

FOUR THINGS I WISH I HAD BEEN TOLD WHEN I BEGAN A CAREER IN RESEARCH

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I am asked to say a few words on the subject of scholarship, the virtues of research, a life of the mind, that sort of thing. Unfortunately, I find myself in much the same position as the British comedian John Cleese, whom you might remember from Monty Python’s Flying Circus and Fawlty Towers. Here’s what happened. At the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the students are allowed every three years to choose the Lord Rector of the University. And so, back in 1970, they elected John Cleese as their Lord Rector.

This is what happens when you put students in charge.

Well, as part of his duties, Cleese had to give an inaugural address on some noble, rectorial subject such as Courage, Truth, Faith, Chastity, Empire, that sort of thing. The problem was, they’d all been done before. And that’s my problem. What do you say about Scholarship that’s not been said a hundred times already?

Well, what Cleese did was give a speech on the virtues of Cowardice, and on how the world would be a far better place if we all just got in touch with our inner coward. It was a very persuasive argument, it went off very well, so my first thought was, “Hey: Give a speech on the virtues of plagiarism. Or making stuff up for publication. Or something like that.

But I’m mindful that the President of the University is sitting right behind me, so....that’s probably not a terribly good idea.

So instead, I figured I’d tell you four things – four lessons or tips - about being a scholar. You’ve all just begun a career in research or creative achievement, and these are things I wish someone had warned me about when I first started out.

Lesson number the first. I learned this early on from another winner of this award. Writing a research paper is not like writing a crime novel. When we first start out as scholars, we tend to write research papers like they were a detective story – a long build up, clues strewn along the path like birdseed, and then, in the last paragraph – voila! Solution revealed! It was the butler what done it.

This works great in detective stories. It does NOT work great in research papers. The problem is that other scholars are just too dumb to realize how brilliant you are, so they can’t be bothered to read to the end to find out what it’s all about. And it’s not like you and I are good at writing detective stories. If we were, Oprah would be interviewing us on her Sofa of Solitude. So tip one: When you write a research paper, put your main point right up front and put it in REAL clear and simple terms. Hit readers on the head with it, hit ’em early, and hit ’em hard.

Tip number the second. Writing a paper always – ALWAYS! – takes four times longer than you think it will. You think it’s going to take a week? Try a month. You build a month into your schedule? Think four. You figure four years to write that book? Sixteen years later, I’m still working on that one.

Actually, I did eventually learn this lesson. These days, it only takes me twice as long to write things as I thought it would.

Lesson number the third. Deadlines are your enemy, and they will lead you from the straight and narrow. Here's the problem. Because you're under the gun, you start to write your paper before you have any idea what you want to say. You start to write, and you THINK you're making progress – well, 'cos: “Hey, look Ma! There's nice new, shiny words on my page!”

But it's a sucker's game. Eventually you're just gonna have to throw away all those nice shiny words because they don't say anything worth saying. Don't start writing ANYTHING until you have a very good idea of what on Earth it is you're going to say.

It took me until two years ago to learn this lesson.

As you will have realized by now, I am a VERY slow learner.

Finally, talking of deadlines brings me to tip number the last. As your research career develops, you will gradually become aware of a peculiar form of schizophrenia that eventually comes to afflict ALL scholars. It works like this.

One day, you suddenly become aware that you have two selves. Self Number One is a blithering, irresponsible, drooling idiot. Self Number One is the Self who blithely says to book editors or conference organizers: “You want a 10,000 word paper on cooperation in large-scale social groups by next October? Sure, thing. No, no: I don't know anything whatsoever about the subject. But don't worry, I'll get it to you. Yeah, yeah. Really. Next October. No worries.”

Self Number Two is the Mother Theresa Self. Self Number Two is the poor, long suffering, self-sacrificing self who actually has to write the wretched paper that stoopid, STOOPIID Self Number One promised. You will find that Self Number Two really does not like Self Number One. In fact, Self Number Two thinks Self Number One is a psychopathic moron, who should be tied down with thick ropes before it can do any more damage.

I have not yet learned this lesson. In fact, I can say with complete assurance that around about October of this year, Self Number Two is really, really going to hate my guts. There are rumours in the back of my head, in fact, that Self Number Two is going to try and get Self Number One onto the next rocket ship to Alpha Centauri.

It won't work of course. Self Number Two is just going to end up having to write something for the Alpha Centauri Journal of Deep Space Ethnology.

Well, that's all I got folks. One's usually supposed to conclude a speech like this with some wise and uplifting epigram about the subject at hand. You know, some witty observation: brief, clever, memorable. Preferably not said by Oscar Wilde.

It's odd though. I've done my research and scholarship on this, and no-one seems to have had anything uplifting to say about research and scholarship. It's all just snark and sarcasm. Things like:

“When you copy from one person, it's called plagiarism. When you copy from many, it's called research.”

Or, there's Finagle's law; I never heard this one before. “If an experiment works, something has gone wrong.”

And so on.

So, given that no-one seems to have any wise and uplifting observations about research or scholarship, I came up with my own. Despite all the mistakes we scholars make. Despite all the aggravations that come from a career in scholarship. Despite that IDIOT Self Number One. People! Us researchers? WE. HAVE. GOT. IT. MADE! How many other careers are there where they actually pay you to do your hobby?

Huh? Huh?

OK, rock star – I'll spot you that. Yeh, and actor, Brad Pitt. OK. Alright, and er...stock-car driver, OK. OK. But still. It's a real terrific racket you're entering.

We get paid for doing what we'd do even if we weren't getting paid!

Believe me, you'll enjoy a life in scholarship, folks! Take care and have a good life.