



# **Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School**

*By Adam Ruben*

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This is a book for dedicated academics who consider spending years masochistically overworked and underappreciated as a laudable goal. They lead the lives of the impoverished, grade the exams of whiny undergrads, and spend lonely nights in the library or laboratory pursuing a transcendent truth that only six or seven people will ever care about. These suffering, unshaven sad sacks are grad students, and their salvation has arrived in this witty look at the low points of grad school.

Inside, you'll find:

- advice on maintaining a veneer of productivity in front of your advisor
- tips for sleeping upright during boring seminars
- a description of how to find which departmental events have the best unguarded free food
- how you can convincingly fudge data and feign progress

This hilarious guide to surviving and thriving as the lowliest of life-forms—the grad student—will elaborate on all of these issues and more.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

"A hilarious, and exquisitely thorough, rebuttal for every time your parents bring up 'The G-Word.'" --Rob Kutner, writer, "The Daily Show," "The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien," author, *Apocalypse How*"

"The academic world is so full of humorless wonks and pedants, that Ruben arrives like a crazed party-crasher. It's as if a tweedy committee coma has been interrupted by someone from the roller derby. This very funny book also slings many sly arrows into an overstuffed and moribund culture that needs repair and reconfiguration." -- Compound Calico, Moderator, RateYourStudents.blogspot.com

"Adam Ruben's book is funnier than even the funniest dissertation, thesis, lab report, or legal brief. I wish my law school casebooks had been 10% as enjoyable to read." - Jeremy Blachman, author of *Anonymous Lawyer*

"Indispensable for any prospective grad student who wants to get a jump on his or her anxiety requirements. This book proves that years of obscure, excruciating academic toil can, in fact, make a meaningful contribution to society as a source of comedy." -- Jay Katsir, writer for "The Colbert Report"

"Why waste a few years in grad school when you can waste a few bucks on this hilarious and insightful book instead? You'll end up with the same career prospects (zero), but have had a lot more fun." -- Jeff Kreisler, author of *Get Rich Cheating*

"Hilarious! Adam Ruben has nailed the graduate student experience, and has done it with a great sense of humor....this is a true survival guide for anyone foolish, er, ambitious enough to embark on an advanced degree."-- Dexter Holland, Grad School Sufferer and Sympathizer (Lead Singer, The Offspring)

### **About the Author**

ADAM RUBEN spent seven years at Johns Hopkins University earning his Ph.D. in Molecular Biology. While there, he parlayed his healthy disdain for academia into a stand-up comedy act, which he has performed at clubs, colleges, and private functions from Boston to San Diego, recently opening for Dane Cook's Tourgasm at the Warner Theater in Washington, D.C. and earning second place in the Funniest Jewish Comic Contest at the Laugh Factory in Times Square. For five years, Adam has taught an undergraduate stand-up comedy class that has quickly become one of the most popular January "Intersession" courses at Johns Hopkins University and culminates in a final show open to all students. He's written humor pieces for *The National Lampoon* and appears weekly on *Food Detectives* with Ted Allen.

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### **Foreword**

There exists a subculture of dedicated academics who view spending a decade masochistically overworked and underappreciated as a laudable goal. They lead the lives of the impoverished, grade the exams of the whiny, and spend lonely nights in the library or laboratory pursuing a glowing truth that only six or seven people will ever care about. These people are grad students, and they are idiots.

This book is for readers considering or already committed to spending the best years of their lives without sunlight. You'll learn which departmental events have the best free food, what pranks to play on hot-but-vapid undergrads, how to convincingly fudge data, and why your friends who opted to take faceless nine-to-five jobs after college were actually the smart ones.

## Preface

Seriously? A foreword *and* a preface?

Indeed. The existence of both sections can teach you a lot about grad school:

1. Much can be gained by stretching a small amount of content over multiple pages.
2. In general, such redundancy imparts powerful messages that are powerful.
3. Your reaction reveals whether you should be a grad student:
  - a. Those unfit for grad school have skipped ahead, probably to a page with an illustration.
  - b. Those who belong in grad school feel a compulsion to read every word (and, in some cases, take notes to prepare an extensive critique on the book's use of dialectic assonance).

