

How to thrive in grad school

Food for thought and a little advice...

By definition, if you're here, you've had a minimum of 16 years of formal education. But if this is your first time in graduate school, you are likely to find the experience is qualitatively—and in some instances *quantitatively*—different from your undergraduate studies.

The primary **quantitative** difference is in the amount of reading you're expected to do. Some say the amount of writing is a second quantitative difference; that's probably so for many of you.

The qualitative differences? There are several.

We expect you to be an active participant in your own learning. You might have made it through undergrad school by keeping your head down and doing exactly what your teachers told you to do. Passivity isn't going to work so well here. YOU are in charge of your learning. You don't come here as a blank slate; you come because you've chosen a particular profession, and you've presumably chosen it for one or more reasons! You know a lot about what you most want to know. (Don't worry: we'll hit you with a lot of stuff that WE know you need to know, so you won't be doing this by herself.)

You're going to read a whole lot more than most of you are accustomed to.

For those of you who had first-rate undergraduate education, this won't be new, but for many it will be: Regurgitation is not enough here. Spitting back what you've read and what your professors have said in class in some instances might get you a passing grade, but not much more. What we want is for you to integrate what you've read and heard with your own experience and with all the other knowledge you bring, and then to apply the concepts. You show us you've learned when you show us you can *use* what you've learned. And—here's a scary thought—at this level of higher education, you are by definition a scholar! So we expect scholarly work out of you.

This will be a more intense personal journey than many of you expect. You want to be a social worker; you want to be an agent of change in the lives of people and communities. Well, the only tool you have as a change-maker is yourself. Everything else is knowledge and technique—you are the instrument of change. And for that instrument to be effective, you've got to know it inside out. You're going to be doing a lot of reflecting on who you are, and how you came to be who you are, and what you believe.

So, some tips for thriving:

1. Learn to read in a different way than you ever have before. *Read for meaning, not for mileage.* It doesn't matter how many pages you plow through if you end up not knowing what the author was trying to communicate.
2. Treat your study and preparation-for-class time as appointments, and accord yourself the same respect you would accord a colleague, a friend, or even a stranger who made it onto your calendar.
3. Remember to look at yourself holistically, which is especially appropos since that's what a good social worker would do. Body, mind, and spirit all need feeding. And rest. And play. And work. If you exercise regularly, now is *not* the time to give it up. If you don't exercise regularly, now *is* the time to take it up, even if that seems counterintuitive when you're taking on this big new workload.
4. Use the faculty. We can be extraordinarily useful to you, especially if you let us know what you need. If there are things you're not clear on or simply want to explore in connection with a class, e-mail or call the prof or catch him or her during his or her office hours. You have an academic advisor, who is your advocate and resource. If you're having a problem, let your advisor know, and sooner rather than later.
5. Use your fellow students. Make time to connect. You'll learn a lot from them—and you need a few friends who get it about what you're doing here.
6. Never lose sight of what a fabulous opportunity you've made for yourself by being here. You have the privilege, however hard-won, of spending two or three or four years in a learning community, where your central responsibility is to stretch out, to grow, to explore the big questions, to take chances in a safe place where people will understand what you're trying to do. Savor it. Enjoy it. Remember it when you get in an end-of-the-semester grind for the finish. It really is about the journey.

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