



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
mentor memo
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**By Justin Reedy and Madhavi
Murty, in conversation with other
UW graduate students**

This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

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Creating a research agenda should be a major goal for all graduate students—regardless of theoretical interests, methodological preferences, or career aspirations. A research agenda helps you orient yourself toward both short- and long-term goals; it will guide your selection of classes, help you decide which academic conferences (and within those, which specific divisions) to engage in, and steer you in recruiting mentors and research collaborators.

What is a research agenda? It's a plan and a focus on issues and ideas in a subset of your field. You cannot study everything in your field during your time in graduate school, so decide what to focus on now, and what to defer until another day.

Research agendas are not set in concrete; they naturally change over time as your knowledge grows and as new research questions emerge.

Don't be intimidated. Many students may start a graduate program with only a few ideas of areas they would like to study, or perhaps a few general research questions. Graduate courses, conversations with faculty and fellow students, and time spent reading the literature in the field can help you start to form a research agenda out of those ideas or research questions.

How to get started

- Talk with faculty members about your general interests. Use faculty as a resource to find out which topics are over-studied and where additional work is needed.
- If there are students with similar or overlapping interests, get their perspectives as well.
- Read a great deal, even in the early weeks of your graduate work. Be open to reading research outside your immediate areas of interests and seeing how they link to your own areas.
- Ask faculty for reading lists or copies of syllabi. Such resources help you familiarize yourself with the research already done in areas that interest you. Be sure to follow up on citations that are interesting or intriguing.
- Identify key authors relevant to your interests. Read their scholarship and understand the work that has informed their research.

there's more... >

Advancing your agenda

Classes

- Identify courses that will help advance your research agenda—both in terms of specific knowledge about the issues and relevant methods. Remember that the title of a class might not always fully describe it, so contact the professor to find out more about class content.
- Look both inside and outside the department for classes—and look outside especially in your second year in the program. Graduate students in interdisciplinary fields, for example, may find very valuable classes in diverse departments.
- Think specifically about the research questions you want to ask, and think about how you will answer them. Then pick courses to help you in reaching this goal.
- Try to use class assignments to advance your research agenda. If possible, use each seminar paper as a way to focus on a specific part of your overall agenda —whether it be a literature review or a proposal for a study.
- Don't be afraid to take a chance on a course that seems somewhat outside of your agenda or your comfort zone. If the topics or research methods covered in the course draw your interest, you could find a way to incorporate those into your overarching research agenda.

Conference papers, colloquia, and research articles

- Ask faculty members if they have research projects in which you can participate.
- Work with more than one faculty member. Different faculty members provide different perspectives even if they are interested in the same concepts.
- Talk to faculty and other graduate students about conferences you should attend (and conference paper deadlines). Use conference paper deadlines to pace your own research production.
- Present your work at conferences, listen to others' ideas, and solicit feedback on your research.
- Consider working towards the publication of your papers. With enough feedback and guidance from faculty, fellow graduate students, and colleagues in the field, what starts out as a seminar or conference paper could turn into a journal article or book chapter.
- Attend talks and colloquia on campus—both inside and outside your department. These talks can help you generate research ideas and help you see your research in a new light.
- Recruit others to work with you on projects. Student collaborations are especially fruitful when the constituent members have similar interests, but bring different yet complementary perspectives and skills to the endeavor.

Be active: Be a part of the conversation in your field!

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