

TRAVEL GUIDE TO YOUR **PhD**

How to finish your thesis
successfully, healthily and on time

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TRAVEL GUIDE TO YOUR PhD

How to finish your thesis successfully, healthily and on time

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COSMOS OF ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES

BRIDGE OF WEEKLY GOALS AND DAILY PLANS

CLEAR BOUNDARY RIVER

PLANNING AREA

PhD ROAD

CLEAR PLAN OBSERVATORY

DISTRACTION POINT

ROCKS OF UNREST

FOREST OF PROFESSIONAL WRITING

TIME OUT CAVE

WOOD OF GOOD RELATIONS

OASIS OF GOOD HABITS

PROCESS ROAD

ADJUSTMENT CANYON

WELL OF COMMUNICATION

PENINSULA OF THE HOW

INSPIRATION LAKE

PhD

PhD ROAD MAP

DESERT OF PROCRASTINATION

DISTRACTION ROAD

DISCOVERY BAY

SEA OF TIME

POINT HOPEFUL



SIRENS OF DISTRACTION

LITERATURE MOUNTAIN



HEALTHY HABITS ROCK



SWAMP OF DEMOTIVATION

BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS (AND AN UNFINISHED PhD)



SOURCE OF SYSTEMATIC WORK

VALLEY OF SUCCESS



PhD PEAK



TRAP OF COMPARISON

NEXT STEP RIVER

PROMISED LAND

LAND

HORA EST HIGHWAY

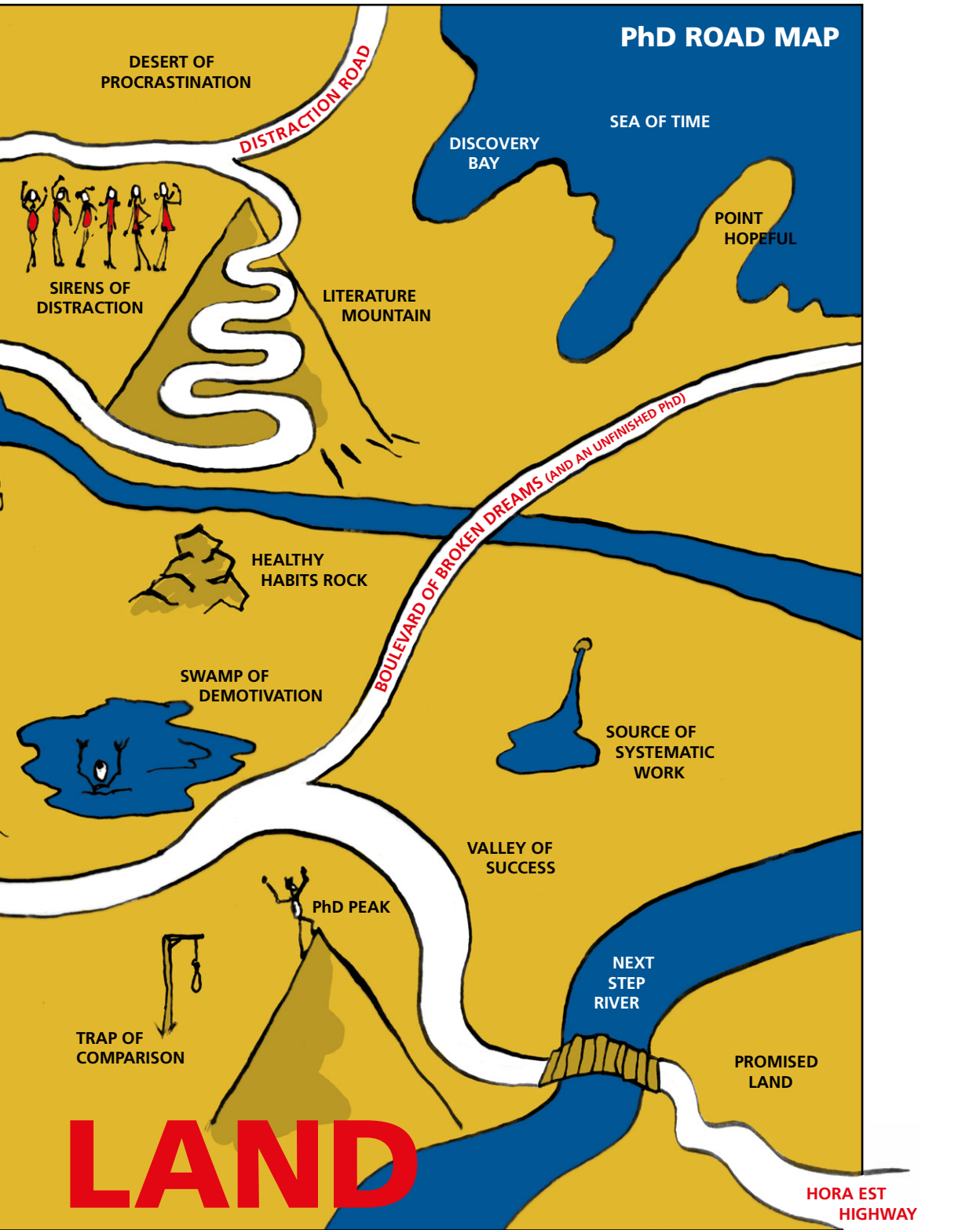





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FOREWORD



Robbert Dijkgraaf was awarded his PhD cum laude in 1989 for the thesis entitled *A geometrical approach to two-dimensional Conformal Field Theory*. He later went on to work as Professor of Mathematical Physics at the University of Amsterdam and Director of the Institute for Advanced Study. He has been the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science between 2022 and 2024.

