Chapter 2
Getting Started with a PhD

Abstract In this chapter, a number of first skills that can be useful for a beginning PhD student are revised. A first topic is "familiarizing yourself with your new workplace and your new city". You will receive tips on how to get settled in your new workplace, and which procedures you need to review with Human Resources and immigration offices. We provide advice on getting to know fellow researchers in other research groups, through lunch lectures and intersectional activities. A next topic is "discussing your mutual expectations with your promotor." While ideally most PhD students have had a chance to discuss the project and what support their host university can offer, the beginning of your PhD would be a good time to discuss your mutual expectations in more detail. A next topic, called "start documenting your journey", deals with developing a research journal, a lab book, a log of activities and other documentation that can serve you later on. In this chapter, we will focus on learning how to document work. Following this discussion, comes the topic "figure out your data storage protocol". A schedule for making backups is also discussed. With a last topic "make a rough outline of your days/weeks", we will give some first tools for finding a work-life balance, as well as the first concepts of planning and working in harmony with our natural circadian rhythms.

Keywords Getting started · Meetings · Administration · Planning · Data storage · Organization · Exploring

2.1 Introduction and Learning Goals

In this chapter, a number of skills that are useful for a beginning PhD student are introduced. We will travel together from your moment of arrival, when you get to know your new institution and city, to your first meeting with your promotor, and your first days of work.

One of the topics of this chapter is related to setting yourself up for success. Sure, you could just save all your files in one big "My PhD" folder, but your dissertation-writing self will thank you for an organized structure of your files. Likewise, you could take the beginning of your PhD as it flows, but easing yourself into working with schedules and finding a schedule that works with your energy levels through-

out the day will be a useful skill to develop so that you can work in an organized manner once your PhD trajectory starts to pick up speed.

This chapter is chockful with suggestions and ideas. You don't have to do everything at once. Consider this chapter a toolbox that you can use as you see it fit for your situation.

2.2 Familiarizing Yourself with Your New Workplace and Your New City

2.2.1 Sorting Out Your Paperwork

Before you can get started in your new place, you need to get your paperwork all sorted out. Don't let this administration wait until problems arise – coordinate from the early beginning (i.e. before your arrival) with the international office of your new institution and with the Human Resources department. Will you be considered a student with a scholarship, or will you be considered an employee with a salary? How will this affect your current and future standing with regard to taxes, building up retirement savings, and social security?

Make sure you bring all required documentation to arrange your legal situation, including notarized copies, and, if required, translations of all your documents. Is your previous degree accepted by your new institution, or do you need to have your degree registered or approved somewhere?

Think ahead about housing – will your university help you find (temporary) housing, or should you stay in a hotel for a few days while you scout for a place to live? How easy or hard is it to find housing? Along the same lines: do you need to get a health insurance, are healthcare providers available on campus, or do you need to find them in your new city?

Lastly, inquire if there are organizations for expats in general, or expats from your home country to get in touch with. They can inform you about the ins and outs of moving to your new institution, and perhaps you might be lucky enough to take over the room and furniture of somebody who just graduated for a soft price. Ask within the university, through alumni networks, and browse on Facebook for possible groups.

2.2.2 Getting Settled in Your New Workplace

Prior to your arrival, it might be a good idea to get in touch with the secretary of the research group where you'll be working to ask about a number of details: will you get an office and a computer? How will you get your key, door access, account on the university network with e-mail address? Are there any other practical things you need to take care of (permission to print/copy, coffee card…?).

Before you hit the ground running and dive into the lab, take a few days/weeks to familiarize yourself with your new work environment. Who will you work with?

How many PhD students work for the same supervisor? Get together with more experienced PhD researchers in your lab over lunch or coffee, and ask for their advice. If possible, ask if you can work along with them for a few days to learn from their routines.

Who else is working in the laboratory? Is there technical support? If so, get to know the technicians from the beginning of your research journey. You are part of a team, so show your team spirit and learn from the technicians – some of them might have been in your lab for 20 years and know exactly what all the noobs do wrong when they start. It's not because they may not have a PhD degree that they are not experienced in experimental work.

To familiarize yourself with your new workplace, ask a senior PhD student or lab technician for a tour. Ask them to show you what's inside of every cupboard, and what every machine does. Does your research group have a library of its own, maybe a collection of hard-to-find conference proceedings from colleagues who went there? You might not need everything at day 1 of your research, but it's good to know what is available and where to find it. By seeing what is possible in your research group, you may even get a few ideas.

