

The PhDidn't Handbook: How to Quit Grad School Like a Champ
a proposal

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Overview

I love quitting.

In the fall of 2010, I hit a plateau as a research associate at a neurolinguistics lab. And as much as I enjoyed a steady income, I was not okay feeling stagnant in my professional life. So, I quit. I quit with one month of savings and no plan which was not unusual for me. But the regret landed hard. I needed money. And, hey! Financial aid was money. But, I already had a master's degree, so the next logical step was a PhD. Right? Most of my friends and colleagues at the research lab had them, so why not?

I ended up applying to the only PhD program I could find within driving distance of my parents' house that did NOT require a foreign language mastery. Even before I filled out the nine-billion-page doctoral school application, I started a pro/con list about Getting a Doctorate. And it wasn't looking great for the doctorate.

But, I was still curious. And the application deadline was a week away. The ticking clock made it exciting: *Would I make it in time? Were they already full? Would they like me?* Oddly, a huge piece of me did not want to go back to school—but I really, really, really hated the idea of another 9-to-5 office job. But before completing the application, I had the foresight to request an informational meeting with the dean. I wanted some clarity on the process of getting a PhD.

On the day of the appointment, I arrived with a printed copy of my résumé per the dean's request and a list of all my questions. I even left space to take notes as he answered. The dean was kind and candid. After looking at the first page of my resume, he told me he was confused why I thought I would be a good fit for a doctoral program. Admittedly, I was relieved to hear it. But before I could agree with him, his eyes lit up at something on my résumé.

As it turns out, this dean was a huge fan of one of my research colleagues. And that's when the tenor of the whole meeting changed. The dean smiled, stood, and insisted on giving me on a tour of the department. And he did. He told me to leave my things and he took me to meet administrators, advisors, and professors. No students though. Once we had circled back to his office, he opened my application, approved it, offered me a graduate assistantship, a partial tuition wavier, and an on-campus teaching appointment. I was so flattered, I forgot my questions.

I should have known better.

And the dean should have done better.

I should have gone back to my crappy apartment and taken that part-time tutoring gig while I dove deep into a job hunt. I had a right to have my questions about enrollment heard and answered honestly. But the dean's enthusiasm was intoxicating.

Two years later, I had successfully completed all course requirements. And I was miserable. Plus, I still didn't know what I was going to do with a doctorate. But it was the salary math that was my breaking point. The PhD I was on track for was costing me around \$180,000 in student loans, but would only afford me an average pay increase of \$73 annually. Yes, ANNUALLY. That was the cherry on top of a stress-filled cupcake sprinkled in guilt.

Confessions of a PhDidnt: How to Quit Grad School Like a Champ is the handbook I needed but never had when making the difficult decision to quit my doctoral program.

Approach

Confessions of a PhDidnt takes a non-academic approach to unpack the academic-iest topic of all: Graduate school and what to do when it *suuuuucks*. This little handbook uses empathy and humor to navigate that inevitable itch to quit and offers tips, tools, and templates to help any struggling grad student quit like a champ. The inclusion of hindsight and interviews from former and current grad students serve as cautionary proof that miserable grad students are neither alone nor optionless. My goal for *PhDidnt* is to connect struggling grad students with the support, tools, and options they may not even know existed for deciding if, when, and how to quit. Because when staying is toxic, quitting is self-care.

The Market

This handbook is for any PhD student but will appeal to med, law, master's and certificate students, alike. According to the Council for Graduate Schools, half of all graduate students will never complete their program. As of 2019, there was a record-breaking 1.8 million new grad student enrollees. This means that there are currently 900,000 grad students who are now facing the guilt, stress, and stigma of quitting regardless of their reason for doing so. Not knowing what comes next can be terrifying, but is not a healthy reason to stay.

As relieved as I am to be a PhDidn't, I was not prepared for the mental and emotional toll the decision-making process took.

