

Top Ten Tips for Doctoral Study

Marlaine Smith, RN, PhD, AHN-BC, FAAN

1. Get organized and stay organized. Doctoral study demands different skills from you than your baccalaureate and masters education. Organize your courses, your readings, and your notes. Start reading early and keep up with your readings. Start your papers early. It is almost impossible to whip out a good doctoral level paper in a few days. Create files for your articles by topic or author. Keep all your course work together in binders.
2. Spend some time in the library. Libraries are wonderful places for browsing and finding treasures that you would never have found without taking the time. Go to the library as you prepare to write your papers. Know where things are located in the library. Ask for a tour. Take classes offered on searching literature, accessing databases, etc. The library is a great quiet space for writing, reading and thinking.
3. Make friends with technology. If you aren't great with word processing and power point you will be by the time you are finished. Use the bibliographic referencing software like "Endnote". It can save you so much time.
4. Find a good balance between focusing on your particular phenomenon of interest and exploring new ideas. You want to be open to possibilities that emerge as you take courses, but you don't want to get so distracted that by the end of your program you are without an idea for a dissertation or capstone project.
5. Get to know faculty. Meet with your advisor once a semester and more frequently as you advance in the program. You will be assigned a first year advisor. When you decide on a specific area of interest you may want to change advisors. Try to align your work with the work of faculty. Do your research practicum with a faculty member aligned with your area of interest. For DNs look for practice mentors in your field and begin to build relationships for your capstone experience.
6. Develop an ongoing glossary of terms. The language of doctoral study can be bewildering and befuddling...even funny! When you don't understand a word write it down...look up its meaning or ask the faculty to clarify its meaning.
7. Keep a journal of your emerging ideas. Doctoral work is the most creative time in your life. You are enriched by all the new ideas, discussions, and readings. A journal can help you to save those brilliant insights that you had as you were reading something at 2 AM.
8. Build relationships with your classmates. They are sojourners with you on this doctoral adventure. Help each other! Rely on each other for support. Ask for honest critique from each other. Talk about ideas with each other. These relationships can last a lifetime.
9. Take time to play in the literature. Search, read, search and read some more. Creativity involves: preparation, incubation, illumination and justification. When you are playing in the literature you are preparing the soil for the seeds of scholarship to grow.
10. Take good care of yourself. Follow a disciplined program of caring for self that involves physical activity, stress reduction (meditation, yoga, relaxation/breathing), good nutrition, and balancing work and recreation.