

**Dr. John Hockey**

**Do you  
want your  
PhD now?**

***The PhD Gold Standard***

**The PhD Student's  
Stratagem**

# **Dr. John Hockey**

## **The Ph.D. Student's Strategy**

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## **Preface**

I wrote this book a few years ago with the intention of never publishing it...what changed?

When I first wrote this book, I had some experience with several universities scattered around the world, and I saw similar things happening to the PhD students in those Universities. But, I thought that these occurrences were isolated – at least, that is what I wanted to believe. Fast-forward a few more years, and I went from working on one side of the world to the other, seeing the exact



same things happening – half a world away, same problems (and many locations in between). So, here it is. I hope that it is useful to you:

Most importantly, **do not tell anyone about this book**. While you'll reap the benefits of this book regardless of whether or not others know that you've read it, you'll reap the greatest benefits if no-one knows that you know this kind of information, or that you are even thinking about the topics discussed in this book.

This book is about how to get you your PhD. It starts by giving a description of what a PhD is, what you need to do to obtain your PhD,

and who is involved in your PhD. These facts are fairly well covered by most universities. However, this book goes further and reveals details that are not disclosed to PhD students. They are not disclosed for one simple reason; the university and the advisors don't want you to know them, as this would reduce 1) their leverage over you, 2) the amount of work that you need to do in order to complete your PhD, and 3) the timeframe of getting your PhD. This book covers the political side of your PhD, which usually dominates your PhD. The political side of your PhD is so important that, often it doesn't really matter what research you've actually done during your PhD, but rather how you've played the "game". The political side cannot exist without the human

interactions during the PhD, and so this book will cover topics, for example, about whom you're dealing with, manipulation tactics that you could face, how to fight back, and how to cope.

The reasons for employing political tactics are also discussed, and hopefully you will not succumb to derisively using the ideas presented, but rather, use them judiciously.

Everything that I present in this book is based on my own experiences, or the experiences of others I have interacted with. I hold a PhD from a reputable university.

The purpose of this book is to present information in a practical fashion. For some, it does not matter what I say, they will convince themselves that this book is inaccurate and pessimistic, but for others, this book will hold invaluable pieces of information. For some that are very lucky, everything that I write in this book will be needless, whereas for others, the information in this book will be the very thing that keeps them going. Regardless, if you ever find yourself in an unfavorable political situation during your PhD, remember this book, and read it.

While this book is tailored towards attaining a PhD, similar logic in assessing the situation,

and the tactics to employ, are applicable to many other events.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

So, you're doing a Ph.D., what's the situation?

The situation consists of what you need to do, who is involved, and what benefits each person involved gets.

While these topics may seem fairly straight forward, they are actually complex, and can entail many different answers. The first portion of this book covers these topics, while the second portion of this book covers what to do when things go wrong; how to recognize when your PhD isn't going to plan, what to do

if your PhD is falling off the rails, how to withstand the emotion toll and more...

If you are already in the situation where your PhD has gone off the rails, you're being taken advantage of and you want a quick fix (as much as there can be one), then skip to chapters 3 and 4, which cover negotiation and manipulation tactics. Once you have read chapters 3 and 4, read the other chapters in time, to gain a more complete understanding.

## **The PhD**

A PhD is essentially a deal among the parties involved, whereby you do something that someone else wants, and in exchange you get your PhD. As long as all parties openly express what they want prior to the deal being formed, and all parties agree to these terms, then the deal is fair. However, the deal becomes unfair when ulterior motives enter and people don't hold up their end of the deal. Almost always, the party who suffers is the PhD student. We'll get into the reason for this later.

The idea of a PhD is to train a person of a certain standard to the level whereby they can effectively investigate an area of interest.



To do so, first the area of interest must be identified, which could be anything from investigating the effects of stress on memory, to investigating the effects of language on thought.

It doesn't really matter what the area of interest is, as long as the work will feasibly result in tangible benefits. For example, understanding the effects of stress on memory might be important for a hospital, as a surgeon involved in a stressful procedure may be more prone to forgetting minor details, which could cause complications later on down the track.

