

A photograph of graduates in green gowns and black caps, with many caps being tossed into the air. The scene is bright and celebratory, with hands raised in the air.

Writing Your Thesis and Leaving Graduate School - What Next?

It is really important to make good progress in your research studies, and to focus hard on ensuring that this progress is continuous. It does not mean that research progress will always be successful results and endless publications, but it does mean that you should always focus on being productive. It can be hard to be continuously productive, as oftentimes research has soft deadlines that get pushed off due to harder, non-negotiable deadlines (classroom exams, TA grading assignments, etc). However, research progress is the single most important benchmark by which your advisor and future employers will judge the success of your graduate degree.

Writing your dissertation

Writing a dissertation is almost always going to take more time than you think, and usually substantially more. This means that it is never too early to start working on the writing. As soon as you have research results that you are sure are reliable and reportable, start keeping a file with that information. Some programs allow you to compile all published papers and use that as your thesis, which will lower your workload substantially. Even with that, however, formatting issues around what is usually a relatively large document can take days to weeks in order to fully address. Note also that a written thesis has to be adequate in order for it to be complete, and that it does not have to be perfect. Do not let concerns around perfection prevent you from completing your dissertation in a timely fashion. Chances are high that the only person who will ever read your entire thesis will be you.

Most written dissertations have a section for acknowledgments. Unless you are on terrible terms with your advisor, this acknowledgment section should include at least a token acknowledgment of him/her and the mentorship and guidance that your advisor has provided. Consider acknowledging your thesis committee, general committee, and other faculty members, as well as members of your research group. Personal family and friends are often acknowledged as well. Use the opportunity to personalize your acknowledgment section while keeping it professional and appropriate.

Scheduling a thesis defense

Deciding when it is time to schedule a thesis defense and start to wrap up your graduate career can be a tricky decision, but it is one that should be the product of multiple discussions between yourself and your advisor, ideally over the time period of several years. If you can, try to get information from your advisor early on about what milestones you need to meet in order to be permitted to stand for a thesis defense, put those expectations in writing, and refer to those expectations as you progress through your career. Some programs require that all students defend within a certain time frame (5 years from the start date, for example), and so in such cases the advisor will have little to no impact on the timing of such a defense. Ask yourself if you feel ready to be done with graduate school, compare your work products to those of



other people in the group and in the department, and have a rational discussion with your advisor to set the particular time for the defense to occur. Ideally you would benefit from some flexibility in your thinking about such scheduling, as your advisor may have different ideas than you about your preparedness to defend. Hopefully those differences are not substantial, however, and are easy to resolve to a mutually amicable timeframe.

When you are scheduling your defense date, understand that it will require several faculty members to be in the same room at the same time. Because faculty members have numerous other commitments and often travel, finding this time can be tricky. Use any number of internet-based scheduling tools to accomplish this scheduling, and consider giving your faculty members many choices of days and times, as well as ample advanced notice, to increase the likelihood of successfully finding a defense date.

Finding a job

Hopefully you have spent some time during your entire graduate career thinking about what you want to do after you are done with graduate school, and have taken advantage of opportunities to explore a broad variety of options and career paths. Now as you approach the end of graduate school, it is time to decide what you want to do and find your next position. Much advice on this topic will depend on your particular choice for your next step, but some general advice includes: (i) Keep your LinkedIn page professional and up-to-date, and focus on making new connections through LinkedIn; (ii) Keep your CV (for academic positions) and resume (for non-academic positions) current and to date as well, and use your university career center resources to address any formatting or content issues; (iii) Use opportunities at conferences to network with people, especially people in your future career choices who can you find your next job; (iv) apply broadly and consider all kinds of positions and opportunities; and (v) work hard to be well-prepared for your interviews, in whatever format they may be. Increasingly first round screening interviews take place either by phone or by Skype; be prepared for those interviews and take them as seriously as you would an in-person interview.

Specific advice if you are applying for a postdoctoral research fellowship after graduate school includes advice to apply early, usually up to one year in advance of when you expect to defend. Many fellowship opportunities exist for postdoctoral researchers, and your opportunity to compete successfully for those opportunities depends on having already selected a postdoctoral advisor. Oftentimes potential advisors may indicate that they only have openings if you can secure your own funding; these kinds of responses generally do not indicate a good commitment and should not be taken as commitments. When you sign a postdoctoral offer letter (or any letter, really), make sure you are clear on terms of employment, how much notice you would need to give before you leave, and whether your employer can terminate your position at will. This kind of information is relevant in all jobs, but is particularly critical in academic employment positions where certain loyalty to a postdoctoral advisor is expected.



Staying in touch

Remember that every person who you meet professionally can become part of your permanent professional network, and that every interaction that you have with those people contributes to the overall impression that they form of you. This is true in general, and it is especially true of your relationship with your research advisor. Your research advisor, especially if you are staying in academia, will be instrumental in helping you find your first academic job, and potentially other jobs (both academic and non-academic) after that fact.