PhD Advising Guidelines

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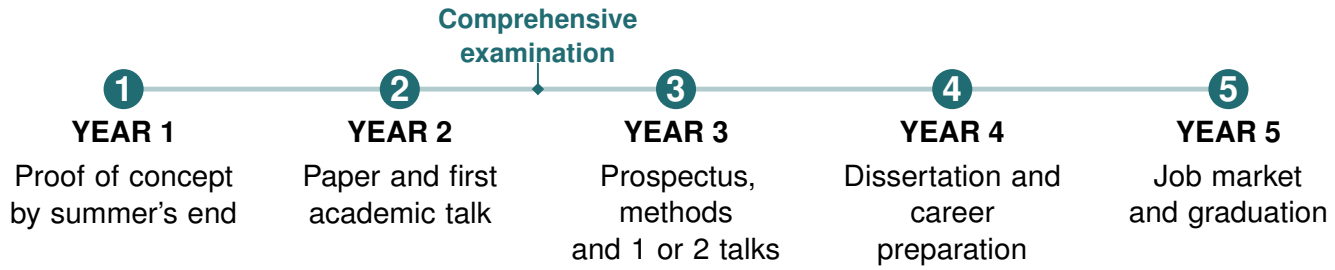
Five years in a PhD can go by quickly, so it helps to have a plan from the start. I wrote this guide for students I advise and those considering working with me. It covers coursework, research, preparation for academic and industry jobs, and how we will work together. The directory of conferences, workshops, and summer programs lists places to learn, present your work, and meet other researchers. I hope this guide helps you plan your PhD and discuss the support you need.

This is an ideal plan to aim for, not a fixed timetable. We will adapt it to your research, circumstances, course availability, and goals, and review it together each academic year. Use the timeline and checklists to guide those conversations. Departmental and university requirements still apply.

Some goals depend on decisions outside your control. You can submit an excellent paper, but you cannot guarantee publication or choose how long review will take.[1] Conference acceptance, internships, and job offers also depend on other people's decisions. Focus on the work you can control: regular research and writing, seeking feedback, preparing applications, submitting papers, and responding to reviews. We will use the checklists to discuss that work and adjust the plan when needed. The suggested mix of projects should also fit your research and career goals; papers and collaborations need not all follow the same model.

Planning backward from graduation

If you need to finish in five years because that is how long your funding lasts, use backward induction: start with graduation and work backward. Identify when you need to finish the dissertation and apply for jobs, then work out what you need to do this year, this summer, and this term.



Navigate this guide

Select a section below to go directly to it. Linked program names in the yearly plan lead to the opportunities directory; each table includes an official website. Use Contents in the footer to return here.

- Planning backward from graduation — Work backward from when your funding ends to plan your degree.
- Year 1 Build your foundation — Connect coursework to research and develop a first proof of concept.

[1] To give you an idea, my first solo publication took 2.5-3 years to receive R&R at the first journal I submitted to.

- Year 2 Complete your paper — Write and present your paper, pass comps, and begin dissertation planning.
- Year 3 Establish your dissertation — Defend the prospectus, complete methods training, and develop papers and talks.
- Years 4-5 Dissertation and Job Market — Use Years 4 and 5 to advance research, pursue jobs, and graduate.
- Industry path — Prepare for internships, build technical skills, and pursue industry jobs.
- Conferences Workshops and Summer Programs — Find places to present your work, learn methods, and meet researchers and employers.
- Additional guides — Find advice on starting the PhD, meeting speakers, presenting, discussing papers, and using AI.
- How we work together — Set regular working hours, take time off, and ask for support when you need it.
- Communication and progress — Keep in touch, prepare for meetings, and review your plan each year.

Year 1 Build your foundation

In your first year, learn the methods and substantive literature you will need for research. Take as much methods training as available, then prioritize your subfield while meeting program requirements. Join the lab and start developing research ideas. In Years 1 and 2, use methods and substantive class projects to build the foundations and proofs of concept for dissertation papers or other research projects. Participate in your department's speaker series (at USC, this means CIS) and meet every invited external speaker; attend job talks and meet every candidate. These conversations will help you learn how researchers frame questions and present evidence.

Progress checklist

- [ ] I have taken 6–8 courses.
- [ ] I use methods and substantive coursework to develop research projects.
- [ ] I participate in my department's speaker series and meet every invited external speaker.
- [ ] I attend job talks and meet every candidate.
- [ ] I have joined the lab and begun developing research ideas.