## Prologue

All right, now this is just insane. A prologue? Really? Are we stuck here in limbo, doomed never to begin the book?

Exactly. Now you're getting it. This book is like your life, and the prologue is grad school. You eagerly want to begin your life, but grad school stands in the way, and just when you think it's over—nope! Another section.

And the hell of it is, you could begin your life this moment. Really. You could skip to Chapter 1 and begin reading the actual book. But out of obligation to the printed word, or out of inertia, or out of a misguided need to finish what you start, you'll keep reading and waiting.

A foreword, a preface, *and* a prologue. Ridiculous. I mean, seriously, what's next—an introduction?

## Introduction

Every speech at my college graduation buzzed with a sense of finality. "You have completed your education," each one reminded us. "Now go contribute to society!"

And most of my classmates eagerly accepted the challenge, having known that this day—the official, robe-clad end of the beginning—would someday arrive. As they pocketed their diplomas, they envisioned their new jobs, their new responsibilities, their lives outside the academy. They entered college as children, but

they exited on that hot June afternoon as citizens of the world.

Most of them. Not me.

And not all of my classmates, either. As guest speakers and valedictorians exhorted us to go forth into the real world, a few of us felt the directive a bit premature. We knew that college had ended, but we also knew that the “real” world was years away. We were prepared instead to enter a half-assed compromise between college and real life, a simultaneously intense and lackadaisical academic perdition called “grad school.”

I felt a little like a cheater, like a twelve-year old who still wades in the kiddie pool, knowing it’s well past time to start swimming, but frightened of the loud teenagers in the big pool. Or maybe like a budding musician who masters *Guitar Hero*, but never picks up an actual guitar.

Instead of a job and a boss and a mortgage, September would bring another college campus with its dorms and quads and classrooms—and we wouldn’t even feel like its most welcome occupants.

We would walk around our new planned communities in a daze, not quite fitting in with the social culture, and not really supposed to. We would experience all the disorientation of a new campus—just like we did four years ago—but none of the excitement. And we’d have no idea whether to go to football games.

\*\*\*

I spent the first two months of grad school determining whether three amino acid residues (out of hundreds) were important for the functioning of a certain protein (out of thousands) that helps certain bacteria eat a sugar called arabinose.

I demonstrated that those three residues are not important.

Two months.

But that’s grad school. You take a tiny corner of the universe that a professor finds fascinating and bury your face in it, only looking up occasionally to steal unattended bagels.

At the end of two months, I felt ready to announce my discovery to the world. “Residues 103, 107, and 109 are unimportant!” I wanted to cry from the hilltops. “Unimportant!” But a journal article never quite coalesced, and I moved on to a different lab, and now exactly zero people know about my discovery—which, had I ended up publishing the results, would have been exactly the number of people who cared.

What *was* this? My entire life, I felt I was gearing up to *do* something. Now I had finished my college education, and as a reward, I got to sit in an ignored corner of an academic building, growing and harvesting plate after plate of meaningless bacteria, solely for the sake of turning grant money into fodder for more grant money.

To a member of the generation that was reminded, “You’re special!” at every turn, nothing strikes a blow like realizing you’ve reached adulthood positioned to be completely, maybe permanently, irrelevant.

\*\*\*

Hence this book. No matter where you are in the grad school process, you’ve probably felt this way (or will

soon).

Sure, you love what you study—but to the exclusion of nearly all else? When you’re typing page three of a 25-page paper at 4:00 AM, sucking down your ninth Red Bull of the night, will you honestly feel there’s nothing you’d rather do? Or will you shut your laptop in anger, thrust your head into your hands, and lament your stupid, stupid decision to go to grad school?

\*\*\*

If there’s one thing I’ve learned from writing a book about grad school, it’s that writing a book about college must be easy. Most college students are young, overconfident, drink beer, go to classes, take exams, write papers, party, live in dorms, deal with professors, parents, and roommates—in other words, their experiences are relatively universal.

