

SO YOU WANT TO DO A PhD?

Part II: Choosing a topic

by 10,000 monkeys

Some students come to a PhD with a well-defined topic that is tied to a scholarship. This type of scholarship is often offered because it is cheaper than employing someone to do the work. If they can convince you that your drudgery is all in the name of your own education, they can pay peanuts instead of award wages. If this applies to you, you can skip the next few paragraphs. If not, feel free to bask for a moment in your academic freedom. Perhaps you have enough rope to hang yourself.

Many students begin a PhD fired up with enthusiasm for some particular topic. If you have in mind some problem that presents you with a particular intellectual fascination, you should at all costs avoid choosing this as your PhD topic. In three or four years' time, you will have come to hate your thesis topic. You might as well choose a subject towards which you already bear some antipathy.

Often there is a tradeoff between the risks and possible rewards of a thesis topic. If you seek to answer one of the great, unanswered questions in your field, there is a good chance that you will meet with failure, fall into a pit of despair, take to excessive alcohol consumption as an emotional crutch, and die young following a thirty-six hour standoff with police after having shot and killed every senior member of your faculty. On the other hand, it'd be pretty cool if you succeeded, ay? Either way, you'd be famous.

Most students choose a safer option – a topic in which they can make an incremental, barely discernable (but ultimately defensible as “original” under university guidelines) contribution to the field. You may get to the end of your PhD and wonder what it was all for; but at least you may get there.

Whichever path you take in choosing your official thesis topic, your task has not ended yet. You also need to discover what you will actually be spending most of your time on for the next few years. It may seem at this stage that this will be the same as your thesis topic, but as any veteran of postgraduate research can tell you, HA!

Your second (unofficial) field will be where you make the real progress, because it is what you will spend most of your time and creative energies on while avoiding work on your thesis. Your true field could be pretty much anything – from scrabble strategy to fine art. It helps if you choose a field that can be made to look like work. “Internet studies” is an area of particular promise, presenting a wide range of subspecialisations.

Often, the most productive fields of learning prove to be those that allow you to convince *yourself* that you are working on your thesis. Perhaps you really need to know everything there is to know about your computer's operating system and assembly-level programming before you can feel that you are making the best use of the time you spend typing notes for your Politics dissertation into your word-processor. Perhaps you will come to recognise the importance of a study of Greek history as background for your thesis on soil chemistry. Perhaps you will feel that a detailed, even transcendental, understanding of the complete works of Douglas Adams is exactly what you need to come to grips with your study on the effects of methadone on the development of rat fetuses, in which case, good luck finding "The Long Dark Teatime of the Soul".

Ultimately, however, you don't need to choose your unofficial thesis topic: it will choose you.

Next week: Managing your supervisor.