

# Advice for Finishing that Damn Ph.D.

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# About Asking Famous People

**I have noticed many people, particularly students, are scared to ask famous professors questions, particularly about papers the profs have written.**

**Don't be scared!!**

**Your questions show**

- 1. that you are *interested* in the prof's work,  
and**
- 2. that you have *read* the prof's papers.**

# Asking, Cont'd

**What prof could complain about either of those?**

**I for one am *really pleased* to see that someone other than the authors, the three referees, the copy editor, and the typesetter has *read* the paper, and has read it closely enough to have questions.**

**So forget the fame of the prof and just go up and ask or just send e-mail and ask!**

# Asking, Cont'd

**And if you don't get an answer after a week, then send the questions again.**

- **Important e-mail does get filtered out as potential spam.**
- **Important e-mail does get lost among all the spam.**
- **Many profs are just overloaded to the point that their e-mail boxes have become pushdown stacks that never get popped.**

# Publishing

**Go for journals, not conferences, to publish your results. Journals are a lot easier and count more in hiring and promotions. Conferences are very hard, because the committee has to reject 80% of the submissions by a short deadline. The slightest problem with the paper leads to its rejection. In a journal, the same problem would lead to the referee saying, “Accept the paper pending certain revisions.”**

# Publishing, Cont'd

**Of course, you may need to have a paper accepted to a conference to get the funds to attend the conference.**

**Also, it's good to go to conferences**

- **to learn what is going on in your field and**
- **to meet your future colleagues and to network.**

# Publishing, Cont'd

**When your paper is rejected, treat all the ignorant remarks from the stupid referees as indications that *you* did not write clearly enough that even *they* would get your point.**

**Don't take criticism personally; it's criticizing your work, not you. It's criticizing the work, even if they say “*You* made a MISTAKE! Nya Nya!”**

# Publishing, Cont'd

**Actually, some critics may *be* personal; there are lots of people with low self-esteem around, who have to put down others. However, *you* have the choice not to take it personally. You *know* that you're smart but human, and thus you make occasional mistakes that do not detract from your basic smartness.**



# Methodological Advice, Cont'd

**Procrastination, the ultimate seduction!**

**The biggest problem with many a person doing research and in particular writing a research paper, such as a Ph.D. thesis, is the lure of the immediate, easily disposed of duties: ...**

# Methodological Advice, Cont'd

**e.g., checking his or her e-mail; replying to important e-mail; browsing the news sites for all places in which he or she has lived; staying ahead of the students in the class he or she is teaching; doing his or her daily errands, including buying food; keeping in touch with his or her family and friends; etc.**

**Very quickly, the day is over and he or she has done almost nothing towards finishing the research or writing.**

# The Exams

**There are three exams that you will probably have to do,**

- 1. the Knowledge Exam, proving that you know the field,**
- 2. the Proposal Exam, in which you present the proposal for your Ph.D. research and dissertation, and**
- 3. the Defense Exam, in which you defend your Ph.D. dissertation**

# Knowledge Exam

**The knowledge exam is the *toughie*.**

**It is where a number of students get flushed out.**

**This is where you really need to study!**

**It's a serious exam in all senses of the word!**

# Don't Fret the Others

**Most students fret the proposal exam and the defense exam, but really, these exams are not all that hard.**

**I have never heard of anyone flushed out in either of these exams; at most you may have to repeat it.**

**They really should not be called exams, but tradition reigns!**

**In any case, the proposal exam can and should be used to your benefit.**

# Proposal Exam

**First, the proposal exam is not a real test in the sense of making sure you know your stuff.**

**At that stage of your career, it is already abundantly clear that you know your stuff. The knowledge exam (or its substitute) proved that!**

**The issue is whether what you propose to do is enough to warrant getting a Ph.D. if you do what you propose.**

# Proposal Exam, Cont'd

**Of course, the committee is concerned that you know all the background and previous work relevant to your dissertation topic, but if you have done your homework, you probably know this stuff *more* than any committee member.**

**You are already one of the world's experts.**

# Proposal Exam, Cont'd

**Instead of fretting, use the proposal exam to your benefit, to get a commitment from the committee as to**

- **the scope of your work and**
- **most importantly, what is required to get the Ph.D.**

**This is where you try to arrange that a smaller amount of work be accepted as having completed the Ph.D.**



# Proposal Exam, Cont'd

**This is where you get a commitment that doing an experiment correctly earns you the Ph.D., *regardless* of the conclusions.**

**This is where you get a commitment that building a prototype of the tool and using it in a substantial case study earns you the Ph.D., *regardless* of whether or not the tool solves the problem it is supposed to!**

# Proposal Exam, Cont'd

**Treat the exam as a negotiation; ...**

**you are trying to minimize your requirements,  
and ...**

**they are trying to maximize your requirements.**

# Defense Exam

**Most of all, do not fret the defense exam, ...**

***if* you and your advisor agree that you are ready and that you have met the scope and requirements agreed to at the proposal exam.**

**Remember, *you* are the world's expert on the topic, even more than your advisor, and certainly more than any other committee member.**

# Defense Exam, Cont'd

**You should be able to walk circles around any question about the topic thrown at you by any committee member.**

**So, focus on being relaxed, able to quickly access all that you know, and able to think on your feet.**

**Go to a good movie the night before, a comedy! (not a horror movie!)**