Photography: Martijn Beekman

DOING A PHD IS ABOUT DISCOVERING YOUR FREEDOM

My PhD program was probably the most exciting part of my scientific career. It was my first real opportunity to do independent research, but still in a protected environment. And always armed with the great excuse that I didn't know everything yet. So, I'm happy to share a few lessons from my own experience for anyone starting out on a PhD.

LESSON 1

PHD RESEARCH IS CHARACTERIZED BY FREEDOM, EVEN IF IT MAY NOT FEEL LIKE IT

The biggest mistake you can make as a PhD student is to stifle your own curiosity, because by doing that, you're also restricting your own freedom. That's why you should avoid focusing only on the subject you hope will get you to the finishing line. As a PhD student, you're still in the divergent phase of your research career. In this phase, there's still an awful lot you can absorb. And you also have the time in peace and quiet to do so. Life only gets worse! You don't yet have to provide an annual report of how many articles you've written or apply for all kinds of grants. During your PhD program, you should therefore go actively in search of completely different subjects and push yourself outside your comfort zone.

LESSON 2

WHAT APPEAR TO BE USELESS SUBJECTS WILL ULTIMATELY FALL INTO PLACE, LIKE THE PIECES OF A JIGSAW

An awful lot of what I needed later on was learnt during my PhD program. Not because it fitted in with my research, but simply because I was interested in it. Because I wanted to understand it. The fact that it only became useful later on was what you might call the usefulness of useless exploration. In fact, later in my life, I wrote a book with the title "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge". The funny thing is that the original subject of my PhD ended up only being mentioned in a footnote.

LESSON 3

YOU NEVER DO RESEARCH ALONE

My fellow PhD students and I were like a club of rebels. We enjoyed each other's company and learnt from each other's research. That really energized me. Another important factor was our group supervisor, Gerard 't Hooft, who would go on to win the Nobel prize. He treated us with a kind of loving neglect. That was because he himself had seen the freedom to do independent research as the greatest gift and he was eager to also pass that onto us.

LESSON 4

YOUR FRESH PERSPECTIVE HAS REAL VALUE

Starting PhD research is scary and difficult for everyone. When it comes to your research subject, everyone you meet knows more about it than you do. Of course, you find yourself wondering what you have to add to the piles of thick volumes already published and to the life's work of the great experts. You can lean on your fellow PhD students, because they're in the same position as you. But your ignorance also puts you at a huge advantage, because you have a fresh perspective on a subject and on the existing research. That has real value, because breakthroughs in research often result not from something new being achieved, but through a new perspective on something that is well known.

LESSON 5

YOU LEARN THE MOST BY DOING YOUR OWN RESEARCH

Of course, you can start by reading all the articles and books about your PhD subject first, but that's actually just training yourself to think like the establishment. You're better off starting by setting a period of time aside to ask yourself why things are as they are. Often, the answer to the puzzle may be known, but you don't know the solution. So, you can start by looking at how you would come up with that solution. That's what you learn the most from.

The only things I can still reproduce from my time as a PhD student are the things that I came up with myself. These were not necessarily new or brilliant discoveries, but subjects that I wanted to understand in my own way. That process imprints deeply on your mind. It's just like holiday photos. You quickly forget other people's holiday photos, but if you've been somewhere yourself and found your own path, step-by-step, the place and the journey remain with you always.

When you're doing your PhD, you might think that it's all about the finishing line – the thesis that contains something special. But, in retrospect, your time as a PhD student turns out most of all to have been a highly productive period because you've learnt so many new things and because patterns have been ingrained that will be of major advantage to you later on.

LESSON 6

WORK ON A SUBJECT THAT MAKES YOUR HEART RACE FASTER

Don't get bogged down with a subject that doesn't really have your passion and interest. If you see something more fun or interesting on your journey, then pursue that instead. No one is holding you back. Be open to the fact that plans might suddenly change

FOREWORD: DOING A PHD IS ABOUT DISCOVERING YOUR FREEDOM

during your journey. You're being trained to be an independent researcher. That means that you're developing a feeling. Not only for how you do research, but also for the things that energize you.

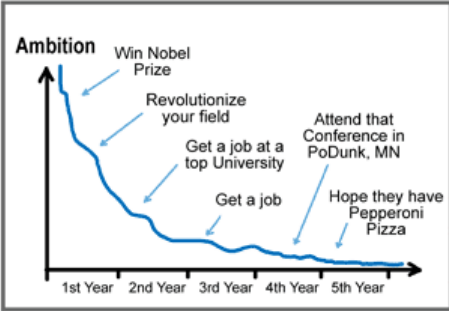
The big question is always this: will I work on something for which there's actually a solution? And if there is a solution, is it also interesting, for you and for other people? You need to develop a feeling for that. You're currently still living in a protected zone, without external pressure and with support and supervision, surrounded by colleagues who are in the same boat, but soon you'll have to venture out into the world of freedom. Being prepared for that is something you learn while you're working on your PhD.

