

ADVICE FOR SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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PREFACE

This document brings together six popular posts I have written over the past few years for my blog [This Sociological Life](#). These posts provide pithy advice drawn from many years of experience about how to successfully engage in various aspects of academic research – from using social media to revising journal articles and many things in between. Some of the content has been written with sociologists and other social researchers in mind, but much of it will be relevant across the disciplines.

The original blog posts were designed to be open access and shared with anyone who was interested. In this spirit, please feel free to share this document widely and to use it for your own purposes, but please ensure the original authorship details are acknowledged.

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1. 30 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND PUBLISHING

These tips are in no particular order, apart from number 1, which I consider to be the most important of all.

1. Choose something to research/write about that you are passionately interested in. I find that most of my research and writing tends to spring from wanting to find out more or understand more about a particular phenomenon that intrigues me. In explaining it to myself I end up explaining it to others, hopefully in a new and interesting way that is worthy of publication.
2. Be organised – planning time use is essential when there are many demands on your time.
3. Make sure that you set aside one or more periods of time each week when you devote yourself to research and don't let other demands impinge on this time.
4. So I can easily see what I need to do and by when, I use a white-board with a 'to do' list with tasks listed monthly and their deadlines. I rub off tasks as I complete them (usually with a great sense of accomplishment!). Very low tech, I know, but effective as a visual reminder.
5. Plan your research in chunks: this morning, today, this week, this month, next few months, this year, next three years. Have a clear idea for what you want to achieve in these time periods and try to stick to this as much as you can.
6. I don't tend to think more than a year ahead when it comes to research outcomes I want to achieve, but I find it helpful to write up at least a one-year research plan at the beginning of each year. Some people may also want to prepare a 3- or 5-year research plan.
7. Be strategic about every bit of research time available. Think about the best use of your time. Difficult cognitive tasks requiring intense thought often need a lengthy period of time, so plan to do these when this is available to you. Easy or less time-intensive tasks such as correcting proofs, editing or formatting a journal article or chapter for submission or reading some materials and taking notes can be fitted in smaller periods of time.
8. Use whatever research time you have to do *something*, however small the task.
9. Make a start. Once you have an idea for a piece of writing, create a file for it on your computer and write down anything, however rough and however brief, even if it is just a provisional title and some notes about possible content. It can always be polished and developed later or even discarded if you decide eventually not to go ahead with the idea.
10. Organise your writing into different computer files: articles in progress, submitted articles, accepted articles, conference papers, blog posts, book proposals, grant applications etc.
11. Organise your PDF journal article collection under topics in files on your computer.

12. If you are feeling unenthusiastic or have hit a wall – leave that piece of writing for a while and work on another piece of writing.
13. If no external deadline has been set, set yourself deadlines and try to meet these as much as you can, so that you can then move on to the next piece of writing.
14. Use your writing in as many different ways as you can – conference papers, articles/chapters, books, blog posts. Turn the small (unrefereed) pieces into bigger (refereed) pieces whenever you can and vice versa. What starts out as a blog post can be later developed into an article, for example. Conversely some of the main arguments of an article can be used in one or more blog posts.
15. Never let a conference/seminar paper stay a conference/seminar paper – turn it into an article/book chapter as soon as you can. If there is simply not enough substance for a piece that is the length of a journal article or book chapter, consider polishing and referencing the paper appropriately. Once it is at a standard where you consider it ready to be available to others, publish it on your university's e-repository as a working paper. That way, anyone will be able to access the paper digitally and reference it.
16. Decide on an appropriate journal as you are writing an article and tailor the argument/length to the journal's requirements before you finish it.
17. Once you think that you have finished a piece of writing and are ready to submit it, put it aside for a least a day and come back and read it again with fresh eyes. You will most probably notice something that could be improved upon. Once you have done this and are feeling happy with the piece, go ahead and submit. As [another commentator](#) has argued, you need to conquer your fear and send your writing off into the world: 'we owe it to the words we have written to send them away'.
18. Receiving feedback from academic referees on a writing piece or research proposal can sometimes be demoralising. Don't let negative comments get you down for long. Grit your teeth and revise and resubmit as soon as you can, however tedious it feels. See this as an opportunity to make your piece the very best it can be. If the article has been rejected, take a good hard look at whether the referees' comments are valid and if necessary, revise and then submit it to another journal. Remember that all successful academic writers have received negative feedback at times: that is simply part-and-parcel of academic writing and publishing.
19. Rather than simply deleting material when you are editing a piece of writing, make 'edits' computer files into which to 'paste' this material when you cut it (I make several edits files under topics). You never know when you may be able to use this material somewhere else.
20. Think about how one writing piece can lead to another as you are writing it.
21. Make sure that your abstract is well-written and will lead others to your work (see [here](#) for guidelines on writing an effective abstract).
22. Keep on top of the latest research published in the journals you use for your research. One easy way to do this is to sign up to email alerts with the publishers of the journals and you will be notified by them of the contents of each new issue.