It doesn't really matter what the tangible benefit is as long as it is desirable (usually the desire is in terms of money: "by understanding this effect, this process could become this many dollar less expensive or you could make this much money", etc. – universities are effectively businesses, they operate on money, even seemingly irrelevant research can often generate income).

Once the area of interest, or "the question", has been formulated, the next step is to determine a methodology that will answer this question. This process is key in the training because it builds critical thinking skills, and increases the student's ability to understand the limitations of methodologies

and how to create appropriate methodologies. This process also involves forethought, trains your abilities to predict potential problems that will arise, and to devise solutions to these problems before they occur. During the implementation of the methodology, there could be complications due to unforeseen issues, which provides further training in problem solving.

Once the results have been obtained, processing and assessment occur, whereby the PhD student (along with the advisors) determines if the results are sufficient for answering the original question of the PhD. If not, then repetition of the previously defined methodology must be done, or a new

methodology must be formulated and carried out.

Finally, the results are then presented in a concise and comprehensible manner; usually as a dissertation, journal papers, and possibly an oral examination.

The crux of the PhD is as simple as what I've just written, and in the perfect world, you wouldn't need to bother reading the rest of this book. However, the remainder of this book covers what usually happens in this world, and why few PhDs are ever that straightforward. Take for example the process I've defined, it is very subjective, which can

easily lead to problems. For example, some questions that arise are:

-How “big” must your question be?

-How conclusive must your finding(s) be?

-If you find a negative result, is that still good enough?

The completion of your PhD hinges on these questions. Furthermore, the answers to these questions, and other questions relating to your PhD, are determined purely by your advisors, dissertation committee, and other people in the university. **In other words, the answers to these questions are determined by people who aren't you,**

**and if one of those people say jump,  
then you will probably have to jump.**

This massive power difference gives rise to many of the issues that could occur during the PhD process, as you are more or less at the mercy of others.

What's more, the longer than your PhD carries on, the more ruthless those with the fate of your PhD in their hands can be. Let me explain that statement: at the start of your PhD, you have invested very little effort into the project, so while you may not want to quit, if an unreasonable request comes your way, you are able to do so with relatively little regret. On the other hand, imagine that after

four years, having worked like a dog, scraped by on a pitiful wage in an effort to complete your PhD, and jumped through many hoops (not to mention the four years of your life that you've invested), and a seemingly ridiculous request comes along - you are far more likely to accept the request than if you were within your first year. Furthermore, the people that hold the fate of your PhD in their hands, know this.

Another disadvantage that the PhD student faces is that the PhD, the thing that they are after, is discrete; either you have it or you don't. So, doing everything required to get a PhD and not crossing the finish line amounts to nothing. There is no such thing as an

“almost-PhD”. So, what does that mean in terms of the deal that you originally made? Well, the things that the other players in the deal get may be less discrete, such as research. Throughout the PhD, you are conducting research, so a player who wants research is getting a return on the deal continuously and they have less to lose the longer your PhD continues. You on the other hand, have more to lose as the PhD continues, and not until you’ve completed your PhD do you get that for which you bartered.

So it is clear that, a PhD is more about whom you please than what research you actually do – you need to please those who determine whether you get your PhD or not. To that end,



it is a good idea to know with whom you're  
dealing.

## **The Players**

There are many people and entities who could be involved in your PhD, and each one has their own desires and motives for your project. By understand as many of these desires and motives as possible, you will then be able to develop a course of action that will meet those that are necessary for your PhD completion.

It is not necessarily unfair that each player has their own objectives, because, as mentioned previously, the PhD is a deal. However, it does become unfair when these objectives are hidden, especially from the PhD student, who is typically the most naïve of the bunch, and hence most easily taken

advantage. An example of a hidden objective is when someone who controls the fate of your PhD might be after “cheap labor”. You getting your PhD is not part of the “cheap labor” objective.

Let's go through the players.

## **The Student**

The most obvious player in the PhD is the PhD student. This person is probably the most transparent in terms of what they are after; typically it is the PhD.