The target audience for a guide about successfully quitting grad school includes:

- Prospective grad students
- Current grad students
- Former grad students
- Fans of humor writing
- Readers concerned with grad student wellness
- Readers drawn to academic or professional self-help
- Professors of unhappy grad students
- Family and friends of unhappy grad students
- Administrators of unhappy grad students
- Pets of unhappy grad students

Structure

Each chapter contains three main chunks:

- **The Confession:** The first third of each chapter will contain one **confession** from my ill-guided time as a doctoral student, and a paragraph or five on the **Hindsight** and takeaway (ex: What went wrong, what could have helped). Any resources mentioned here will be detailed in the annotated **Resources** section of each chapter, (see below).
- **Interviews** with other PhDidn'ts, current grad students, quit-positive authors and experts make up the middle third of each chapter and provide first-hand accounts from the grad school trenches.
 - Anonymity is likely for some interviewees as it is common for alumnae to remain active members of their institutions, even after they quit. At the very least, I will include interviewee age, year, and degree program when possible.
 - Names, ages, degree, and areas of study were fabricated for the sample chapters, but the interview responses are authentic from personal interviews. However, if any willing interviewees' identities would be made clear if requested. Especially for a higher education expert like Dr. Karen Kelsky or a well-known personality like author Meg Cabot.
- **Annotated resources** like websites, books, blogs, or articles will make up the final third of each chapter. They will be specific and relevant to the topics covered in that chapter. These are the very resources I needed but never had when deciding to quit.

Special content in this book includes:

- **artifacts** like screenshots of actual emails, mock-ups, or hand-drawn charts/graphs
- **footnotes** will contain deep and dirty insight or quick tips that don't necessarily fit in the body of the chapter.
- an **appendix** of any/all templates mentioned in the chapters

- a fully alphabetized list of **resources** mentioned in the chapters (including articles, blogs, books, movies, TV shows, and organizations)
- a **glossary** of lesser-known jargon unique to PhD programs, and grad school experiences. This type of language tends to be exclusionary and “othering” and knowing these terms ahead of time may be very helpful in making better choices (see sample terms in the **Chapter Summaries** section of this proposal starting on pg. 5).
- an **index**

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: I PhDidnt and So Can You (Sample)

- A brief history of my PhDidnt
- Why I wrote this book
- How to use this book

Chapter One: What Color is Your Garbage Fire? (Sample)

- Confession & Hindsight
 - I applied for admission because I did not want to look for another 9-to-5 job.
- Interviews
- Resources
 - When/why NOT to go to grad school, red flags

Chapter Two: Don't Be a Menace to Your Cohort While Chugging Your Latte in the Restroom at the End of the Hall

- Confession & Hindsight
 - I faked a coughing fit to get out of a class discussion.
- Interviews
- Resources
 - Imposter syndrome, asking for help, burn out

Chapter Three: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

- Confession & Hindsight
 - I waited two semesters to quit because I thought everyone would be mad.
- Interviews
- Resources
 - Making the decision to quit, managing toxic positivity

Chapter Four: Is the Tassel Worth the Hassle? (Hint: No.)

- Confession & Hindsight
 - I still do not earn enough to repay my 200k in student loans.
- Interviews
- Resources
 - Financial aid risks, emotional costs, sunk costs, income-based repayment

Chapter Five: Quitting is Self-Care

- Confession & Hindsight
 - I don't miss grad school but I do miss campus life.
- Interviews
- Resources
 - Damage control, life after grad school, self-care, moving forward

Chapter Six: Resources, Appendices, and Glossary

Resources

An alphabetized list of all resources mentioned in each chapter, grouped by medium.

Appendices

Custom **templates** for all your quitting needs, including but not limited to:

- How to request an informational meeting

- What to ask before you apply to a doctorate program
- How to ask to speak with grad students before you enroll
- How to ask for an assignment deadline extension
- How to ask for a meeting with your advisor or professor
- How to inform someone you are running late
- How to request a Leave of Absence
- How to submit your intent to withdraw (the Big Quit!)
- How to request a “consolation” master’s degree
- How to tell colleagues/cohort that you quit
- How to tell friends/family that you quit
- How to request a letter of reference
- How to request a letter of recommendation
- How to address unfinished degree on a resume
- How to address unfinished degree in a cover letter