Along the same lines, when you get a tour, make sure to note down for yourself where to find whichever product you need, or where to find those conference proceedings from 1996. Nothing is as annoying as having to explain the newbie four times in a row in which cupboard the markers are hiding.

Finally, I encourage you to get acquainted with the etiquette of your lab and/or research group. How do your fellow researchers work? When do people start working, when do they take a coffee break? When do you clean up after experiments? What are the opening hours of the laboratory and/or your building? Learn about the customs of the lab, and adhere to the unwritten rules of your lab. Again, you're in a team, you're not a lone wolf looking for mischief.

2.2.3   Exploring Your New Institution

Let's take it one step broader. Now that you've started to explore your research group and lab, start to familiarize yourself with your new institution and campus as well. Is there an orientation for new graduate students you can join, or an invitation for new employees to learn more about the institution?

Where are the restaurants? When are they open? Where can you find food at 10 pm, if needed? Where can you find coffee very early in the morning?

If something goes wrong – where can you find the nearest doctor, nurse and/or pharmacy? Is healthcare provided on your campus? Are there sports facilities on your campus? How can you join? Are there other clubs related to arts and hobbies on campus that are of your interest? What kind of activities are organized and when?

Where is the library? To which journals do you have access? How can you take advantage of the services offered by the library? Many libraries organize short workshops to introduce themselves and their services to new students – go and take advantage of that.

What other services and support can your university offer? Are there organized services such as intervision,[1] mentoring, and career advice? Is there psychological support and/or coaching available? Who can you talk to in confidence when you have a disagreement with your supervisor? Are employees unionized, does your type of contract allow you to join a union, and would joining a union be interesting for you? How can you access these resources?

In terms of research, which other research groups are involved with work of your interest? How can you get to know them? Do they present at occasional (lunch) lectures that you can attend? Are there intersectional activities you can attend?

2.2.4   Exploring Your New City

So, where did you end up living for the next three years or more? Explore your new city and its different neighborhoods. Where can you go and hang out during the weekends, on a sunny day, or during the cold months of winter? Which stores are open late during the week for when you need to buy groceries after a late class or a long day in the lab? How do you get around your new city? Is there (reliable) public transportation? Is it safe to return home late in the evening?

If you have a partner and/or children, identify places where you can go as a family on the weekend. Which options do you have for childcare and schools? If your partner does not work, are there groups for partners of international candidates? Can your partner volunteer for a cause?

Exercises
Time for your grand entrance into your new research group, institution, and city. Let's roll out the red carpet!

1. Celebrate your arrival by organizing a drink or cake-and-coffee get-together with your new colleagues. Ask the secretary or another fixed value in your research group how people take their breaks. If it's coffee breaks, bring cake (or maybe a typical snack or candy from your home country) to the coffee table to share with your new colleagues, so you can get to know them better.
2. Sign up for a tour of your new institution, or ask a senior PhD student if he/she has time to give you a tour along the facilities.
3. Check the five top things to do on Tripadvisor or a similar website for your new city, and go do these things. Doing so will enable you to get to know your new city a bit better, and if you don't make these visits at the beginning of your PhD, chances are you will never be able to find time for it.[2]

---

[1] Meetings between peers. For more information, refer to the glossary in Part II.

[2] Admittedly, that sounds as if doing a PhD means you will not have a life. But what I meant is that, once you live a certain amount of time in a city, you simply feel less inclined to go do all the touristy things. So go ahead and have fun while you still see your new city with fresh eyes.

2.3   Discussing Mutual Expectations with Your Promotor

While ideally most PhD students have had a chance to discuss about the project and what support their host university can offer, the beginning of your PhD is a good time to discuss your mutual expectations in more detail with your promotor.[3] Where are you starting from? Is there a proposal, or an updated version of the research proposal? Which deliverables need to be submitted to the funding body, and when? Where can you find the first references to start reading about the topic? Does your supervisor outline a direction for your research, or should you determine the direction of your research?

In practical terms, discuss with your promotor how you will work together [1]. How often will you meet? Will you have a meeting every week, or will you meet when you have results? How should you communicate your results: with short reports, with short presentations, or by sketching on a whiteboard? How often are you expected to keep your promotor posted about your work? Will you have a senior colleague stepping up as daily supervisor, or do you work solely with your promotor?