The PhD student's role is to do most of the leg-work of the PhD; identifying areas of interest, formulating hypotheses, developing and carrying out the methodologies, and assessing the results.

In addition, some universities require students to do some level of teaching or assistance to the academics. These requirements are usually stated clearly and accessibly before signing on for the PhD, so

whether this is fair or not is at the student's  
discretion *prior* to agreement.

## **The Advisors**

Role:

Another group of players is the advisors. Straight off the bat there is deception in their role.

The word advisor means “someone who gives advice” (as per the Webster Dictionary), so it stands to reason that, while this type of person is a valuable asset in shaping your PhD, your PhD is not contingent on their advice or opinion – their advice is merely there to help you.

In many universities, the advisor is defined as exactly that; an expert that gives advice. However, in order for you to complete your

PhD, in almost every university, the advisors must sign the student off. So, let me ask you this; **what do you think the odds are of your advisors signing your PhD off if you haven't done what they think is the right course of action?**

Immediately, it becomes clear that on the one hand advisors are defined as people giving advice, but on the other hand they essentially dictate your PhD through the rules in place **(action versus words)**.

In addition to the great power that advisors have over your PhD, they also have the fall-back of relinquishing responsibility; if something goes wrong, then the PhD student

bears the responsibility, as it is ultimately the student's choice if they take their advisors' advice – the advisors are just there to give advice, right?

What's more, this contradiction in the role of an advisor has been specified by the university, so that tells you something about the university as well; they've set this situation up and want it to be like that. I am not saying that every advisor will take advantage of this situation, but I am saying that not everyone is a saint.

In some countries advisors are called supervisors, which subjectively entails a little more responsibility. Nonetheless, the



consequences can very easily be placed on the student if things go wrong. After all, students are dime-a-dozen to the university, but the advisors are usually more valuable. The discrepancy between the worth that a university places on advisors compared with students can be easily seen; the advisors usually advise multiple students, bring in grant-money, lead research groups, consistently represent the university for media releases, get paid far more than any student, etc. So, **when push comes to shove, the more expendable you are, the more likely you are to take the fall – students are far more expendable...**

Benefits:

So, we've covered what the role of an advisor is, but what do they want out of the PhD deal?

There are many things that they could get, but what they really want depends on their motives (as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter). Some general things include research, money, power, and seeing someone improve.

Research is very attractive to an advisor as it potentially makes them more reputable, which could fuel their desire for a greater reputation. It could also make them look more attractive to the university, which could

help their chances of promotion, of getting a raise, or of increasing their job security (tenure).

Money is always a top goal, as it could make them feel more powerful, make them more reputable, give them greater peace-of-mind, etc. The money could come from grants or from the university. For example, if an advisor receives a grant for a project, perhaps 90% of it may be used for the actual funding, and the last 10% might be used for less tangible things, which while frowned upon, is not unheard of.

Power could make them feel good inside, allow them to make more money, or increase their reputation, etc.

So, many of the potential benefits derived from the PhD, for an advisor, are linked together, and one often entails the other.

A final benefit, and a big one, is that, they get someone to do their research for them. The advantages of having you around far exceed the disadvantages.

## **The University**

Role:

The university refers to the university itself, but also to those who are indirectly related to your PhD, for example, the Dean, or your advisors' bosses.

The university is primarily there to provide the tools required for the completion of your PhD. This could include advisors, equipment, etc. **The university also, usually, resolve disputes between anyone involved in the PhD – this last point is very important, remember this point.**

Benefits:

At the end of the day, while a university may harp on about increasing the knowledge of humans, or furthering technology for the good of the people, etc., they are a business. They're there to make money, and everything else is just a means to do so. For those who are sceptical of that, then among other tell-tale signs, I ask this; **why do the top dogs in the university get paid so well?**

It doesn't really matter what the answer to that question is, because if the people at the top are after money, then that is what the university is geared towards. I am not saying that getting paid handsomely is a bad thing

(especially if you're doing your job well), but you need to understand what people are after.

So, by understanding that the university is, at its core, after money, it is relatively simple to glean what benefits a PhD student entails.

