



Study Shock: Making the Leap to Graduate-Level Work

Reading. Research. More reading. Studying. Writing. Rewriting.

When graduate-level research and assignments start to pile up, you may wonder how you are going to survive. This is new territory and you may not have realized how much harder the work was going to be.

How do you make the leap to a higher level of academic achievement? Take a few tips from those who know what you're going through.

Laura S. Heidel, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist and Learning Strategies Counselor for Learning Support Services at the University of Houston. She counsels graduate and undergraduate students on learning issues, effective study, time management, test anxiety and other academic issues.

"One of the biggest shocks affects graduate students who are now in a different discipline than they were as undergraduates," says Heidel. "That can be very disconcerting."

For example, someone who was a biology major may have entered law school, says Heidel. "Changing disciplines can be like learning a new

language. Not only is the vocabulary and culture different, so are the processes of mental reasoning required. It takes time to adjust to a new way of thinking."

Learning *how* to read professional articles in your discipline is an important skill to pick up early in your graduate program.

"Reading professional articles will help you focus on the 'big picture' issues, says Heidel. "There's a secret to reading them, too. At the end of most articles is a discussion of results and the article's main points. Read that *first*. It will help you understand what the results mean. You can do the same thing with articles which have an abstract. Read that before you dig into the whole article."

"Even when reading isn't required for a course, read the key journals that relate to it," says Heidel. "Ask your professor if you don't already know. Then go to the library and look through the journals. That will help you discover the writing style in the discipline as well as its major issues. It will give you a sense of what questions you should be asking in your research and help you become familiar with journals

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you may eventually be submitting your writing to."

"It's essential to become comfortable reading scholarly journals," emphasizes Robert L. Heath, Ph.D. professor emeritus in the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston. "It's surprising how many students never think of reading the articles cited in their textbooks. But by reading those articles and journals, students become exposed to differing points of view, and can develop stronger independent thinking skills as a result."

Developing an early intellectual curiosity about the literature of your discipline is crucial, says Heath. "Seek out the distinguished faculty in your own and other programs. Ask them what else you should be studying. Learn about the big ideas in your discipline. Learn the difference between a good journal article and a bad one. That will help you when you have an opportunity to write a term paper. Rather than just looking for something that's 'doable,' find an exciting topic. Look for the clash of ideas rather than just the efficient mastery of material for the exam."

Another way to keep your focus on the big picture is to attend colloquia

in your department, Heidel recommends. "Listen to the guest speakers to get a feeling of the language of your field and its important issues. Go to other students' defenses of dissertations, too. This will help you see what's ahead. Most are open to the public. Go to get a sense of what questions are asked. You'll be better prepared and less intimidated when it's time for your own."

The amount and type of writing required in graduate school can be daunting. Heidel sees many students for whom writing is a major stressor. "Sometimes they haven't had much practice writing as an undergrad," she says. "They may be trying to impress their advisor and that makes it even more stressful."

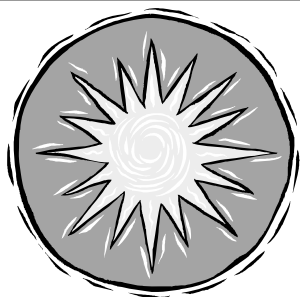
Practice is the best thing for developing writing skills, says Heidel. "Students can

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Suite 300
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Study Shock—How to Stay Grounded

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find help at the campus writing center. Some students may need help organizing their writing, and others may need to brush up on their grammar.”

Practice also helps when it comes to developing presentation skills. “If people have difficulty speaking in front of groups, Toastmasters can be a good way to get more comfortable,” says Heidel. “Or, if they don’t have time for that, they can practice talks before their research group, and get feedback in a safe setting.”

Juggling the demands of graduate school with work, family responsibilities and still having time for yourself can be a challenge. Heidel

says she found it helpful to block out certain hours for school work just as she would a job, to make her schedule more predictable and finite. “When you do that it also allows you to see blocks of time that you can spend with your family and taking care of yourself.”

Pamela A. McConathy has learned to plan ahead so she can keep her balance. McConathy is principal of Foresight Communications Group, and she is finishing a Master’s of Science degree in Futures Studies in the College of Technology at the University of Houston. “I ask other students in my program what textbooks and reading are required in the courses I will be taking

the next semester,” she says. “I get the texts ahead of time and do some of the reading before classes begin.”

That kind of self-motivation isn’t just smart, it’s expected at the graduate level. Heidel remembers the frustration of waiting for her advisor to read materials she had submitted for her dissertation. “I finally had an epiphany, and realized it wouldn’t get done unless I caused it to get done,” she says. “I put together an outline and a schedule for her so we could move the process along. As a graduate student you have to learn to act more like a colleague with your professors.” ■

Resources

- The USF Writing Center, Cooper Hall 257, 813-974-9572 is staffed by graduate students from the Department of English. Services are free for students.
- www.HowToStudy.org offers resources related to writing and study skills. ■

When gas prices put the squeeze on your budget...

It might be tempting to fall for a product that promises better gas mileage. Some businesses are promoting fuel boosting additives or offering engine modifications to help drivers conserve fuel. However, Better Business Bureau (BBB) advises consumers to stay away from gas saving products, parts and modifications that sound too good to be true. Despite advertising claims, there is no simple, single way to improve fuel economy. Instead, BBB offers these tips for more reliable ways to conserve fuel:

- **Stay within the speed limit.** Gas mileage tends to decrease rapidly at speeds above 60 miles per hour.
- **Avoid “jackrabbit” starts and stops.** You can improve your gas mileage up to 5% around town by avoiding jerky starts and stops.
- **Use overdrive gears and cruise controls.** Cruise control and overdrive gears improve fuel economy when driving on the highway.
- **Go ahead, use the AC.** Using the air conditioner at lower speeds decreases fuel efficiency, but at higher speeds, open windows create drag that can reduce gas mileage by 10%.
- **Remove excess weight from the trunk.** An extra 100 pounds can reduce a typical car’s fuel economy by up to 2%.
- **Keep the car properly maintained.** The engine should be tuned, tires inflated and aligned, the oil changed on schedule and the air filters checked and replaced regularly. Replacing clogged filters can increase gas mileage up to 10%.

Find reliable consumer information and money-saving tips at www.bbb.org ■