Are you expected to teach? If you are hired as a teaching assistant, the answer is easy. If you are, on the other hand, hired as a junior employee (as is often the case in Europe), you might not be entirely sure about what is expected from you in terms of teaching and supervising students. Will you be a teaching assistant, guiding students with their homeworks and projects, will you have a guest lecture once in a while, or will you be expected to step up and teach the lectures when your promotor is traveling?

How about conferences? Which conferences will you receive funding for to attend? Can you expect to receive full funding? Do you have to apply for travel scholarships, or is there a fixed budget for travel on your project?

What are the expectations with regard to publications? Will there be restrictions that apply on your publications? In some countries, PhD students are discouraged from publishing until they have finished their dissertation.[4] Other institutions will demand a number of journal papers as a graduation requirement.

> **Exercises**
> Prepare a template for your meetings [2] with your promotor and/or co-promotor.[5] For a template with explanations and ideas, see Fig. 2.1. Decide if you want to use printed copies in a binder, or digital files.

---

[3] Also called: advisor, supervisor.

[4] Also called: thesis.

[5] Also called: co-supervisor, co-advisor. In the Dutch context, the co-promotor can be your daily supervisor (assistant or associate professor). Until 2018, the promotor had to be a full professor in order to be legally allowed to graduate doctoral candidates, and it is still common practice that the promotor is a full professor. The co-promotor does not have to fulfil this requirement.

Date and time: Place: Attendants: *Start with some basic administration for your future reference*

Agenda:
  1. ---
  2. ---
  3. ---
  4. ---
  5. ---
  List maximum 5 items that you want to discuss with your promotor. Start with the research-related topics, and place the administrative/practical topics towards the end of the meeting.
  These items should be filled in prior to the meeting and communicated to your supervisor prior to the meeting.

References
  List here documents that you might have sent for discussion to your promotor. These references are the background to your agenda items. Examples of documents are an interesting paper that you want to discuss, a document that you wrote yourself, or a presentation you want to go through.
  These items should be filled in prior to the meeting.

Discussion of progress of research:
    1. Main findings since last meeting
    2. Discussion of planning
    3. Goals until next meeting
    4. Discussion of potential problems
  Use these four items to discuss the general state of your research.
  Your main findings and update on your planning should be written prior to the meeting. You will discuss your goals and possible problems until the next meeting with your promotor, take notes of this during the meeting, and then send the updated file to your promotor.

Points of action
  For PhD candidate
    1. ---
    2. ---
    3. ---
    4. ---
    5. ---
  For supervisor
    6. ---
    7. ---
    8. ---
    9. ---
    10. ---
  Here, you will take notes of what you've agreed upon to do until the next meeting. Start with the research-related topics, and place the administrative/practical topics towards the end of the list, to represent the level of priority of the tasks.

Next appointment   *Make an appointment for your next meeting, and agree upon finishing the points of action prior to this meeting, so that you can submit documents (the References for your next meeting) to your promotor a few days in advance of the next meeting. Discuss with your supervisor how many days in advance you should submit your new material.*

Fig. 2.1 Meeting template

2.4   Start Documenting Your Journey

2.4.1   Setting Up a Research Journal and a Lab Book

Trust me, the day you will be writing your dissertation, you will not remember in detail what you did in your experiments, and where you applied that sensor. Make sure you document your work, keep all relevant information combined, and have an accessible data and/or storage protocol [3].

Take photographs of your experiments whenever you can, from different angles and at different distances. Later, when you are preparing a presentation, you will be glad when you find an overview photograph and not only detailed photographs.

From the very beginning of your research journey [4], I recommend you to keep a research journal and a lab book. You can buy some nice notebooks and pens, and use these to make notes; or you can go digital and use for example Evernote to combine lab notes, pictures, and other sources of information. If you decide to go digital, make sure that it is safe to use a laptop in your lab – if you work with chemicals that can get spilled over your laptop, you might just prefer a notebook and use handwritten notes. You can also use loose sheets of paper and combine them in a binder, with tabs to find the relevant documents when you need them.

For your research journal, you can make it personal and use longhand writing to describe what you did during the day, your wins of the day, and your reflections on your research. If you prefer typing, you can use the clean writing environment of 750words.com, where you can type out your daily rant about research: what you tried and did not work, as well as what were your successes of the day. If you don't enjoy the purging effect of writing, you can just use for example Evernote and put a few bullet points of what you did that day and the insights you developed. You can even decide to write your observations into your calendar, if you use a digital calendar. Keeping a research journal serves two purposes: to document your journey, and to develop the skill of writing as a reflective practice. We will come back to calendars and planning in Chap. 3.

