

HOW TO AVOID GRADUATION

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Introduction

To avoid graduation from an undergraduate program is relatively easy. The undergraduate Student Union offers a rich array of activities, which effectively fill up one's days with things other than studies. Finding such activities once in grad school becomes substantially more difficult. For example, the grad student realizes that it is no longer socially appropriate to spend every evening at the Student Union Pub on campus. S/he must then come up with other strategies that would help avoid reaching the end point of graduate studies; those strategies must be largely accepted by the social ambiance, and also, easily reconcilable with one's own conscience. Luckily, there are a number of such

strategies, which have been empirically tested and proven very efficient in delaying graduation and subsequently receiving the title Ph.D. The purpose of this manual is to outline some exemplary strategies which can further stimulate the grad student's fantasy and hopefully initiative for a deeper exploration of the fascinating field of Graduation-Delay-And-Avoiding (GDAA).

The safest strategy to avoid graduation is of course to see to that one never gets really started with a dissertation. Many grad students manage to implement this strategy with success. How successful one is depends, of course, on how well one chooses the alternative occupation which will provide acceptable motivation about why one is not

writing a thesis. Since graduate studies also include taking classes, it is perfectly acceptable to dedicate one's time to those. However, the number of classes one has to take is limited to a certain number of credits. So one should be careful not to get those too soon. With regards to this, prior experience from undergraduate studies will certainly help.

In order to write a thesis, one has to come up with a thesis topic. This fact presents the basis of an excellent strategy for avoiding graduation. Whenever one gets the question: 'How's your thesis coming?' one can answer 'I am in the process of choosing a topic'.- a reply that will efficiently stop any other annoying questions on this issue. The process of choosing a topic can be extended in

many different ways. Weeks, months, even years can be spent interviewing and consulting with various people. All suggestions ought to be weighed out, compared and eventually rejected for various reasons.

Another strategy to actively avoid making any progress on the thesis is "*I-can't-possibly-graduate-on-this*"-strategy. This strategy implies that one refuses to recognize one's current work as something that is interesting enough to be included in a thesis. It applies first of all to graduate students who happen to get an appointment in a research project. By seeing to that there is no connection whatsoever between the project and one's own thesis work, the graduate student gets an almost unbreakable ground to wait with the latter until

the project is over sometime in the future.

The Penelope Strategy

According to Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus's wife Penelope was surrounded by a number of ardent suitors asking for her hand during his lengthy absence. She avoided giving them a definite answer by applying the strategy described below. She promised that she would choose one of them once she finished the knitting work she was currently doing. Every night she undid what she had done during the day thus never coming even close to completion. The graduate student who is avoiding graduation has good reasons to see Penelope as a model-figure to follow. Many of the strategies outlined in greater detail below can be seen as variations of Penelope's strategy.

It is, of course, very difficult to follow Penelope's example literally. Every night one could take and destroy one's daily work but it would not be very convincing. However, always remember that:

No thesis chapter is so good that it cannot be written again.

Here, a true graduation avoid-er should be able to see a huge potential for graduation delay, namely: by writing new versions of the same chapter over and over again. Besides, one can come up with many variations of this strategy. Experiments might need re-running (there are always mistakes in them!); if the thesis is based on collecting a certain type of material, one can suddenly realize that it's no good and needs to be

thrown away and start a new collecting process.

Another successful way of applying this strategy is the '*a-little-bit-more*'-strategy. One can say that the sampled material is too small, one has done too few experiments, the literature covered is not enough. This strategy is, however, a short-term one because, it becomes harder and harder to implement convincingly as time goes by.

Live Dangerously!

As already mentioned, the method to destroy every night whatever one wrote during the day is not especially convincing. However, a graduate student can, by a balanced carelessness, significantly increase the chances that something happens to her/his thesis such that defense is greatly delayed. For example:

A well tested method (see *Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey*, the chapter about Uppsala) is to put the thesis manuscript by an open window, especially on windy days. In the best possible case, if the wind is really strong, the manuscript will be spread over very large areas.