23. Inspiration for research can come from many places. Attending conferences and seminars and reading the latest academic literature in your field are all extremely important, but so are other strategies. As a sociologist, I have generated many ideas from listening to good quality radio programs, reading newspapers and my favourite online sites and blogs regularly and engaging in social media such as Twitter and Facebook with people interested in the topics I research (see more on social media at no. 25).
24. Connect, connect, connect. Publicise your research and make connections with other researchers as much as you can. Make contact with others working in areas related to your interests even if they are in different departments or in other universities. Join relevant research networks or start your own.
25. Strengthen your online presence. Think about using social and other digital media to promote your research, engage with the community and make academic connections. Set up a profile on Academia.edu at the barest minimum. Make sure your university webpage is kept up-to-date with your latest publications and research projects. Write blog posts (if you don't want to commit to your own blog, do guest posts for others' blogs or for online discussion forums), sign up to Twitter and relevant Facebook pages, put your PowerPoints on SlideShare, make Pinterest boards (see [here](#) for my introduction to social media for academics).
26. Use digital bookmarking sites to save interesting material you have found on the web (see [here](#) for a discussion of using tools like these for academic work).
27. Use a computerised online reference manager such as Endnote, Zotero or Mendeley. Get in the habit of loading citations straight into this each time as soon as you come across them.
28. Think carefully about who you collaborate with on research before agreeing to do so. Good collaborators will add immensely to your own work: bad ones will make your life difficult and you won't be happy with the outputs you produce.
29. Seek out the advice or mentorship of more experienced academics whose research you respect.
30. Take regular walks/runs/swims/bike rides. This will not only keep you physically fit but will also provide a mental space to think through an argument or come up with new ideas. Some of my best ideas have come when I have been in motion and my thoughts are unencumbered.

Further Resources

PhD2Published: <http://www.phd2published.com>

Writing an article in 12 weeks: <http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1107>

Getting published: what academics need to know (advice about books only): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2011/apr/27/getting-published-academics>

How to publish your journal paper: <http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep02/publish.aspx>

2. 15 TOP TIPS FOR REVISING JOURNAL ARTICLES

1. Take a deep breath. No-one likes to have their precious writing critiqued, and it can be very easy to feel defensive and annoyed. But remember a condition of academic writing is that we expose ourselves to critique. We must learn to accept this and realise how the review process can help us.
2. Feel gratitude for the work performed on your behalf by the reviewers and editors. Although you may not like some of their feedback, nearly all (and yes, there are some nasty exceptions) have reviewed your work in the spirit of academic generosity and have taken precious time from their own work to do this. If they have performed the review constructively, they deserve your thanks and appreciation.
3. See the revision process as a way to make your work the best it can be, and a challenge to push yourself to improve it.
4. If the editor has given you a decision of 'revise and resubmit', always attempt this, however extensive the work required of you. There is a very good chance that if you revise your article competently it will be accepted.
5. If the editor has rejected your article, acknowledge your inevitable feelings of disappointment and frustration (or even murderous rage!) but then move on. Think about where else you can resubmit it. Consider first the comments made by the reviewers and decide whether you should address some of these before submitting elsewhere to enhance your chances of success next time around.
6. Bite the bullet. Try not to leave the revisions or submission to another journal too long – it can be easy to keep putting this job off, but it must be done!
7. If the article has been written with other authors, decide who will take leadership on the revisions. This should usually be the person who led the writing of the original manuscript. The lead author should take on as much of the revision work as they can, and then share the revised version with the other author/s for their contributions and feedback.
8. Block out a good chunk of time in which you will be able to begin work on the revisions. Choose a time of day if possible at which you know you will be feeling the most mentally alert. There is no denying that you have a demanding task ahead of you.
9. Don't rush things. Take as much time as you need to complete it properly.
10. Now that you are mentally prepared ... go back and read your submitted manuscript. You will most likely have forgotten most of what you wrote and this is a good chance to read it with fresh eyes.
11. Then go back to the email from the journal editors with the reviewers' comments. Copy and paste the reviewers' comments in to a new Word document. Then go through and isolate each comment which suggests or requests a revision. Then read each comment carefully.
12. Start to go through your original manuscript and begin addressing those points you think require revisions. It is often easiest to address the minor revisions first. In your 'response to reviewers' document, write your responses under each separate point as you go. Your response should explain the changes you have made. If you disagree with a suggested change, you are entirely within your rights to state this and explain why.

