

100 PhD rules of the game to successfully complete a doctoral dissertation

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Received 25 July 2018
Accepted 30 July 2018

Abstract

Purpose – A doctoral dissertation is a challenging undertaking requiring determination, persistence and resilience over a long time: four to six years' study or more. These PhD "rules of the game" are intended to help students successfully navigate this challenge.

Design/methodology/approach – The author has assembled 100 PhD rules of the game from the author's work over many years with masters and doctoral students. Each rule is accompanied by some further short guidance. Additional citations are included directing readers to resources embellishing the 100 PhD rules of the game.

Findings – The paper documents 100 PhD rules of the game.

Research limitations/implications – There are many other PhD rules of the game not included in the author's list of 100 PhD rules of the game.

Originality/value – This paper is a one-stop-shop brief introduction to the author's 100 PhD rules of the game.

Keywords PhD, Dissertation, Doctoral studies, Rules of the game, Thesis

Paper type Viewpoint

This paper contains rules of the game unique to doctoral education. These are written specifically for doctoral students. This 100 PhD rules of the game complements Brennan (2019) "100 Research rules of the game"[1], [2]. Most of Brennan's (2019) 100 research rules are also relevant to doctoral research and need to be assimilated and applied by doctoral students.

Brennan (1998) is a precursor to this short article, written for my Master of Accounting students, providing them with guidance on how to write a masters dissertation. Appendix 5 contains my table-of-contents template for structuring a masters/doctoral dissertation. What starts out as my table-of-contents template quickly becomes unique to students' own dissertation table of contents as they customise it to their topic (see Rule No. 63 "Look at Brennan (1998) template to begin your table of contents").

My colleague, Prof Donncha Kavanagh (2013), has described the PhD journey as follows: "What we find in this model [of learning] is that the lecturer takes on the servant role [rather than the sage-on-the-stage role], with the student, in effect, having responsibility for setting a unique, just-for-you curriculum, defining their own particular research agenda, and mapping out their own journey of inquiry". Doctoral students are being trained to be independent researchers and therefore need to take responsibility for their research (see Rule No. 15 "Take responsibility for your research").

Each rule is accompanied by a short description/some advice with citations to support the rules (Table I). Most but not all citations are short articles on a PhD rule-of-the-game topic.

I have organised the 100 rules into eight sections. Section 1 starts with some high-level general advice on doctoral education and being a doctoral student (19 rules). Then in Section 2 (ten rules) I provide advice on how to find a supervisor. Choice of supervisor is probably the most crucial decision in the doctoral journey, as a good supervisor can make or break the doctoral experience. Research shows that most doctoral students are satisfied with their supervisors (e.g. Beattie and Smith, 2012). Doctoral students may find it hard to find a topic, so I include some suggestions for finding a topic in Section 3 (ten rules). The one-on-one relationship between supervisor and doctoral student can be close and intense, so in Section 4



| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Overall</i> | | |
| No. 1 | Enjoy your doctoral studies | It is hard to be good at something you do not enjoy. If you enjoy your doctoral studies, you are more likely to become a successful researcher |
| No. 2 | Open your mind | Do not be defensive when you receive criticism. Open your mind to new ideas. Learn from criticism |
| No. 3 | Develop your critical thinking skills | Good academics do not take anything at face value. Critical thinking is fundamental to the academic world, e.g. critically evaluating prior research to problematise differently something taken for granted or to find a gap; critically reading others' work as part of the journal-review process and providing constructive feedback. Learn to take a critical perspective during your doctoral studies. Like a film critic, learn to critique, identifying what's good and bad and justifying your position |
| No. 4 | Have confidence | Thousands of people before you have completed doctorates. While it is daunting, have confidence in your ability to complete your dissertation. Rule No. 34 "Don't magnify the requirement for contribution to unrealistic proportions" is also relevant here |
| No. 5 | Be determined, dogged and persistent | Try and acquire the grit credential in terms of determination, doggedness and persistence. These characteristics are arguably more valuable in completing doctoral studies than IQ |
| No. 6 | Be resilient | Be like a bowling skittle. No matter how many times you get knocked down, bounce back up again |
| No. 7 | Manage the highs and lows | The doctoral journey is a rollercoaster. You will experience high moments and more likely low moments. This is a normal feature of the PhD experience. The ups and downs of doctoral study recall the board game "Snakes and Ladders" evoked in another PhD-related context in Rule No. 96 "Play snakes and ladders". Rule No. 5 "Be determined, dogged and persistent" is also relevant here |
| No. 8 | Focus | Put on your blinkers. Do not allow other issues to distract you from your doctoral studies (Newport, 2016). Rule No. 19 "Understand the importance of finishing" is also relevant here |
| No. 9 | Be disciplined | Initiate, plan, execute, control and complete the research and dissertation to meet the standards required for a doctoral dissertation within the timeframe allowed by your university |
| No. 10 | Be methodological | A doctoral dissertation is a large project to be managed over a long time. Be methodical, keeping careful records of your reading, your research, etc. |
| No. 11 | Understand your philosophy | A PhD is a doctorate in philosophy. Understand your philosophical positioning in terms of: What is research? What is the purpose of research? What is the nature of knowledge? How can you access knowledge? |
| No. 12 | Don't do too much teaching or grading | It can be helpful to have some experience of teaching on your CV to obtain a job after your doctorate. But remember, all the time spent teaching is time not spent working on your doctorate (Davis, 2001). |