To everyone doing a PhD, I wish you a world of unsuspected and unsought knowledge. Combined with the pleasure of searching for it yourself. Let's hope that this book provides help in approaching that effectively, so that others can gain the same sense of satisfaction from doing a PhD that I still feel to this day.

Bon voyage!

INTRODUCTION

YOUR LIFE AMBITION - What Happened??



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INTRODUCTION

FINISHING YOUR PHD SUCCESSFULLY, HEALTHILY AND ON TIME IS SIMPLE, BUT NOT EASY

This book is for you if you are already on your PhD journey or if you are planning to begin it. Have you ever wondered if there is a proven strategy you could use to make sure you complete your thesis successfully, healthily and on time so that you reach your destination and can take the next step in your career or life? There is!

Or perhaps you even wish you never started your PhD or have become discouraged by everything that needs to happen? It doesn't have to be that way! The PhD journey is challenging for PhD students, but it can also be an enjoyable, fulfilling time in your life – that is, provided you know how to navigate it without ending up at a destination where you don't want to be, or overwhelmed or burned out.

Statistics don't lie: a 2018 study from VSNU shows that in the Netherlands, only 11% of PhD students finish their thesis within the required time. That number increases to 45% after five years, but after seven years or more, only 70% of PhD students have finished their thesis and received their PhD. The numbers are very similar in other countries.

These numbers show that the journey of getting your PhD can be highly challenging. Research conducted in 2018 shows that PhD students have a higher prevalence of mental health issues compared to the general population. Nearly one-third of them are at risk of depression, primarily due to stress and an imbalanced work-life relationship. But it doesn't have to be that way.

We'll let you in on a secret: the problem with finishing your PhD successfully, healthily and on time doesn't have to do so much with the content of your research; rather, it has to do with the process of how you do it. There is a clear pattern in the obstacles that you are most likely to encounter as a PhD student. In this book we show you these obstacles and what you can do to conquer them and progress towards your destination with ease. One way of putting it is that finishing your PhD successfully, healthily and on time is simple, but not easy.

THE PROCESS IS CRUCIAL

All the chapters in this book have to do with the process of getting your PhD. By focusing on the process instead of on the content, you will discover that your PhD journey will change. Even if your content is brilliant, if the process is not working, you won't finish.

What we see is that talented and intelligent PhD students get overwhelmed, frustrated, struggle or fail because of all the requirements they have to meet. Writing articles, doing experiments, gathering data, having meetings with your supervisor, being prepared for conferences, learning new skills, navigating the academic world – it all needs to happen. You might have other obligations as well; maybe you have another job, a family to take care of, or volunteer work. There are many factors to consider, and often you may be unsure if you are on the right track and still on schedule with your PhD.

Maybe you have put forth a lot of effort, and your supervisor simply says that you did it wrong and need to do it differently. Or perhaps you start to doubt whether you are in the right place and begin to suffer from imposter syndrome. What about equipment that doesn't work if you are a STEM PhD student? Or the fact that it is often not possible to speak your mind because you feel not safe to do so?

There are so many things that need to be done during your research, and you will find conflicting advice on all of them. As a result, a lot of PhD students become insecure. When all of these factors start piling up, it's easy to start feeling defeated and to question whether you are ever going to succeed in finishing your thesis.

Don't give up. We are going to tell you exactly what you can do to stay confident and on track and to make sure that you reach your destination. We will tell you what equipment you need, how to travel, how to treat your companions, what tools you need and how to reach your goal. The process is crucial; the content will follow.

Forwarned is forarmed

Your PhD can be full of pitfalls they do not tell you about at the start. At page 138 we describe what problems/unexpectedness you might encounter.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Every chapter in this book has a similar structure. First you get an overview of the topic. Then we give you step-by-step input and instructions. In every chapter you will find a supervisor's perspective on that particular topic to give you a different perspective. You will find a summary at the end of each chapter and we also refer to resources where you can find more information.

Throughout the book you'll find helpful tips, highlighted facts, and interviews with extraordinary PhDs, along with their advice for you.

INTRODUCTION

THE TOPICS IN THIS BOOK ARE ALL ABOUT THE 'HOW'

What are the topics in this book? Every chapter deals with a challenge virtually every PhD student will encounter.

The **first** challenge is planning: if you don't have a plan, how will you make sure you finish within the required time? How will you know that you are heading in the right direction? How do you keep the big picture in view so that you can make informed choices? You will learn how to plan in such a way that your plan will support you during your journey

The **second** challenge is procrastination. How do you execute your plan without procrastination? In your PhD journey you will have to do a lot of new, unknown, difficult and complicated things. Procrastination is lurking around the corner. And – as paradoxical as it may sound – for a lot of people, planning leads to procrastination. How do you recognize when you are procrastinating, and what can you do about it? You'll learn how to turn your plan into a workable and actionable day-to-day schedule.

Third, as a PhD student, you read a lot to get a picture of your domain, your field of study. You'll have to read hundreds of books and articles. How do you keep an overview, find the right literature, and then write about that literature? You will learn how to deal with your literature in a systematic way.