13. Highlight changes in your manuscript with bold or coloured highlighting so that the editor and reviewers can easily see where you added or significantly altered material. Don't use the track changes function (unless this has been specifically requested by the editor), as track changes can leave the manuscript looking very messy and difficult to read.
14. Once you think you have conducted the revisions to the best of your ability, put the revised version aside for at least a day. Come back to it and read it through again. Read your 'response to reviewers' document again. Make any further changes you deem necessary.
15. Take another deep breath ... and resubmit your article. Good luck!

3. TEN TIPS FOR INCREASING YOUR ACADEMIC VISIBILITY

It is important that academic researchers draw attention to their research. We don't engage in scholarship just for our own benefit. We want others to be aware of and use our research, including those outside the academy. Quite apart from the high value given to factors such as impact, stakeholder engagement and numbers of citations to your work, promoting goodwill and strong networks with your colleagues is important for your flourishing, including feeling part of a community and that you are making a difference.

Here are some ideas for increasing the visibility of your research to as great a range of publics as possible.

1. Actively use social media: blog, tweet, sign up to Facebook groups of interest or make one of your own to bring like-minded researchers together. Use these networks to publicise your activities – including new publications, calls for papers, and event announcements. Be a good academic citizen and also publicise the outputs and activities of your colleagues – they will likely return the favour.
2. Sign up to platforms such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu and maintain your profile, updating new publications on it. These platforms provide an easy way for people to request copies of your publications and for you to share them.
3. Publish preprints and postprints in open access outlets such as your university e-repository, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Social Science Research Network etc. This will make your work readily accessible for those who can't access academic journals.
4. Ensure that you have a Google Scholar profile that lists all your publications and citations. I can't emphasise enough how important this is to make your publications and citations visible in one place. Google Scholar automatically links to all your open access publications as well, helping people to readily find your work. **Important!** – ensure that you check your profile regularly to weed out any inaccuracies that the Google Scholar algorithms may have created, such as not including a publication of yours or wrongly attributing someone else's publications (and citations) to you. An inaccurate Google Scholar profile is not a good look, particularly if it appears that you are taking credit for someone else's work.
5. Sign up to Google Scholar alerts for your name – this will mean that every time you are cited, GS will email you a notification. This a fantastic way not only of seeing who is citing you but also how they are using and building on your work.
6. Create some kind of web presence for your research projects, so that you can share updates, calls for participants, invite feedback on preliminary findings, announce events and list outputs (hopefully with as many as possible available in open access form). Consider including a section that provides resources such as links to other relevant websites and research groups, methods toolkits, curriculum ideas and reading lists.
7. Take every opportunity to do interviews for mass media outlets and write pieces about your research for forums such as The Conversation.

8. Make podcasts and videos to talk about your own research or interview other academics working in your area about their research.
9. Don't be afraid to self-cite in your publications (particularly if you are female – research shows that women academics are far less likely to cite their own work than are men).
10. Use a platform like Slideshare to publish your presentation slides.

Edited to add: Also be aware that at times, increased visibility can bring with it unwanted negative attention, particularly if you research contentious or controversial topics that bring out the trolls, and if you are identify with a marginalised or vulnerable social group. If this is you, be careful in your choices about how to communicate your research publicly. (Thanks to Emma Renold for drawing attention to these issues when commenting on this post.)

4. TIPS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS SEEKING FUNDING – WHAT NOT TO LEAVE OUT OF YOUR GRANT APPLICATIONS

It is grant reviewing season and I've been reading through some very interesting applications from some accomplished qualitative researchers in the social sciences and media studies. The rationale and background for projects are usually very well described and justified, as are the track records of the applicants.

