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# IT SHOULDN'T HAPPEN TO A PHD STUDENT

HOW TO THRIVE, NOT JUST SURVIVE, DURING YOUR PHD



THE GIRLYMICROBIOLOGIST

## It Shouldn't Happen to a PhD Student – Chapter 12 Exercise

Choosing to undertake a PhD is a really exciting moment in your life, but at times it can feel overwhelming. To help with this, and to support in some of the processes and decision making, I have published a book entitled:

It shouldn't Happen to a PhD Student: How to thrive, not just survive, during your PhD  
The book takes you through a PhD from applying, year by year study, and finishes with how to maximise your future success.

Some of the chapters benefit from having additional material and so these exercises run alongside the book, although they can probably be undertaken independently by anyone who would find them useful.

Exercises link directly into the following chapters:

CHAPTER THREE: CHOOSING THE RIGHT PHD FOR YOU

CHAPTER FOUR: DEVELOPING YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH

CHAPTER EIGHT: DEVELOPING YOUR LEARNING AGREEMENT

CHAPTER TEN: DEVELOPING YOUR GOAL SETTING SKILLS

CHAPTER TWELVE: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: MAINTAINING YOUR WORK LIFE BALANCE

## It Shouldn't Happen to a PhD Student – Chapter 12 Exercise

This exercise is linked to Chapter 12, please head over either to Kindle or to your print version of the book to support you working through this exercise.

### Managing Expectations

One key part of managing expectations is being able to fully recognise the context and readiness of your work at key reflection stages across your PhD. It is easy to become very focused on key components of your work to the exclusion of being able to see how they fit into the whole, and how they are currently serving the aims and objectives of your PhD.

Reflecting on your work and your plans for implementation should occur at the start of your work, during the planning stage, but should also be undertaken at you start to reach either decision making milestones that impact future planning, or at key time points linked to your PhD gateways.

A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis is one tool that can help you assess and plan for your research project, identifying what might be quick wins, as well as areas that you may need to have a plan a, b, and c to ensure you keep on track. Try to ensure you are breaking your project down into appropriate pieces to enable meaningful assessment.

Being aware of these different components can also assist in taking a modular approach to your research, ensuring that you can maintain momentum and minimise frustrations. If a threat you recognise is that there are supply chain challenges which mean that there may be delays in your work, or a key course you need to upskill to undertake the next phase only runs once per year, you will need to plan other activities that can run alongside and allow you make the most of all your available time.

The other area where this approach can be really helpful is when you are planning grant applications or drafting manuscripts, as it can help you answer questions such as 'what are your study limitations?' and 'what are the risks to your listed grant deliverables?'. These are common questions and by being fully able to identify the threats you are better able to articulate how you will address them before questions are raised by reviewers.

The starting point for a SWOT analysis is to start by making a list of:

**Strengths** – what are the definite benefits of your planned work

**Weaknesses** – what are the known challenges for what you've planned

**Opportunities** – what are benefits that you are aware of that could come into play with sufficient planning or resource

**Threats** – what factors could impact on your project that, although not definitive, may cause you to need to change your plans or approach

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### Examples of SWOT considerations for research projects

#### Strengths:

- Strongly aligned with PhD project core direction
- Pilot data available
- Established method
- Publication interest expressed
- No resource limitations

#### Weaknesses:

- Skill not yet developed
- Method not yet established
- Requires considerable resource investment
- Niche area which may be challenging to publish
- Requires external collaborator support

#### Opportunities:

- Opportunities for collaboration
- Peer to peer support linked to fellow students working on similar projects
- Builds upon other planned project threads
- MSc student available to assist
- Small project funding grant call upcoming

#### Threats:

- Only enough resource for a single attempt
- Time frame for new method implementation
- Limited access to equipment
- Multiple stages required
- External research work already engaged in similar work

Strengths	Weakness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pilot data available and method already established</li><li>• Resource available for sufficient replicants</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To ensure novelty and innovation additional collaborator needs to be identified</li><li>• Further stages cannot be planned until phase one is completed</li></ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To cement new collaboration opportunities</li><li>• Rapid publication options as baseline data already available</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Similar work is already being undertaken by different group and so need to ensure novelty</li><li>• Phase two of work will require identification of additional resource</li></ul>

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### Undertaking your SWOT analysis

Date of initial SWOT analysis:

Make lists of you project component Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Think about:

- Who to involve
- Resources to identify
- Timeline predictability
- Skills required
- External factors or gateways that may be in or out of your control
- Level of alignment with overall project
- Level of importance for onward dissemination
- Level of importance for onward project steps

**Strengths:**

**Weaknesses:**

**Opportunities:**

**Threats:**

Strengths	Weakness
Opportunities	Threats

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Once you have undertaken your initial reflections and included them in your SWOT analysis, you need to utilise them to make plans to maximise any benefits and minimise any challenges:

Plans to maximise **Strengths**:

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Plans to minimise **weaknesses**:



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Plans to develop **opportunities**:

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Plans to characterise and reduce **threats**:

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Planned project review dates:

Current SWOT:

Strengths	Weakness
Opportunities	Threats

Revised SWOT (date: )::

Strengths	Weakness
Opportunities	Threats

Revised SWOT (date: )::

Strengths	Weakness
Opportunities	Threats