Glossary

Simplified definitions of PhD jargon including *but not limited to:*

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ ABD○ Admission○ ATC○ Attrition○ Autoethnography○ Cohort○ Colloquium○ Committee○ Comps○ Confferal○ Dissertation○ Dissertation proposal○ IRB○ Leave of Absence | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Matriculation○ PhD○ Practicum○ Professional Doctorate○ Qualifying Exam○ Qualitative Research○ Quantitative Research○ Research Analysis Exam○ Rolling Admission○ Symposium○ Thesis○ Tuition Waiver○ White Paper○ Withdrawal |
|---|---|

Marketing and Publicity

Having taught composition, humanities, and creative writing to adult learners of all ability levels, I recognize the need to connect professionally and articulately with my readers, wherever they are. To do so, I would love to plan a release date that coincides with either the joyful end of an academic semester or with the annual Graduate Student Appreciation Week that occurs the second week of April. Also, I anticipate using my professional connections and social media platform to promote *PhDidn't* in the following ways:

Professional Connections and Possible Interviews or Testimonials

During my career and graduate education, I have connected with influential professionals whom I could approach about contributing to interviews, writing blurbs, and/or endorsing *Confessions of a PhDidn't*, including:

- **Ms. Meg Cabot:** Best-selling author of *The Princess Diaries* series. We met in 2004 and follow each other on Twitter. Her article *Actually, Quitters Do Win* was a huge part of why I finally quit. I have the impression Meg would be willing to be interviewed and/or provide a blurb on her positive quitting experiences. Maybe even a foreword.
- **Ms. Dee Romito:** Author of *The BFF Bucket List*. Dee is a colleague and personal friend of mine as well as a grad school survivor. She has already agreed to write a blurb for *Confessions of a PhDidn't*. I would also like to include her in the interview portions.
- **Ms. Jen Mann:** Author of *People I Want to Punch in the Throat*. Ms. Mann and I communicate regularly via Twitter and I am a fan of her humor books and blog. I would be comfortable seeking her endorsement.
- **Ms. Abby Blachly:** Co-founder of LibraryThing.com and my cousin. Abby has already invited me to share my book on LibraryThing in the *Promotion* section, when the time comes.
- **Dr. Emily Maiden:** Dr. Maiden is a personal friend and assistant professor of Political Science. She has offered to interview me about *Confessions of a PhDidn't* on her YouTube channel which recently hit 60k views with close to 1.7k subscribers.
<https://www.youtube.com/c/DrEmilyMaiden>
- **Dr. Leonard Cassuto:** Dr. Cassuto is an author, professor of American Literature, and expert on graduate school attrition. He is a personal acquaintance who has offered to help in any way he can, and I would be honored to ask him for a blurb and to interview him for this book.
- **Dr. Adam Ruben:** Author of *Surviving your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Graduate School*. Dr. Ruben and I have connected via Twitter. He has offered to help in any way possible so I will be contacting him to interview him for this book.
- **Dr. Karen Kelsky:** Author of *The Professor is In*. This no-nonsense academic consultant is a leading expert on the post-graduate life. She has already expressed interest in this guide and I'd be honored to ask her for a blurb, and to interview her for this book.
- **Dr. Jon Malesic:** Higher Education professional who frequently writes about his experiences in academic burnout. He has already expressed interest in this guide and I will be contacting him to interview him for this book.
- **Mr. Neil LaBute:** Director and screenwriter for *Van Helsing*, *The Wicker Man*, *The Shape of Things*, *Possession*, and *Nurse Betty* for whom I interned in 2004-05. I would certainly feel comfortable sending him the book for a blurb.
- **Mr. Steve Koren:** Screenwriter for *Veep*, *Bruce Almighty*, *Click*, *Superstar: Dare to Dream*, *Saturday Night Live*). I shared office space with Steve and his humor had a huge influence on my own writing. I would be more than happy to reconnect with him via mutual contacts to request a blurb.