Make sure you take backpacks or other bags where the manuscript

resides **everywhere** with you in order to increase the chances that they be forgotten or stolen.

A consistent loose-sheet system ensures that important parts of the thesis disappear, at least temporarily. Avoid putting labels on folders and disks. This simple step can make important pieces of text inaccessible for many years ahead.

An important rule of thumb valid for all of the above is to avoid having copies of the thesis in case something happens. This is especially applicable to your computer usage. A crashed hard-drive without a backup can delay one's graduation by several years. Should you happen to use floppies, make sure, you use the oldest, soft ones; it is strongly recommended to use bad disk drives; drink and spill as

much coffee as possible near or on
the computer.

How to avoid work on the thesis

What the strategies grouped here have in common is that they all result in graduation delay by simply avoiding all work related to the thesis. The groups can be further split into two subgroups, the *manic* and the *depressive* strategies. Manic strategies are those whereby one is doing as much as possible, only seeing to that whatever one is doing has absolutely nothing to do with the thesis. The depressive strategies amount to generally do as little as possible. The two strategy types vary with regards to the extent they suit different personalities. However, it has to be pointed out that nothing prevents one from applying a combination of the two types. Right application of either type or

combination of both gives the same result.

Manic strategies, or “Work is good for your health and well-being, and also keeps you from doing research”

There exist many alternative activities where the grad student can become involved all of which successfully prevent him/her from doing work on the thesis. These activities can be divided into *academic* and *non-academic*.

The academic activities are, first of all, all forms of department service. The main advantage of these activities is that they are fully socially acceptable and in many cases much more appreciated than one's work on the thesis. In this group we include work such as teaching lower

level classes and various kinds of administrative tasks which are often given high priority by the department head, and besides, are many times urgent.

Sitting in student committees and active participation in various other social activities (such as in party organizing committees and similar) are other examples of excellent occupations that actively delay graduation. To help other graduate students with their dissertations is a perfect example of an altruistic activity with a high graduation-delaying effect (for the helper that is). (To reverse this: one should avoid accepting help from others as much as possible; this could in the worst case lead to a rather quick graduation).

We can of course find activities with similar effect in the non-academic world as well: a second or third job (which can be easily motivated by the grad student's financial situation); club- or society meetings, exercise and sports, evening classes etc. However, the really effective graduation delay-er, especially for female grad students is of course **THE FAMILY**. The issue calls for a chapter of its own which is why we are not going to discuss it in detail here. Instead, we would like to point out love affairs as other activities with extremely longstanding graduation delaying effect.

Depressive Strategies

Even here, we can find a literary precursor, namely in the Russian 1800-novel *Oblomov* by Ivan A.

Gontcharov. Oblomov spent most of his time in bed, thinking about all the wonderful things that he could do if he only had the energy. The graduate student should be able to find a great deal of inspiration in this example.

A depressive strategy that fully justifies the term, should not only prevent the grad student from thesis writing under the time when it's practiced (if 'practice' is the right verb for 'do nothing') but should also contribute to the grad student's general lack of energy and inability to deal with the thesis. To move as little as possible tends generally to give very good results (Please note the manic correspondent of this depressive strategy: dedicate all one's time to exercise. All strategies are good except the really boring ones.)

The drawback of following Oblomov too closely is that this way of action is hard to combine with clear conscience. One should therefore use a *moderately depressive strategy*. This strategy involves scheduling one's day as ineffectively as possible. This domain offers undreamed-of possibilities:

Going to the bank, the post office and other authorities are all examples of activities (all fully socially acceptable) which can take very long time and energy, and besides must be done during office hours (the time when one would "normally" write the dissertation). A good planning can increase the effect significantly. For example, one should avoid doing more than one errand at a time.

Things that need repair can take up very many hours which otherwise would have been dedicated to the thesis. This can be especially effective if one would hire a repairperson that never comes on time.

Visits to the doctor and the dentist (not to forget psychotherapy and ditto analysis!) are not to be neglected either. One should, of course, choose as remote hospitals as possible, and also make sure that the appointments are in the middle of the day so that maximum amount of time goes to those.

