

What Exactly Did I Do Today? Making the most of PhD research years



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PhD requires 4 skills

1. Technical skills
2. Research strategy
3. Time management
4. Emotional management



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TODAY



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PhD requires 4 skills

1. Technical skills
2. Research strategy
3. Time management (organizing unstructured time)
4. Emotional management (where to look when (3) isn't working)



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Myths

#1 Project management is easy.

Highest median annual salaries for technical project managers by state



Burning Glass Technologies, "Occupation Analysis: IT Project Manager" (2022).



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Myths

#2 If I was successful as a student and/or advanced professional prior to entering the PhD program, I should know how to organize my time.

1. Time is highly unstructured w/minimal deadlines
2. Work is often less social/collaborative → a lot of time in your head



Myths

#3 If your project isn't progressing linearly, you're doing academia wrong.

The flexibility to follow unexpected threads to interesting discoveries is one of the benefits of academia.

But – it can be a double-edge sword.



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Confession

I don't know any academic (person?) who really feels like they're 'crushing it' at time management.

I think this can be heartening though:

1. A little goes a long way...
2. ...but you don't have to be perfect.

Goes without saying: just my opinions follow.



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Where to Start

1. Defining a realistic **“Good Day”** (so you know when you’re having bad days vs. unrealistic expectations)
2. Finding your **People** (so you have backup when things fall apart)



What is a Good Day?

Another academic secret: You can't do deep, thoughtful work for that many hours a day.

On a **Good Day**: you get up, have a full, focused work-day, and have enough time afterward to do non-academic life things and feel refreshed enough by morning to have another **Good Day**.

- Not a fantastic day (or a pre-deadline day)
- Not a day where you got distracted and binge-watched Schitt's Creek at 4pm (hypothetically)



What is a Good Day?

Another academic secret: You can't do deep, thoughtful work for that many hours a day.

Varies by person:

- Maybe: 4 focused work hours/day (with a few meetings/seminars thrown in on top)
- Maybe: 2-3 days a week with 6 focused work hours (and meetings/class/admin on other days)



What is a Good Day?

Another academic secret: You can't do deep, thoughtful work for that many hours a day.

This might not feel like a lot, but I promise:

4 hours of focused work is a lot.



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What is a Good Day?

Another academic secret: You can't do deep, thoughtful work for that many hours a day.

Exercise #1: Over a few normal, research weeks, pay attention to how many focused hours you can reliably work.



What is a Good Day?

While I would love for you to have only Good Days, that's probably an unrealistic standard.

But it's useful to know what a **Good Day** is:

1. When you have a flurry of work (e.g., near a deadline), you are **borrowing (with interest!)**, not setting a new normal.
2. Knowing what a **Good Day** is helps to have more of them and to diagnose why you're having **Bad Days**.



Why Might You Have Bad Days?

1. Work hygiene
2. Unrealistic standards
3. Overwork
4. Stuckness
 1. Not always within your control!



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Setting a baseline



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Why Might You Have Bad Days?

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**When things
fall apart**



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Work Hygiene

This is classic time-management advice with which many of you are probably familiar.

- 1. Timing:** When are you at your peak? What is the hardest thing you need to do today? Are these aligned?
 1. Don't schedule hard work right before dinner.
- 2. Focus period:** What is your optimal focus period?
 1. Pomodoro [25 min/5 min OR 50 min/10 min]
 2. Deep Work [first 25 min wasted, next 90 min useful]
- 3. Distractions:** How do you handle meetings? Are you avoiding the Twitter, the news, etc. when working?
- 4. Scheduling:** Is work well-placed within your week?
 1. Don't schedule hard work right after teaching.



Work Hygiene

But good work is also about long-term stamina. What work environment gives you energy? What makes work feel joyful?

It's a curse and a blessing of academic work that it's incredibly hard to get anything done if you don't feel energized/motivated.

