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Eight Awesome Books for Your PhD

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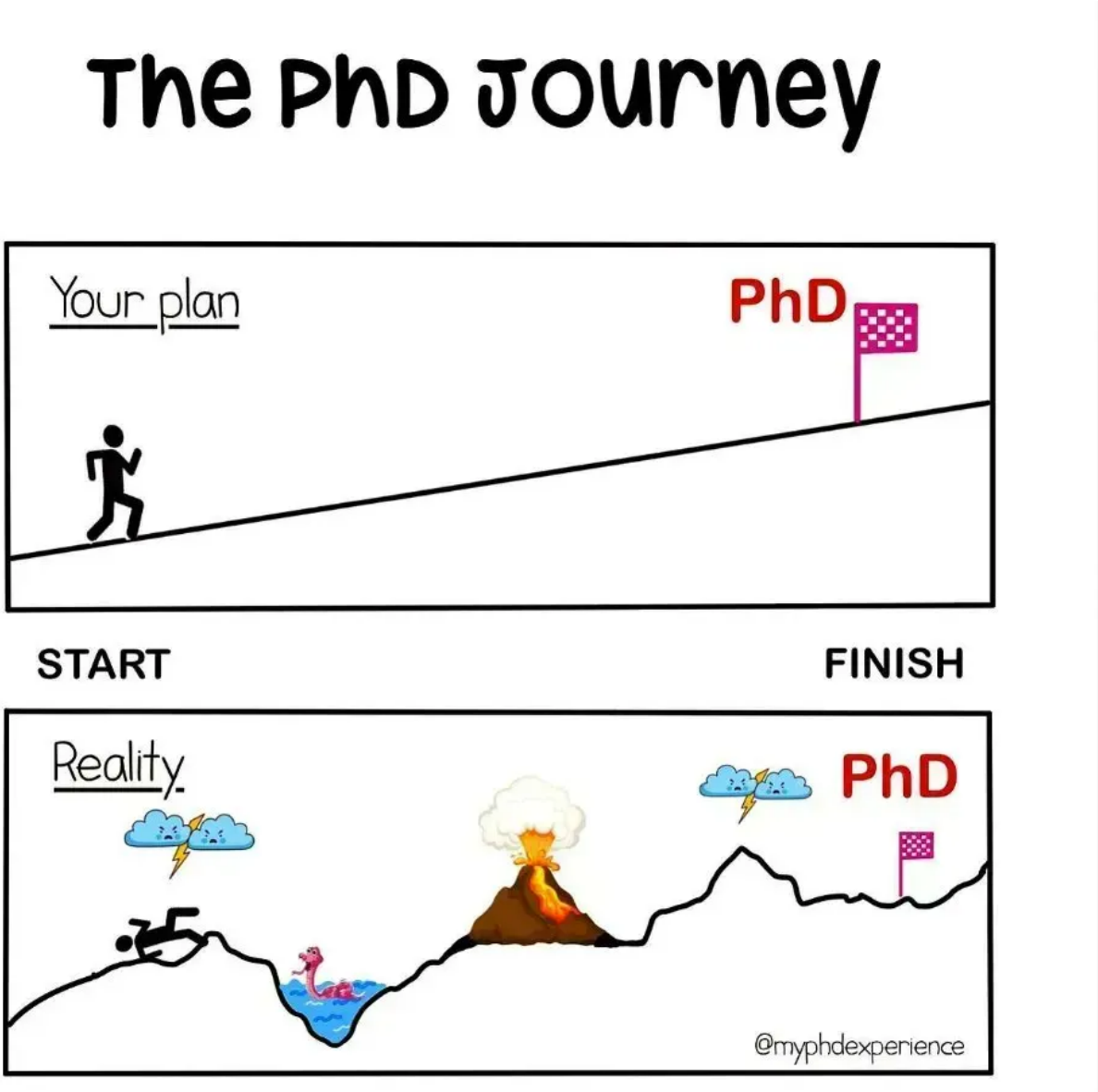
A PhD is less a straight path and more a survival course. My best advice to first-year starters is to treat it as a marathon rather than a sprint: you need to have enough energy and motivation to carry through 4–5–6–7(!) years, with a lot of potential rejections, many times of questioning yourself and your research. You begin with optimism, face setbacks, and must adapt both intellectually and emotionally to keep going. Most of the emphasis will be on your technical skillset, but that is, perhaps, not enough. These eight books helped me through the different phases — starting with building essential skills, gaining a broader perspective, and ending with a reminder of why I started. Hope you will find something here for yourself!