Grad schools are all different. You could earn a Master’s, a Ph.D., a J.D., an M.B.A., a D.V.M., (that’s a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine), or one of hundreds of other degrees. Your daily routine could include hours of classroom instruction (either giving or receiving it), or you may never need to attend class. You might obligatorily spend twelve hours a day in a lab, or you might have to research your dissertation at your own pace in a location of your choosing. Hell, you may not even write a dissertation. You also might not have oral exams, teaching responsibilities, or an actual advisor. Your program may stop after a flat-out guaranteed two years, or you could find yourself puttering around campus a decade from now, swearing up and down that you’re going to graduate any minute. You might be twenty-two years old and eager to spend the rest of your life studying particle physics, or you might be fifty, have a job and a family, and you’ve decided to earn an M.B.A. at night online for a little salary bump.

So here’s what I don’t want. I don’t want to find my book on Amazon.com with little user reviews that say things like this:

**What the hell is a “thesis”?**, April 13, 2010

By **Stupid Whiny Complainier**

Not everything in this book applied to me! Waah! Waah!

If you read a sentence in this book about the GRE, for example, and you’re getting your advanced degree from a pharmacy college, which means you’ve taken the PCAT instead—let it go. As grad school teaches in spades, it’s not all about you. In fact, almost nothing is.

So relax, enjoy, and please fight the urge to take notes. Maybe you’ll even learn something, which is allegedly the point of grad school.

Then get back to work.

## Chapter 1

Stop? Drop? Enroll?

## DECIDING WHETHER TO RUIN YOUR LIFE

WHEN facing a major decision—say, whether to buy a car—take a piece of paper and make two columns. Label one "Pros" and the other "Cons." In these columns, write the positive and negative factors that will influence your decision. (For example, "On the one hand, I'd have an easier commute, but on the other hand, I'd have to pay for parking.") Then see which list is longer—and your decision is made.

When deciding whether to go to grad school, the process is similar. Take a piece of paper and make two columns. Label one "Cons" and the other "Super Cons." In these columns, write the negative and really negative factors that influence your decision. (For example, "On the one hand, I'd feel overworked, but on the other hand, I'd also be depressed.") Then see which list is longer—and do whatever the hell you want anyway.

After all, the decision to attend grad school is made with the heart, not with the head. And your heart is a moron. Your heart says, "I love to learn!" while your head says, "Hey, wait a minute. I'm the one who has to do the learning!"

But you can't fight an organ that could kill you at any moment, so listen to your heart. If it says, "Go to grad school," you know what to do. (See a doctor. It's supposed to say, "Ka—thump, ka—thump." Seriously. If your heart speaks words, you're fucked.)

### Two Schools of Thought

Some people think grad school will be just like another few years of college: "College was fun, so grad school will be even funner, because I'll be able to buy alcohol legally!" These are typically the same people who don't see anything wrong with the word funner.

In reality, graduate school can be considered an extension of college in the same way that death can be considered an extension of life.

Some of the primary differences between college and grad school:

#### Quiz: Is Grad School Right for Me?

#### Or Do I Prefer Joy?

Stop! Before you decide to matriculate, which is a hilarious word, consider that grad school is not for everyone. For example, supermodels can count themselves out right away, as can regular models, athletes, aesthetes, optimists, social butterflies, the "in" crowd, the outward bound, the upwardly mobile, international singing sensations, aristocracy, the generally well—adjusted, and anyone else already enjoying life.

To determine whether grad school is right for you, take this simple quiz. (Hint: If you're reading this book for pleasure but thinking, "Hooray! I get to take a quiz!," you're halfway there.)

Here's a criterion to start you off. This quiz is like the ones you see in Glamour or Cosmo. If when you see those titles, you picture them in your mind like this\_.\_.\_. .

Glamour: (J Glam 6(23): 13826-8)

Cosmo: (Cos Rev Lett B 167(1): 220-9)

. . . you're ready to enroll.