Table I.
(continued) 100 rules of the game

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| No. 13 | Look for help ^a | Rule No. 8 “Focus” is relevant here, as is Rule No. 19 “Understand the importance of finishing” Find opportunities to get help with your research, from other doctoral students and other academics. If you are experiencing a major specific problem, do not hide it. Tell your supervisor/doctoral programme director/head of research. It is okay to confess if you do not understand, or if your research is taking more time than expected, or even if you have a health problem. If you do not tell them, the problem may get worse |
| No. 14 | Learn the literature | Become familiar with the top journals in your field. Ensure that papers you read in lower-ranked journals are good papers |
| No. 15 | Take responsibility for your research | Doctoral students, not their supervisors, are responsible for their research (Kavanagh, 2013) |
| No. 16 | Talk to other doctoral students in your university | Talk to doctoral students ahead of you, who have learned how the system works in your university and who can tell you stuff they’ve learned “on the ground” not recorded in writing, official policies, etc. |
| No. 17 | Find a study buddy | The doctoral journey is a lonely one. Finding a study buddy can help to make it a more sociable experience. |
| No. 18 | Learn from others | Study buddies can support each other on the down days You do not have to reinvent the wheel. Others have conducted literature reviews, completed research, written up results, etc. Watch and learn from the experts in your discipline |
| No. 19 | Understand the importance of finishing | In my opinion, the most important feature of doctoral studies is finishing your doctorate. Focus on finishing. Do not let yourself hit a wall |
| <i>Finding a supervisor</i> | | |
| No. 20 | Register in a university with good supports for doctoral students | Universities with formal doctoral programmes, that require students to meet milestones (confirmations, transfer assessments), that provide space and other supports for doctoral students, will help you get through. This rule is subsidiary to Rule No. 22 “Pick a research-active supervisor”; Rule No. 23 “Choose a supervisor who shares your research interests” and Rule No. 24 “Choose a supervisor you will get on with” |
| No. 21 | Register in a university with a track record in your chosen field of research | If the university has a track record in your chosen field, advice and support will be available from a wider group of academics beyond your supervisor |
| No. 22 | Pick a research-active supervisor | Your supervisor should be publishing in international refereed journals on a regular and up-to-date basis. If your supervisor is not publishing in top international refereed journals, you are unlikely to publish at that level (Brabazon, 2013) |
| No. 23 | Choose a supervisor who shares your research interests | Ideally, there should be a meeting of minds, including sharing research interests, between you and your supervisor (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) |
| No. 24 | Choose a supervisor you will get on with | The relationship with your supervisor must be sustained over a long time. A doctoral dissertation takes 4–6 years to complete. It is essential you get on well with your supervisor |

Table I.