(image via myphdexperience on Instagram)

Phase 1: Learning to Communicate

1. Marketing for Scientists: How to Shine in Tough Times — Marc J. Kuchner

In this book, Kuchner explains how to position your research for visibility and impact through strategic communication. Covers branding, networking, and telling the story of your science. It's a fun and easy read, my personal rating is 11/10.

Why: You need to make your work visible to others — supervisors, collaborators, funders. *"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound"?© My PhD advisor*

2. On Writing Well — William Zinsser

A timeless guide to clear, concise, and compelling writing. Zinsser emphasizes simplicity, precision, and human connection in nonfiction. Full of tips!
Why: Clear writing forces clear thinking. Whether you are drafting your first literature review, an abstract, or your thesis, mastering the craft will separate your work from unreadable academic sludge.

3. Strategy and Statistics in Clinical Trials — Joseph Tal

Hilarious, funny, non-statistician's guide to designing and interpreting rigorous studies. Emphasizes logic and design thinking over computation.
Why: In the early stages, your research will be scrutinized for methodological flaws. Anticipating and preventing them is easier than defending them after submission.

4. Elements of Grant Writing — Peg AtKisson

A practical manual for crafting competitive funding proposals that speak directly to reviewer priorities. Focuses on clarity, structure, and persuasion. I found out about this book in one of the courses that I took from Harvard Catalyst, taught by Peg AtKisson, during my first year of PhD. It switched my thinking from "paper"-oriented to the "grant"-oriented, which I think helps to craft better papers.
Why: Midway into your PhD, funding or project extension requests may arise *(hopefully not, but anyway)* . This will broaden your view on academia and how grants are different from papers.

Phase 2: Strengthening Teaching and Collaboration Skills

5. What the Best College Teachers Do — Ken Bain

A wonderful, easy read on insights into how exceptional teachers create environments for learning.
Why: If you teach alongside research, the second or third year is when you can either excel or sink into mediocrity. Good teaching can shape your reputation as much as research. You might never need to teach in a classroom, but you will possibly supervise master's, undergraduate or summer interns.

6. The Culture Map — Erin Meyer

About cultural differences in communication, decision-making, and trust-building.
Why: As collaborations expand, cultural intelligence becomes essential. Misinterpreting cues can stall projects; understanding them can accelerate results. It will broaden your prospective on ways that different people see collaboration and

communication.

Phase 3: Protecting Your Motivation

7. The Choice: Embrace the Possible — Eger, Dr. Edith Eva

A memoir by a Holocaust survivor turned psychologist, this book shows how choice can transform outcomes.
Why: The later PhD stage can be disorienting. Learn how to manage yourself when things inevitably go wrong.

8. Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes — Alfie Kohn

A critique of how external rewards undermine creativity and intrinsic motivation.
Why: As you approach the end, the pressure to "finish for the sake of finishing" can erode your original curiosity. This book is a reminder to preserve the reason you began the work.

Closing Thoughts

This reading sequence is intentional: start by building the skills to communicate and collaborate effectively, and finally protect the motivation that will carry you to the finish.

If you found this list useful, share it with other PhD students, early-career researchers, or anyone thinking about starting a doctorate. The right book at the right time can save someone months of struggle.

What are some of your favourite books? Share in the comments below!

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