THE FAMILY

As stated above, the FAMILY is altogether a very important graduation delay factor, especially for female grad students. Here come some hints as to how to use it effectively:

- ◆ Having children should be planned well so that at each important stage of the thesis writing one has at least one, but better two or three small children at home.
- ◆ One should avoid day-care and other all too rational forms of child caring. If one must send one's children to day-care, one should at least pick a *coop* one because these require that parents be present a certain number of hours during the week. It is also relatively effective

to place one's children in different day-cares so that the amount of time that would go to take them there and pick them up would increase substantially. Also, please remember that children do not feel well if they spend longer than six hours a day at day-care! By closely following this rule, one can maximize one's own working day to five hours at the most (or four if the trips back and forth are long enough). (Alternatively, one can break the 'child-at-day-care-six-hours-a-day' rule; dedicate working time to remorse about it instead and thus significantly decrease one's productivity). The best strategy in this domain is however offered by the good old-fashioned play-schools, nowadays called part-time-pre-schools, which have a

three-hour schedule that effectively makes it impossible for any responsible parent to concentrate on anything.

- ◆ The parent who is not writing a dissertation should choose a job from which s/he can never be absent so that taking the kids to and from the day-care should become solely the dissertation-writer's responsibility.
- ◆ Plan your home so that separate working rooms are not available. The children should have access to as large a part of the house as possible. Placing the grad student's working desk in the common bedroom is an effective way to prevent her/him from night work that would otherwise dangerously speed up the graduation.

- ◆ Make sure you choose a partner with as little understanding for the nature of research work as possible. A negative attitude on the partner's side often has a significant graduation delaying effect particularly (for male partners) if it is combined with a strong macho personality. Even the children can of course be indoctrinated to show an anti-research attitude.
- ◆ The *Live Dangerously* strategy can be applied with great success in the home environment. Young kids can accomplish miracles on thesis manuscripts or disks if they are given the chance. For those who don't have children, pets are a good replacement. A cat, for example, would always prefer the thesis

manuscript instead of the litter
box.

How to cope with one's advisor

The advisor is often a problem for a grad student who wants to avoid graduation. A lot can be gained by choosing the "right" advisor (which in many cases is as difficult as to choose right parents). By "right" advisor, we mean an advisor who either (i) leaves the grad student alone, or (ii) is on the whole active but also sufficiently destructive in his/her activities so that one's graduation is not significantly speeded up.

Chances to get an advisor of type (i) increase if one puts a certain amount of effort in locating someone who shows one or more of the following qualifications: (a) senile, (b) alcoholic, (c) completely incompetent with regards to the subject area of the

thesis (d) generally not interested. Luckily, such individuals are relatively easy to find in many departments.

To pick up an advisor of type (ii) could be somewhat risky because his/her destructiveness could at times affect the grad student in unforeseeable ways. However, managing to cope with an advisor of type (ii) in the right way can be used quite effectively to delay graduation. Such an advisor (usually a male) can significantly help the grad student to foster a truly low self-esteem (see below for more details on this issue).

Should one have the bad luck to get an ambitious advisor with a constructive attitude towards dissertation writing, one should nonetheless not despair. There are a number of strategies that can be

used. We describe them separately below.

Defensive Strategies: how to avoid one's advisor

In order to satisfy the requirements of the social ambiance, one ought to, at least once per semester, try to contact one's advisor. Generally it does it is considered bad taste if this is done too close to the time when fellowship renewal is considered, so one should preferably choose a different time. However, trying to contact one's advisor is one matter, meeting him is another. A detailed study of the advisor's habits makes it possible to call him or knock on his door without any further chance of actually meeting him. Should the advisor then start to ask questions as to why one has not been in touch, one

could, without any remorse, say "I have been trying to contact you, but you are never in your room". Another strategy is to point to the fact of how busy the advisor is: one felt uneasy disturbing him. Yet another, somewhat bold strategy is to state that they had agreed that advisor himself would try to get in touch.