(continued)

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
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| No. 25 | Work with your supervisor for a time before registering | I do not take on doctoral students unless I have worked with them (mainly helping them with their proposal) for several months. It is a big step for both parties and deserves time. Rule No. 24 "Choose a supervisor you will get on with" is relevant here |
| No. 26 | Maintain a good relationship with your supervisor | Relationship with supervisor extends beyond the doctoral period. For example, your supervisor may act as your referee in coming years as you apply for promotion. Try to maintain and nurture your relationship with your supervisor |
| No. 27 | Check whether your supervisor is likely to stay in your university | It can be difficult if your supervisor leaves the university/retires and you are left without a supervisor or with another supervisor who is not able to supervise your topic |
| No. 28 | Check out your supervisor | Find former doctoral students supervised by your target supervisor and check out the strengths and weaknesses of the supervisor |
| No. 29 | Understand the role of supervisor | The supervisor's role is merely one of advice and guidance, to ensure the student keeps on the right track. The supervisor is not responsible for the research. Rule No. 15 "Take responsibility for your research" is also relevant here |
| <i>Choosing a topic/research question</i> | | |
| No. 30 | Find a topic/research question that interests you | A doctoral dissertation takes 4–6 years and longer if the period to get published is included. Your interest in the topic must be sustained for a long time. Topics chosen by students with supervisor support may be better than topics chosen by supervisors for students |
| No. 31 | Avoid fad-du-jour topics | A dissertation takes 4–6–10 years to complete and publish. Pick a topic that will be of interest when you publish it and for your readers thereafter (Davis, 2001). Academics are not journalists. Their work needs to remain relevant for a long time |
| No. 32 | Find a topic/research question that makes a substantial contribution to the literature | For research (e.g. from a PhD dissertation) to be published in a refereed journal, contribution is critical. Cochrane (2005) advises on how to write the contribution. Issues to consider in arriving at a contribution include: What aspects of the prior research is the current study extending or revising? What is unique about your argument/contribution? To what does this unique aspect add value? What are the commonly held beliefs on your topic? What are the questions/anomalies/doubts in the literature on the topic? What are the current explanations on the questions/anomalies/doubts? How is knowledge on this topic underdeveloped? |
| No. 33 | Put three bricks on the wall of knowledge | A doctoral dissertation should be capable of generating three publishable papers, i.e. make three substantive contributions to the prior literature, i.e. should add three "bricks" to the wall of knowledge. The literature review is critical in identifying the bricks already on the wall of knowledge. |

(continued)

Table I.

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| No. 34 | Don't magnify the requirement for contribution to unrealistic proportions | Students should identify the precise bricks on which they are putting their brick, i.e. the exact papers in the prior literature to which they are contributing A doctoral dissertation is not expected to produce the equivalent of Einstein's theory or, as Mullins and Kiley (2002) put it, attract a Nobel prize. A doctoral dissertation is merely a large project generating three contributions to the prior literature |
| No. 35 | Choose a topic in an area you are likely to teach | Beyer <i>et al.</i> (2010) divide accounting into six categories. In which category are you most likely to teach? Can you find an interesting topic in that category? |
| No. 36 | Write a dissertation proposal | Most universities require students to prepare a dissertation proposal in advance of registration. Brennan (1998, p. 12) contains an outline structure for a dissertation proposal |
| No. 37 | Write ten dissertation proposals | My superb supervisor, Prof Sidney J. Gray, suggested I write ten proposals. I did so (I did everything my supervisor asked me to do – Rule No. 43 “Play tennis with your supervisor” is relevant here). This exercise helped me to find a good topic and contributed to my understanding of the prior literature |
| No. 38 | Summarise ten articles | I give prospective doctoral students a first task of summarising ten articles in their chosen field. It's a good exercise to check whether prospective students have the aptitude for doctoral work. It also reveals whether students can write |
| No. 39 | Avoid the flounder factor | The finding-a-topic stage has the greatest risk for floundering, which is unproductive. The quicker choices are narrowed the better. Quickly decide on the category of the discipline you want to locate it. Quickly identify the sub-categories in that category and quickly decide which one to locate in. Recursively repeat this exercise until you find your niche |
| <i>Working with your supervisor</i> | | |
| No. 40 | Have regular meetings with your supervisor | It is students' responsibility to arrange meetings with their supervisors (Kearns and Gardiner, 2011). Once every month/two months is sufficient regularity in my opinion. Get dates in diaries well ahead of time. Plan what you will talk to your supervisor about to ensure the meetings are productive |
| No. 41 | Give your supervisor written, as well as verbal, reports of progress | Providing your supervisor with written work (well in advance of meetings) will help your supervisor give you better quality feedback on your work |
| No. 42 | Take notes of your supervisor's advice | When meeting your supervisor, take notes of his/her advice, so you can reflect on the advice received afterwards |
| No. 43 | Play tennis with your supervisor | Do (almost) everything your supervisor suggests. If your supervisor puts a ball in your court, get it back to the supervisor as fast as you can |
| No. 44 | Listen and respond to your supervisor's advice | Do you hear or do you listen? Listen carefully to your supervisor's advice. Make sure you understand the advice being given. Action the advice received |

Table I.

