

# **SURVIVING YOUR PhD**

**Advice from  
PhD students for  
PhD students**

*A PhD is a journey.  
Nobody goes through it  
and remains the same;  
use it as a stepping  
stone to a better you.*

**Joy, Year 4**

*Often we hear a PhD  
is something you have  
to suffer for. This is  
completely untrue -  
it's absolutely okay  
to enjoy what you're doing.*

**Rosie, Year 4**

University of York PhD students have developed this booklet and online resource to help you get the most out of your PhD experience by sharing what we've learnt along the way. We want all doctoral students at York to enjoy and excel in their PhDs. Here, you will find brief advice on what we wish we had known right from the start of our PhD journeys.

## Finding your 'work groove'

One of the advantages of doing a PhD is having flexible hours, which allows you to work at a time and rhythm that suits you best. Some stick to regular fixed working hours, while others prefer to work when the inspiration hits. Sometimes life and responsibilities will get in the way and that's OK. There's no right or wrong way to work, although consistency helps!

Find what's most effective for you.

*A PhD thesis is like writing a book. It will need a single storyline that is told across several chapters. In practical terms, this means getting into the habit of writing regularly. Not everything that you write will make the final cut, but it will all be a contribution to your intellectual process.*

**Ana, Year 4**

*I wish I had known to relax a bit about the timeline and accept that things can't always go to plan during a PhD.*

**O'Dessa, Year 4**

*When you have a quieter period of time in your PhD don't rush to fill it with work through fear that you're not being productive. Make the most of the quieter times as the busy times soon come back!*

**Chris, Year 4**

*There is no right or wrong pace. Other people may seem to have done more work, but they've done different work. Don't compare your progress with others.*

**Vicki, Year 1**



For more  
information visit  
**[york.ac.uk/  
survive-your-phd](http://york.ac.uk/survive-your-phd)**

*Throughout your PhD, it is important to remember why you wanted to do it. This can help you re-engage with your project when you're feeling less motivated.*

**Sarah, Year 2**

## Supervisors and support

Each supervisor works differently, so it's important to learn how to work with yours. Some like to oversee every step of your PhD and have lots of contact time, whilst others will give you almost complete freedom to do as you please. Set expectations and establish a clear working relationship from the beginning - talk to them about how often you will meet, what support you will need, how often you will submit work and receive feedback.

*Make the most of your supervision meetings - submit a piece of work in advance so you can get feedback or take an agenda of points you want to discuss. Don't ever feel like you are burdening your supervisor - it's their job to support you through the process.*

**Beth, Year 3**


Write down your motivations for doing a PhD e.g. to have a career in research, or your passion for the topic.



## Criticism

### From academics and of yourself

Constructive criticism serves to identify the shortcomings of any research. It is not intended to be personal. Remember that these comments aim to bring the best out of your skills and potential as a doctoral researcher, and help you produce your best work.




*Be your best critic, but also cut yourself some slack. Academia is a tough environment, but don't take rejection personally. Focus on making yourself proud, first and foremost.*

**Marina, Year 3**

## Reflection and making notes

It is good to keep a record of how your project evolves, decisions you're making, and things that are interesting but outside the scope of your research. This will help you reflect as you work on your PhD, and you can look back on how far you've come, both academically and personally.



*Write 'thought pieces' often even if you are not ready to start writing for your actual thesis. I've found it extremely useful to re-visit early pieces of theoretical writing and some has found its way into my final thesis.*


**Sharon, Year 4**

*You will deal with a lot of literature, data, records and notes. Keeping track of everything can become challenging and confusing. Be organised from day one!*

**Matteo, Year 3**




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## Bumps in the road

### Being adaptable

Doing a PhD is not a linear process. A lot of students experience setbacks or doubts about their findings, or the scope of their research. These challenges are often no bad thing - they will improve your thesis and deepen your understanding of the topic.



*A PhD will come with a lot of failures, but you will learn more from failures, difficulties and rejections than success.*

**Giampaolo, Year 3**

*Don't be surprised if your research focus changes, even while you're doing fieldwork. It's normal to continually discover new things you didn't know previously.*

**Eli, Year 1**


*Sometimes you discover something in your research that you don't like. It may challenge your assumptions or conclusions. It's better to find these problems early and work through them now, rather than at your viva.*

**Victoria, Year 2**



## Remember you're not alone

Everyone knows that doing a PhD is hard. But it is absolutely worth it! If you feel like you are struggling academically or with your mental health, there is support available to you throughout the university.



*Make time to catch up with other PhD students. It might be an individual piece of work but they understand the difficult bits and appreciate the significance of the milestones too. It's great to support each other.*

**Chris, Year 2**

*Do not be afraid to ask for help. The University, your Department and supervisor have steps in place to help you if you are struggling with personal and/or academic difficulties.*

**Lou, Year 4**

## Skill development

Each person's entry level and career pathway before their PhD differs, so everyone will learn different aspects of research during their PhD programme. It is an excellent time to learn new skills and develop existing ones. Seek out and make use of the opportunities available. Auditing Masters modules, teaching, attending and presenting at conferences, workshops, training courses, departmental activities, and even involvement with student-led societies will add hugely to your overall PhD experience.

*The first year of the PhD is as much about optimising your skills as a researcher - learning how to organise your time, finding out what patterns of work suit you best - as it is about your topic.*

**Catherine, Year 2**

Make a list of the other things you want to get out of your PhD experience. e.g. skills in public speaking or contacts in your field of interest.

*If you spend every waking minute doing research in your office, you'll be left with no memories of anything besides the work when you're done.*

**Ned, Year 1**

## Life outside the PhD

Unlike a regular job, where there are usually clear boundaries between work and personal life, your PhD is always there in the background. You'll need to define these boundaries yourself. It's important to spend time with your loved ones, but also try to build a network of people who understand the PhD journey and can empathise.

*Make sure that you actively incorporate breaks into your week even when you have deadlines looming!*

**Katie, Year 3**

*Doing a PhD can be lonely. Get involved with university life - sports, forums, part-time work, conferences - and use them to build lasting and meaningful relationships with your peers.*

**Sam, Year 4**

*Give yourself regular rewards so you have something nice to look forward to in the near future.*

**Ana, Year 4**

*Eat, sleep, exercise, socialise. Support from friends, family and colleagues is important for your mental strength so maintain healthy social ties. Take care of your body and mind.*

**Tabitha, Year 4**

*Make sure you enjoy life while working - you don't want to come out of university with a lot of stress and no friends. Connect with other research students. They may not understand your topic, but they'll understand your passion and goals.*

**Victor, Year 2**





## Resources


There is a lot of information and useful resources available to PhD students via the university website ([york.ac.uk](http://york.ac.uk)). As well as reading your Department's PhD handbook spend time early on in your PhD gathering information about the resources available to you. We recommend visiting:

- SkillsForge,
- Yorkshire VLE,
- the Library's Subject Guide for your department,
- the websites of the York Graduate Research School (YGRS), Wentworth College and the Graduate Student Association (GSA).

*Make time to read your Department's PhD Handbook and progression policies early on. Refer back to the policy for every TAP (Thesis Advisory Panel) and progression meeting to make sure that you are fulfilling the programme requirements. Make it easy for them to pass you by showing that you are meeting the marking criteria!*

**Kim, Year 2**

We've only been able to share a small amount of what we've learnt with you in this booklet. Visit our webpage for more advice, and a list of apps and other resources we've found helpful for productivity and relaxation:



**[york.ac.uk/  
survive-your-phd](http://york.ac.uk/survive-your-phd)**

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