

Successful Habits

I find it easiest to set a goal, and then plan a strategy to meet that goal. The goal for a successful PhD should be to publish at least 3 papers in major journals with others sent to journals with a narrower audience. At your thesis defense no member of your committee will know more about the subject than you. You will be a world expert on the subject of your thesis. So how do you get to this point? Successful habits will help you achieve your goals:

1. Graduate School is a job! You are an adult. Act like one. Take responsibility. Treat graduate school as a job. No excuses. Act professionally. Support your profession by joining a professional society.
2. Graduate School is NOT a job! Treat graduate school as an opportunity for self fulfillment, as the initiation to a life dedicated to understanding the world around you in greater depth and detail that you never before could have imagined. Bring passion to every activity. A class you take or a seminar that you listen to should be treated as an opportunity to make you a better scientist, so throw your full intellectual weight into every endeavor. Graduate school is easy if you have the passion, and if you don't then you will have difficulty achieving anything but a mediocre thesis.
3. One does not become accomplished in the mundane professions or in areas of creative expression without lots of work. Think about all of the scales that professional musicians play to become proficient, or the repetition that athletes perform in order to become elite. You should be working at least 40 hours, reading, writing, taking classes, and collecting data and this is in addition to your teaching duties. If you have the luxury of support independent of a TA, then you should be working at least 60 hours per week on these activities.
4. Science is about asking questions. So begin asking questions. Ask questions in seminar. Ask questions at lab meetings. Keep track of crazy ideas or questions you have from your readings in a note book or other retrievable document.
5. Read, Read, Read. This is a scholarly endeavor and one way to impress and to demonstrate scholarship is having a wide understanding of the literature. Also know the historical precedents. Before there were sequence technologies there were geneticists and they had remarkably prescient ideas on how evolution occurs. You will know your field better if you have an historical understanding of the literature. Also try to read EVERYTHING your mentor has written, or at least ALL of their key articles. Doing so will establish a common conceptual basis between you and your mentor. Also read as much as possible written by the graduate students and post docs in your lab, for the same reason.
6. Engage, Engage, Engage. Meet people. Become a science junkie, talk science, eat drink and sleep science. Participate in journal clubs. Organize journal clubs. Make a point to talk with fellow graduate students, independent of their year, as well as faculty, find out what they are doing, and try to get them to think about your interests through their prisms and vice versa.
7. Work work work but most need a release. 10 hrs per day x 6 days a week is probably a minimal work load, but try to leave at least one day free a week for other pursuits (hiking, music, sport, etc.). Most people need a restart button to maintain their productivity.