But I've seen some common areas across several of the applications that need more detail. These are:

1. There is often not enough (or sometimes even any) information about the approach taken to analysing the qualitative data you are collecting. Simply saying you are 'using NVivo to analyse the data' and leaving it at that is not enough. NVivo seems to have become a magic word to use to explain and justify qualitative data analysis. But it is just a data management tool. I want to know what you are going to do with it. There are many approaches to analysing qualitative data. Which approach are you using? Have you had previous experience with this approach? Please justify the reason for your approach and provide some information about what you will be looking for in the data, and why.
2. If you are recruiting research participants for interviews, focus groups or other types of participation, please provide details of whether you have used your recruitment methods before and how successful they were. I know from experience that recruiting participants can be difficult and time-consuming, and achieving this successfully is crucial to the feasibility of your project. I would like you to explain to me more carefully how you are going to find people, and how you will keep them involved if they are required for more than one activity or you are asking them to be involved over quite a long time in the project.
3. This issue is particularly important if you are proposing to recruit hard-to-reach or marginalised social groups, and also high-status groups (such as busy professionals, for whom time is money). Here you need to provide even more information about how you will successfully recruit these participants and commit them to be involved. What will persuade them to be part of your study?
4. Which leads on to the ethics of recruiting participants from marginalised groups, or those you wish to engage in discussions about potentially distressing experiences. How will you persuade these people to want to speak to you? How will you protect them from harm, if you are raising sensitive and distressing issues and inviting them to discuss them with you? How will you protect yourself and other researchers involved in the project from the distress you may yourselves feel at discussing sensitive and very personal issues which may be very sad or otherwise confronting for all involved? I am concerned to see that often these very important issues are not discussed in enough detail, or are even glossed over, as if the applicants do not consider them important or have not considered their implications.

5. Many qualitative researchers now make statements suggesting that their research will have impact outside universities. Yet here again, often not enough fine details are provided to convince assessors and funders how feasible these claims are. Please tell us more about how this impact will be achieved.
6. And finally ... many major funding bodies now mandate that the publications generated from the projects they fund should be made available open access. Yet very few qualitative researchers demonstrate any awareness of this, or describe how they will meet these requirements. Here again, more detail is required. Will you be depositing your publications into your university's e-repository? Will you need to ask for funding in your budget to pay journals to publish your accepted manuscript as open access? Please explain your strategy.

5. OPENING UP YOUR RESEARCH: SELF-ARCHIVING FOR SOCIOLOGISTS

I have been reading more and more about the virtues of making one's academic research available on open access sites (also known as 'self-archiving') and [the best ways of doing this](#). There are several reasons why this is a good idea. Open access publishing makes your research visible by removing it from behind paywalls and rendering it accessible to anyone with an internet connection. An increasing number of research funding bodies are now expecting this as part of their requirements. It has been demonstrated that uploading your material to open access services [increases academic citations of your work](#), and therefore contributes to its impact.

Sociologists in general are way behind academics in some other disciplines in their use of any kind of digital technologies as part of their research and scholarship. Those of us using social and other digital media, therefore, have fewer colleagues with whom to interact. A critical mass of 'digitised sociologists' has yet to be generated. In failing to use open access archiving, sociologists are missing out on sharing their work, gaining a greater audience and citation numbers, achieving engagement with those who do not have access to journal collections and accessing other sociologists' research.

As part of my own attempts to work towards open access of my writing and research, I have recently been experimenting with different ways of achieving this. I have uploaded documents to the following open access archiving services: my institution's e-repository, Academia.edu and ResearchGate.

My experience suggests that combining the use of my university e-repository with ResearchGate and Academia.edu is the most effective form of self-archiving for sociologists. University e-repositories are functional rather than fancy-looking, and do not provide any type of social networking functions. However they have been carefully established to capture all the metadata required to facilitate access by search engines (title, place of publication, date, what type of article and so on), constitute a permanent and secure space in which to deposit papers, generate a consistent hyperlink to the publications and are overseen and managed by university staff members.

As depositing my documents into the e-repository produces a stable URL that I can then easily distribute via blog posts or tweets, it is very easy to publicise them. I can insert this link into my Academia.edu publications page, thus directing readers directly to the e-repository archive if they wish to view or download the publication, as well as embed it in my university profile page and so on.

ResearchGate and Academia.edu, for their part, provide features that university e-repositories do not. They include social networking functions, offering the opportunity to follow other individual researchers and research topics and for others to follow you, and also facilitates discussions with other members. I therefore recommend using both services in conjunction with each other to achieve maximum exposure, as well as employing social media tools such as Twitter, blogs and Facebook to publicise the material that you have uploaded.

