way of this list. Really, there's much more than I can put in a list of 10 items, so be on the lookout for more advice to follow.

### 1. Immerse yourself in writing – and learn how to write a funding proposal

Some might say this is more important after you finish a PhD. Don't fall into that trap. Learning how to write a funding proposal is nothing like writing your dissertation or a typical journal article. However, all types of funding proposals (federal, state, foundations, private/corporate, military) may offer you an opportunity to actually fund your research while working on your PhD. And it may very well be your best and most attractive resume item to landing a great job. For example, my professional organization, the [American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science](#), offers research grants to conduct graduate research. I was able to fund most of my research budget by this opportunity. Many other federal granting agencies, organizations and private foundations will have funding opportunities that often offer graduate students a vehicle to fund their research, especially if you are conducting research that is important to that agency/foundation mission.

## **2. Find a strong mentor**

I can't stress how important this is. Can it be your Dissertation chair? Possibly, but find someone that can give you critical feedback on projects and encouragement. I was fortunate to have several colleagues in my college that had taken the PhD journey. I surrounded myself with several of these "PhD veterans," and they were able to help me avoid hurdles that could have slowed me down. They also were able to provide the most important thing a grad student might need – understanding and constant feedback. Think about finding someone that knows how to motivate you to finish jobs. It might be a colleague or a former professor. However, it should not be a friend that tells you all things will be just fine.

## **3. Grow a thick skin and take critical feedback for what it is – constructive criticism**

It's OK to sulk a bit (we all do when we find out we are not a Nobel Prize winner in our first year of grad school), but get over it ASAP and learn from these comments. Most professors and advisors have much to share when it comes to the ins and outs of research design, writing for publication or finding grants. An old saying I always tell students and colleagues – "One often remember the toughest teacher the most" – is true for a reason.

## **4. Find the right dissertation chair for you**

I always tell new PhD students that the chair of the program may not be the right choice – or a brand new tenure track professor or the 30+ year professor in the department. Do your research! Do they "graduate" students in a timely manner, and are they decently well-known in their research field? Are they collegial?

One way to find a dissertation chair is to do some research via the internet, or you could talk to current graduate students about particular professors. The department might also be able to assist you on finding out the statistics on each professor. For example, I found out the start to finish time period for a graduate student and the PhD completion rate under "X" professor. In my personal opinion, you don't want a rookie professor that's trying to make tenure, and you don't want the retiring professor that may not be worried about research anymore. And it's OK if they are tough. If they teach you something and get you through the process, that's what matters. It's like parenting; they shouldn't be your friend when they need to be your parent!

## **5. Direct your course research projects or independent study for course credit towards your dissertation**

This could easily be my number one piece of advice. If you can conduct literature reviews or pilot research projects in your preparatory courses towards what you want to do your dissertation on, do it. This step will help you save time downstream in the dissertation phase. I turned three independent studies (with future dissertation committee members) into nine hours of completed doctoral coursework while also completing much of my first two chapters for the dissertation. Let me explain how I did this in more detail.

I always knew that I wanted to conduct a [dissertation on Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus \(MRSA\) with regard to the knowledge, learning, and adaptation of individuals who had been diagnosed with MRSA](#). So, I went to

the department chair of my PhD program and asked about opportunities to take independent study courses (electives) that would allow me to build towards conducting my literature review, pilot study and funding opportunities for my topic. By the time I reached the proposal stage, I truly had my first two chapters of my dissertation in good shape.

## **6. Keep your dissertation topic as narrow as possible**

You may want to save the world, but do you want to spend 10 years on your PhD? You have a research life after the PhD is done to save the world. Certainly, if you want to win the Nobel Prize while working on your dissertation, then go for it, but be prepared for a long commitment. This is very important.

A narrow topic might seem like you will not have enough data or things to say. However, the longer I do research, the more often I see the value in a strong but narrow research design. Seek out active researchers in your core area of interest and discuss the "needs" of that research. Is there something missing from the literature? Are there research questions or hypotheses already being asked that need answering? These are great ways to narrow your topic and be relevant for publication.

## **7. There's a reason 50 percent of PhD candidates stay ABD...**

Perseverance and finishing the job, in my humble opinion, are the two most important traits and qualities one needs after coursework is complete. As I tell my own two children, it's OK to fail but it's not OK to quit. Set an agenda and schedule with your dissertation chair and be accountable to it – and keep your chair accountable. I met with my chair every three weeks during my dissertation and finished in one and a half years! It can be done. Don't let your chair or yourself off the hook on this item. Find the time to meet on a set schedule. I typically would promise my chair that I would have a portion of a chapter done before our meeting time.

And, don't alienate your chair by emailing them pages to edit the night before. Always be sure to give them the courtesy of at least a week of time to review your work prior to your set time. They are very busy too and it will be more productive if they have time to edit your pages in advance. Celebrate each hurdle that you clear so that you know you're making progress.

## **8. Focus only on the next step or hurdle as you work**

This can be very difficult – to not stress out about the entire dissertation journey. It's so easy to become paralyzed by the mountain of checklists and things to do. This tip follows #7 for a reason. Set your agenda and schedule, and focus on what is immediately in front of you. Usually, the first step is forming your committee with a chair. Do that and celebrate. Then move to the next step, and the next:

- Proposal/research design – check
- IRB (institutional review board) consent – check
- Pilot study – check
- Gather data – check
- Analysis – check
- Write, write, write with a purpose and schedule – check
- Defend – check
- Finish – yes!

## **9. Find a strong quantitative (or qualitative) research colleague that will assist you with a strong design**

This is a critical decision, and doing it early and correctly will make your dissertation matter so as not to end up on the shelf. It has been my experience that most poorly written or non-meaningful dissertations were a result of the wrong research design. If your university has a "go-to person" for a quantitative design, seek that person out. But, don't choose that person to be on your committee or to assist you if they are primarily a qualitative researcher.

If you are considering a mixed-methods approach, then you might consider that option. I have a very good friend who is an expert quantitative researcher that has won multiple funding awards on a variety of projects across multiple disciplines. He always states that this is the biggest weakness of dissertations – a poor design. It's a national problem so don't ignore it. Find help if you need it. *Get it right* up front, and not only will it help you finish. It will make your work relevant and publish-worthy.

## **10. Promote your work and talk to others**

This advice may not seem relevant for your dissertation. However, I would argue that you should do this not only on your campus but to go to graduate research forums, professional organizations for graduate research presentation, colleagues in your research area, and other routes to promote your work. Obviously, in today's world that might mean a good online blog, too. It can actually lead a solid sounding board for your research and may lead to job opportunities as you move into the final stages of your dissertation completion.

Now go do it. Concentrate on each step and see yourself finishing that step. Success is mostly about hard work and persistence. It's what separates the "almost finished" from a job well done. Nothing, in my experience, can take the place of *sticktuitiveness*. Good luck!