Summer after Year 1

Read the literature related to your ideas. Identify what researchers already know, what remains unanswered, and what your project could add. Find data and replicate relevant papers. By summer's end, have a clear proof of concept for your second-year paper: a question, a workable research design, data, and initial evidence.

Summer checklist

- [ ] I can explain what the literature establishes, what remains unanswered, and what my project could add.
- [ ] I have found data and replicated relevant papers.

I have a clear proof of concept for my second-year paper.

Year 2 Complete your paper

Continue taking available methods courses first, followed by field courses. Much of the research design, data collection, and initial analysis for your second-year paper should be done during the first summer. Use that work to spend this year mainly on framing, writing, and improving the argument. Present the paper to the department and deliver your first academic talk.

Consider applying for grants for which you are eligible, including RSF, Horowitz, and internal departmental funding. Begin mentoring other PhD students as you gain experience with coursework and research.

Research assistant (RA) work in Year 2 or 3 can help you build relationships with faculty and learn how research projects develop. It may also open opportunities for future collaboration. Explore roles that fit your interests and leave time for your own work. If an RA project develops into a collaboration, discuss contributions and authorship expectations early.

Progress checklist

- I am taking the methods and field courses in my plan.
- I have completed my second-year paper.
- I have delivered my first academic talk to the department.
- I have checked my eligibility for RSF, Horowitz, and internal grants and decided whether to apply.
- I have discussed RA opportunities for Year 2 or 3 with faculty and considered how they fit my own research.
- I have begun mentoring other PhD students.

Summer after Year 2

This summer, focus on three things: prepare for comprehensive exams, begin the prospectus process with a dissertation rationale and overall plan, and improve your second-year paper. Study intensively for the examination. This is a valuable chance to read widely beyond your own research topic. Complete the comprehensive examination between Years 2 and 3, following the department's schedule. By summer's end, build relationships with three faculty members in your department (POIR at USC) to help form your committee in Year 3. Prepare a professional website before applying to conferences.

Summer checklist

- I have passed my comprehensive examination.
- I have outlined a rationale for my dissertation prospectus and an overall dissertation plan.
- I have improved my second-year paper.
- I have built relationships with three faculty in my department (POIR at USC) to form my committee in Year 3.
- My website is ready before conference applications.

Year 3 Establish your dissertation

By spring, defend a prospectus built around a clear, feasible dissertation project. Revise your second-year paper so it is nearly ready for journal submission. Deliver one or two academic talks in the department, at conferences, or through GSIPE. Join GSIPE and continue mentoring, participating in the department speaker series, and attending job talks. Plan conference applications early; some deadlines fall before spring.

Aim to develop two side-project papers in addition to the dissertation, with both submitted for review or published by graduation. Begin the first in Year 3 and plan to start the second in Year 4. These may be coauthored with faculty or peers, or written independently. Agree on the scope and next steps so you can keep making progress on your dissertation.

Start planning how to gain teaching experience. If you are targeting teaching-focused institutions, aim to teach your own course when an opportunity is available, perhaps during the summer after Year 3 or 4.

Progress checklist

- **By spring,** I have defended a clear, feasible prospectus.
- My second-year paper is close to journal submission.
- I have delivered one or two academic talks.
- **By spring,** I have applied to PolMeth, APSA, and IPES by their deadlines.
- I have started my first side project and planned its scope around my dissertation.
- I have identified teaching opportunities and planned when to gain experience.
- I participate in GSIPE, mentor peers, and attend the department speaker series and job talks.

Methods coursework by the end of Year 3

Plan to complete the following methods courses by the end of Year 3, allowing for when they are offered. Take Formal Theory and Qualitative Research Design even if you do not expect to use them in your dissertation. They will help you think through research questions and designs, and you may use them in future projects.

Completed courses

- Math for Political Science Research
- Regression Analysis for Political Science Research
- Causal Inference
- Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE)
- Text as Data for Social Scientists
- Formal Theory
- Experiments
- Qualitative Research Design

Summer after Year 3

Present your strongest paper at PolMeth and attend EITM or another relevant summer school. Use what you learn to revise the paper, aiming to submit it to a journal by summer's end. If you plan to work in industry, fit conferences and training around your internship plans.

Summer checklist

- I have presented my strongest paper at PolMeth.
- I have attended EITM or another relevant summer school.
- I have revised my strongest paper for journal submission.