Naturally, it is sometimes necessary to stay away from the department if the risk of running into one's advisor is all too big. Should incidental meetings occur, one should be always prepared to bring up something that has nothing to do with the thesis; the odds are then that the advisor will forget altogether to ask about THAT is coming.

If per any chance they agreed on a meeting time, the grad student should

see to be there exactly on the hour. If the advisor happens to be a little late, the grad student can happily leave (but not without putting a reproachful note on his door).

Aggressive strategies: attack is the best defense

Most of the strategies discussed in the previous paragraph showed some aggressive elements but these can be significantly strengthened. The basic idea of an aggressive strategy is to disarm the advisor by getting him to feel morally inferior, normally by making him feel guilty. Below follow examples of suitable answers to be used when the advisor shows dissatisfaction with the fact that the grad student is not producing anything or never shows what s/he has written:

- You never read what I write anyway.
- You said only negative things when I turn in stuff to you the last time.
- When was the last time you wrote an article yourself?
- You intend to use my results for your own purposes.
- Why didn't I get a fellowship?
- It's not worth it to finish - one doesn't get a job anyway.

One strategy that is really hard to resist or find good answers to is the *happy strategy*. It involves denying all problems. Some exemplary applications result in the following responses:

- Oh, sure; it's coming really well. You are going to get the manuscript tomorrow.

- Oh, yes; I did have a few hold ups but now I am really writing.
- Actually, I would have turned in the chapter today but I just got some wonderful ideas, I have to include them too.

A strategy that is both aggressive and distracting is the *social one*. For example, one can invite the advisor out to dinner when he was about to start a serious discussion about the dissertation. This way it is easy to take him out of his professional position so that he cannot put his plans into action. More advanced strategies as to how to distract the advisor are left to reader's imagination.

“Not today, but soon...”

Some ways to justify why one did not turn in the thesis chapter TODAY as previously agreed

- The color band of the typewriter broke.

(Modern variant): The toner of the laser printer has to be replaced.

- My mother-in-law turned seventy.
- My son had a test in math.
- The cat got kittens.
- I had to take the car to the shop.
- The subway was on strike.
- I am waiting for an article from Europe (or the US, whichever appropriate).
- I am waiting for a printout from the computer center.
- I am waiting for comments from NN.
- I found an error in my calculations; I have to re-do the whole thing.

- I haven't been inspired lately.
- I am in love.
- I have a cold.
- Was it really today I was supposed to turn this in?
- I forgot the thing at home.
- My husband promised to mail this to you, hasn't he done this yet?

How to cope with one's social ambiance

The advisor is, of course, not the only problem in the grad student's existence. A long-term graduation avoid-er will also need to find way to ward off intruders other than the advisor. Family, friends, acquaintances, and last, but not least colleagues tend to show a very annoying interest in how one's thesis is coming and when one actually plans to graduate. Of course, one can pretty much use the same strategies as the ones used to cope with the advisor. Besides, here, one has the advantage to be able to bring up the advisor's incompetence or malice (see the chapter entitled ***Strategic paranoia*** below). With regards to non-academic relatives and friends,

setting up smokescreens should be fairly unproblematic as these people have a rather vague idea about what dissertation writing really means.

It is probably most difficult to appease one's own colleagues. They have, naturally, first-hand knowledge of what the whole thing is about! But the experienced graduation-avoider is, of course, able to find solutions for all kinds of situations. The *Chutzpa-strategy*, for example, can be recommended but it requires being of the right kind of personality. It simply means that one is able to state, in any given moment, that the defense is just about to occur. ("I am graduating in February!"). Generally, one should, consequently, refer to the advisor's authority, even if this is somewhat risky. A milder variant of this

strategy is the *generally boastful* strategy. It amounts to canalize one's energy to tell tales about all the distinguished individuals who read one's manuscript and predicted a brilliant future for the writer.

But even less complicated strategies can be quite effective. Many younger colleagues can be intimidated and rendered speechless rather easily by determined statements on various theoretical issues and thus completely forget to ask about one's thesis.

