

SO YOU WANT TO DO A PhD?

The first in a series of articles on postgraduate studies by 10,000 monkeys.

Before you embark on a PhD, you should consider your reasons for choosing this course. If you make a conscious decision now that this is what you really want, you will be able to look back and chuckle over your naivety with genuine irony in years to come. If, on the other hand, you drift into it because it is assumed you will do it, you will have no answer to the inevitable question, “What in Dante’s seven hells could possibly have possessed me to think that this was a good idea?!”

Here are some of the most common reasons for embarking on a PhD: which of them apply to you?

- *“I have a diagnosable mental illness”*

It is a popular misconception that you would have to be mad to start a PhD. As we will show below, there are a number of other possible reasons for postgraduate studies. Still, this is a good one. If you are stark raving bonkers, you will fit right in to the academic world. If insanity is your main reason for wanting to do a PhD, however, there are a few things you should consider first. Have you sought treatment? Many mental illnesses are now curable or at least controllable with a simple course of medication. Others may be resolved with appropriate counselling in less time than it takes to complete a PhD. If, however, you are certain that your insanity will last the distance, go right ahead and sign those scholarship forms.

- *“I can’t get a job.”*

Perhaps your undergraduate degree was a BA. Perhaps your grades are good, but you have the social skills of a discombobulated iguana and don’t do so well in interviews. Perhaps the state of the economy is such that only job available is as a trainee kitchen hand in your uncle’s fast-food joint, and you are too proud to take it. Any of these factors may mean that you are basically unemployable, and further education may be a wise choice. It won’t change anything, but at least it will keep you off the streets for the next few years.

- *“I can’t face the real world.”*

You’ve been in some form of educational institution for upwards of sixteen years – probably most of your life. You’ve heard rumours that there is something beyond this environment, but you don’t want to take any chances. Heading out into the ‘real world’ can be delayed for up to five more years if you start a PhD now, and if you do well, you may be able to delay it indefinitely by becoming an academic. If this is your main reason for embarking on a PhD, you may wish to consider doing a Masters degree first – that way, you can add an extra year or two to your total study time.

- *“I think it would be cool to have ‘Dr’ before my name on my credit cards.”*

Well yes, it *is* cool. But not everyone thinks so. Judges and most jurors are unlikely to have PhDs of their own, and may not be understanding after you are found strangling with your bare hands a clerk who nonetheless insists on calling you “Miss”. “But your honour, ‘Miss’ is a demeaning appellation symptomatic of over a century’s subjugation of women and *besides, I lived on ramen noodles and relied for hydration on nothing but my own recycled sweat and tears for **four years**, all the while enslaved*

to the whims of an arbitrary, inconsistent and uncaring supervisor, just to earn those two fucking letters" is unlikely to go down well at your hearing.

- *"I seek to further my knowledge and contribute to the advancement of science in this, my chosen field."*

Bwhahahaha! Good one! No, why really? If this is truly your reason, well, it's all very noble and self-sacrificing of you and all, but in general, it's rarely if ever enough to carry you through. Somewhere, in the morass of inaccurate and fudged journal articles that constitutes the full sum of knowledge on your chosen topic, the overbearing visiting academics with condescending attitudes and bad ties, the fumbled seminars, the perky, over-achieving colleagues, the whole ramen noodle thing, and so on, you'll find that all you really wanted was those two fucking letters, and that they don't make a blind bit of difference in the real world anyway. But in the meantime, good luck with the advancement of science and all, huh?

- *"I'm too ugly to be a model or an actor or a prostitute."*

Well, you've probably got a point. Still, there are other possible career options, and, if you've been down Oxford St. recently, you might want to rethink the latter one.

- *"I am impressed by the example set by my television role model, and wish to follow in his/her/its footsteps."*

This would be, what, Dr. Smith from *Lost in Space*? You're aware that Felicity is an undergraduate? I suppose it really does take all kinds.

- *"Smart chicks are hot."*

There are two options here. Either you're a girl hoping to capitalise on the mystique of the intellectual woman, in which case I'm afraid to say that a pair of glasses and a library card will provide pretty much the same effect, or you're a guy, hoping to use that line to get some action with a lonely and undersexed bookish type, in which case, a better bet would be a six-pack of lemon rusks and a sympathetic expression. A PhD will almost never help you pick up. And as long as I'm offering free advice, they don't really want to know about your research, they're just being polite. Make something up. You'll thank me.

- *"It is a condition of late Uncle Fergus' will that his estate will only go to someone who can withstand severe psychological torture. My cousin is going to join Mossad for their training program."*

I have it on good authority that the Israeli Secret Service prefers to recruit PhD graduates, possibly for this exact reason. Your cousin is out of luck.

- *"PhD? I was just looking to put my application for the lab tech job, so that I can have a salary and job security and can still wear the funky white coat."*

Now you're talking.

Next week: Choosing a topic.