

Reverse Graduation Timeline

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****Please note, this timeline was developed specifically for students at the Wharton School of Business. Requirements and norms may vary from program to program. We would encourage you to use this as a helpful reference point and to check your understanding with faculty at your specific program.***

To graduate successfully and on time, you should envision the end from the beginning. In that spirit, and borrowing an idea from my own advisor, I've created this reverse graduation timeline. It assumes a 5 year doctoral experience. Plan on completing the program in that amount of time. There's no evidence that taking more time helps you have a better academic career—if you do what's necessary in the early years.

Taking an extra year *can* be good under very specific circumstances—more on that below. But do *not* assume it will take 6 years. Even worse, avoid the mistake of not having a plan at all.

So without further ado, here's how to work backwards towards your ultimate goal:

Timing	Action(s)	Comments and Context
Summer after 5th year	Move to start your new job. Take a well deserved vacation. Make a plan for what you'll do during the first few years as an assistant professor.	You killed it on the job market! Gather advice on how to handle the assistant professor phase. That's the subject of a totally different document, however.
Spring/summer of 5th year	Finish any dissertation related tasks (writing, analyzing remaining data, etc.) Formally defend your dissertation.	Be done with it before starting a new job. You'll want a clean slate as you become an assistant professor.

<p>Fall/early spring of 5th year</p>	<p>Apply for jobs</p> <p>Job talks</p>	<p>Be especially mindful of your mental and physical health. The job search can be stressful—it's a long process.</p> <p>The main, short-term goal of going on the market is to get a job. But there's a secondary, long-term goal you could overlook. This is your coming out party, where you make your unique ideas known to the academy. It's also the beginning of forming career-long relationships. Those relationships will be critical sources of co-authorship and mentorship for years to come. Keep your eye on both goals, even if you're tempted to obsess only about getting a job.</p>
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<p>Summer after 4th year/early fall of 5th year</p>	<p>Have a strong version of your job market paper (including rigorous empirical results)</p> <p>Have a clear “elevator pitch” to explain (a) who you are and (b) what your job market paper is about</p> <p>Make a list of schools you’re interested in. Ask your advisor, committee members, and other faculty to introduce you to professors at schools you’re interested in.</p> <p>Network at AOM and other conferences.</p> <p>Apply for jobs.</p> <p>Practice, practice, and practice your job talk.</p>	<p>Your job market paper gets you the job. It’s the most important aspect of your application. Your quality as a scholar is judged by it, more than your publications or pipeline.</p> <p>Your CV gets you job interviews. Having a publication is desirable but not the most important thing. Having a pipeline of work beyond your dissertation is also good. Many schools like to count papers. But don’t sacrifice a good job market paper for “numbers” in your CV. Be wise about building up both, but prioritize high quality work central to your identity as a scholar.</p> <p>Be your own marketing department. If you don’t promote yourself, nobody else will. That means being proactive about asking for what you need, networking, and making yourself known.</p> <p>We tend to underinvest in communication skills in our profession. Writing a good paper requires different skills than presenting a paper well. Practice your presentation a lot. The experience of presenting your ideas often in earlier years will pay off at this point.</p>
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<p>Spring of 4th year</p>	<p>Finish gathering data for your job market paper.</p> <p>Analyze the data using the cutting edge skills you developed through coursework and in other projects.</p> <p>Defend your dissertation proposal if you didn't do it previously.</p> <p>Have a full version of your job market paper (or something close). Get as much feedback as possible.</p> <p>Manage other research projects, but prioritize your job market paper.</p> <p>Present something you're working on in a department seminar this semester or the previous one.</p>	<p>If you've done things right in the previous years, you'll be applying many of the research skills you developed during coursework and other research projects to your job market paper (and dissertation). The dissertation will challenge you in its own ways, but it shouldn't be the first time you apply basic research skills.</p>
<p>Summer after 3rd year/Fall of 4th year</p>	<p>Take a break/vacation.</p> <p>Finalize your dissertation committee and agree with them on the format of your dissertation.</p> <p>Defend your dissertation proposal.</p> <p>Manage other research projects, but prioritize your dissertation.</p>	<p>It's best if you can get defend your proposal in the fall of your fourth year so you can focus on your job market paper the following spring/summer.</p> <p>Advisors differ on whether a dissertation proposal needs to have preliminary results or be a "pure" proposal with no results. You'll figure this out (and negotiate) this with your advisor and the rest of your committee.</p> <p>There is no predefined format for a dissertation. The three essay dissertation seems to be common at Wharton. But ultimately a dissertation is what you and your committee agree it is.</p>