1. I want my \_significant other to

- a. love\_me forever!
- b. stick with me through good times and bad!
- c. abandon\_me after two or three frustrating years of incompatible schedules.

2. To me, money is

- a. very important.
- b. somewhat important.
- c. wholly unnecessary and loathsome. Fie upon thee, o vile money!

3. If I were an animal, I would be

- a. a tiger.
- b. a bear.
- c. a tiger or a bear who is in grad school.

4. At least half\_my conversations include the phrase

- a. "It was the best time I've had in my entire life."
- b. "It was the drunkest I've ever been, ever."
- c. "It was one of the more\_thoughtful pieces I've heard on NPR this week."

5. The most beautiful thing in the world is

- a. a rainbow.
- b. true love.
- c. the Euler equation.

6. When I was little, I always wanted to be

- a. an astronaut.
- b. the President.

c. someone who designs a small valve on an astronaut's shoe or publishes esoteric analyses of presidential policy.

7. I see a tray of free pastries. I think,

a. "These look pretty good. I may eat one."

b. "I'm not very hungry. Oh well."

c. "Well, that takes care of this week's breakfasts, lunches, and

dinners."

8. I'd love to earn fame and notoriety

a. right now!

b. during a long and successful career.

c. for someone else.

9.

Train A leaves New York at 9:03 a.m. traveling at 80 miles per hour, and Train B leaves Washington, D.C., at 10:18 a.m. traveling at 70 miles per hour. If both trains maintain a constant speed,

a. Train A will have traveled 100 miles by the time Train B departs.

b. the two trains will pass each other near Wilmington, Delaware.

c. I can still only afford the Chinatown bus.

10. I hope

a. someday to achieve greatness.

b. for a secure, stable future.

c. rarely.

If you answered "a" or "b" to most questions, relax! Enjoy yourself! You have a rich and rewarding life ahead of you, no part of which should be spent in academia. Go directly to the frat house.

If you answered "c" to most questions, fuck. You're perfect for grad school. Say goodbye to your social life, your finances, and any friends who don't study the same subject.

Blockin' Out the Scenery, Breakin' My Mind

Still not sure if you should go to grad school? Look for the top ten signs that you belong in an institution (pause) of higher learning:

10. You have friends who got high—paying jobs doing something easy right out of college...and for some reason, you don't envy them.
9. You could talk for hours about the awesome features in the new versions of EndNote or RefWorks.
8. No one depends on you financially.
7. In college, your favorite classes were the most fascinating ones, not the easiest ones. And you did all the "optional" reading—and loved it.
6. You find yourself describing academic texts using the same terms other people use to describe extreme sports. ("That gnarly textbook chapter by Hoffman et al. is such an adrenaline rush that it rocks the fucking universe!")
5. You think the job market will improve in a generation or so, right when you'll be ready to join it.
4. You feel a deep love for a particular citation style and genuine contempt for all other citation styles.
3. It's been too long since you had a good bout of nervous diarrhea.
2. To you, "semiformal" attire means wearing a T—shirt that wasn't free.

And the number one sign you should go to grad school:

1. Despite all you've just learned, you still freaking want to. That's the only sign you'll heed, anyway.

### Making Cents

Before committing to your program, ask yourself two basic questions: Can you afford to go to grad school? And if you can't, will that stop you?

Write the annual amounts you're likely to receive from the following sources on the blank lines. Add them. If the final total is less than the cost of your graduate program, but you still want to enroll, consider sleeping with a lonely financial aid officer.

### Departmental Aid

In some programs, your department may actually give

you an annual stipend or fellowship. To calculate the

amount they're likely to offer, look up the average cost of living in your area and divide by a thousand while cackling

maniacally. \_\_\_\_\_

## Research Assistantship

If you take an RA position, you'll perform cutting-edge studies using state-of-the-art equipment and get your name in prestigious publications, giving you a leg up for the rest of your career. Just kidding. You'll wash glassware. \_\_\_\_\_

## Teaching Assistantship

When you're in college, the TAs seem like aliens—a species of students slightly too old to be your friends, who probably live in the academic building where they proctor your exams. This is only mostly true. Also, the moment you become a TA yourself, you'll realize exactly why you, as an undergrad, were so annoying.

