

What's the Easiest PhD?

This question really doesn't have a straight answer. PhDs are not easy. They are not intended or designed to be easy. But there are probably things you can do to make the whole process easier.

You have to create something new in a PhD. That's the threshold for success. New knowledge. And by design, this usually means doing something no one else has done before. And being the first to do anything will be difficult. Imagine learning to cook, but only being able to use trial and error to make something tasty. Or trying to make a new food or a new meal. You can use cookbooks etc., but the meal has to be new. Never been made by someone before.

I've already written about falling in love with your PhD. And I think that's the first thing to do. Get to love or really like your PhD. Liking or loving anything is a sure fire way to make it seem easier. Or at the very least make that thing far more tolerable and thus reduce the amount of perceived effort required for success. Just think about how kids (as well as yourself) learn to do new things. There's likely the frustration of failure, but the love of the process and achievement helps get them/you through.

Part of loving your PhD is to get to know your supervisor. And, if you cannot fall in love with your PhD, having a good relationship with your supervisors make your PhD easier. And I don't mean a relationship void of conflict or disagreement. Instead, a good relationship with your supervisor is one where you can disagree, even argue, but still continue to do good work. Getting to know your supervisor and sharing stuff about yourself can help build a strong supervisor-student relationship.

I guess, those 2 things focus on people already in their PhD. But if you are yet to start your PhD, or you have the opportunity to influence your PhD, here are some things that I think will make your PhD easier.

- 1. Have a good research question.** A good research question will clearly define the scope of your research. It will be clear to you and your supervisor what is in and what is out. It will be easy to say "yes" or "no" to certain experiments because they will or won't help answer your research question. Part of asking a good research question is to avoid compound questions. Instead break them up into component parts. It should be specific. Not general. You should know if/when you've answered your question. Or at least know if/when you've moved closer to the answer. If your PhD desired is more applied than theoretical, asking a good research question will require you to have a good understanding of the problem you'd like to solve.
- 2. Use known research tools.** Above I mentioned making a new meal that has never been made before. If something like that is your goal then you might be also inventing new cooking techniques. That will add time to your project. Whereas, if you restrict your new meal to making use of existing cooking techniques - or better yet techniques specific to a person, place or period of time - the task becomes easier. There are already instructions for those techniques. There are people who use them. There are experts you can learn from. The same is true for research tools. Using tools that others have perfected will make data collection easier.
- 3. Have accessible data/samples.** There are varying degrees of accessible. For example, your research team could have everything you need - surveys, cohort of potential respondents, analysis software. But that still means you need to recruit participants and send out the survey. As well as collate the responses. All before you do the analysis. Conversely, if the surveying has been done, and the data collated, your role will be analysis. Interrogating the data. This will make the process easier. So, if you want to work with people, you can make the PhD easier by not only having access to a pool of volunteers (e.g., I'm a clinician so I can send the survey to my clinician friends), but KNOWING you have enough volunteers (e.g., all of these people have already agreed to participate, or I can force them to participate). In a biomedical setting, the team might have the cells and reagents, but you need to do the

work to collect the protein and store the samples. Whereas, if the samples are already collected, you might only need to put them through some kind of analysis machine/process (e.g., staining, chromatography). Or better yet, the samples might already be stained/visualised, and you just need to count. Or better still, the counting has been done, you just need to bring together the experiment versus the controls.

4. **Build your analytic skills.** I cannot think of a PhD that does not require you to be good at analysis. So, building your analytic skills will make the PhD easier. It might be hard to build your ability to see trends, spot patterns or make connections. But you can do things like, become good at stats (and if you do, you'll be leaned on by everyone else), good at programming (to both analyse and visualise data), or good at using programs (e.g., MS Excel, Google Sheets, SPSS). And the good news is, as a current student you can start this, and it'll make your PhD easier.
5. **Be skilled in word processing.** There are only a few examples of PhDs that don't require much written work. And for most of us that means using a word processes. I don't care what one you use just get good at it. IMHO MS Word, and Google Docs are the best places to start. Most universities have these programs as part of their suite provided to staff and students. But if you prefer others, use them. And just like with analytics, as a current student you can start building your skills and it'll make your PhD easier.
6. **STOP scope creep.** Scope creep means your PhD changing from your original thought or idea. Sometimes this is good. But most times, changes to your plan add time without increasing quality or reducing difficulty. And I've never seen some change scope and then have their PhD get shorter. Although PhD quality matters, the end result is pass/fail. Other than maybe one or two people getting the best thesis award each year, there is limited comment on PhD quality. I'm not saying turn in a piece of rubbish. But I am saying, changing tack because, "It'll make your PhD better" doesn't give you a better *mark* in the same way that changing an essay might shift your mark from an F to a C. Scope creep also happens in relation to building skills and selecting software. Don't spend 6 months working out the best programming language, statistical software or word processor to use. Spend 6 months getting awesome at using one. Chances are the one you have easiest access too will be the best. That's why it is easy to access. Then maybe worry about what is best.

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