Grant money is a big benefit. In addition, the student's research could increase the university's reputation, which leads to more grants and student enrolment, which lead to more money, etc.

## **Advisors and The University**

Advisors are usually representatives of the university through the responsibilities that the university places on them. For example, an advisor's role may include checking the quality of the PhD student's research so that a high level can be maintained, which reflects well on the university.

If the advisor does not fulfil the responsibilities assigned by the university, then they could be fired.

As such, the university is typically represented by the advisors.



**Typically, students rarely interact with anyone higher up than their advisors (but you shouldn't be scared to do so if necessary),** so the remainder of this book is primarily focused on the advisor-student relationship, which implicitly covers the university as well.

## **How to Identify if You Are Being Taken Advantage of**

**You are being taken advantage of if you are doing things that you didn't sign up for – it's as simple as that.**

This could be teaching against your wishes, managing lower-level research students, etc.

In addition, if your PhD has suffered complications (e.g. doing more work, conducting more complex investigations, etc.) for no good reason, then you are being taken advantage of.

An example of being taken advantage of could be if you conduct an investigation and you find very interesting and useful results. The plan that you had with your advisors was to finish investigating after this final task and focus on wrapping everything up. Your advisors then might say to you that you're doing so well and that you should extend your PhD to cover another related area. This might seem ridiculous, but unfortunately, it's commonplace.

Alternatively, consider the previous example, but while your investigation answered your PhD question, they didn't give groundbreaking results. Your advisors might then say that you need to conduct another

investigation because the results weren't as ground-breaking as they were hoping for. Remember, your PhD plan was to conduct this investigation, and while you got negative results, you executed the agreed plan, so your PhD should still be on track, shouldn't it? There's nothing in your PhD contract saying that you need to line your advisors' and university's pockets with \$200,000 worth of findings before completion, is there?

In either of these examples above, your advisors are using you. They are even jeopardizing the completion of your PhD, as you may become demoralized and dejected, which could lead to you quitting. Unfortunately, I've seen this happen to many

students. Some people who I did my PhD with never finished. It is difficult to think about, even so many years later – I think of what their lives and careers have become since, and many of them seem to be worse off now than if they hadn't even done a bachelor's degree (not just having failed a PhD, but they seem to have regressed degrees). The jobs that they have are far lower. I don't know why, but maybe it is because they are emotionally shot, or there is a stigma associated with them now that they failed their degree, but somehow, they've regressed a couple of degrees. And looking back, I am so glad that I stuck through with my PhD, especially when the times got tough (as some of those things will be detailed in the remainder of this book); back then, it

seemed that it was so difficult to continue, but now, I realize that, the only thing worse than continuing would have been to stop and give up – that would've been a real death sentence. Especially when you consider that many of the people who initially undertake PhDs are incredibly bright.

## **Plan of Attack**

To date, we've gone through what a PhD consists of, who is involved in your PhD, and how your PhD could go off track. But it is still unclear how this information all comes together. How do you get your PhD back on track? What is the plan of attack?

The answers to these questions are to renegotiate. Renegotiating involves two things: **understanding what they value most (professionally) and showing them that you can take it from them,** and **understanding what they value most (professionally) and showing them that you can give it to them.**

The more value that they place on what you can take from them or give to them, then the more commitment that you'll have. That is why you need to understand what someone's motives, desires, and what they're getting out of the deal is. You then align the "giving" with you completing your PhD and the "taking" with you not completing your PhD.

To put it another way, for a deal to be honored, there needs to be a carrot and a stick for each party. The carrot entices the party to act in a certain way, and the stick prevents them from backing out. Currently, the deal that you've made with your university results in every party having a carrot (for you it's the PhD, for your advisors it could be research, or



reputation, etc., and so on for the university), but in reality the only party that really has a stick to keep them in line is the PhD student. Your goal is to create a stick for any other party that holds the fate of your PhD in their hands. In addition to creating a stick for the other party, you should also try to make the carrot (which is aligned with you completing your PhD) as enticing as possible. That way the carrot draws their attention and the stick prevents them from becoming distracted by other carrots (like the carrots arising from taking advantage of you).