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## Outside Fellowship

If you're ever worried that history will forget the details of your life, holy crap, get a fellowship named after you. These have names like "The Mortimer H. L. Nussenzweig, PhD Class of 1951 Doctoral Fellowship for the Playing of the Zither," and are as difficult to land as they are to fit into one line on your rsum. \_\_\_\_\_

## On-Campus Job

Yeah. Awesome idea. You don't spend enough time on campus as it is. Now you have to spend twenty hours a week working in the library's Special Collections Room or fielding calls from confused tenured professors at the Computer Help Desk. "Well," you think, "at least it pays better than waiting tables." But it doesn't.

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## Off-Campus Job

Something probably makes you feel good about being the smartest waitress at Applebee's—briefly, anyway. You can spend all day thinking about the master of fine arts degree you're getting at night while you serve high-school kids who order the cheapest items on the menu. You pity your co-workers who'll still be bussing tables three years from now, but then you realize you'll still be bussing tables three years from now as well—and you'll have a giant debt. \_\_\_\_\_

## Your Parents

During college, your parents were so proud of everything their brilliant little scholar accomplished. But ask them to support you financially during grad school, and watch how fast they backpedal on their commitment to education: "Well...that seventeen-year PhD program sure looks nice, but don't you want to...I don't know, get a job now?" \_\_\_\_\_

## Student Loan

Thirty years from now, when you look at your hard-earned diploma, you'll reminisce about the good times you spent studying the subject you love. Then you'll sigh, dig out your checkbook, and make another monthly payment. \_\_\_\_\_

## Sallie Mae

This is the name of your great-aunt on your mother's side. She is wealthy. Kill her and take the money.

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Um\_.\_.\_. You Know\_.\_.\_.

Someplace

Most students plan to fund their graduate education by acquiring a large sum of money from um\_.\_.\_.you know\_.\_.\_.someplace. Don't listen to the dissidents who tell you this plan won't work. It must, because you've already made several decisions that require it to have worked.

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TOTAL: \_\_\_\_\_

## Users Review

### From reader reviews:

#### **Jared Williams:**

What do you concentrate on book? It is just for students since they're still students or it for all people in the world, the actual best subject for that? Merely you can be answered for that question above. Every person has various personality and hobby for every single other. Don't to be compelled someone or something that they don't desire do that. You must know how great and important the book *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School*. All type of book would you see on many solutions. You can look for the internet options or other social media.

#### **Marcella Aragon:**

What do you in relation to book? It is not important to you? Or just adding material when you want something to explain what you problem? How about your spare time? Or are you busy individual? If you don't have spare time to do others business, it is make you feel bored faster. And you have time? What did you do? Every person has many questions above. They must answer that question because just their can do in which. It said that about book. Book is familiar on every person. Yes, it is suitable. Because start from on jardín de infancia until university need this *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School* to read.

#### **Guadalupe Marshall:**

This *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School* is new way for you who has interest to look for some information given it relief your hunger info. Getting deeper you on it getting knowledge more you know or perhaps you who still having small amount of digest in reading this *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School* can be the light food for you because the information inside this book is easy to get by simply anyone. These books develop itself in the form that is reachable by anyone, yep I mean in the e-book contact form. People who think that in e-book form make them feel sleepy even dizzy this e-book is the answer. So there is no in reading a book especially this one. You can find actually looking for. It should be here for you. So , don't miss this! Just read this e-book kind for your better life in addition to knowledge.

**Joseph Russell:**

As we know that book is essential thing to add our knowledge for everything. By a reserve we can know everything we would like. A book is a set of written, printed, illustrated or blank sheet. Every year had been exactly added. This book *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School* was filled regarding science. Spend your spare time to add your knowledge about your science competence. Some people has different feel when they reading any book. If you know how big benefit from a book, you can sense enjoy to read a guide. In the modern era like today, many ways to get book you wanted.

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