<p>Spring of 3rd year</p>	<p>Choose a dissertation topic. Refine it into a clearly defined research question. Work on the research design.</p> <p>Manage other research projects, but prioritize your dissertation.</p> <p>Complete any teaching requirement.</p> <p>Present something you're working on in a department seminar this semester or the previous one.</p>	<p>Selecting and refining a dissertation topic will take a lot of time, iteration, and feedback. Don't get paralyzed. Good ideas aren't like gold that's out there and must be found. Good ideas are more like clay that you sculpt. You make them good by working on them, putting them out there, getting feedback, and doing it all over again.</p> <p>It helps to have "taste" for what good research is because it creates a standard you strive to achieve as you pick a research question and research design. That taste will come from your coursework, from reading others' research and watching them present, and from your advisor.</p> <p>If you expect to have a published paper (or one under advanced review) by the time you go on the job market, this is about the latest opportunity to submit it to a journal. (Of course, it's better to submit later than never.)</p> <p>Learning teaching skills is valuable. Take it seriously. But your priority is your dissertation and other research. It will be tempting to spend too much time on teaching tasks because it's more structured than research and you get immediate feedback.</p>
<p>Fall of 3rd year</p>	<p>Defend your 2nd year paper (Wharton Specific Requirement)</p> <p>Generate as many dissertation ideas as possible. Get a lot of feedback—not just from your advisor or potential committee members.</p> <p>Work on other research projects you started in years 1 and 2. Set a goal to</p>	<p>It takes time to come up with a dissertation idea. You'll have many "dumb" ideas, and many will go nowhere. Don't worry! Quantity leads to quality when it comes to idea generation. Remind me to have the conversation on how to generate and get feedback on ideas with you, and get advice from others too.</p>

	<p>get at least one paper under review at a journal during the 3rd year (if you haven't done so already).</p>	<p>This is a good point at which to start learning how to outsource: recruiting (and paying) others to conduct time-consuming tasks you don't strictly have to do. Think like a project manager. Your advisor can help with research funds, and there are many research centers at the university to which you can apply for funding.</p>
<p>Summer after 2nd year</p>	<p>Defend your 2nd year exam.</p> <p>Take a break/vacation.</p> <p>Work on your 2nd year paper and other projects you started earlier.</p> <p>Start thinking of dissertation ideas. Write them down. Generate as many ideas as possible.</p> <p>Supplement your methods skills with any self-directed learning you might need.</p>	<p>It's important for you to take some time off. But, once again, beware of taking the entire summer off!</p> <p>Your next year (the third) is the most dangerous, and the one that determines if you'll graduate in 5 years or not. Suddenly, you don't have the structure of coursework, and you have to start working on the undefined monster called a dissertation. You can lose the entire 3rd year spinning your wheels. Create structure and accountability where it doesn't exist. Remind me to have the conversation on how to do that with you, and get advice from others too.</p>
<p>2nd year</p>	<p>Complete your coursework.</p> <p>Work on defining your topical and methodological interests.</p> <p>Present something you're working on in a department seminar.</p>	<p>Avoid leaving unfinished coursework for the third year.</p> <p>Challenge yourself with advanced methods courses! It'll be much harder to learn methods after year 2.</p> <p>Start investing in your communication skills now. The job market year shouldn't be the first in which you present your research.</p>

