

A few of my favorite things*

**where things are defined as research-related
pieces of advice and/or resources for PhD students*

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Getting feedback

Getting research feedback (1:1)

Get the most out of time with advisors:

- Come prepared to meetings
- Focus their attention on the problem or the issue you want feedback on

What is preparing?

- Have questions, have ideas, have pitches
- Talk through how to communicate any issues/blocks => try writing it out in a few sentences
 - If you can't explain it a few sentences, you may lose most of the meeting to communicating the issue instead of discussing how to solve the issue
- Preparing is thinking, writing is thinking, communicating is thinking!
 - You'll clarify your own thinking in preparing for a meeting

Resources: [Empirical Research Proposal Template](#)

Amassing and aggregating up feedback

Get a variety of opinions on your research

- Wait to implement changes or ideas until you've gotten a few votes/reactions and then assess those all together
 - If 4/4 people don't get your motivation slides + say the same thing => super informative
 - If 2/4 people like version A of your intro but 2/4 like version B => well, reasonable people can disagree
- People will have different reactions...
 - avoid getting caught in a loop of intro A=>B=>A=>B=>A based on who you recently talked to*

Resources: [So you want to go on the job market](#), *Veep (S5E6)

Seminars: lots of feedback at once!

In grad school you get the opportunity to give presentations in front of faculty/students. Some advice on these:

Do 1-2 practice talks before with a small group of other students => if you can establish this as a norm among a handful of people, it has great upsides:

- You get to learn from watching others prepare
- You get to practice asking questions and giving suggestions
- You'll get practice answering questions on the fly
- You're warmed up for the talk (you can make changes based on what didn't work in practice)

Have a friend take notes for you on questions/comments from audience

- It is hard to take notes and manage the room
- Assess the questions after to help guide future work

Seminars: tips for managing Q&A uncertainty

How to time seminars? You get lots of Q&A, so the timing can be hard.

- I find that a ~50-55 minute talk (without Qs) translates to 75 min with Qs
 - One heuristic I use: practice talk with no Q's should be $\sim 2/3$ of the actual seminar time

Sometimes there will be MANY Q's, so you need to speed up... sometimes there will be no Q's, so you need to slow down!

- Trick for this:
 - Decide ahead of time what section is cuttable (you can skip if needed) + include a bonus section (if time allows) – make sure these are later in the talk, so you can assess timing
- If you're nervous you're often talking too fast – slow it down if you're ahead of time

One way to assess timing during the talk:

- Prep: time out intro + roadmap components (e.g., 5 min intro + 5 10-min sections)
 - Pick a place in the talk where you'll check the time (e.g., between sections 3/4) + decide whether to skip items or discuss bonus items

Communicating research

“And But Therefore”

Storytelling is part of effective communication; storytelling is happening in abstracts/intros of papers/slides (key to motivation/pitch)

One mode: “And But Therefore” (ABT) formula

- And: establishes some facts
- Bt: introduces a conflict
- Therefore: you offer a resolution with your paper

Example: take [Einiö \(2026\)](#) (*“The Long-Term Impacts of Mixing the Rich and Poor”*; *AEJ: Applied*)

- And: social interactions impact economic inequality, social interactions depend on social sorting
- Bt: causal evidence on social exposure effects is scarce, most exposure is non-random so that’s a challenge
- Therefore: he leverages a fitting natural experiment to study this—assignment to conscript dorms was quasi-random

You can try out this framework

- Useful in advance of advisor meetings/presentations
- Relates to advice of writing your abstract/intro often (many ABT’s in these)
- Better communication of your ideas is better for everyone => easier for people to... read your papers, attend your talks, give you feedback

Resources: [Why Science Needs Story](#), [The Shape of Stories](#)

The digital world

Make yourself a website

- **Help people find you!!!**
- Help me help you
 - If I can't find a website with your info, I can't...
 - learn about your research before we meet
 - send it to a colleague with related work
- “What if I don't have papers yet though?”
 - That's fine if it's very minimal and just lists your year in grad school, fields, interests
 - You can also list advisors, papers you assisted with as a RA!
 - **Make the skeleton now and fill it out as you develop working papers**
 - This will become your JM website