The **fourth** skill is writing. If you don't master writing, you won't obtain your PhD. Writing is an underestimated skill: you are supposed to be able to do it, but no one tells you how to approach writing. In this chapter you will learn about the writing process.

The **fifth** challenge has to do with your travel companions. In your PhD journey there will be various traveling companions: your supervisors and your colleagues, but maybe also your family or your partner. It's important to have good relationships with these companions so that you are supported and get the right kind of feedback. Read how to make that happen.

The **sixth** challenge has to do with your motivation and inspiration. During every journey there will be moments in which you will be less inspired or motivated. For PhD students there are certain moments where that tends to happen. The first is after a year: you have permission to continue, but you often get a bit less support, and the excitement of the fresh start is gone. Now what? Another moment is closer to the end of your journey, the moment when you figure out there is still a lot of work to do and not enough time to do everything. Now what? Learn how to stay motivated and inspired during the entire length of your journey.

Seventh, during your journey you need to become a professional. Your PhD is an aptitude test: you 'prove' that you are able to do research and write about it. When you have completed this journey, you are a professional researcher. What does that mean?

And last but not least, what are your plans after finishing your PhD? What next steps can you take to clarify what it is you want?

We wish you a great journey to a successful PhD!

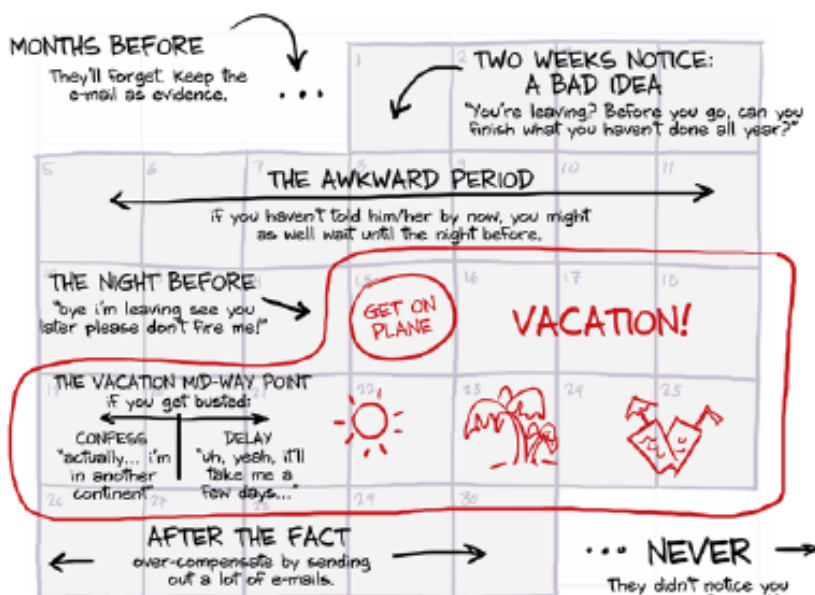
SUMMARY

- Many PhD students get overwhelmed, frustrated, struggle or fail because of all the requirements they have to meet.
- Only 11% of PhD students finish their thesis within 4 years, 45% within five years and 70% within 7 years.
- One-third of all PhD students are at risk of depression, primarily due to stress and an imbalanced work-life relationship.
- A successful PhD has to do with the process of how you do it, not with the content
- There is a pattern in the challenges you will encounter. This book shows you how to conquer them.
- Every chapter deals with a challenge: 1) planning, 2) procrastination, 3) dealing with literature, 4) writing, 5) dealing with companions and supervisor(s) 6) motivation and inspiration, 7) becoming a professional and what to do after your PhD.
- Each chapter starts with an overview of the topic, followed by a step-by-step input and instructions how to deal with the obstacles at hand. At the end of the chapter, you will find a supervisor's perspective, a summary of learning points and a list of resources for more information.

NOTES

MAKE A CLEAR PLAN

WHEN TO TELL YOUR ADVISOR YOU'RE GOING ON VACATION



MAKE A CLEAR PLAN

If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail

Benjamin Franklin

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

Planning. Yes, it is important. And most people are not so sure how to do it – or else they make a plan but then don't know how to stick to it. We know many PhD students and supervisors are reluctant to plan, but you really need to. Without it, the chances of getting lost or quitting altogether are high.

Why is planning so important? Obviously, there is very clear deadline for your PhD. After a certain amount of time, you need to be finished. Whether you are a PhD student or whether you are getting your PhD in your own time, at a certain point you need to finish. There will be a deadline, and not meeting that deadline can get you into a lot of trouble: no more funding, having to finish your thesis in your own time, problems with the next step in your career, and so on.

Without a plan, it's as if you're getting into a sailboat and setting off – let's say from France – and saying: I just need to go west, and I will make sure to arrive in the United States on time. If we put it like that, you might agree that it is a bit ridiculous: you know that you need a clear direction, that you need to take the tides and reefs into account, that you need ample supplies, that you need a crew, and so on. If you don't prepare and have a clear plan, you might end up in South America, or get lost at sea or sink.

You need a plan for your PhD; otherwise, you might get lost or quit. And the plan, as with sailing, does not only involve you, but others as well. And the supplies, and ...

When you have a plan, you have a tool to stay on track.