One drawback of self-archiving is that one needs to be conversant with what can be quite complex copyright legislation. There are no standard copyright agreements across academic

journal and book publishers in terms of self-archiving, and these can vary quite widely. Most journals and book publishers in sociology never allow authors to upload the final, published version of the document as it appears in the journal/book itself (often called the 'publisher's version'). Most do allow authors to self-archive the author's own postprint version (the final version formatted by the author in a word-processed document that was accepted for publication by the journal following the review and revision process). Preprints (your version of a piece before it is peer-reviewed) can generally be uploaded straight away **as the author holds the copyright for this material**. However, the uploading of postprints often has to wait for lengthy embargo periods, which in the social sciences tends to be 12–18 months. Some book publishers even require a three-year embargo period following publication of the final edited version for book chapters in edited collections. The copyright agreements of each individual journal or book publisher need to be checked when self-archiving, particularly in relation to restrictions around postprint versions.

According to the **Budapest Open Access Initiative website** (an extremely comprehensive source of information about open access and self-archiving), researchers should be self-archiving articles at both preprint and postprint stages of publication. Publishing on open access services is a great way to publish pieces of writing that would otherwise have languished on your computer hard drive, such as seminar or conference papers. It has been contended that **writing book chapters, in particular, may be a waste of effort**, as they are often not accessible to search engines and therefore difficult for potential readers to find. Publishing an author's version on an open access service will overcome this.

I have found that a working paper published on an e-repository can be an effective choice for research that you are keen to publish quickly because it is particularly important or topical, rather than waiting the many months that the peer-review and standard publication process involves. This kind of pre-submission publication also allows for any comments or feedback from others to be incorporated (a kind of **pre-publication review** process) before finalising the piece in its required journal article or book chapter format. As well as pieces of a standard article/book chapter length, I have published quite short pieces of writing such as conference papers and collections of blog posts gathered under a single topic (e.g. collections on **fat politics** and **digital sociology**).

Two last pieces of advice. First, try to make sure that all the papers you upload are of 'publication standard': polished, carefully proof-read and attractively formatted. Second, include a statement at the beginning of each paper indicating how it should be cited. Including this statement, or at least enough information so that people can cite the document is very important if, indeed, you want your publications to be cited. I have come across several pieces of other people's writing that they have uploaded to digital repositories where the document does not state even the year of publication, let alone other details, so it cannot be cited.

Further reading: **The Academic's Guide to Self-Publishing** discusses self-archiving and lots more.

6. WHY I BLOG

Recently I did a short audio interview with Mark Carrigan for his digital sociologist series about my academic blogging (you can listen to my answers [here](#)). Responding to Mark's questions have made me think some more about the reasons why I blog as part of my academic work. Here are some:

- I enjoy it! At the risk of outing myself as a word nerd, I love writing about ideas and investigating social life, which is why I chose to become a sociologist. My blog gives me the opportunity to do this writing in a different way from the usual academic format.
- Academic blogging is a refreshing alternative to writing long, detailed academic pieces – journal articles, book chapters and books. It takes many hours of dedicated attention and focus to produce these pieces of writing. Once written, they must go through the review and publication process, which again takes months or even years. In contrast, I can quickly write a blog post, finish it, press the 'Publish' button and it is immediately out in the world.
- Related to this is the notion of control over my work. When I write a blog post and publish it, I have full control over its content and form.
- I can use the blog to present ideas that would otherwise not have a forum. For example, I have written quite a few 'how to' posts in relation to using social media for academia and tips for conducting academic research. These posts are not traditional academic pieces and would not have a place for publication and sharing if it were not for the blog.
- Blogging affords me the opportunity to comment very quickly on current social issues, a far cry from the long lead times of traditional academic publishing (see, for example, [my post on Kate Middleton's pregnancy](#), which I wrote and published within 24 hours of the announcement).
- I can use the blog for research purposes in various ways. First, to present some ideas I am currently working on in their early form. Second, to outline some of the findings of an academic piece that has been completed and published. Third, to respond to or comment on other academics' work.
- Blogging gets my ideas out from behind paywalls and makes them accessible to everyone. It therefore allows for an exchange of ideas not just between academics but with anyone who cares to engage. Sociologists write about 'society'. What we research is *about* people, and with blogging, it can *for* and *with* people too. As academics we should be sharing our ideas and research with everyone, not just those who can access our work in university libraries or can pay for it.
- While blog posts do not go through the standard processes of academic review and quality control, blogging provides a form of '[post-publication' review](#). People can read, comment on, share, tweet or blog about, reblog or cite the material, all of which are forms of engagement and commentary on the work.

The negative aspects of blogging? The only one I have yet identified is the additional time commitment required. For the reasons outlined above, I believe this is a small price to pay.