Once you've created the stick, you need to continually sharpen the contrast between the carrot and the stick. By doing so, the carrot

shines brighter and the stick becomes comparatively bigger. Sharpening the contrast typically involves making the stick worse and the carrot better, and how you do this depends on what manipulation tactics you employ.

What you need to be careful of is not doing anything illegal, like blackmail. An easy way to prevent that is to create situations where if they don't do something, then naturally something else will happen, which just so happens to negatively impact them. For example, say that you've agreed upon a completion time with your advisor, lined up a job with a major company, and that this company funds your advisor. Now, if your

advisor doesn't fulfil their end of the deal, then you'll obviously have to explain this to your to-be boss. In other words, your advisor is going to look bad in front of a company that funds some of their work, thereby jeopardizing future funding. If your advisor values, above all, his reputation, then losing face in front of an industry partner is gut-wrenching. So, you've now created a stick that helps ensure that your advisor will keep their word without resorting to blackmail or threats, etc. In such an event, your advisor may try to find something that turns the blame to someone else, possibly you, but it is your job to make sure that the onus is firmly on them, or at the very least, to make sure that

it will be a long and dirty fight, and that you love to fight.

As a side note to give you a leg-up: when I was doing my PhD, I found it incredibly difficult to make carrots for my advisors. I tried to be very agreeable, offer concessions, and offer them a lot, but try as I might, whatever I had to offer wasn't enough. I couldn't understand why, until a few years later, when I was out of my PhD and I had been running projects, and interacting with PhD students; I realized that, PhD students have very little to offer. When I am running a project, I think about time, money, and resources. These things usually come from other places, like industry partners. For my wage, it came from my boss.

The PhD student can't do much to positively influence any of these things. It's a Catch 22; the only thing that a PhD student can do to positively influence any of these things (directly or indirectly) is to work harder or smarter. If they choose those options, then why would their advisors want them to pass their PhDs and move on? The positive for the advisors is to have these people continue to work harder and smarter. In other words, the harder and smarter that you work, the more incentive there is for the advisors to keep you around – you pump out more work for them! On the flipside, if you then think that you'll keep the same workload or reduce it, then how does that get the PhD done? Given this Catch 22, what else can the PhD student

positively entice their advisors with? I only found out the answer to this question through experience; I realized that, everything is relative – yesterday, you might have been better off than today, but it took you until today to realize that. And now that you do, you want yesterday back. In other words, you don't have to provide a better situation, all you need to do is to make the current situation worse and then the positive incentive is the original situation, which shines far brighter. And unfortunately, that is really all that a PhD student can do. But make no mistake, doing so will create a very enticing carrot for them.

## **Structure of This Book**

The remainder of this book relates to when your PhD is going sour, and will cover:

- People
- Negotiation
- Methods of Manipulation
- How to Strike Back
- Staying the Course
- How to Cope Emotionally
- How to Turn Enemies into Supporters

Let's briefly go through why each of these topics is important for you during your PhD, as the reasons may not be currently clear.

Understanding people is important for two reasons. The first is that it helps you identify when your PhD is going wrong, when people are taking advantage of you, when you need to act, etc. The second is that you can then know how to “attack” (negotiate). If you don’t know why people are doing what they are doing (their motives), then you will likely overlook nuances to their actions that give away what they value. Furthermore, if you have little understanding of someone’s motives, then you are not ready to negotiate with them, as you don’t know how to motivate them.

Knowing how to negotiate is vital. You might be thinking that if you’ve already made the deal (when you signed on to do your PhD),



then what is the point of knowing how to negotiate; things are past that stage. True, but if your original deal is turning sour, then you need to make a new deal, a deal that everyone will honor. The only way that you can make the deal that you need is to understand how to negotiate. The variables will be different, and so it is imperative that you understand how everyone views them. Furthermore, there will be many negotiations throughout your PhD; some of which may be: which conference to attend, what method to use, whom to work with. So, negotiation is a skill that you will use time and time again during, and after, your PhD. I should point out that, a negotiation may not be formal – you might not sit around a table with notes being taken,

and offers being tabled. It might be very informal – we negotiate in everyday life more than we think (the very acts of saying “please” and “thank you” are both negotiations and manipulations). I don’t want to go too much more into negotiation here – I want to save it for the negotiation section, but you need to understand how vital negotiation is in your PhD – 99% of students (and people) don’t understand how negotiation factors into their lives. But you must understand that, because that will provide the structure you need to approach any interaction and be able to walk away with the terms and conditions you want (and avoid the bad terms and conditions).