The funny thing is that not all supervisors bother so much about planning. That might be because in their time the system was a bit different, and it was not so problematic to take more time to finish your PhD. It could also be because they focus more on the content than on the process, or that they are not so sure how to plan themselves. Or because they think that plans will change and that therefore planning is not needed. Obviously, plans will change, but you need them to stay on track and you can use them for instance as guideline for discussion on progress or for evaluation talks.

So how can you make a plan for your PhD that is working for you? You will read about that in this chapter.

MAKE A PLAN FOR YOUR THESIS

Most PhD students believe it is not really possible to plan your PhD: you are going to do research that has never been done before, you will get outcomes that are not yet clear, you'll have to do things you have never done before. How can you plan that? But actually, it is not so difficult to plan a PhD because, as strange as it may seem, a lot is already known about your project, even if you haven't started yet.

What is already known? There are certain milestones that every PhD has. They might be a bit different depending on the country in which you are pursuing your PhD, but in the Netherlands, it will most probably look like this if you are a PhD student:

First year:

- Application for your project
- Exploration of your subject
- Defining the problem statement
- Writing the proposal for your project – although you may also apply for a PhD project that already has a proposal (and for some, medical or ethical permission must also be received)
- Become part of the graduate school
- Assessment interview at the end of the first year where you will get a go or no-go

Initial and subsequent years:

- Writing chapters, articles, papers
- Visiting conferences, symposia
- Gathering and analysing data
- Learning new skills

Last year:

- Drafting thesis
- Submitting your thesis to the reading committee
- Thesis defence
- Possibly post-doc proposal writing or writing additional publications

You can, of course, adapt this to your own situation.

CHAPTER 1: MAKE A CLEAR PLAN

The first step you have to take when you plan your PhD is to find out what is already known: how many articles or chapters do you need to write, how much time do you have between submitting your thesis and the actual defence, how many conferences do you need to visit? Find out as much as possible by talking to your supervisor, fellow PhD students and people in your field who have (almost) finished their PhDs. Make sure to read dissertations of your predecessors as well, so that you can familiarize yourself with the components that constitute a dissertation. The demands can vary between universities, between faculties and even between departments, so find out as much as possible.

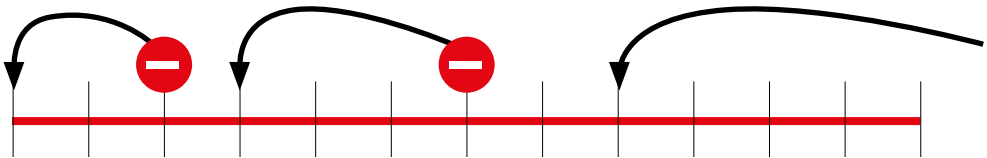
Then you can take the next step: put all of this into a schedule. To do this, draw a line for every year, and divide that line into 12 equal pieces, one for every month, like this:



Then you start to plan backwards and decide when you need to stop with an activity.

What does that mean? You start at the end: if your thesis defence will be in four years' time, how many months before that do you need to submit your thesis to the reading committee? And what does that mean? When do you need to finish your introduction and discussion? When do you need to finish your last article? When do you need to finish the article before that?

And if you need to finish that article, when do you need to stop gathering data for it? And when do you need to stop reading literature for that article?



Are there parts of your project that are interrelated, hierarchical or in other ways? Or, in other words, do certain things need to happen before something else can happen? Take that into account in your plan.

Then you plan periods of data collecting and writing. You plan courses, training, conferences and symposia; you plan holidays. Is there something that needs to be prepared before a course? Make sure the deadline is clear. What is the deadline for the conference paper? When does your presentation need to be finished?

And don't forget to take all your other activities into account as well. Activities that you might need to plan for include:

- Reading
- Doing a pilot study or pilot experiment
- Gathering your data (for instance, via case studies, interviews, experiments)
- Writing a paper – take the different writing phases into account (see Chapter 3)
- Taking part in courses and trainings
- Visiting conferences and symposia (either in person or online)
- Teaching or supervising students
- Appointments with supervisors

Then you take a closer look. Usually, the reaction is panic. There will definitely be some problems. See if you can solve them. **Then you need to check whether there is enough open space in your planning.** Did you think about taking holidays? About taking a day off after finishing your data collection, for instance, or some time off after an intensive course?



If you are not sure how long certain activities will take, make sure to talk about it with colleagues or your supervisor. They have more experience and can often give you a good estimate of how much time certain tasks takes.

And then there is a very important addition: a great rule of thumb is to never plan more than 80% of your time. And that holds true for days, weeks, months, years....

Where does this 80% come from? We humans are usually optimistic about what we can do. We forget that there is one thing we can be sure of: unexpected things will happen. You never know when, but those unexpected things (like phone calls, work that follows from a conversation or email, reading that took longer than expected, unexpected visits, someone getting ill and you needing to take something over for them, experiments taking longer than expected, and so on) take up about 20% of your time. That means that if you plan 80% of your time, you can be sure that it will be filled to 100%. If you plan 100% of your time, you will – applying the same rule – be working 125%. And that might be okay every now and then, but not as a baseline. That's a recipe for burnout.