Get Married, Get Divorced, Join a Club...

The heading is a quotation from an old *Hase & Tage*-review; it is intended to be a parody of the kinds of advice one usually gets in magazine's columns meant to boost up one's love life. As

luck has it, the graduation-avoider can make a really good use of those as well. The basic principle is that all changes in life are bound to take up a lot of time, and thereby actively contribute to reaching the ultimate goal, which is **avoid graduation at all costs**. This strategy can be generally formulated as "Change X" where X can be given an arbitrary value (or just about):

- Change your partner.
- Change your place to stay.
- Change your job.
- Change your car.
- Change your advisor.
- Change your computer.
- Change your word processor.

The last one is especially recommended. Lengthy hours will go to learning the new program and above

all to converting old dissertation files to the new format. The classical Change-strategy is however:

- Change your thesis topic.

Many students implement this strategy iteratively (that is many times). However, it tends to lose its convincing force after a while, and may also cause a certain amount of irritation on the part of the social ambiance, the advisor in particular. Its convincing force increases if the strategy is backed up by some kind of motivation, for example, that the old topic turns out to be already taken or dealt with by someone else.

How to foster a low self-esteem

A genuinely low self-esteem is an invaluable resource for the graduation-avoider. Thus, it is very important to develop it in the right direction, and make sure it is not injured by a possible positive feedback from the environment.

The basis for a low self-esteem lies in a hypothesis about reality such that it states that one is not capable of achieving anything. In this context, the hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

- I will never be able to write this dissertation.

Science theory has shown that hypotheses can be constructed in such a way that they become "immune"

for falsification. This is a very important strategy for our graduate student. S/he has to learn to deal with all kinds of information, which contradict the hypothesis and find helper-hypotheses, which prove that all positive evidence is wrong. Example: if the advisor gives a high praise of a certain part of the dissertation, the graduate student should re-act by making one of the following assumptions:

- He only wants to encourage me so that I don't give up entirely.
- He hasn't read this carefully.
- He doesn't understand this anyway.
- (whenever applicable) He is only hitting on me.

Another strategy is, of course, to avoid getting oneself into situations where one could get a positive

feedback. One should therefore let one's manuscript be read by others as seldom as possible. It is also important to restrain oneself from giving talks, and other presentations, particularly not at conferences, where one can become known outside of one's own university.

Strategic Paranoia

A paranoid attitude towards life can also be a valuable resource for the graduation-avoider. It has the advantage of eliminating the need for a negative self-image (a rather unpleasant thing to have) by transferring the responsibility for one's own failures to the (presumably) hostile environment. The basic pattern of the paranoia-based explanatory models is "*It's not worth it for me to try because, they will, nonetheless, always be against me because of p*" where p is a proposition about reality. Some possible values of p follow below:

The Discrimination Model

- I am an immigrant.

- I am a woman (in the above case, a man).
- I am a working class person (in the above cases, upper class).

The Sexual Harassment Model

- My advisor is just seeking revenge because I turned him down.

The Jealousy Model

- My advisor is jealous because I am smarter than he is.

The Wrong Paradigm Model

- Everybody in this department belongs to school X; I belong to school Y.

Creative Procrastination

A true graduation-avoider has to master the art of reaching the state of **creative procrastination**. The latter can be accomplished in various ways. A major group of strategies are the ones whereby one sees to that thesis work become dependent on something that lies outside of one's own sphere of influence. For example, one could ask the busiest and most uncooperative technician of the department to fix one's computer. While waiting for him to show up (naturally, one avoids to remind him about this all too often), it is fully justifiable not to work on the thesis. Similarly, one can wait for colleagues to get done reading one's manuscript; one can wait for a statistician to check one's data etc, etc.

Another variant is to have a problem, which one feels should be dealt with, but never gets about to do it because it is all too complicated. Here bibliographical references are an excellent example. For instance, one could have found a reference in some bibliography to an article or book, which is not available in one's own library. Many depressed weeks can be dedicated to try to get one to go to the other library, which, one knows, has the book. (There is of course inter-library loan, but one feels that it takes an awfully long time anyway. Besides, those ILL forms are really hard to locate.)