The Job Market Website

- How long do people look at your website when you're on the JM?
 - Based on my own data collection, **55 seconds** on average
 - Research page got 6 times as many clicks as teaching page
- THEREFORE, keep it simple and skim-able. Don't overwhelm with information.
- Need to have:
 - Home page with: name, headshot, email, fields/interests, and a **statement that you're on the job market.**
 - Links/tabs for: (1) CV PDF, (2) a research page with links to papers
 - **make it clear which paper is your job market paper!**

Resources: [So you want to go on the job market](#)

How to email

- **Reduce back-and-forth**
 - If someone asks for coffee and you say yes, propose 3 times and a place
- Make it **easy to skim** => lower cost for people to read/reply
 - Informative subject line
 - Avoid large blocks of text
 - Use bullet points

Resources: [How to email](#), [Deep Work](#)

More important than version control

Hot take: clear ReadME files are way more valuable than version control.

(I think economists emphasize version control because it sounds technical and impressive but 95% of what we need vis-a-vis organization is actually all about good notes and documentation.)

Good file names are:

- Machine readable
- Human readable
- Sorted in a useful way

Resources: [How to Name Files Like a Normie](#)

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sorted in a useful way

- plan for alphanumeric sorting
- put something numeric-ish first-ish
- use the ISO 8601 standard for dates
- left pad numbers with zeros

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logical

```
01_marshall-data.R
02_pre-dea-filtering.R
03_dea-with-limma-voom.R
04_explore-dea-results.R
90_limma-model-term-name-fiasco.R
figure/
helper01_load-counts.R
helper02_load-exp-des.R
helper03_load-focus-statinf.R
helper04_extract-and-tidy.R
Makefile
```

chronological

```
2015-11-09_package-installation.R
2015-12-23_package-installation.R
2016-05-21_package-installation.R
2016-07-30_package-installation.R
2017-09-05_package-installation.R
2018-06-29_package-installation.R
2019-02-19_repair-default-library.R
2019-06-25_package-installation.R
2020-06-06_record-existing-pkgs.R
2021-06-15_git-config-analysis.R
2021-07-19_fix-https-git-urls.R
2021-08-29_git-default-branch-analysis.R
2022-08-11_rebuilding-my-user-library.R
2022-08-11_record-existing-pkgs.R
```

I promise you don't need to typeset everything

Don't create more...

- work than is needed
- complexity than is needed
- barriers to putting your ideas down

In fact, there is utility in writing down things in basic simple ways....

- **is the idea good, or does it just look good because Palatino* is so pretty???**
- unneeded machinery can get in the way of thinking
 - it is very tempting to focus on making a button in beamer... but I promise you, the button is not your top priority (*even though it is fun*)

Save typesetting for beautifying later stage work

- **slides are much easier to make without typesetting** (faster to make annotations that help viewers)
- if you need equations, for a section, you can typeset a few slides and then insert those PDFs or just screencap what you need

*FYI this is not Palatino because it's not a supported font on google slides

Organization

Project logging

Related to ReadME's but different!

- ReadME's are for code
- Project logs are for everything else

Create a log for your project. These are your internal notes! This can be a word doc:

- Write the date, write a few bullets on what you did
- Put your meeting notes in here
- Put your next steps in here

This is a tool for reminding yourself of what has been done + what the issues are

- This does not need to be beautiful. It will be long and that is fine because...
- You can **control F** this thing and find lots of answers you will not remember otherwise

Make the notes NOW, don't let them all linger

At the end of grad school I had many physical notebooks of ideas and thoughts I wrote down but never organized... by the time I organized them after graduating many were out of date and/or deprecated

- this took a long time and was super inefficient (summer 2022*)

Allocate time for organizing your thoughts

- E.g., you wrote up some project ideas on a post-it => you need to move that to your log now! (before you lose it/forget about it)

How to organize? Trial and error:

- Try a system, see how it goes for you
- Try another one, see how it goes

**could've used some AI assistance a few months later*

How to organize yourself

Use 15-30 minutes at end of your workday to recap what you did + next steps

- Help your future self!
- Use project logs

Organize time by “big” and “small” tasks

- *“A task with a short deadline will trump a task with a longer one—no matter how significant it is”**
- **Allocate time chunks of 2-4 hours for research**
 - One 3-hour chunk >>>> 3-hours with 10 interruptions for small tasks
 - Relates to “don’t touch the same piece of paper twice” advise

Within a research time chunk,

- Avoid digital interruptions (experiment with phone “work” setting, don’t have your email open)

Notice: tasks can expand to fill the time

- Strategy to combat this = hold yourself to internal deadlines (**set up meetings, practice talks – high-cost to bailing**)

Resources: [Deep Work](#), *[The No Club](#), [Doing Economics](#)

Learning to research

The gap between your taste and your current abilities

"Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, and I really wish somebody had told this to me.