MONDAY	TUESDAY
8.00	8.00
9.00 writing methods	9.00
10.00 meeting	10.00
11.00 OPEN	11.00 OPEN
12.00 lunchbreak	12.00 lunchbreak
13.00 lab experiment	13.00
14.00 reading article	14.00
15.00 OPEN	15.00 OPEN
16.00 admin.	16.00
17.00 reading article	17.00
18.00 plan tomorrow	18.00
19.00	19.00

So plan, and apply the 80–20% rule. That means: make sure that 20% of your time is still ‘open’, or ‘empty’. That may lead to another panic attack, as all of a sudden you don’t seem to have much time at all. It may mean that you have to make adjustments, such as having to skip an experiment. Think smart: maybe you can combine going to a congress with a holiday or a family visit. It’s useful to take into account the

difference between ‘nice-to-haves’ and ‘must-haves’: what is really needed for your project, what must be there? And what would it be nice to have? It may be necessary to skip some of the nice-to-haves or schedule them for the end, when you’ll know that you’ll still have the time to do them.

In short:

- get clarity on what is already known
- put it in a time schedule
- plan backwards and enter stops
- plan periods of data collecting and writing, courses and conferences, and holidays
- check if there is enough open space in your planning
- apply the 80–20% rule
- make a clear distinction between must-haves and nice-to-haves

When your plan is finished, discuss it with your supervisor. They might see things that you overlooked or might have a better idea of how long certain tasks take. This is also an excellent moment to schedule the appointments with your supervisor because the planning clarifies when you and your supervisor need to meet, which might be more often than you initially thought.

Then it is important to print your schedule and hang it somewhere where it is actually visible! The thing is, you’ll need it for the next steps: making your weekly goals and daily schedule. And, of course for the discussions with your supervisors.



AS A NOTE

A lot of PhD students panic a bit when they make their overall plan. At first, four years looks like a long time, but when you have finished this plan, very often it doesn't seem so long anymore.... Don't panic: it is quite doable as long as you get your weekly and daily routines working for you (you will read about that further on in the chapter) and you are not procrastinating too much (more about this in Chapter 2).

And remember: **plans are there to be adjusted**. But if you don't have a plan, there is nothing to adjust or to work towards. Without a plan, you won't have a clue if you have time for that extra course, if you can teach that extra part of the curriculum, how much time you have left before you need to start writing your next article, if you are on time with that paper for the conference, and so on. You need a plan so you know what track to follow, and to see when you need to adjust your track or to find shortcuts to achieve your goal on time. Remember the sailing trip we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: you need to check whether you are actually sailing towards America, or if you may need to make a stop, recruit another crewmember or buy more .

MAKE A RISK ANALYSIS

So there you have it, your plan. Before turning this plan into weekly goals and a daily plan, you have to make sure you perform a risk analysis on it. And we speak of different kinds of risk analyses.

RISK ANALYSIS FOR CRUCIAL STAGES IN YOUR PROJECT

The different stages in your project have certain dangers, certain risks. What kind of risks are we talking about? Some examples:

- Your supervisor will be away for half a year, teaching at a university at the other side of the world
- Your daily supervisor is available only once every three weeks
- You are not sure if you can find enough patients for inclusion in your research
- There is no lab time available when you need the data for your article
- You don't have funding for the last year of your research



INTERVIEW WITH A PhD

PhD	Annelien Bredenoord
Promotion	2006 – 2010 University Maastricht
Title	Ethics at the interface of reproductive medicine and genetic technology; the case of mitochondrial disorders
Later positions	Professor of Ethics of Biomedical Innovation at the UMC Utrecht (2017) Rector Magnificus EUR; responsible for education, research and impact, scientific staff (policies), students and science information. Member KNAW Chair of D66 party in the Dutch Senate

Why did you decide to pursue a PhD?

After studying Theology and Political Science, I became a lecturer in medical ethics at the LUMC. That year I delved into a range of topics, but it quickly became clear to me that my heart lay in the ethics of biomedical and technological innovation. Because I had not yet finished learning, I applied for a PhD job in Maastricht with Guido de Wert.

What was the subject?

I investigated the ethical aspects at the dividing line between reproductive medicine and genetics, with questions regarding all kinds of embryo research and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis.

What is your dominant memory of that period?

The loneliness. Not in the sense of 'being alone' but in the sense of 'doing research that is so specialized that you can hardly talk to anyone about it'. Hours alone behind the computer. You know more and more about less and less. To broaden myself, for social applications and because of the contacts, I became active for D66 (I had already become a member as a student). There I worked on the construction of the D66 talent training program (Route66). At that time, as a PhD candidate you 'earned' a gross amount of €1350 (!) in your first year. Fortunately, that was later corrected.

What benefits did getting your PhD have for your later career?

I experienced it as intellectual enrichment. If you go into depth you will understand better what you don't know. In other words: 'depth creates modesty'. It gave me a different view on complicated issues. But then I also really enjoyed looking at the broader context again. As a rector, I like to have my thinking nourished by experts around me.

What tips do you give to PhD students?

First, only do it if you are passionate about the subject. We sometimes say: 'getting a PhD is like getting married on your own'. You must be sure that you 'love' the subject on which you are pursuing your PhD.

Second, break the process into manageable chunks and celebrate the completion of each chunk. You can do this with friends in the pub once you have completed a part. Or what suits you.

