

Everything I needed to know to succeed in graduate school I learned from the Simpsons

Lucas Wanner
NESL Lab — UCLA
wanner@ucla.edu

February 2015

Introduction

After completing [redacted] years in graduate school, I started thinking about what one needs to be successful as a student. As I remembered the achievements and failures of my not-so-brief academic career so far, I realized that all the important lessons from graduate school were mirrored in my favorite TV show, *The Simpsons*.

Smarter and more qualified people than I have written about academic success. In Computer Science in particular, David Patterson has shown “How to have a bad career in Academia” [3]. Randy Pausch’s “Last Lecture” [4], as well as his talk on time management [5] are both excellent. Nevertheless, after so much time in higher education, I believe I’ve learned many of the factors that make a successful student. I thus present my advice derived from the immense wisdom repository given to us by the *Simpsons* writers. After all, even Ralph Wiggum has had his day as a good student.

1 Organization

The average graduate student will, throughout the years, go through a couple admissions processes, a few fellowship applications, perform dozens of experiments, prepare a number of lectures, and write at least a half a dozen articles and a couple of theses or dissertations. Sooner or later, old files and documents will inevitably come back to haunt the unprepared student. Finding some lost piece of data may not be as complicated as dealing with Homer’s myriad lawsuits, but it will be very tiring.

A good organization of files, both physical and electronic, is essential to save time and energy. Knowing immediately where that research project from two years back is stored may help you finish a hard introduction



“I beat the smart kids! I beat the smart kids!”

Ralph, after getting first prize in the diorama contest by presenting his Star Wars action figures.

paragraph. In most disciplines, authors are expected to keep data records for published papers, both for public scrutiny as well as to support independent reproduction of results. Electronic media are not to be trusted, cloud services disappear, and not even Homer’s favorite deity, *Jebus*, will be able to save a student that doesn’t keep regular backups.

Following Homer’s way of life, good organization allows a student to *appear* prepared and efficient with no great effort. After all, no one in the audience needs to know that your awesome talk was prepared by stitching together slides from the last couple of years. While your colleagues spent time repeating past work, you can move on to more important things in life, such as enjoying a cold Duff beer.



“I tell you, the kid’s a wonder. He organized all the lawsuits against me into one class action.”
 Homer, appreciating the effects of Bart’s ADHD medication.



“TV! Teacher, mother, secret lover.”
 Homer, declaring his love for television.

2 Time management

If procrastination was an Olympic sport, even Homer would have a hard time beating an average student. There are many many books dedicated to time management, but the principle is always the same: know what you need to accomplish today, this week, this month, and so forth. Organization methods can range from a to-do list ordered by priorities to a detailed calendar. In any case, the sooner Homer deals with the toxic waste barrels at the nuclear plant, the sooner he can go bowling with Barney or to Moe’s tavern. Long-term time management is also important: conference and fellowship application deadlines are usually inflexible, and should be known well in advance. Finally, not having concrete long term goals will inevitably mean passing on good opportunities.



“It’s so hard to write 500 words!”
 Homer, the restaurant critic.

Turn off the TV¹

It may seem contradictory to write about the Simpsons and advise turning off the television. In reality however, Homer’s love for TV is just an elaborate ruse, and ...

Alright, there’s no way around this one: Homer loves TV, and here I must depart from the Master’s wisdom. TV is a huge time suck, and not just for students. Between lousy programming and commercials, there’s hardly anything good on the air. Note that I’m not advocating giving up on entertainment. Quite the contrary, between Netflix, other streaming services, and cheap DVDs, there’s no reason not to watch good

movies and shows. There’s a huge difference, however, between passively watching whatever is on cable and watching a show on Netflix. A movie or tv show episode has limited duration, and a much better entertainment-to-time than any broadcast. In summary, turn off the TV and watch your time multiply. And keep in mind that even Homer turned off his (illegal, of course) cable connection when TV started to interfere too much with family life.