- **Ms. Kimberly LaRussa:** The Buffalo News community writer, SweetBuffalo.com. As a native Buffalonian, I believe Ms. LaRussa would be interested in featuring *Confessions of a PhDidnt* in either the Community section of TBN or on SweetBuffalo.com.
- **Dr. Julie Sarama:** Kennedy Endowed Chair of Innovative Learning Technologies at University of Denver. Julie is a leading scholar of early mathematics. She a supervisor-turned friend and has agreed to provide a blurb for the book once complete.
- **Dr. Alan Gellin:** Retired Communication and Student/Alumni Relations specialist for SUNY at Buffalo. Alan is a friend and former colleague. He conducted workshops for doctoral students and was a great source of support when I was in the PhD program. As an advocate for graduate student health, Alan's reach into the network of graduate professionals and 240k+ SUNY alumni would be invaluable. Alan was a sounding board for the resources in *Confessions of a PhDidnt* and has already offered to help in any way possible.
- **Dr. Thomas Jankowski:** The webmaster for www.PhisheD.com, an online support and writing group for doctoral students. In addition to posting a link to information on *Confessions of a PhDidnt*, I would be happy to ask him for a blurb and possible interview.

Social Media

- **Pipeline Media Group:** My employer with a network of 30k+ followers helps develop writers for publishing, film, and television through Book Pipeline and Script Pipeline.
- **LibraryThing:** This 2.5-million-member strong website for users to catalogue their personal book collections. As stated above, my cousin Ms. Abby Blachly is a librarian for LT and has already invited me to utilize the section for authors to promote their work.
- **Twitter:** @TheDavisGirl & @PhDidnt (2000+ followers combined)
- **Facebook:**
 - I would not oppose a PhDidnt group on Facebook, but would rather have input on the function before launching.
 - PhDistractions (60+ members) A private PhD support group I established in 2009. I would invite members for interviews and ask them to promote *Confessions of a PhDidnt*.
- **LinkedIn:** With 200-plus connections I would leverage my professional network to share news about *Confessions of a PhDidnt*.

Media

- **The Chronicle of Higher Education:** This weekly news and career source is aimed at anyone affiliated with or enrolled in Higher Education.
- **The Buffalo News, Community beat:** Kimberly LaRussa is a Twitter acquaintance and The Buffalo News community writer. She also runs SweetBuffalo.com. Since I am a native Buffalonian, I believe Ms. LaRussa would be open to and interested in featuring *Confessions of a PhDidnt* in either the Community section of TBN and/or on SweetBuffalo.com.
- **Buffalo Magazine:** The Buffalo News publishes this lifestyle magazine. I will contact Buffalo Magazine about an author interview and/or book review.

Academic Organizations

The following organizations have an ever-changing menu of events and networks through which I would promote this guide-pending input from my agent:

- Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
- National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
- International Doctoral Education Research Network (IDERN)

Events

- **Virtual Book Parties:** I will ask family, grad students, friends, and colleagues to host *PhDidnt* parties in their homes, classrooms, or student lounges where I can promote *Confessions of a PhDidnt* and lead small discussions on putting its resources and deliverables to good use.
- **Book Talks, Readings, and Signings:** I look forward to building on existing readers relationships and making new contacts for future tours at campus and bookstores alike.
- **Writing Conferences:** I will continually check the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) for current writing conferences to attend as an author.

Other Outlets

- **Blogs**
- **YouTube Channel**

Comparative Titles

There are dozens of books currently in print on *getting into* and *surviving* grad school. But as thorough and hilarious as some of those resources may be, none talk about what to do when a student wants out. What about those who are no longer happy or healthy or functioning in grad school? As helpful as the following sources are for getting into and through grad school, *Confessions of a PhDidnt: How to Quit Grad School Like a Champ* fills that gap for anyone who wants (or needs) to GTFO.