2.4.2   Log Your Activities

Before you can plan your work, you need to know how much time you spend on certain activities. Therefore, I recommend you start to log your time, and that you do this every time you want to evaluate or change your planning. With your tools of choice, you need to select a method that works for you, that you can stick to, and that will not distract you from the actual purpose of being productive.[6]

---

[6] For us STEM-folks who love tech gadgets (guilty as charged), it's tempting to download all the planning and list apps and try out everything. You'll spend more time playing around with the apps than reaping the benefits of these tools.

One method is to simply have a sheet of paper next to you and log the times manually when you change from one activity to the other. An example of a log of 1 hour could be:

- 8:00 am: arrival to my desk, unpack my things, greet colleagues
- 8:10 am: start reading paper
- 8:35 am: check my smartphone
- 8:40 am: continue reading paper
- 8:55 am: phone call from lab mate
- 8:57 am: go get coffee and go to the bathroom
- 9:00 am: continue reading paper

While this log might look extremely detailed, you will learn quite a number of things from this: you will learn during which times of the day you are less distracted, you will learn how much time you are effectively working (for this example: 40 minutes of reading in an hour of work), and you will be able to use your logs in the future to estimate how much time a certain task will take.

Another method could be very similar to the pen-and-paper approach. For this case, however, you can open a text file on your computer in Notepad and use the automatic time stamp feature (tap F5)[7] whenever you want to log your time and change activity. The disadvantage of this approach is that you need to be near a computer at all times. Laura Vanderkam [5] in her book "168 hours" recommends her readers to use an Excel file to log time.

The last method is using a software tool, such as ManicTime. This free software tracks automatically which program you are actively using, when you are using your computer, and when it is in sleeping mode. You can then easily tag slots of time with activities. I've used ManicTime religiously throughout my entire PhD, which helped me draw conclusions on how much time it really takes to prepare for a conference, to write a journal article, and to write a dissertation. The disadvantage of the software is that it works best when you are using your computer. If you go to the lab to do a number of things, you may end up tagging that entire time slot as "lab time".

If you want to get an idea of how much time you spend replying e-mail and browsing the internet, you can use RescueTime. You can categorize websites and computer programs in categories ranging from "very productive" (Matlab or MS Word, for example) to "very distractive" (the news website, and Facebook, for example). At the end of the week, you can see an overview of how much time you spent on your computer using computer programs in your "very productive" set, as well as see how much time you were distracted and using programs and websites of your "very distractive" category. The free version of RescueTime is a bit limited, but you can use it during the trial period to get an idea of what your time sinks are, and when during the day you have difficulties concentrating.

---

[7] On a Windows machine.

2.4.3   How to Start Writing Early on

There are lovers and haters of the principle of "starting to write your dissertation from day one". Your early scribblings most likely won't make it into your final dissertation, but I'd encourage you to start writing early on. I think the discussion on when you should start writing is irrelevant – writing is a form of communication that is crucial in science. Moreover, writing is an excellent way to reflect on your work and progress. So the question is not "Should I start writing early on?", but "How can I start writing early on?"

Don't write in your first week thinking you are developing your first dissertation chapter. Write to practice this skill, and write to communicate your results to your advisor. Explain why a certain paper is of particular interest to you, or outline the strategies you used to find the limits of a theory that you studied. These small written documents make discussions with your promotor easier, and they help you practice writing. Writing is not just about communicating new insights – you can turn your notes into writing so you have material to discuss your current understanding of the topic.

Here are a few ideas of what type of material you can start writing from the beginning:

- **Summaries of papers**: Whenever you read a paper that turns out to be valuable, write a small summary. This summary can be really short (half a page). You can use the document to type out some equations that you might need later on.
- **Discussions of a set of papers:** If you've read a few papers on a similar topic, you can pull that material together and write a small report (5–10 pages). Important here is to discover which points are still open for discussion, where different authors contradict each other, and what the limits, boundaries and assumptions are. If you can apply these ideas to a set of data from the literature and play around a bit – even better! This discussion will prepare you for writing your literature review in the future.
- **Exploratory calculations**: If you are preparing experiments, document the calculations that lie at the basis of these experiments. Try out different methods to predict the outcome of your experiments. Type out the equations you used – you might end up using them quite often. If you are setting up codes and/or spreadsheets to support your calculations, write a discussion or little user manual to these tools. Don't wait until you have your own data to start making calculations and developing tools: set up your tools as early as you can, and use published data to validate them. If you are like me and have a hard time staying concentrated when you spend your entire day reading papers for your literature review, then infusing more active work and calculations at the beginning of your research will help keeping your engaged.

