Working on Your Thesis or Dissertation – Do’s and Don’ts for the Students

1. Think of yourself as a researcher. What is research? It is about identifying a research question, explaining why it is interesting in the context of the existing literature, coming up with a reasonable methodology to solve the research question, and learning new tools on your own along the way.
   a. In other words, think how best to answer the research questions. Think about the methodological approaches and problems, and think of responses and solutions to them.
   b. Don’t just think about completing what the advisor wants or has in mind, like it is an assignment by the advisor. Think how you should extend the idea as a researcher. Take responsibility as a researcher in defining and solving the research problems.

2. Don’t think of your advisor as an answer provider. While your advisor is likely to have expertise and experience in your intended research and will give you good advice and feedbacks, he is not the ultimate answer provider. After all, if he has all the answers, why ask you to work on a particular topic? What is your value added?
   a. Don’t think: I have a question, you give me an answer.
   b. Don’t think: You are here to teach me how to do this or do that. Your advisor will give you feedback to your ideas. But he is not here to provide answers to all the questions that you have or hold your hand and teach you how to do this or that. Research is about teaching yourself to how to solve problems and learn things that you did not know before.

3. If you ask your advisor to give you a topic or an idea to work on (which ideally should not have happened in the first place if you think as a researcher rather than as a student), don’t ask him whether the contribution of his proposed research idea is significant enough.

4. Be punctual. Don’t be late for appointment with your advisor. This applies to any appointment with anybody, not just with your professors.

5. Don’t give him a draft the day before you meet him and expect him to have read the draft. Give him the draft at least one week in advance before your meeting with him. In any case, it is always easier to just discuss your problems and ideas in person rather than to write him long emails describing your problems and ideas and expecting him read it carefully and reply with an equally long emails. Emails should be used as last resort when you could not meet your advisor in person, say because he is away.
   a. When you can talk with your advisor in person, don’t email.
   b. Your advisor will probably read your final draft carefully, but not the numerous drafts in between. Nevertheless, it is important to have the drafts, as they serve more as your own pre-commitment device to avoid excessive procrastination.

6. Meet your advisor between once a week or once every three weeks. If you meet him more than once a week, chances are you wouldn’t have done enough work to discuss fruitfully with him. If you meet him less than once every three weeks, chances are you have been procrastinating
and didn’t do anything. Even if you haven’t made any headway, you should still keep your advisor posted at regular intervals with what you have done. Else, you risk procrastinating for too long.

a. I personally think that the most optimal frequency is about once every two weeks. But it is something you should work out with your advisor.

b. Don’t knock on his door whenever you think of a problem, like three times on a single day, unless your advisor maintains an open door policy. Try to think through it first before consulting him. Remember, your advisor is not an ever ready answer provider.

7. Being grammatically correct is different from writing well. When you first start on a draft, follow David Romer’s advice: don’t think, just write. After you have your drafts, revise, revise, and rewrite it until it is easy to read and follow. The readers don’t owe anything. They don’t have to read your paper just because you write it. You hurt only yourself if you don’t spend enough time to make your papers very readable and irritate your readers.

8. Be nice and polite to the papers you review. Don’t put down other people’s works to make your work appear important. If for nothing else, these people are likely to be your referees when you submit your paper to the journals.

9. Realize that when you decide to do research, you are ultimately responsible for what you ultimately produce, not your advisor.