- ***How to Crush Law School: Graduate at the Top of Your Class and Land the Job of your Dreams*** by Charles Buist, 2020. Kindle, Paperback, \$14.99. Buist takes concise and edgy approach to leveraging personal habits to get through law school as efficiently as possible. Similarly, *Confessions of a PhDidnt* will show unhappy grad students the most efficient way to quit their program, and the benefits therein.
- **#GRADBOSS: A Grad School Survival Guide** by Dr. Toyin Alli, Independently published, 2019. Paperback, \$19.99. This self-published practical guide contains worksheets, templates, and advice from the author who obtained her PhD in Math and landed her dream job before graduation. As uplifting, inspiring, and positive as her success story is, the other side of the coin needs to be addressed. *Confessions of a PhDidnt* will also have practical templates and advice to help students know if quitting is the healthier decision for them.
- ***The Graduate School Mess: What Caused it and How We Can Fix It*** by Leonard Cassuto, Harvard University Press, 2015. Kindle, Hardcover, \$29.95. Not only does Dr. Cassuto acknowledge the garbage fire that is the graduate education system in the United States, he offers researched-based solutions for moving forward toward improvement. Like *Confessions of a PhDidnt*, Dr. Cassuto's book provides advice to a specific group in academia. However, the group he targets is active professionals in places of power throughout higher education. *Confessions of a PhDidnt* targets students who are affected by the very issues Dr. Cassuto's book addresses.
- ***Quitting: Why We Fear It--and Why We Shouldn't--in Life, Love, and Work*** by Peg Streep and Alan Bernstein, Da Capo Press, 2015. Paperback, Kindle, \$15.99. This book gives an honest look at why quitting is a healthy response to unhealthy situations. *Confessions of a PhDidnt* also shines a positive light on quitting, but is designed exclusively for grad students who are considering--or ready to--quit.
- ***The Professor is In*** by Karen Kelsky, Three Rivers Press, 2015. Paperback, Kindle, Audible. \$16.00. This go-to career guide is for post-doc graduates interested in turning their degree into an ideal job, even if it is not in academia. Similarly, *Confessions of a PhDidnt* has information for former students on using their graduate school experience as professional leverage, however this advice does not require the reader to have graduated.
- ***57 Ways to Screw Up in Grad School: Perverse Professional Lessons for Graduate Students*** by Kevin Haggerty and Aaron Doyle, The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Paperback, Hardcover, Kindle, \$19.98. This tongue-in-cheek take on everything that can go horribly wrong in grad school fills the gap in the literature of what (not) to do once you are accepted into grad school. While 57 Ways talks about avoiding grad school pitfalls, *Confessions of a PhDidnt* names them for what they are: red flags.
- ***Is Graduate School Really for You?: The Whos, Whats, Hows, and Whys of Pursuing a Master's or PhD*** by Amanda Seligman, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Kindle, Hardcover, Paperback, \$29.95. This book is for anyone considering grad school and

addresses ill-fated signs prior to applying enrolling. However, *Confessions of a PhDidn't* guides the reader through deciding to withdraw as well, not just making the decision to enroll or not.

- **A PhD is Not Enough! A Guide to Survival in Science** by Peter Feilberman, Basic Books, 2011. Kindle, Hardcover, Paperback, \$14.99. This is a great resource for science grad students in need of a mentor for preventing mistakes during and after degree completion. Similarly, *Confessions of a PhDidn't* addresses mistakes, but instead of prevention, my focus is on damage control, and is applicable to all academic or professional fields.
- **Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School** by Adam Ruben, Broadway Books, 2010. Kindle, Paperback, \$12.99. Dr. Ruben's book talks about navigating the harsh realities of grad school with gentle, but snarky, humor. While *Confessions of a PhDidn't* also admits the downside of grad school, it validates a student's desire to detach, instead of encouraging her to merely survive.
- **The Dip: A Little Book that Teaches You When to Quit (and When to Stick)** by Seth Godin. Portfolio, 2007. Hardcover, \$10. Godin's bestselling book is one of very few in print that shines light on the positives of quitting. *Confessions of a PhDidn't* does the same but for on a smaller scope: for those 900,000 grad students who are getting crushed by the guilt and shame of not wanting to complete their programs.

Author Biography

Erica Davis is a freelance writer and editor from Buffalo, NY. In 2013, she made the difficult decision to quit her doctoral program in English Education and translated her course work into a master's degree. Months later, she pivoted from a fifteen-year career in academia and began honing her editorial feedback skills in publishing. First, as an assistant editor at Entangled Publishing, then as a literary agency apprentice at Fuse Literary. When she's not editing, she interviews authors and reviews books for a global resource site for horror writers. She lives with her husband and dogs in Florida. Currently, she is the Management Executive and developmental editor at Book Pipeline and co-host of *This Podcast Needs a Title*. Learn more at www.ericadavis.xyz. Erica welcomes connections via Twitter @TheDavisGirl.

Sample Chapters

*The PhDidn't
Handbook* SAMPLE
CHAPTERS GO
HERE