- **Plan of action**: Another important document to write at the very beginning is your Plan of Action, which can be a Research Plan and/or Education Plan[8] or any similar document. Brainstorm the different methods that you would like to apply, and assess the amount of time you will need. Write down how you interpret the agreements you made with your promotor, and then return this document to him/her for discussion. You'll use this plan during your annual evaluations[9] to see which milestones you have achieved or which tasks you should focus on a bit more.
- **Motivation for your research**: Why does your research matter? Motivating your research is not about getting ready to write your introduction chapter, but it is about getting the larger picture. Write that larger picture down in a document, and revisit it frequently.[10] If your research has practical applications, keep a tie to practice. If your research has broader impacts on society, place things into the right perspective.

> **Exercises**
> 1. Set up your lab book and/or research journal: go buy a nice notebook and colored pens, or decide to go digital.
> 2. Make a template for your research journal entries or lab book entries, see examples for a journal entry in Fig. 2.2 and for a lab book entry in Fig. 2.3.
> 3. Decide how you will log your time, and start by logging a week. At the end of the week, analyze how you spent your time: how much time did you spend on research tasks (reading, analysis, experimental design), how much time did you spend on administration and e-mail? How often are you distracted? Are there times during the day when you are more distracted?

2.4.4   Figure Out Your Data Storage Protocol

To some, figuring out how and where you are going to store your data and research results is obvious. Right at the beginning of your PhD can be a good time to think about how you will set up a clean structure of folders on the space where you store your data. You can create folders for experimental results, literature, coursework, events, documents you generate, etc. and have a clean substructure in each of the main folders. Lay out your tree structure of folders at the beginning of your PhD trajectory, so you have an overview from the very start.

---

[8] It depends on your institution how important these documents are. Some places use your plan as a contract you have to fulfil, others use it as a tool for your planning, and others don't use it at all.

[9] Annual evaluations are typical for universities where PhD candidates are hired as employees.

[10] Whenever you need a reminder of why your work matters, which can be important when you are slogging through endless data.

Date and time:
Place:
Just some administration for your future reference
Tasks I completed today:
1. ---
2. ---
3. ---
4. ---
5. ---
What are your main achievements of the day? List them quickly.
Tasks I could not complete today, and why:
1. ---
2. ---
3. ---
What did you plan to do but could not finish? Add a brief reason why (for example Task 3 of the completed list took me 1 hour longer than foreseen, or I had to go to the library to get a reference, which took me about an hour)
Reflections
Leave some open space to write out your reflections about the day. How are you currently thinking about a certain theory? Here is your space for self-reflection at the end of the day, where you can place your current work in perspective, discuss tiny details or the bigger picture, or write down loose strands of ideas that are forming in your head. This section is important for documenting how you formed your thoughts about your research, and to think through your research on a daily basis.
What do I want to achieve tomorrow:
1. ---
2. ---
3. ---
4. ---
5. ---
At the end of your workday, you can plan ahead and prioritize your next day. Write your most important task on the top of the list, and start this task first thing in the morning. Administrative tasks go to the end of this list.

Fig. 2.2 Template for your research journal

The next thing you should decide on is where you are going to store your data. Will you use the hard drive of your office computer, a folder in the cloud, your university's network drive, or an external hard drive? I recommend using a folder in the cloud, so that you can seamlessly sync your work between your office computer, home computer, and laptop – if you use all of these.[11] Moreover, I recommend you back up your data regularly to an external hard drive – and maybe to several hard drives[12] (in case you want to make sure your data can survive the zombie apocalypse).

---

[11] Note that cloud folders are not infallible. I've had to have my Dropbox repaired/restored twice, and the syncing process after restauration can take a lot of time. For me, it meant limited access to my cloud drive for about a week.

[12] Store them at different locations! You don't want your laptop and all backup drives to get stolen from your car together.