Third: Have a good peer group. Working in a group is more fun than working alone.

Fourth: Aim to work abroad for a while. That broadens your view.

What changes do you, as a rector, strive for with regard to the PhD process?

The strategy of Erasmus University Rotterdam is: 'Making positive societal impact'. We expect our PhD candidates and students to think about questions such as: What am I doing it for? How do I ensure broader relevance and dissemination of the results of my research? To this end, we want to pay attention to, for example, scientific-philosophical aspects and integrity of research.

PhD candidates and students must be able to develop into the leaders of the future, the 'change agents', who can make a valuable contribution to our society. In other words: 'student success' is broader than 'study success'. And for PhD students: 'PhD student success' is broader than 'PhD success'.

Which statement from your dissertation do you like best?

Ethics are just like football; everyone has an opinion about it.

Would you recommend your children to pursue a PhD?

Absolute. I wish everyone to explore a specific subject in depth and breadth.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ARJENNE LOUTER

**Studied Dutch language and literature at Utrecht University
Worked as teacher, senior communication advisor, senior consultant, researcher, mediator, and coach and is self employed**

Co-author: Professioneel communiceren

Why did you want to do a PhD?

I didn't, so I do not have a PhD. It's not my ambition. I prefer the role I have as an expert in supporting the process. Therefore, I chose to support PhD students, as I see how they often struggle in their journey. It is a profession I actually invented in 2008, as I saw that many PhD-students were struggling with the process whilst on their PhD journey. By now, I have supported thousands of PhD students in many different ways.

People ask me, 'Can you support PhD students without having a PhD yourself?' My answer is, whole-heartedly 'YES'. I often compare my role as being part of the team of an Olympic sporter. This person needs to work towards a big accomplishment in four years, and has a whole team to make that happen. Not everyone on the team is an Olympic medallist, but everyone in the team is important to help the Olympic athlete to win.

I'm a supporter outside of academia, which gives me a different perspective, which often turns out to be helpful: I can have an objective view, I don't have a stake in the outcome. For that reason, people feel free to speak about what is actually going on. And they feel more respected.

My strength is to encourage people and help them to take the reins of their PhD to become more aware of the choices they make. To learn that, I obtained a wide range of education: including in teaching, mediation, non-violent communication, working with art, coaching, and qigong. The different job experiences I had as teacher, advisor and consultant also help me to do what I do best: support PhD student to finish their thesis successfully and on time. My main message: Put the process first. If the process works, the content will follow, not the other way around.

I know the academic world and the process you have to go through as a PhD student inside out. I did research myself whilst working at different universities and applied universities. And of course, I have heaps of experience, as I actually had contact with thousands of PhD-students.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: ARJENNE LOUTER

What is your most important tip for PhD students?

Pay attention to how things are going: What can you do to improve the process? Most importantly, make sure to take good care of yourself. You are the most important asset you have!

Would you recommend anyone to do a PhD?

Sure. But only if you want to. You don't need one to be happy.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

LODEWIJK SCHMIT JONGBLOED

PhD

Groningen University 2008 – 2017

Title

Job satisfaction with Dutch Physicians

Later positions

**Formerly owner of a health consultancy firm (LSJ Medisch Projectbureau)
Owner of publishing house Schmit Jongbloed Advies
Author of Reisgids Mantelzorg 2.0, MantelWijzer and other books.**

Why did you want to do a PhD?

In 2008, I was invited to do a PhD in Groningen. After a week of lying awake, I decided it was worth doing research for a number of years, beside my work as a health consultant.

What was the subject?

I surveyed job satisfaction among cohorts of general practitioners, medical specialists and social physicians at ages 35, 45, and 55 years.

What do you remember most about that period?

The ups and downs in the process. The ups of the success of the surveys, analysing the results, and getting an article accepted. The downs the weekends and evenings lonely in front of your computer and of a rejected article. The euphoria at the promotion day with my family, friends, and acquaintances. And the pride: I did it!

How long did it take you?

I expected to be ready in five years; it appeared to be nine years.

Did your promotion help you later in life?

During my promotion, I wrote and published the book *Heal the Doctor. Living and Working with Zest* (with Angele van de Ven). As this book sold 10,000 copies, I started writing and publishing other non-fiction books (like the book you're reading now).

What is your most important tip for PhD students?

Firstly: Take plenty of time for a thorough orientation on the research theme. I had to produce a questionnaire within two months. As both my promotor and I were hardly familiar with the subject, the questionnaire was insufficiently thought out. My PhD

suffered from its shortcomings.

Secondly, especially for external PhD candidates: hire a student to help you with time consuming aspects of your research. My student searched for relevant literature, helped me with statistical analyses and relieved me of other time-consuming tasks. Without her, my PhD would have taken even longer.

Thirdly, train yourself in the important aspects of a PhD: smart planning, scientific writing, and all other topics covered in this book.

What theorem did you like most?

At the end of your PhD, you will understand where and why you fell short.

Would you recommend to your son or daughter to do a PhD?