Years 4-5 Dissertation and Job Market

Year 4 Advance the dissertation

Continue writing your dissertation. Revise and submit your first side-project paper and begin the second. Set dates for drafting and submission, and discuss how the work fits alongside the dissertation. Seek workshops related to your topic and apply for research grants. In spring, or earlier if deadlines require it, apply to conferences taking place in the summer before you enter the job market. If you receive a revise-and-resubmit (R&R), prioritize the revisions. If a paper is rejected, use the feedback to improve it and submit it to another journal. Continue mentoring other graduate students, participating in the department speaker series, and attending job talks.

Gain teaching experience. Depending on the opportunities available, this may include working as a teaching assistant, leading discussion sections, or teaching your own course. Ask for feedback and use it to improve your teaching. Save syllabi, lesson plans, assignments, student evaluations, and any peer observations that will help you explain your teaching approach and document your experience.

Progress checklist

- My dissertation work is on the schedule we agreed on.
- I have submitted my first side-project paper for journal review.
- I have started my second side project and set drafting and submission goals.
- I have gained teaching experience, sought feedback, and saved examples of my work.
- I have applied to relevant workshops and research grants.
- **By spring,** I have applied to relevant conferences for the summer before the job market.
- I have completed R&R revisions or improved and resubmitted rejected papers, as needed.
- I mentor peers and participate in the department speaker series and job talks.

Summer after Year 4

Prepare your academic job applications: a cover letter, teaching and research statements, a job-market paper, and another strong writing sample. Use specific examples from your teaching experience in the teaching statement. Have a full job-talk draft by August. Attend relevant

conferences, including APSA and PolMeth, and EPSS or EPSA if you are pursuing the European job market.

Summer checklist

- I have prepared my application materials and revised both writing samples (academic path).
- I have a full job-talk draft by August (academic path).
- I have attended relevant conferences: APSA and PolMeth, plus EPSS or EPSA for the European job market.

Year 5 Finish and pursue jobs

In the fall, submit academic job applications, revise your job talk by September, and keep practicing. Prepare for interviews and flyouts, which may occur in October and November, although timing varies by search. Form a job-market support group and help your peers. In spring, focus on dissertation writing and preparing for the defense.

Progress checklist

- I have submitted applications and revised and practiced my job talk (academic path).
- I have practiced for interviews and flyouts (academic path).
- I participate in a job-market support group and help peers.

Summer after Year 5

Finish, defend, revise, and file your dissertation by university deadlines. Graduate before your funding ends, revise chapters, and submit papers.

Review the two side-project papers. Aim to have submitted both for journal review by graduation, and complete revisions or resubmissions as needed. Whether they have been accepted by that date depends on the review process; assess your progress through the papers you have prepared, submitted, and revised.

Summer checklist

- I have finished, defended, revised, and filed the dissertation on time.
- I have planned graduation and summer paper submissions around the date my funding ends.
- I have submitted two side-project papers and completed any revisions or resubmissions due.

Industry path

The dissertation, side-project, and teaching milestones apply if you plan to work in industry too. Include career preparation in your annual plan. When schedules conflict, give internships priority over conferences or summer schools, and plan how you will keep your dissertation moving.

Year 3 and the following summer

Apply for internships in the spring of Year 3, or earlier if recruiting deadlines require it. Develop strong technical skills by coding regularly, and practice for interviews. Aim to complete an internship

during the summer between Years 3 and 4. If you do not get one, identify what you can improve and apply again the following year.

I recommend the Erdős Institute for technical training and interview preparation.

Progress checklist

- I have applied for internships by the relevant deadlines.
- I have a regular schedule for coding and interview practice.
- I have completed an internship during the summer after Year 3.
- If I did not get an internship, I have identified what to improve before applying again.

Year 4 and the following summer

Apply for internships again in spring, or earlier if needed. Keep practicing coding and interviews, paying particular attention to difficulties you encountered in the first search. Complete an internship during the summer between Years 4 and 5, whether this is your first internship or your second. Plan your dissertation work around it.

Progress checklist

- I have submitted internship applications on time.
- I have used coding and interview practice to work on the difficulties I encountered in my first search.
- I have completed an internship during the summer after Year 4.
- I have planned my dissertation work around the internship and our agreed deadlines.