<p>Summer after 1st year</p>	<p>Defend your 1st year exam (Wharton specific requirement)</p> <p>Take a break/vacation.</p> <p>Work on research and gain as many skills as possible. Do all you can to work with data.</p> <p>Supplement your methods training with summer workshops or self-directed learning.</p>	<p>It's important to take some time off. But beware of taking the entire summer off! You'll be tempted to do little because year 1 was intense, and you might spin your wheels because research is unstructured compared to coursework. Learn to create structure and accountability where it doesn't exist.</p>
<p>1st year</p>	<p>Take classes.</p> <p>Proactively seek opportunities to develop basic research skills.</p> <p>Work with your assigned first-year advisor and, if you can manage, with other faculty members. Do all you can to work with data.</p> <p>Actively participate in the life of the department. Get to know the faculty. Don't limit yourself to your advisor or the few faculty you met initially. Learn about the research people are doing. Attend seminars and learn from what and how our guests present. Ask questions during seminars. Go out to lunch with visitors, faculty, and peers.</p>	<p>This first year should broaden your horizons. Learn as much as you can about different topics. Avoid narrowing your interests prematurely. Take some risks in the courses and projects you pursue.</p> <p>You'll be tempted to think that the "soft" skills are easy because you can read, write, and talk already. But reading and writing for research purposes is different. And presenting ideas effectively is about more than putting together slides and talking.</p> <p>You'll also be tempted to take it easy with methods classes because graduate school is hard enough. Stretch yourself as much as possible with methods. The bar for rigor isn't what you find in the "classic" research papers you'll read in your seminars. The bar is better reflected in what the best students on the job market are doing each year. Follow the work of methods experts on social and other media.</p>

Summer before 1st year	<p>Prepare yourself mentally and physically for the demands of a challenging program.</p> <p>Settle into your new town.</p> <p>Participate in math camp and other preparatory skills (Wharton specific)</p> <p>Register for classes.</p> <p>Connect with the other PhD students in the program. Get to know as many professors as possible—set up meetings to introduce yourself and discuss what they’re working on. Consider who you may work with as your first year advisor.</p>	<p>Set aside time for the things that keep you healthy. Honor your commitments to your well being and your loved ones. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Showing up and being consistent matters more than working crazy hours. I’ve written about this here.</p> <p>As you consider first year advisors—and others you might work with—focus on more than topical fit. You need to develop as many research skills as possible: reading critically, coming up with ideas, writing persuasively, gathering and managing data, coding, and research methods. Work with those who’ll give you the most opportunities to develop those skills.</p>
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A few additional comments:

1. This is an ideal timeline. The real world is messy, and almost nobody will be “on schedule” all of the time. But it’s still useful to have a template to benchmark your progress and set goals. The template isn’t meant to increase your stress level. It’s meant to increase clarity about what you should be doing. That clarity should also help reduce stress by freeing up wasted time on things that you should NOT be doing.

2. How do you know if you should take an extra year or go on the job market? Barring unusual external circumstances (like a global pandemic), it’s not an easy decision. But it helps to have a clear vision of what it means to be ready for the job market. As I pointed out earlier, the most important thing is a strong job market paper, followed by a strong CV (publications + pipeline). A publication is great to have but it isn’t required to go on the job market (this differs a bit by subfield, so ask around). But ultimately, it doesn’t guarantee anything

So the main reason to take an extra year would be that your job market paper has significant weaknesses. Remaining an extra year for “CV building” would be a secondary consideration. But be careful. You can overestimate how much better your CV will get or how successful a paper will be at a journal in that extra year. Obviously, you’ll make this decision in consultation with your advisor.

But if you must take an extra year, you'll use it much more fruitfully if you planned to graduate in 5 years from the outset than if you need the extra year out of desperation because you didn't plan for the job market in earlier years.

3. Remember how privileged you are to be in a PhD program! This is an amazing, enriching, enjoyable profession if you love the process of knowledge discovery. Very few people in the world get paid to do what we get to do. When you start to stress out, take a step back to remember the fundamental reason you're here. Surely there's something that motivated you to apply in the first place. Keep that as your north star when things get tough.