Experiment number
Give a number to your experiments, for your administration, sanity and future reference – and stick to your numbering method.
Date and time:
Place:
Just some administration for your future reference
Main parameters
How is this experiment different from the previous one? Is it a repeat or benchmark experiment? What is the input of the experiment?
Changes
Note down any changes you made in the lab with respect to drawings you made when preparing for your experiment, so that you have a record of these changes for your future reference. Note down here if a sensor is malfunctioning and cannot be trusted for the data analysis of this experiment.
Main observations
What did you observe in your experiments? At what time during the experiment, or for which variable input value? During my experiments, my main observations are related to a discussion of the cracks that develop in the concrete for a given load level.
Reflections
Leave some open space to write out your reflections about the experiment. Here is your space for reflection at the end of your experiment, where you can place your current work in perspective, discuss tiny details or the bigger picture, or write down loose strands of ideas that are forming in your head. What did you observe that is odd and that needs further study?
To Do list

1.   ---
    2.   ---
    3.   ---
    4.   ---
    5.   ---
 List things that popped into your head that you need to do prior to your next experiment, or to keep your series of experiments moving forward.

Fig. 2.3 Lab book entry template

Having a backup is one thing, having a backup that is up-to-date is another thing. Make sure you know when you will sync your data and your backup, and do so at least once a week.[13] You can use software tools that automatically sync your data with your external drive, or you can manually copy your folder regularly to your external drive (keep in mind that you want to let it overwrite files if you have been working in files that have kept the same name).

Exercises
1. How are you going to store your data? Do you have an institutional cloud drive that you can access? If not, this might be a good time to open a Dropbox account or to try out Google Drive.
2. Go buy an external hard drive, or maybe even two. Yes, they are relatively expensive, but when your computer crashes or somehow files get corrupted, having access to a backup will be priceless.

---

[13] Backup your experimental results after each experiment.

2.5   Make a Rough Outline of Your Days/Weeks

2.5.1   Plan the Outline of Your Days

Without going into all details about project management, scheduling, and time management, we will now look at the rough outline of your days. Which tasks do you need to fit into a given day? Are you working in the industry and doing your PhD part-time, or are you a full-time PhD student? Do you have young children that need your attention?

Consider your day with 24 hours. Subtract 8 for sleeping, 3 for eating and getting ready, and you are left with 13 hours. How do you want to spend these?

One example would be:

- 8 hours: PhD work
- 2 hours: commute
- 2 hours for exercise (including the time to get there and back)
- 1 hour for reading

Another example could be:

- 8 hours: office job
- 2 hours: commute
- 1 hour: workout at home
- 2 hours: PhD study

Think about what a good day would be like for you, and sketch a rough outline. Factor in how your body works – this is called your circadian rhythm, see Fig. 2.4. It's a fancy term for figuring out if you are a morning person or evening person,
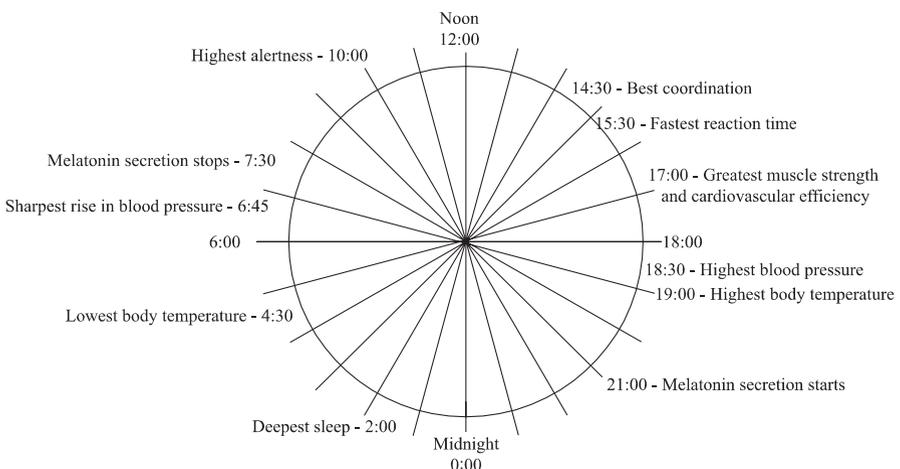
Fig. 2.4   Example of circadian rhythm

when your energy levels drop during the day, and which tasks work best for you at which time of the day.

For example, you get a bit lethargic after lunch. If that's the case, right after lunch is not the best time of the day for you to do your deep thinking. Some people have their boost of energy right in the morning, others around 3 pm. Know when you are at your best, and plan your deep thinking sessions and writing sessions for those times of the day.

Try to think of your day in terms of waves: your body ebbs and flows during the day, and if you can softly flow with yourself, you will be more productive and get the same amount of work done in a shorter amount of time and with less friction.

While this section is about getting the ideal outline for your days and weeks, know that there is no such thing as a template for every single day, every year of your life. We change constantly, and an outline that worked for a while, will need some tweaks a few months later. I want to invite you to experiment, see what feels good for you, and make changes if you feel friction. Use your research journal to reflect on these experiments.

