



THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THESIS ADVISORS
by John J. W. Rogers; Illustrations by Sylvia A. Lauterborn

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If you're curious about graduate school, you've opened the right book. This is a do-it-yourself manual for dealing with thesis advisors.

Your rights as a graduate student

Forget them. You don't have any. You may think that the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964 conferred broad and liberating powers on you and all other American citizens. But it doesn't if you want a job in the field you've chosen to study. (If you don't want a career in the field, you're wasting your time and everyone else's. You ought to leave graduate school and get a life).



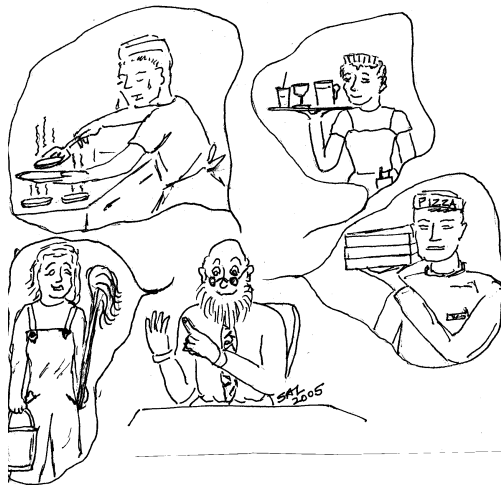
If you do want a job in your field, then your thesis advisor has to like you. Otherwise you won't get a good letter of recommendation and won't get a job.

So this is wrong.

Actually you do have one right

Once your advisor accepts you as a graduate student, he/she is obligated to do everything humanly possible to prepare you for a career. If your advisor has any doubts about your ability to be competitive in your field, then he or she must tell you this at an early stage and let you try something you can do better.

There are a few faculty members who don't care about preparing their students for jobs. They want students just so they can brag to their colleagues. Here is one who bragged about having four students get PhDs last year. Run, do not walk, away from these people.



How to keep your advisor happy

This depends on you and your advisor. It is much easier if your advisor is an assistant professor without tenure.

He or she is so desperate to get tenure that you are in charge. A word of criticism from you to the department chairman/woman/person/robot might doom your advisor's chance at tenure, which means that he/she won't have a guaranteed salary for life whether he/she ever does anything useful again.

So, write your thesis and demand that your advisor sign it.



But what if your advisor has tenure? Then you have no choice except to be ingratiating.

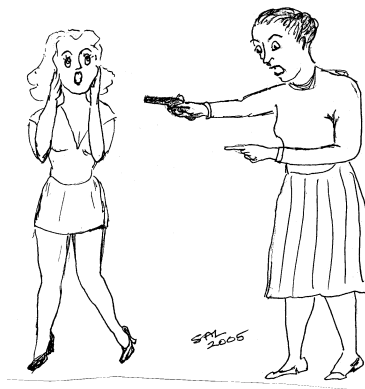
Tell him or her how much you admire his/her latest book even if you think it is rubbish. Laugh at his or her lousy jokes.



Some students might try another ploy.



But that is wrong, particularly if he is married.



Making your mark in your profession

You need to call attention to yourself by doing a thesis on something that no one else has worked on. This takes different forms depending on your field.

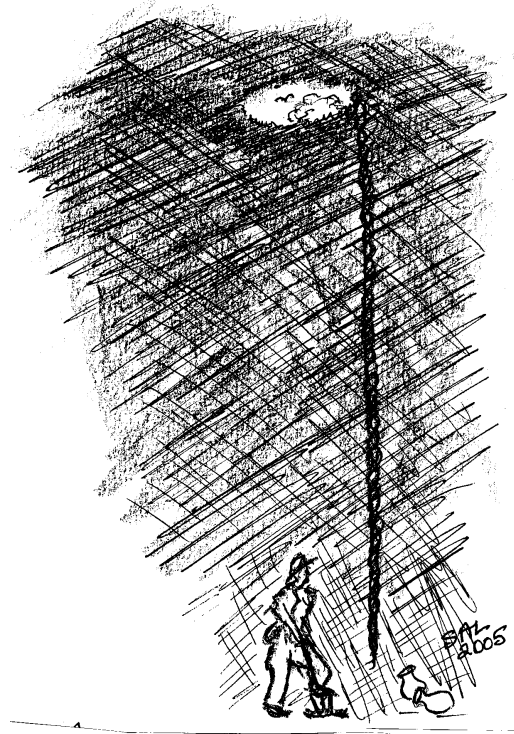
A biologist might study the wide-mouth cobra, an animal that everyone else avoids.