(continued)

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Conducting the research</i> | | |
| No. 45 | Have a doctoral-completion plan | Universities impose tight deadlines for completing doctoral studies. Prepare a detailed plan for the timeframe allowed. Keep refining your plan |
| No. 46 | Make sure your plan is comprehensive | Include every little detail in your plan, refining it over time, e.g. time to get feedback from your supervisor on final draft chapters, time for binding the dissertation, etc. |
| No. 47 | Meet your own deadlines | Try to stay on track with your plan. If there is slippage, find ways of catching up on your plan |
| No. 48 | Identify key milestones in your plan | Universities have processes to support students completing their dissertations, including requirements at stages in the process such as confirmations, transfer assessments, etc. Make sure you are clear about the time limits for these stages and make sure these stages are in your plan |
| No. 49 | Complete your course work as fast as possible | Most universities require doctoral students to complete coursework. The sooner you complete your coursework, the sooner you can focus on your dissertation. Having completed the coursework, you will better understand what is required to complete your dissertation |
| No. 50 | Become a world expert on your theory | What theories have you considered? What theories are you using and why? What theories are you not using and why not? Do not use too many theories. However, theories can sometimes work well in concert. The theoretical thread should go right the way through the research (see Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017) |
| No. 51 | Become a world expert on your method and methodology | Make sure you know your method with depth. Justify why you chose your method. What other methods could you have chosen? Can you justify why you did not adopt those other methods? What are the controversies and debates on that method in the literature? How is your research positioned concerning the controversies/debates? |
| No. 52 | Be familiar with your university's policies on research | Do you have to get ethical approval for your research? Make sure to get the paperwork done in good time, so that waiting for ethical approval does not delay your progress |
| No. 53 | Find opportunities to present your work | Be proactive in creating opportunities to present your work. The mere act of presentation is a learning experience. Preparing the presentation will help you to become clearer about your work. As you stand up to commence your presentation, some new idea may pop into your head: "how do I know what I think until I hear what I say" (Weick, 1995) |
| No. 54 | Find opportunities to get feedback | Your main source of feedback will be your supervisor(s). Other sources of feedback might include other academics in your discipline, visiting academics to your discipline, your doctoral colleagues, arising from presenting at conferences and seminars |
| No. 55 | Attend doctoral colloquia and workshops | Attending doctoral colloquia and workshops provides opportunities to present your work, get feedback on your work, meet other academics, meet other doctoral students |

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| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| No. 56 | Attend departmental seminars | Have an open mind to learn from others. Department seminars and visiting academics are great opportunities to learn from, even if their topic is not in your topic area (Davis, 2001). Keep a note of what you learned when attending such seminars. Rule No. 18 “Learn from others” is relevant here |
| <i>Writing the dissertation</i> | | |
| No. 57 | Start writing your dissertation on the first day of your doctoral studies | Writing is a discipline and a habit. Get into the habit of writing from the start. The more you write the better you write (see Brabazon, 2010; Cochrane, 2005; Dunleavy, 2003) |
| No. 58 | Learn to write ^b | Understand structure of paragraphs, types of sentences, syntax, wordiness, pronouns, punctuation, spelling, etc. |
| No. 59 | Know how to make an argument ^b | Recognise poor forms of argumentation and logical fallacies (see Cottrell, 2017; Damer, 2013; Gula, 2007) |
| No. 60 | Decide on the model of dissertation to pursue | Some universities allow students a choice of traditional <i>magnum opus</i> dissertation vs a three-paper model. The choice does not have to be made immediately. Nevertheless, the sooner you make your choice the better |
| No. 61 | Understand your university’s regulations concerning PhD dissertations | Universities have extensive regulations concerning dissertations. Make sure you understand these from the beginning. A length limit is not a target to be reached. Keep your dissertation as short as possible, just long enough to land the thesis. Find out whether your university requires students to sign a declaration that the dissertation is their own work |
| No. 62 | Start your dissertation with a table of contents | Completing dissertations and jigsaw puzzles have a lot in common. To complete a jigsaw, the first thing one does is pick out the pieces with flat edges and form the four-sided boarder of the puzzle. The jigsaw is then completed by trial and error. The table of contents is the equivalent for a dissertation, a route map for the beginning, middle and end of the dissertation |
| No. 63 | Look at Brennan’s (1998) template to begin your table of contents | Brennan (1998, Appendix 5) contains a generic table of contents to start a dissertation, which quickly adapts to students’ own dissertation topic. The backbone of my generic table of contents is the research questions which drive the whole project |
| No. 64 | Think about your dissertation structure/ table of contents regularly | A clear structure for the dissertation is critical for a clear dissertation. Keep sharpening and refining the structure as you develop your project |
| No. 65 | Prepare a dissertation master document | Have a master document so that the whole dissertation is developed in a holistic manner rather than piecemeal in separate files |
| No. 66 | Keep backup copies of your dissertation | Stories are legion of doctoral students losing their work. Make sure you are not that student |
| No. 67 | Read a bit, write a bit; Write a bit, read a bit | As you are reading the literature, summarise it and, where appropriate, include in your dissertation, building up the document over time. Rule No. 69 “Write (almost) every day” is also relevant here |