Sure. But read this book before you start.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MARJO WIJNEN-MEIJER

PhD	2006–2012; Utrecht University
Title	Readiness for clinical practice
Later Positions	Program Director Medical School LUMC; Leiden, the Netherlands Assistant /associate professor UMC Utrecht; Utrecht, the Netherlands Professor of Medical Education / Head of Department Curriculum Development, Medical Education Center, Technical University of Munich, Germany;
Current position	Professor of Medical Education / Director of the Institute of Medical Education / Medical Faculty and University Hospital Carl Gustav Carus, TUD Dresden University of Technology, Dresden, Germany

Why did you decide to pursue a PhD?

I had never seen it as an option and did not see myself as a researcher, but more as a curriculum developer. In 2005, through an open application, I joined the Centre for Research and Development of Education at UMC Utrecht, under the direction of Prof Olle ten Cate. In 2006, there was a vacancy for a PhD student and Olle asked if this might be something for me. I had thought about it for a while, and in the end, I decided to do it, mainly because I liked the subject. But I did not want to just do research, so we agreed that I would spend two days each week on the PhD project, as well as continuing with my other work. At that time, the latter consisted of leading a team and several educational projects.

What do you remember from that period?

I liked the research much more than expected. I found it very interesting to read literature, attend congresses, brainstorm methods with fellow researchers. I also had a lot of fun writing. This is also the reason why, against my expectations, I wanted to continue doing research after completing the PhD project. As well, I really liked the mutual contact between PhD students, inside and outside my own department. I am still in touch with some of them.

Did the promotion help you in your later career?

Without PhD, I would not be where I am today. My PhD has definitely opened doors for me– in my case, also abroad. But I am convinced that without PhD I would have found my way too, albeit a different one.

What tips do you have for PhD students?

Find a form that suits you. Many PhD students need time and rest to focus on their research project. In my case, that would not have worked; I probably would have quit quickly. I found the combination with another job, especially management, difficult at times, but it also ensured that when I had time for research, I really felt like it. In such cases, it is important to schedule time for research. Over the whole period, I worked on my research one fixed day a week at home and everyone knew that. Twice a year, I planned 2 weeks in a row to write.

And if you manage to do part of your research abroad, do so. I went to England for six months and found it very enlightening.

Would you recommend a promotion to your son, daughter or cousin?

Above all, I would advise everyone to develop further, but it does not necessarily have to be with a PhD project. It can also be through projects at work, another educational programme, and so on. Only if you want to work scientifically, of course, it is a must.

ORIGIN STORY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The origin of this book is rather remarkable. In 2008, Arjenne started “Louter Promoveren/The Dutch PhD Coach,” and in 2011 began a blog about how to successfully and healthily finish a PhD on time. In 2014, after encountering her blogs, an English publisher asked Arjenne if she would like to write a book about pursuing a PhD. When the book was almost finished, however, the publisher decided not to proceed with publication, and its outlook became uncertain.

Meanwhile, in 2012 Marjo attended a three-day writing course with Arjenne. Following Marjo’s recommendation, Lodewijk attended the same course in 2013. In subsequent years, Lodewijk occasionally consulted Arjenne with specific questions about his PhD. During one of these conversations, Arjenne and Lodewijk agreed to complete the book and publish it with Schmit Jongbloed Publishing. Lodewijk was eager to contribute because, during his PhD journey, he had fallen into nearly every trap the book warns about. Marjo—by then a professor—enthusiastically agreed to contribute and provide feedback.

Arjenne revised and updated the texts, Lodewijk interviewed interesting PhD candidates, and Marjo provided her perspective as a supervisor on each chapter’s topic.

Even with renewed determination, we faced significant hurdles while writing this book. The pandemic caused delays, and the process had to be put on hold for an extended period when Arjenne underwent major surgery due to heart issues, during which an LVAD (left ventricular assist device) was implanted. She then navigated a long process of rehabilitation.

The book you are now reading is proof that postponement didn’t mean cancellation. We are therefore especially happy with (and immensely proud of) the final result. We believe and hope you will feel the same after reading the book.

ORIGIN STORY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Arjenne, Lodewijk & Marjo

HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY FINISH A PhD?

Completing a PhD is a long and challenging journey. Many PhD candidates start that journey full of enthusiasm, but lose direction and motivation along the way. Often, this loss of momentum happens because they, like their supervisors, focus too much on the content and neglect the process.

This travel guide teaches you how to successfully navigate the PhD process so that you can enjoy the journey more and reach your destination with better results and in good spirits.

How do you stay on course and maintain a steady pace? How do you tackle challenges and obstacles on your path? How do you keep it fun? Whether you're struggling with writing, finding the right literature, feedback, time pressure, procrastination, motivation, or balancing work and life—this book helps. It's packed with experiences from those who have traveled this road before you.

Benefit from proven strategies, practical tips, and fresh insights. Learn how to set achievable goals, stay mentally and physically fit, and maintain enjoyment in the process. Get inspired by expert tips from Annelien Bredenoord, Eveline Crone, Leni van Doorn, Halleh Ghorashi, Jetty Hoeksema, and Eduard Klasen.

Are you ready to complete your PhD successfully, healthily, and on time?
A final push from a most successful PhD predecessor:

"To everyone doing a PhD, I wish you a world of unsuspected and unsought knowledge. Combined with the pleasure of searching for it yourself. Let's hope that this book provides help in approaching that effectively, so that others can gain the same sense of satisfaction from doing a PhD that I still feel to this day."

Robbert Dijkgraaf

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