All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But it's like there is this gap. For the first couple years that you're making stuff, what you're making isn't so good. It's not that great. It's trying to be good, it has ambition to be good, but it's not that good.

*But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. **And your taste is good enough that you can tell that what you're making is kind of a disappointment to you.** A lot of people never get past that phase. They quit.*

Everybody I know who does interesting, creative work they went through years where they had really good taste and they could tell that what they were making wasn't as good as they wanted it to be. They knew it fell short. Everybody goes through that.

*And if you are just starting out or if you are still in this phase, you gotta know it's normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Do a huge volume of work. **Put yourself on a deadline so that every week or every month you know you're going to finish one story.** It is only by going through a volume of work that you're going to catch up and close that gap. And the work you're making will be as good as your ambitions.*

I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It takes a while. It's gonna take you a while. It's normal to take a while. You just have to fight your way through that." ([Ira Glass](#))

Learning ~~to research~~ yourself

Grad school is a time to learn about yourself

What works well for you? Try out different things! This goes for...

How you work:

- When do you work well? What's a good routine for you? How do you organize yourself?

What you work on:

- What topics are you drawn to? What parts of research are your favorite?

And what you do outside of work!

Introspection and self-learning will help you in life AND on the job market!

- *"Without your own objective function, it's scarily easy to accidentally adopt someone else's goals. Clearly, maximizing someone else's goals means you're unlikely to reach your true optimal outcome."**

Resources: [*Job Market Objective Functions](#)

What motivates you?

In econ, we encourage lots of critical feedback.

This honest feedback can improve our work greatly, but it can be challenging if you start losing the ability to have positive self-talk.

How to address this? One idea: collect the good stuff

- Got a good review from a student? Save it
- Got a nice email from someone about your paper? Save it
- When you feel down, reading these items can be refreshing and motivating

Another idea? Contribute to other peoples' collections

- When someone was an excellent TA, let them know
- When you really, really liked another grad student's talk, send them a quick email – say what you liked

Managing
~~Learning to research~~ yourself

Study yourself

The PhD involves a lot of squishy time.

It can be hard to know what works for you if you don't even know your own process...

- Even 90 years ago (!!), this was a topic of discussion: *"this system of self-analysis, self-education, continued year after year, did more for me than any other one thing I ever attempted"**

How can you learn what you do?

- Collect data on your work habits and review (i.e., time tracking)
- Set time minimums for projects by week
 - Illuminating to see how hard it is to keep these
 - This gives you a better sense of hours needed for very long-run projects
 - Helps you figure out how much time is needed for smaller things (*random example: making slides for a PhD workshop*)

Resources: [*How to Make Friends and Influence People \(1936\)](#)

Work/work balance*

Lots of different tasks count as work. Some are small, some are big.

- In the PhD, the biggest task is your JMP. You want to allocate lots of time to it.

But not so much time that you are stuck on it all the time. Breaks can be good.

- Beyond your JMP, there are: other projects, teaching, service
- Want right mix of work => small things are good to get a sense of accomplishment (and to learn what you like!)
- But all non-JMP = bad; not getting any time for your most “promotable” task

Within the work part of “work/life” balance, find a “work/work” balance for yourself

Resources: [Sandy Black](#), [*The No Club](#)

FIN

Questions? Feedback?

My email: alex@albrightalex.com

*Cited resources: Books: [The No Club](#), [Deep Work](#), [Doing Economics](#), [Why Science Needs Story](#), [How to Make Friends and Influence People](#);
Online Resources: [Job Market Objective Functions](#), [How to Name Files Like a Normie](#), [How to email](#), [So you want to go on the job market](#),
[Empirical Research Proposal Template](#), [The Shape of Stories](#), [Ira Glass](#), [Sandy Black](#)*

More resources: see my [public goods webpage](#)

No gen AI was used in the making of these slides... except for in what follows:

ATTRIBUTION NOTE: This document was authored by Alex Albright in 2026.

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