An even better variant is, of course, to get a reference to a book, which one knows, has information that is indispensable for one's own work but

which cannot be found. This can leave the grad student paralyzed for years to come.

Shorter periods of procrastination should not be neglected either. *"At-this-point-there-is-too-little-time-left"-strategy* can be mentioned as especially relevant here.

Let us finish up this presentation with a reminder that there exist a number of **distractors**, which can be successfully used to interrupt or delay a thesis writing pass:

- Computer games
- Beautiful weather outside
- Sports games on TV
- Phone calls
- Clean the desk
- Water the plants
- Visit to the restroom

- Check your mail

Appendix: Schedules of typical grad student workdays

The schedules below are typical cases based on own empirical studies, which shall be presented in my dissertation (Ask, forthcoming). The most significant result of these studies is that the normal effective working time per day for graduate students of all personality types tends to be of a specific duration which I call *Asks constant* and which amounts to exactly 29 minutes.

1. Typical working day for a grad student of the depressive type

10:00	Wakes up
10:00-10:30	Ponders over the grad student's miserable lot.
10:30-10:45	Puts clothes on.
10:45-11:30	Eats breakfast and reads the newspaper.

11:30-12:00	Looks for a lost article.
12:00	Leaves the house.
12:10	Misses the bus. The next one won't come until half an hour later.
12:10-12:40	Waits for the next bus.
12:40-13:00	Rides the bus to campus.
13:00-13:15	Discusses the grad student's miserable lot with a colleague.
13:15-14:10	Eats lunch.
14:10	Finds out that all places in the library's reading room are taken. Goes to the cafeteria.
14:40	Goes back to the library, locates an empty place, marks it busy.
14:45-14:55	Waits in line to check out a book.
14:55-14:59	Sharpens a pencil.
14:59-15:04	Goes to the restroom.
15:04-15:34	WORKS ON THE DISSERTATION.
15:35-15:50	Smoking break.

15:51	Goes back to the reading room.
15:52	Is struck by the realization that today is the last day to pay the rent and that the bank closes at half past four.
15:53	Leaves the reading room.
15:54-17:30	Various errands.
17:30	Goes back home, deadly tired.
17:30-18:00	Reads the evening newspaper.
18:00-18:30	Cooks food.
18:30-19:15	Eats dinner.
19:15-19:30	Washes the dishes.
19:30-20:00	Watches the news on TV.
20:00-22:00	Would have worked on the dissertation but is trapped by the movie on TV.
22:00	Crashes in bed, deadly tired.

Effective Dissertation Time: 29 minutes
 (=Asks constant)

2. Typical working day for a grad student of the manic type

07:00	Wakes up, gets up immediately and puts clothes on.
07:01-07:40	Morning exercise.
07:40-07:50	Breakfast, reads the newspaper.
07:50-08:10	Rides his/her bicycle to campus.
08:10-9:00	Prepares a lecture.
9:00-10:30	Teaches a class.
10:30-10:40	Drinks coffee.
10:40-10:59	WORKS ON THE DISSERTATION
11:00-11:55	Sits on a meeting of the Graduate Students Committee.
11:55-12:30	Eats lunch.
12:30-14:00	Substitutes for a sick director of studies.
14:00-14:45	Sits on a meeting of the Faculty Research Group on Promoting Efficiency in Graduate Studies (PEGS).
14:45-15:45	Plays badminton.
15:45-15:50	Drinks coffee.

15:50-16:00 **WORKS ON THE
DISSERTATION.**

16:00-17:00 Attends a guest
lecture.

17:00-18:00 Prepares a
postseminar (buys
wine at the liquor
store).

18:00-21:00 Participates in the
postseminar. Gets
into a heated
discussion with the
guest lecturer.

21:00-21:20 Rides his/her bicycle
home.

21:20-22:00 Grades exams.

22:00 Crashes in bed,
deadly tired.

Effective Dissertation Time: 29 minutes
(=Asks constant)