Table I.

(continued)

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|----------|--|--|
| No. 68 | Read other dissertations | Dissertations are a genre with their own style, format, structure. Make sure you understand what your dissertation should look like by looking at how others have written theirs. Find outstanding examples of top class dissertations to learn from. Avoid looking at bad dissertations |
| No. 69 | Write (almost) every day | A dissertation is around 200–300 pages long. If you write every day you will eventually complete your dissertation. Writing is also a discipline that helps clarify ideas. Providing written work to your supervisor helps in the supervision process. Rule No. 41 “Give your supervisor written, as well as verbal, reports of progress” is also relevant here |
| No. 70 | Choose a great title | Choose a clear does-what-it-says-on-the-tin title. Do not have too long a title. You do not have to explain the whole thesis in the title |
| No. 71 | Make sure your preliminary material is presented correctly | Check out other dissertations to learn the correct sequencing of the preliminary material (Title page, Dedication, Table of contents, List of tables, List of figures, Publications (expected) from the research (?), Acknowledgements, Abstract) |
| No. 72 | Write a great abstract | Find out your university’s guidelines for the abstract. This is the first information on your topic your examiners will read. Prepare multiple drafts of the abstract to get it right. Obtain your supervisor’s input on your abstract. The contribution(s) should feature in the abstract |
| No. 73 | Provide lots of signposts for your readers | A dissertation is a long document for readers to digest. Give readers plenty of signposts in term of headings, sub-headings and sub-sub-headings |
| No. 74 | Lubricate your readers through the document | In a <i>magnum opus</i> dissertation, start each chapter telling your readers what they are about to read, end each chapter telling your readers what they have just read, and provide your readers with a move into the next chapter. Remember, you know the dissertation inside out; your readers do not. Get out of your own head and into your readers’ heads. Try to explain your research as simply and as clearly as possible, for non-experts |
| No. 75 | Lubricate your readers through the issue for research | Most dissertations have an overarching issue for research, divided into research questions/hypotheses. The research questions are the backbone of the dissertation (see Rule No. 63 “Look at Brennan’s (1998) template to begin your table of contents”). The research questions should be clearly reflected in the literature review chapter (who else has researched those questions?), method chapter (how did you research those questions?) and the results/findings chapter (what were your results/findings for your research questions?) |
| No. 76 | Pay special attention to the first and last chapters | The first and last chapters are believed to be the most read. The first chapter sets up the dissertation. If the first chapter does not hook readers, the dissertation may be in trouble. The last chapter contains critical elements of the dissertation including the limitations, |

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Table I.