Manipulation tactics are covered because you are subjected to them every day. By understanding what tactic is being used, you gain insight into what the person is trying to do, how they will act, what they want, and how to withstand the tactic. This last point (how to withstand the tactic) is crucial if you want to regain power in your PhD and successfully complete it. I will cover the most powerful tactics that I've seen advisors use, defences against these tactics, and tactics that PhD students can employ. By using these tactics effectively, you can gain more power and hence have a better chance of swinging something your way. As a PhD student has almost no power, they need to find ways of attaining some so that they can at least

feature in a negotiation and not just be whitewashed.

I have dedicated a section to staying the course of your PhD because it is all too easy to forget what you are actually there for; your PhD. Staying the course doesn't just refer to gritting your teeth and pushing forward, it also refers to keeping focused on the goal, and not getting sidetracked with desires that crop up during a PhD, like getting even. This section includes mental tools you can use to effectively keep your mind focused.

Coping emotionally with the PhD process is covered. It is not easy to continue fighting, especially when you're there to do your PhD,

not to fight. But whether you like it or not, you may have to fight in order to get your PhD. If you're not interested in fighting, then don't bother reading any more of this book – it's not going to help you – you're going to fail either way. You can read other books and resources, and they're not going to help you get your PhD, all that will happen is that you'll feel happier while failing and being a slave. Also, don't let anyone tell you that giving up is okay and that PhDs are not for everyone – if you've spent years of your life working towards something, only to give up, then what will you ever fight for? (Please excuse my bluntness – it is necessary to cut through waning resolve, which will ignite your own desire to go on.) This section deals with how to get over the

desire to just give up, and the emotions that may be associated with it.

Finally, turning your enemies into supporters is covered as once you have your PhD, it may be important for you to have the support of those whom you once opposed. Furthermore, fearing that these people will try to ruin your career may prevent you from fighting them in the first place, rendering you powerless... the opposite of what this book is about.

## **Should I?**

A final word in this chapter is on whether you should fight.

When I was doing my PhD, I had a hard time justifying to myself that fighting was okay – that standing up for myself was okay. It was more than just the fear of not succeeding because I didn't really have that luxury anyway – my advisors were never going to let me finish. I know that because I saw what happened to their other students who had many similarities with me.

The problem that I kept facing was being okay with fighting them. I was under the

impression that it was wrong to fight, or to disturb the “peace” or to not “keep the peace”.

I was effectively ignoring reality and life; in the years that have followed, I have noticed more and more that life is about fighting – it’s called “survival of the fittest” for a reason. Everything takes form through fighting and struggling against competitors – even the very way that you came into this world is testimony to that (think about it). I wish that I had seen that back then.

My reluctance to fight made the situation so much harder; imagine people taking swings at you (people who not only outnumber you, but who are currently stronger than you as



well) and you are scared to hurt them. That is what the situation effectively is.

Furthermore, the idea of “keeping the peace” is an interesting one; what is endangering the peace to begin with? If there is something that is endangering the peace, then why should you go out of your way to accommodate it, doing so will likely result in you making a compromise.

Do you want to be taken advantage of...or do you want to get what you want? Do you want to get what's right?

**That's the end of this sample. In the full version, there's over 200 more pages, complete with the information outlined in the table of contents, and throughout the sample version.**

You've got the potential to have the power over your situation. Use it. But remember, once you have the power, use it correctly. If you don't, then you'll be no different to those who once used it tyrannically over you:

**“Nearly all men can stand adversity,  
but if you want to test a man’s  
character, give him power.”**

-Abraham Lincoln