3 Publish or Perish

To advance in academic life, you must publish. “Publish or perish” has a lot of negative connotations, but

¹Also, [:s/TV/Facebook/g](#), [/Reddit/g/](#), or [/XBox/g/](#)

is a simple fact of academic life. Homer has felt this pressure when he worked as a restaurant critic, and sought help from his dog to complete his 500-words text with arfs, barks, and rowffs. In addition to being *the* central metric with which you will be judged by your peers, publishing papers, and having them read, reviewed, and cited by others gives your work validity. Reviewing papers for journals and conferences can also give you perspective and insights into how to present your own work.

4 Communication

Both in publishing papers and presenting ideas, learning how to communicate effectively is extremely important. The greatest idea in the world is worthless if it doesn't leave your brain. Natural talent excluded, there are no shortcuts here: practice makes perfect. Your first papers will probably not be masterpieces in organization and clarity, and your first talks will likely draw yawns (or quizzical frowning faces) from the audience. Heed the advice of your middle school language teacher: one cannot write well without having read a lot. Certainly some reading materials are more worthwhile than others, but no one can read textbooks and papers all the time, and anything from Harry Potter to Dostoevsky can teach you something about communicating ideas.

When preparing any material, organization and structure are at the top of my priority list. It's much easier to present something after you decide on a sequence of facts. In text, this means planning chapters, sections, tables, figures and paragraphs before starting to write the text. In oral presentations, figures almost always work better than text.

Just like Ralph Wiggum, most non-native speakers would benefit from English language training. I am not sure, however, that classes are the best choice. Classes can certainly help in the beginning, but in the end, again, practice makes perfect. It seems to me that most English writing problems are rooted in a difficulty in expressing ideas clearly. A well structured text with somewhat "broken" English can sometimes be comprehensible. Text that was poorly written in its origin language and translated is usually impenetrable.

I highly recommend reading and consulting style and grammar manuals [1, 2]. Possible misspellings in this text aside, never neglect to run an orographic review on your text. Finally, in oral communication, pro-activity



"Me fail English? That's impossible!"
Ralph, after receiving a note from the principal.



"Little Homer is going to make me rich!"
Grandpa Simpson, planning to exploit Homer's voice.
One second later, Homer's voice breaks.

seems very important to me: a talking Ralphie is better than a quiet Lisa.

5 Money matters

Between tuition, equipments, and stipends, students are expensive. In general, an advisor is directly responsible for financing his students. Just like Grandpa Simpson, an advisor's secret dream is that his or her students will one day stop consuming and start bringing in resources. The good news is that there are many ways through which students can become responsible for their own costs. You can apply for fellowships, contribute with ideas, data, and text for proposals, or per-



“Of course I care! I just wanna have a beer while I care!”
Homer, praising Lisa for her high grades

haps work in close collaboration with Industry. The first step towards self-financing is keeping an eye out for fellowship calls.

6 It’s not personal

A graduate student has to deal with a lot of criticism and negative responses. Many students arrive in graduate school feeling like the smart Lisa in their family or undergraduate classes, only to feel like the not-so-smart Bart after their first negative results. The attitude of many Professors may not help in this matter: they care about their students but, like Homer, they’d prefer not to be disturbed while they care. It’s important not to interpret criticism and negative results as a judgment on your potential or capacity to do good work. Most Professors are deeply invested in the personal and professional growth of their students, and this usually requires delivering what can seem like harsh criticism. Finally, negative reviews on papers can be some of the most useful advice to make your work stronger.

References

- [1] William Strunk Jr and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Longman, 1999.
- [2] University of Chicago Press Staff, editor. *The Chicago Manual of Style*. University of Chicago Press., 2003.
- [3] David Patterson. How to have a bad career in research/academia. www.cs.berkeley.edu/~pattsrn/talks/.
- [4] Randy Pausch. The last lecture. download.srv.cs.cmu.edu/~pausch/.
- [5] Randy Pausch. Time management. www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/Randy/.