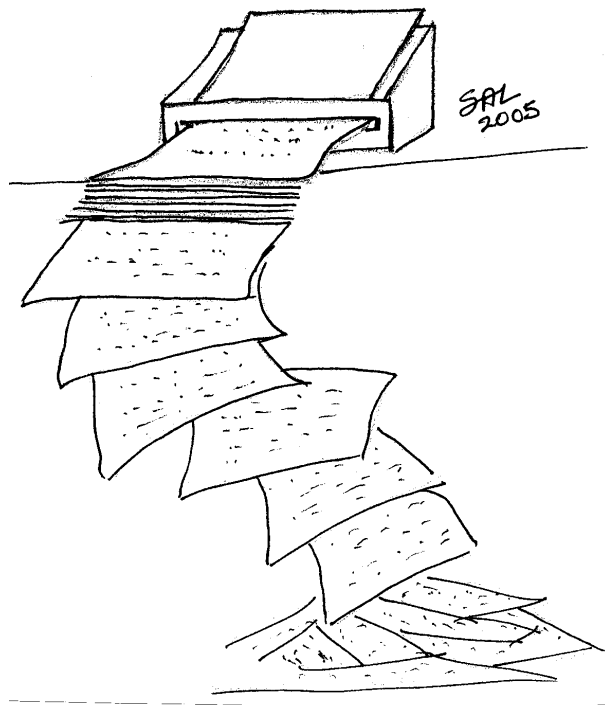
An
historian could investigate the Evenk reindeer
herders of northern Siberia.



An archeologist might dig deeper than anyone before him.



An English scholar could study an unknown author. Possibly a literary analysis of *Ode to a Bedbug* by Axolotl K. Itchy.



A geologist might study Declension Island, which is so remote that it is rarely visited. You and your advisor take a boat to Declension Island in order to get started on your thesis. Your advisor leaves you there to work.



You hope he comes back.



Finding your advisor

Some advisors always keep their office doors closed and do not respond to knocks or phone calls. Some students think that means their advisors have isolated themselves so they can concentrate on their research.

Wrong.



What to do if you think you are smarter than your advisor

Nothing. You are.

People who study brains tell us that we lose brain cells from the minute we are born throughout our lives. This loss of gray matter becomes acute at about the time that college professors are granted tenure.

From that time on, our brains become more like blocks of concrete than thinking machines. You can use that feature to recognize professors regarded as particularly distinguished.

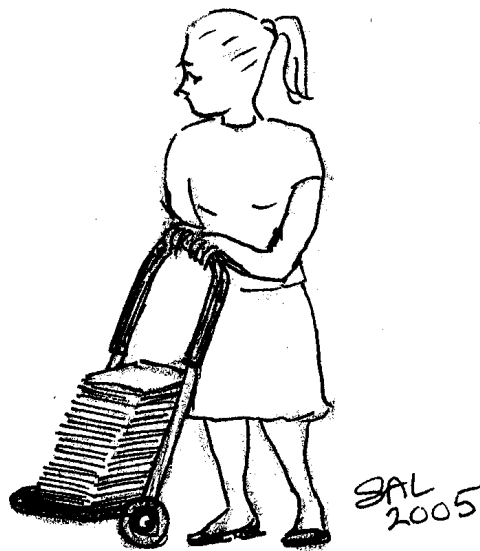
The only advantage your advisor has over you is that he or she has had more time to acquire information. This extra time, plus the ability of concrete to prevent useless stuff from leaking out, means that your advisor knows more than you do. Even if he/she doesn't know what to do with it.