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
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| No. 77 | Don't overlook limitations, future research and implications | future research and implications sections. Rule No. 77 "Don't overlook limitations, future research and implications" is also relevant The last chapter should contain sections on limitations, future research and implications of the research. Each of these sections requires deep thought and effort. A poor effort at these sections, which come at the end when you are tired and under time pressure, could lead to examiner requests for amendment. Rule No. 94 "Expect to be asked to make changes to your dissertation" is relevant here |
| No. 78 | Complete a literature review | Students must demonstrate an understanding of the prior literature. Narrow your review to good-quality books, book chapters and journal articles. Re-read your compendium of journal articles, as you may have missed critical details on first or second read. Examine literature review papers published in top journals for insights on how experienced authors go about the exercise. Cochrane (2005) advises on how to write the literature review section |
| No. 79 | Judge what to put into appendices | Most dissertations contain the main text in chapters and appendices. Think about what to put in appendices. Material in appendices is more detailed than is suitable for the main body of the document |
| No. 80 | Write to tell a story | It is more important to tell a compelling story. Sequence it to make the story compelling, rather than to reflect the chronology of what you did |
| No. 81 | Choose your citation and referencing system at the outset | Find out does your university have style guidelines for citations and references. Apply the style guidelines from the very beginning. You are only making work for yourself by not getting this right at the very beginning. Avoid gratuitous citations/references |
| No. 82 | Copy edit and proofread your dissertation | Make sure your dissertation is perfect – no spelling errors, no grammatical mistakes, etc. The use of a copyeditor/proof reader is a worthwhile investment, on condition the person provides a quality service. If English is not your first language, investment in a copyeditor/proof reader is even more valuable. Brabazon (2010) highlights the risks of errors in dissertations. As a doctoral dissertation should be the student's own work, ensure using a copyeditor is consistent with your university's procedures |
| <i>The viva voce/PhD examination</i> | | |
| No. 83 | Understand your university's regulations concerning PhD examination | What are the examiners' decision options? What happens after the <i>viva voce</i> /examination? What does the student have to do after the <i>viva voce</i> /examination? (Murray, 2009) |
| No. 84 | In consultation with your supervisor, choose your examiner(s) carefully | Your PhD examiner is potentially a brand on your CV. If your PhD has been examined and passed by a well-known academic in your field with a strong publication and citations track record, that person's reputation can reflect positively on your own reputation. Some universities do not permit students to |

Table I.

(continued)

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | | have any input into the choice of examiners, so Rule No. 83 "Understand your university's regulations concerning PhD examination" is relevant here |
| No. 85 | Your PhD examiner can help you to get published | Feedback from your examiner can help you improve your work in advance of sending it out for review in a refereed journal |
| No. 86 | Find out what will happen on the day of the <i>viva voce</i> | Who will attend your <i>viva</i> ? Will your supervisor be allowed to attend? Where will the <i>viva</i> take place? Is the layout of the furniture, IT equipment, etc. suitable for the <i>viva</i> ? Will you have to present a summary of your research first or will the question-and-answer session commence immediately? |
| No. 87 | Know your audience | Be familiar with your examiners' research as this may inform their line of questioning |
| No. 88 | Understand the purpose of a <i>viva voce</i> | Examiners will want to know whether you did the research and wrote the dissertation, whether you understand the research, whether you addressed the research questions and whether they were addressed in a suitable manner |
| No. 89 | Anticipate the questions you might be asked as the <i>viva voce</i> | Prepare as exhaustive a list of questions (and answers) to the questions you might be asked at your <i>viva</i> (see Rugg and Petrie, 2004, p. 178) |
| No. 90 | Do a mock <i>viva voce</i> | Ask other academics and/or doctoral colleagues in your discipline to act as a panel by way of mock <i>viva</i> in advance of the real <i>viva</i> |
| No. 91 | Take notes of the questions | If possible, make a written note of key questions and comments of your examiners. This may help you understand their questions better, are an <i>aide memoire</i> and allow you to ask for clarifications when necessary. If your supervisor is permitted to attend the <i>viva</i> , he/she might take a note of all questions and comments for post- <i>viva</i> reflection |
| No. 92 | Be confident and authoritative | You should be a world expert on your topic. You should demonstrate authority over your topic with appropriate confidence and authority |
| No. 93 | Defend but don't be defensive | All research has flaws. Examiners will find weaknesses in your work. If they find a weakness, acknowledge and accept it (Remenyi <i>et al.</i> , 2003). Limitations of the dissertation and future research are great sections to deal with weaknesses |
| No. 94 | Expect to be asked to make changes to your dissertation | Good academics always see opportunities for improvement. Being asked by examiners to make changes to the dissertation is a normal part of research and is a portent of the journal-review process to come at the publication stage of the doctoral research. When I hear of a PhD passed without correction I wonder is it because the examiner was lazy. Without correction does not mean the dissertation is good |
| <i>Publishing doctoral research</i> | | |
| No. 95 | Publish your doctoral research | The ultimate test of a doctoral dissertation is the publications it generates. A doctoral dissertation should be capable of generating three papers in international |

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Table I.