Year 5 Industry job search

Prepare a resume for the jobs you are applying for, a GitHub portfolio with clearly documented projects, and a professional website. Apply for jobs and keep improving your technical skills. Prepare thoroughly for technical assessments with timed coding exercises and mock interviews. Practice behavioral interviews too, and use the feedback to improve your answers. Apply to present at the NABE Tech Economics Conference and take part in its Industry Job Fair, following the relevant deadlines.

Progress checklist

- I have a resume suited to the jobs I am applying for, documented GitHub projects, and an updated website.
- I have submitted industry job applications.
- I have applied to NABE's Tech Economics Conference and Industry Job Fair.
- I have practiced technical assessments extensively.
- I have practiced behavioral interviews and used feedback to improve my answers.

Conferences Workshops and Summer Programs

Use these conferences, workshops, and summer programs to learn about new research, get feedback, learn methods, and prepare for academic or industry jobs. Choose them according to the stage of your paper and what you need to learn. Check each call for deadlines, eligibility, funding, and format. Applications may be due in the autumn or winter before the meeting.

In this section: General audience conferences · IPE opportunities · Summer programs and short courses

General audience conferences

By spring in Years 3 and 4, check that you have submitted your conference proposals, including those with earlier deadlines. Choose conferences where researchers will be interested in your paper, and plan travel around dissertation work and job applications.

Opportunity	Purpose and format	When to use it
APSA Annual Meeting Official website	A political science meeting with research presentations, workshops, teaching discussions, and opportunities to meet scholars across subfields.	Attend and present as your work develops. Apply during the academic year; proposal deadlines can fall before spring.
PolMeth Official website	The Society for Political Methodology's summer meeting, focused on research design, statistics, machine learning, and quantitative political research.	Especially useful for advanced students working on methods. Submit your strongest paper that fits the conference.
ISA Annual Convention Official website	The International Studies Association's convention for international relations and IPE research, with career workshops and opportunities to meet practitioners.	Choose panels and workshops that fit your research. Follow the current call, which may open well before the meeting year.
EPSS Official website	Political science conferences with research panels, methods and professional development workshops, and connections across subfields.	Present work and meet researchers in Europe, especially if you plan to apply for jobs there.
EPSA Official website	An annual conference covering theoretical and empirical political science research across subfields.	Another European conference option. Choose it if the topics and researchers are a good match for your paper.
NABE Tech Economics Conference and Industry Job Fair Official website	An industry-focused economics conference with applied research, networking, and recruiting opportunities for economists and related quantitative researchers.	Explore industry from Year 3; use the job fair when entering the market. Check proposal, registration, and resume deadlines.

IPE opportunities

Opportunity	Purpose and format	When to use it
GRIPE Official website	Global Research in International Political Economy. Faculty-led online seminars on current IPE research, open to scholars and graduate students. Papers and recordings are available on the website.	Attend throughout the PhD to follow new research and learn how scholars give feedback. Check the current calendar.
GSIPE Official website	Graduate Students in International Political Economy. Graduate-student-run virtual workshops for graduate students, pre-docs, and postdocs. Formats cover early ideas, works in progress, and job-market talks.	A supportive place to test ideas and practice presentations. The current schedule lists Mondays at noon Eastern Time; check each session.
IPES Official website	International Political Economy Society. Selective annual in-person conference, usually in the fall, with approximately 75 research papers. Presentations receive feedback from an audience of IPE scholars.	Talk with me in Years 3–4 about whether your paper is ready. Bring a strong, complete draft that you are comfortable circulating and posting online. You can attend earlier to learn.
Virtual IPES Official website	Online workshops spend 60–75 minutes on one full working paper, with several discussants. Graduate students and early-career scholars are encouraged to submit. The site lists January and July calls.	Apply when you have a complete draft and want detailed feedback. Check the current call and identify scholars whose expertise would help.

GSIPE is a good place to discuss early ideas. Before applying to IPES, talk with me about whether your paper is ready. Aim for a complete draft that you are comfortable sharing with scholars in your field. Virtual IPES also offers detailed feedback on a complete draft.

I participated in Virtual IPES in my fourth year with the paper that became my job-market paper and received feedback from Leonardo Baccini and Cameron Ballard-Rosa.

Summer programs and short courses

Choose a program that teaches a method you need, helps you connect theory and evidence, or prepares you for industry. Be clear about what you want to learn and how it fits your summer plans.

Opportunity	Purpose and format	When to use it
EITM Summer Institute Official website	Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models. Intensive training connecting theoretical models with empirical political research, with faculty instruction, project feedback, and peer discussion.	Years 2–4, once you have methods foundations and a research question. An option for the summer after Year 3.