How to prepare your thesis

This depends on your field. People in humanities and social sciences need long theses in order to convince their advisors and future employers that they are scholars.

No one will read the thesis, but its sheer bulk will impress academicians.



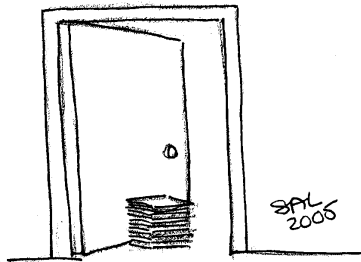
If you are in one of the sciences, your thesis should consist of a lot of short papers that you either have published or will publish in scholarly journals.

This will usually be a series of papers on almost identical subjects. Something like

Relationship between salivation rates and IQs in Bostonians;
Relationship between salivation rates and IQs in Eskimos;
Relationship between salivation rates and IQs in Australian aborigines;
etc.

When you've written enough of these papers, you can combine them for even more papers without doing more research. Such as

Comparison of the relationship between salivation rates and IQs in Bostonians with the relationship between salivation rates and IQs in Australian aborigines.



This goes on until you have enough papers to get a job. Then you combine all of the computer files for each paper into one big file, print it out, and call it a thesis. The sequence of the files is irrelevant, because no one will read the thesis.

What to do if your advisor is considered unreliable by the university administration

Keep your head down and let your advisor worry.



The pressure is probably coming from someone with a title like *Deputy Assistant Subdirector for Milking Rich People*. This man/woman person/robot raises money from rich people in order to pay high salaries to university administrators and coaches.

The Deputy Assistant Subdirector gets nervous when professors and their students investigate subjects that make rich people nervous. The Deputy Assistant Subdirector uses checksheets to send notices to faculty. Something like

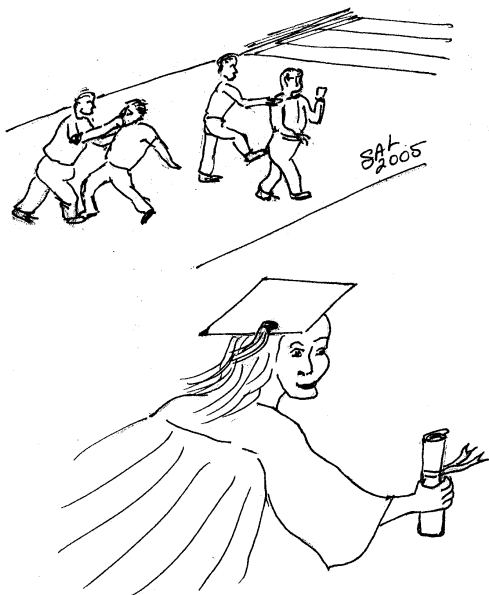
Dear Tenured Professor:

It has come to my attention that you may be promoting incorrect ideas in the field of (check one)

- Anthropology (racial differences)
- Biology (evolution)
- Geology (age of the earth)
- History (particularly the Civil War)
- Psychology (insanity)
- Theology (Oh God! anything)

The administration, trustees, and donors join me in hoping that you will discover the errors in your current publications and lectures. If not, we are considering the following actions (check all that apply)

- Moving your office to a broom closet
- severing your telephone and internet connections.
- freezing your salary
- writing to our donors and the newspapers to remind them that you were granted tenure by members of a previous university administration, all of whom were found to be incompetent and are now gone.



If your thesis advisor is in this position, you should get your degree as quickly as possible, go away, and leave members of the university to pursue scholarship and truth in their own ways.

(no) Apology

We do not apologize to anyone who takes exception to our advice. Most faculty members have a sense of humor and do not want an apology. People who do not have a sense of humor are unfit to hold positions on university faculties.