I've noticed that my ideal days are different depending on where I am living, and what time of the year it is: when I am in Ecuador I wake up earlier than when I am in the Netherlands, simply because in Ecuador life is already in full swing at 7 am, while in the Netherlands most people might just wake up at that time.

It takes time and some self-study to really learn how to listen to your body. You might want to overrule yourself by drinking rivers of coffee and beating yourself up mentally, saying "just two more hours and I will have finished this-and-this". It's so easy to try and force ourselves – but when you are doing research, you need your mind fresh and open to creative ideas, something that does not work very well when you are stressed, afraid, or tired.

If you are ready to start experimenting with your daily schedule, try out the following:

1. **Pay attention to your focus during the day**: When do you feel sluggish, perhaps craving sugar and caffeine? When are you performing at your best? When are you distracted? Can you schedule intensive tasks at the time of the day when you are focused, and easy administrative tasks when your energy is low?
2. **Sleeping and waking times**: If you don't put an alarm clock, when do you wake up - how much sleep do you really need? (Note: if you have young children or maybe even pets who wake you up early, it can be hard to figure out the results of this experiment…) If you are completely sleep-deprived, it takes some time before your sleeping and waking times regulate themselves. But try sleeping earlier for a while – larks and owls are pretty much half/half of the world's population, but in graduate school, it looks like everyone is an owl. There are too many larks trying to fit themselves into an owl schedule. You can take some cues from your parents as well: do they wake up very early and sit quietly reading their newspaper and sipping their coffee in the morning, or do they rush out last minute because they stayed up too late?

3. **Response to stimulants**: try to clear yourself from caffeine, sugar, fatty junk food, and alcohol for a few weeks (maybe a holiday would be a good time for a reset). Then, for example when you return to work after your holiday, pay close attention to how these stimulants affect you. Do you notice the rush after taking your coffee, followed by the dip during which you lose your focus? Do you notice the craving for potato chips, and then the lethargy that comes when your stomach is full of grease? I'm not saying you have to give up your coffee, chocolate bars, cup of wine, or potato fries (I deeply love them all), but maybe a fatty meal is not the best choice when you are struggling to finish a task before a deadline, and maybe all that coffee in the afternoon is one of the sources of your insomnia… So enjoy your vices, but enjoy them wisely.
4. **Response to exercise:** If you've been in the lab until 10 pm, is it a good idea to go for a run and then crash down into your bed? Most people get too energized from exercise, so experiment and see when you get the best results: early morning, in the afternoon, in the early evening or late at night?[14]

2.5.2   Eat, Move, Sleep

Referring here to Tom Rath's book "Eat move sleep" [6], I want to get your attention for three things you should never drop, no matter how busy you are. Too often in graduate school we are running around as sleep-deprived, stressed-out zombies that just can't juggle all the tasks we have to fulfill and drop a ball here and there.

When you make the outline for your day, make sure you take time to eat properly, and time to prepare your food. A bag of chips from the vending machine is not a meal. You can't live on take-out food constantly either (plus you typically don't have the budget to eat in restaurants as a PhD student). Plan when you are going to do your groceries, and which evenings you will need time to cook. You don't need to cook every day – you can make large batches, freeze them, and take out something when needed (buying in bulk is cheaper too, and chilis, stews, and soups with vegetables and beans are filling and cheap).

1. **Eat**: When I went to university, my mother kept telling me to make sure I eat enough, saying that you can't study well when you are hungry or eating poorly. She always asked me (and still does) what I cooked or what I am going to cook, also because food and shared meals are one of the cornerstones of Belgian culture. But there's a grain of truth in my mom's wisdom (well, more than a grain): food is the fuel you put into your body. If you are not eating properly, you will be missing (micro)nutrients, and perhaps not feel at the top of your game. Eat enough fruit and vegetables to get your micronutrients.
2. **Move:** Don't skip exercise because you are too busy. The American Heart Association [7] recommends 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise (at

---

[14] If you have small children, it may be difficult to exercise at a time that is best for your body. Remember: any workout is better than nothing at all.

least 30 minutes for at least 5 days a week) or 75 minutes per week of vigorous exercise (at least 25 minutes for at least 3 days a week), combined with moderate to high-intensity muscle strengthening-activity at least 2 days per week. While this might sound like quite a commitment, consider biking or walking your commute to get minutes of moderate exercise. Inform at your university's gym as well – they typically have group classes that could count for your cardio activity, and check out their gym to see if you can do two sessions of strength training per week. Lifting is not just for bros, you know?[15]