1. a curse because it's easy to let things slide
2. a blessing because you're better at your job day-to-day if you're excited about it



Work Hygiene

1. **People:** How much social interaction do you need to feel fulfilled? How do you get informal social interactions in Zoom-world?
2. **Ideas:** Do you have time set aside to go to seminars/read books/read journal articles?
3. **Impact:** What policy impact do you hope your work has? What steps can you take to be involved in a policy community you care about?

Exercise #2: Think about the day recently when you felt most excited about your work. What do you think led to that feeling? Identify one change you might try to foster more of that.



Unrealistic standards

You should have a pretty good sense of how much work you can accomplish on a Good Day.

1. **Planning:** When you commit to a new task, guess how long you truly believe it will take in your heart-of-hearts and multiply by 3-6.
2. **Iteration (Exercise #3):** Write down what you think you will accomplish in the morning. Write down what you actually did at night. Lather/rinse/repeat until you hit >80-90% of the time. (I do this every day with a group of friends.)



Unrealistic standards

Avoid the work death spiral.

If you didn't finish a task today (e.g. run regressions), **make tomorrow's goal smaller** (e.g. reformat data), not the same, and **definitely, definitely** not bigger (e.g. run regressions & write intro draft).

A corollary: If you've mistimed, drop or reschedule projects to get out of the death spiral. Be ruthless.



Unrealistic standards

Be choosy...but not too choosy.

I can't tell you what to research or how to balance research/teaching/other. The goal is to pick in accordance with your values.

Exercise #4:

- Looking back over the past few years, which things did I regret, and what led me to choose those things? (-> that criterion is something that maybe gets overweighted ex ante and counts less ex post)
- Which things brought me joy, and what led me to choose those things? (->reveals something about my value function – can I weigh those considerations more heavily next time)



Overwork

You should care about how you don't work as much as how you do work.

1. **Don't work 7 days/week.** Just don't.
2. **Don't schedule work for 24h/day.** Leave designated time for dinner/working out/family time. (Some people like a hard stop.)
3. **Your time off should be guilt-free.** The worst kind of not-working is not working and feeling guilty about it.
4. **Your time off should be off.** No need to Zoom in on vacation!
5. **Time off is not contingent on completing a particular task.** Avoid "I'll take a break when..."
6. **Skipping time off is costly.** For life balance AND for work.



Overwork

You should care about how do you don't work as much as how you do work.

If you're feeling really burned out/demotivated, this is a good first place to look.

1. Take a day or (few days) off guilt-free. If you've been working late, plan a week with an early hard stop.
2. Pick something you love. (It can be easy like Netflix with popcorn.) Put it on the calendar like a meeting.
3. **Exercise #5:** Repeat Exercise #2, but for non-work things. What brings you joy/energy in your life? Where can you look for more of it?



Stuckness

A lot of traditional productivity advice stops here. And that's wholly inadequate for the academic experience.

You may need tools for when everything else seems to be in order, but you're just not getting stuff done.



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Stuckness

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

Scenario #1: You have had an important task on your to-do list every day for a month and have not done it.

Scenario #2: You have carved two hours for this task every day for a week and have found yourself doing anything else you possibly can during the appointed time -- making lists of papers you should check out, reading product reviews of office lamps.



Stuckness

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

You're not the worst PhD student ever (or even particularly unique), but desticking is needed.

1. Non-work stuckness
2. Intellectual stuckness
3. Emotional stuckness

Important note: All stuckness is equally valid!!
Differentiating here because different techniques are most useful in different situations



Life stuckness

First, take time to get help.

- **Brown CAPS:** <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/counseling-and-psychological-services/>
- **Student Support Services:** <https://www.brown.edu/offices/student-support/student-support-services>
- **Sexual Assault Response Line:** <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/health/services/promotion/sexual-assault-dating-violence-get-help/sexual-assault-response-line>



Life stuckness

But it can be hard to come back after something tough.

- Academic work is often solitary/isolating.
- Academic work is often slow-paced.

And smaller challenges (“stress fractures”) can be overwhelming when you’re doing hard work alone.