Opportunity	Purpose and format	When to use it
ICPSR Summer Program in Quantitative Methods Official website	Introductory through advanced training in statistics, data analysis, and social research methods, offered through general sessions and topical workshops, online and in person.	Years 1–3 to strengthen methods foundations; later for a specific dissertation method. Choose courses around your training needs.
Frances McCall Rosenbluth Junior Research Workshop Official website	An APSA Political Economy section workshop that has paired junior scholars with senior researchers for feedback on a working paper and advice on their broader research.	For advanced ABD students nearing completion and other junior scholars. The linked workshop call is historical; check the current format and eligibility.
ACES Political Economy Summer School Official website	A summer school for young scholars in political economy and related fields, combining instruction, research development, and faculty and peer feedback.	Years 2–4, particularly with a research outline ready for discussion. Check the annual application and funding details.
Erdős Institute Official website	Programs supporting careers beyond academia through data-science training, practical projects, career exploration, and application and interview preparation.	Explore the programs early. In Years 3–5, use them to prepare for internships, develop projects for your portfolio, and apply for industry jobs.

The Rosenbluth workshop has been offered as an APSA short course. A 2026 organizer announcement also describes a year-long mentorship program; check the current organizer announcement for the available format and application process.

Additional guides

These guides offer practical advice for starting your PhD, participating in academic life, and presenting your research. Return to them when you are preparing for a particular task or trying something for the first time.

Starting your PhD

Things to Do the Summer Before Starting a PhD offers suggestions for resting before the program begins, refreshing useful skills, organizing your work, and handling the practicalities of moving. It also includes advice for international students.

Making the most of external speaker visits

How to Make the Most of External Speaker Visits is a resource to consult before meeting a visiting researcher. These visits are opportunities to learn about someone else's work, ask questions, and discuss your own research ideas.

Preparing research presentations

Presentation Tips is a resource for preparing your talks. Revisit it before presenting in a class, department workshop, or conference, and leave time to practice with peers.

Preparing your job talk

How to Give an Effective Research Talk covers the structure of a research talk, explaining your contribution, designing slides, and handling questions. Use it well before the job market: the same skills matter when presenting your second-year paper and dissertation research.

Serving as a discussant

Discussant Tips is a resource to consult before discussing someone else's paper. Your task is to help the author improve the work and help the audience understand its contribution. Prepare comments that are specific, constructive, and realistic about what can be addressed.

Using AI in research

AI as a Research Tool is a resource for thinking through how AI fits into your research. You remain responsible for the work: check sources, test code, and make sure you understand and can explain any analysis you use.

How we work together

Working routines and wellbeing

Treat your PhD as a job. Set regular working days and hours, take the work seriously, and make time for life outside it. Set aside time for research, classes, teaching, and professional development. Take breaks and regular days off, and look after your physical and mental health. Sleep, relationships, and interests outside the PhD matter too.

If you are struggling, talk with me, your peers, or other faculty. We all struggle and receive rejections, including me. You do not have to handle setbacks alone. Tell me when the workload feels unmanageable so we can adjust the plan.

Summer and planned vacation

Summer is an important time for research, and you should also take time off. The end of classes does not mean taking May through September off. Plan a vacation, rest, and then return to your research schedule.

Use 20 working days, or four weeks on a five-day schedule, as a starting point for your annual vacation. You do not need to discuss vacation dates with me. Find a plan that works for you, with time for rest, research, and your other responsibilities.[2]

Communication and progress

Open communication on Slack

We keep in touch on Slack. When one of us sends a message, the other replies. If a full answer needs more time, we acknowledge the message and follow up. Stay in touch even when progress is slow. We respect each other's working hours and time off. Let me know if we need to move a meeting or change an agreed deadline. I will not disappear, and I expect the same from you.

Meetings every other week

Make progress between meetings and send me a short written report beforehand. During the meeting, walk me through your report: explain what you found, the evidence, any difficulties, and your questions. If you are stuck, describe what you have tried. We will agree on what you should do over the next two weeks.

Annual review and planning

At the end of each academic year, review your progress against this plan. Identify what you have completed, what still needs work, and where the plan needs to change. Use that review to plan the next academic year together, with clear priorities, milestones, and deadlines.

[2] For a reference, revise BLS private-industry vacation averages.