

# It's OK to quit your PhD

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Occasionally I'm asked about quitting, particularly "quitting" a PhD program. This happened several times last week, when I was in Vancouver.

Contrary to what you may hear or what your own internal critics tell you, there's no shame in moving on. I remember a long post on a [Versatile PhD forum](#) from "PJ," an ABD thinking about leaving instead of spending another two years (minimum) to finish their PhD. In response, one commenter wrote, "But the real question is, do you want to be a quitter? Now, not everyone will view that question the same, and I'm sure many will say that equating quitting a PhD program to being a quitter is not valid, but in reality, it is." No! Thankfully, most other commenters on the thread offered more nuanced and helpful reflections and advice. "Finishing is not just about the destination," one former tenure-track professor pointed out. "If that's the only thing you want, then it's a tough few years ahead." Indeed.

Before you make the decision to leave, separate your inner critic – who may well be reflecting outer critics in your life – from what you know is right for you. Trust your gut, not your gremlin. In my experience, this is a decision that individuals make and re-make over time. I've worked with a few clients who've contemplated not finishing their PhD programs. While you figure out what you want, it's ok to be ambivalent, carrying on the work but distancing yourself psychologically and emotionally from academia. What are your goals? Once you know them, you can determine the correct strategy to move toward them. (With thanks to Harvey P. Weingarten's [recent post](#).)

The "no one likes a quitter" attitude that exists in graduate school and perhaps in academia writ large isn't warranted. There is nothing inherently good or bad about completing a PhD. It's only a good move for you if it is a good move for you. While individuals who depart *sans* degree will come to their own personal conclusions about their decisions, the wide world rarely cares. It's instructive that in PJ's original post, they mentioned that their former undergraduate professors were unanimous in advising them to quit. I'll let English professor (and graduate advisor) [Leonard Cassuto](#) speak for ideal advisors everywhere: "Most of my advisees finish their dissertations and get jobs. I'm proud of them. But some walk away – and of that group I'm just as proud" (*Graduate School Mess*, p. 121). I feel the same way about my own clients, whatever path they choose to take.

A while back Christine Slocum reflected on her career journey in a [Transition Q & A post](#). She'd completed an MA and then two years of a PhD program, then moved on before achieving ABD status. In her post she explains there were several reasons for her choice, including feeling burnt out, lack of community in her department, and desire to start a family. Pursuing the doctorate no longer meshed with her goals: "After some soul searching, I remembered that the reason I was pursuing sociology in the first place was to better understand the mechanisms of social stratification because I wanted to better understand how to undo it. Four years of graduate study [later,] I felt like I had enough that the next five years would be better spent working for an NGO, nonprofit, or government position getting practical experience in the field."

[Heather Steel](#) made a similar decision when she decided not to continue her PhD in the midst of dissertating. She learned important information about herself during graduate school. "There were parts of my program that I enjoyed very much (classes, having the chance to read and think, teaching, and my colleagues), but in the end," she realized, "sitting for hours in front of a microfilm reader to write something that few people would actually read was not fulfilling." Heather learned that she enjoys "research in small doses, not projects that take years to see results." When I did an informational interview with her during my transition, I learned that she didn't regret her choices. Her career has continued to progress since then.

When I was in Vancouver, a graduate student in the audience at one of my talks shared his own story: He'd been enrolled in a PhD programs years before, then left. But here he was back doing another doctorate! He was nearly

done, and this time around he knew it was the correct path for him. I know several people who've done similar things, for a variety of reasons. Fascinating, eh?

If completing your PhD is the right move for you, carry on. Get support and help wherever you can find it, go part-time, or take a break or leave or absence. Make whatever changes you need to smooth your journey. But if the doctorate no longer makes sense — your goals have changed, you've learned more about yourself over the years — then I've got your back (in spirit) in deciding not to continue. You're not "quitting" or "leaving"; instead, you're embarking on a new, better-for-you path, taking what you learned and experienced and applying it in a context that's more suitable to who you are, how you work best, and where you want to go. That's risky and brave, but it's also just you standing up for yourself. It took me until after my PhD to do that. Feel free to do as I didn't.