1. Limit work hours when you’re struggling.
2. Work with colleagues/friends (in-person or over Zoom).



Intellectual stuckness

Do you know what you're doing?

1. Make the next step as small as possible. Implement it and re-evaluate.
2. Write down your sticking point as concisely as possible.
3. Talk through the idea/plan with your adviser.
4. Talk through the idea/plan with a (new) colleague.
5. Take a break for a few weeks.
 1. Read a few papers.
 2. Go to a few seminars.
6. Keep allocated time blocks short enough to fill until you have enough to really make progress.



Emotional stuckness

Writing a dissertation is a long process that can come with a lot of feelings.

1. **Boredom:** I just don't care about this project anymore.
2. **Self-doubt:** This is hard because I'm stupid/not good enough.
3. **Nervousness:** What if there are no interesting results?
4. **Overwhelm:** I can't get myself to do this because I'm afraid I'll mess it up/worried I'll find an error.
5. **Loneliness:** Does anyone care about this work I'm doing?
6. **Frustration:** Well, someone cared...I just got scooped.



Emotional stuckness

Why mention this?

1. **Preparation:** Know these feelings might come up.
2. **Reassurance:** They will pass.
3. **Making space:** Some tasks will take longer if they're overwhelming/fill you with dread. That's okay. You're not a machine.
4. **Resources:** Call on your **People!** (And remember Brown resources above.)



Supporting each another

1. Regularly checking in with one another
2. Asking honest questions that make space for vulnerability
3. Proposing concrete things you can do
 1. Do you want to do a research brainstorm session?
 2. Do you want me to help you keep to your deadlines?
 3. Do you want to work on this project with me?
 4. Do you want me to brainstorm an outline with you?
 5. Can I bring/send you food?
 6. Do you want to play Scrabble together?
 7. Do you want to have a weekly non-research hang-out?



Asking for help from other students

You might feel better if you do this sooner rather than later.

1. Can you look a draft of this email I've been procrastinating on? Or even, can you help me get started with this email?
2. I am having so much trouble doing a final read-through of this paper. Could you take a look at it?
3. I don't understand this method. Any chance you might want to go through this paper with me?
4. You seem much more on top of things than I feel. Can I ask more about how you're organizing your schedule?

And of course...pay it forward.

If you're worried about a friend

1. *"I noticed that...."* you're letting other sources of joy slip; you're only focusing on research
2. *"It seems to me that..."* you might not have as much balance as would help sustain you in the long run.
3. *"I wanted to check in to see if my read feels accurate to you?"*
4. *"If so, is this an intentional move?"*
5. *"Okay, how can we restore some balance?" OR "Okay, I'll check on you in 3 months."*



Enlisting Professors' Help: Personal Situation

1. Professors can help connect you to resources/support if needed.
2. Keep your advisers up-to-date however you feel comfortable.
 1. If you disappear for 3 months, they might think you're not interested
 2. If you tell them "I'm struggling (with X), but I'll check back in next month," they'll understand



Enlisting Professors' Help: Personal Situation

1. Inform them if you're comfortable
2. Share a plan for how/when you're returning to research

Hey Prof. Bilinski,

My nanny is leaving in 2 months, and I've spent a solid week full-time searching for a new nanny who can both (a) be paid above board, and (b) introduce minimal Covid risk. Based on my current rate, I'm expecting to spend at least another 4-8 workdays on this. My hope this time is an investment in productive work when transitioning to a new nanny. I will check in with you when I can return my focus to research.

Warmly,
Natalia



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Enlisting Professors' Help: Research Situation

1. Use DGS/admin support for sensitive interpersonal issues with other students/professors
2. When a project explodes:
 1. Share what happened & its impact on you
 2. Lay out options for them about approaching this situation
 3. Ask what their approach would be
 4. Bring along your list of in-progress projects/idea bank
3. **Don't cancel meetings just because you're stuck/not making progress.** This is exactly when we care most about meeting with you.



Thank you! Thoughts/questions?

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