| Rule No. | Rule | Description |
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| No. 96 | Play snakes and ladders | refereed journals. Supervisors hungry to publish will help doctoral students publish their work. Rule No. 22 “Pick a research-active supervisor” is relevant here When you have completed your PhD, you feel like you have gone up a ladder as in the board game “Snakes and Ladders” (Dickie, 2011). However, when you try to publish your dissertation, you will quickly find yourself falling down a snake. The post-doctoral period is a further opportunity for learning – learning how to publish |
| No. 97 | Co-author with your supervisor | Ideally, especially if you have a well-published experienced supervisor, you will co-author with your supervisor. This represents an opportunity to learn more from your supervisor about how to get published |
| No. 98 | Make sure your supervisor is not a byline bandit | Brabazon’s (2013) phrase, “byline bandit”, is perfect to capture those supervisors who are predatory, take a free ride at their students’ expense. If a paper is joint authored, both authors should substantively contribute to the paper. Rule No. 28 “Check out your supervisor” is relevant here |
| No. 99 | Don’t let your paper look like it’s from a doctoral dissertation | Journal reviewers often observe that a paper looks like it is from a doctoral dissertation. Make sure your paper does not look like that. A lengthy list of references is one such giveaway |
| <i>Concluding rule</i> | | |
| No. 100 | Enjoy your doctoral studies | These PhD rules of the game begin and end with the same rule. It is the most important rule which I reinforce by means of repetition. Rule No. 1 “Enjoy your doctoral studies” is also relevant here! |

Notes: ^aI thank Louise Gorman for this rule; ^bI thank my colleague, Donncha Kavanagh, for these rules

Table I.

(five rules) I provide rules on how best to benefit from the advice of supervisors. Conducting the research is specialist to a discipline and topic but I include a few general rules in Section 5 (12 rules). The most daunting aspect of doctoral education is writing the dissertation and Section 6 (26 rules) provides guidance on that challenge. In many but not all universities, doctoral students must defend their dissertation in front of an audience, which is often a nerve-racking aspect of the doctorate. I suggest ways to prepare for the *viva voce* in Section 7 (12 rules). The doctorate is not finished until it is published. The publication phase of doctoral education is a further opportunity for students to learn from their supervisors, which is covered in Section 8 (five rules). Once students have learned how to publish supported by their supervisor, they are then ready to take on their own doctoral students and to co-author with others. The rules conclude with some repetition, the most important rule of all (one rule).

This is a high-level introduction/summary. Bolker (1998), Foss (2015), Kearns and Gardiner (2012), Phillips and Pugh (2010), Petrie and Rugg (2010), Thomson and Kamler (2016) and Wisker (2008) are examples of more comprehensive resources on completing a doctorate. There are also helpful online resources such as: <https://thesiswhisperer.com/about/> (accessed 5 August 2018) and <https://patthomson.net/category/phd/> (accessed 30 September 2018) and resources on twitter such as: @AcademicToolkit; @DocwritingSIG; @firstphdchat; @PhD2Published; @PhDForum; @thehauer; @thesiswhisperer; @Write4Research; @PhDStudents; @ECRchat @WriteThatPhD (accessed 5 August 2018).

My list of 100 rules is not exhaustive. A crucial influence on the doctoral journey, but beyond the scope of these rules, is the support network of family and friends. These rules do not guarantee success in doctoral education. If properly used, they should sensitise students to some basic requirements to successfully complete their doctoral dissertations and publish therefrom.

It is not enough to read and know these rules. They must be applied in practice. As Kavanagh and Scally (2018, pp. 8-9) observe, “games are epistemologically beyond the compass of lists and definitions and can only be properly known through playing. Games are phenomenological practices as they emotionally engage players, giving them a meaningful experience and opportunity to express themselves”.

Daff (2011) provides light-hearted insights into some of the topics touched on in this paper. I have written this paper in the hope that some or all of it may prove to be a game changer for readers.

Notes

1. I use the phrase “rules of the game” tongue-in-cheek, capturing theoretical physicist Edward Teller’s sentiment that (pure) research “is a game, is play, led by curiosity, by taste, style, judgment, intangibles” (cited in Reagan, 1967, p. 1383). Kalfa *et al.* (2018) have a darker take on playing the game in academia.
2. Further resources complementing this paper are available at: www.niamhbrennan.ie and [@100RulesoftheGame](https://twitter.com/100RulesoftheGame).

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