3. **Sleep**: Sleep is important, and identifying your daily cut-off time for work is important to start finding the outline for your days. How much hours of sleep do you need? Very few people function well on less than 6 hours per night, so don't try to fool yourself, but listen to your body and its needs. Part of resting well also relates to getting good quality of sleep – make sure you can sleep in a cool, dark, and quiet room. Use white noise or background sounds if you live in a noisy student building. If you can't get your room entirely dark, get yourself a sleeping mask. Try to sleep and wake around the same time every day. If necessary, set an alarm for when you need to start your bedtime routine.

2.5.3   Determine Your Non-negotiable Self-Care Activities

Which hobbies do you have that really make you feel happy and fulfilled? By all means, keep these in your schedule. Creative hobbies, such as music, reading, or crafts can have a positive effect on your research, since they stimulate creativity. Perhaps you don't have time for your hobbies every single day, but you can fit them in a few times a week.

Which relaxing activities are important for you to indulge in every now and then? Don't skip them, but plan for them. How about keeping an evening a week just to yourself, to do what feels good right then? It can feel right to read a book, to take a bath, to go visit a friend or relative, or just hang out in the park – whatever feels right for you at the moment. Note that as academics we are not used to ask ourselves: "What would feel really good right now?" We are so caught up in everything that we have to do, and stuck in our heads, that thinking about what would feel good for yourself and your body might feel odd at first. This recommendation ties back to experimenting with your circadian rhythms – you can't make progress on your daily planning if the communication between your head and your body is disrupted. You can use your (research) journal to document your experiments and reflect on how certain choices make you feel.

Determine which self-care activities are key to your well-being, and prioritize them. If you are healthy and inspired, your work will flow forward much better.[16]

---

[15] Again, if you are constrained because of the limitations of childcare, see what you can do. I'm currently exploring home workouts in the evening when my baby sleeps.

[16] Even if you are a parent, try to fork out a bit of time for yourself. If you are a single parent, this may be even harder – but remember that a less-stressed mom or dad is more fun for the little ones.

2.5.4   On Creating Nurturing Morning Routines

A good start of the day is half the work [8]. There is a difference in your state of mind between starting the day rushed, throwing in a breakfast and a coffee and storming out of the door, and taking your time in the morning to frame your mind for the day.

Think about your morning routine. Your goal could be to win as much hours of sleep as possible (which should not be an issue if you go to bed on time), or your goal could be to determine a morning routine that leaves your energized, and ready to dive into the day.

During a part of my PhD, my morning routine looked like this:

- 6:00 am – wake up, brush teeth, drink water, etc.
- 6:15 am – yoga & meditation (typically 40 minutes yoga and 20 minutes of meditation, but times are variable according to how I feel)
- 7:15 am – shower and get dressed
- 7:25 am – cook breakfast
- 7:40 am – bike to university
- 8:00 am – start working

While drafting this book, my routine looked like this[17]:

- 5:30 am – wake up, get dressed, make breakfast
- 6:00 am – exercise (crossfit)
- 7:15 am – back home, eat breakfast
- 7:25 am – meditate
- 7:35 am – shower, get dressed, go to the office
- 8:00 am – start working

2.5.5   On Rolling with the Punches of Academia

Ideal day and ideal week – all good and well, but every now and then academia throws us a curveball, and we need to dig deep for a while. As long as this emergency situation is for a short amount of time (say, maximum 3 weeks),[18] you can just isolate yourself from the world and get it done. Working 80 hours a week should be the exception, not the rule during your PhD (and during your academic career). It may even be impossible if you have a family to care for, and even if your partner can step in for you, excessive work hours will eventually corrode your family and social relationships.

---

[17]As I am wrapping up this book, my routine is different because I have a 5-month old baby. I take time every morning to give her a baby massage, which helps us to relax and connect before I got to work.

[18]This limit is different for every person.

It's fine if you need to do an exceptional effort every now and then. There will always be times and semesters that have a peak period that seems to rob you from your life. Try to get it over with, and then go back to your regular life of normal days. I call this rolling with the punches of academia – if you get a punch, deal with it, and then go back to normal.

Don't get stressed if you suddenly have an intensive week, and then you remember you should be spending time on your hobbies, exercising 150 minutes a week plus two strength-training sessions, cooking fresh food, and sleeping enough. It's OK to cut back and soldier through for a little while – as long as it doesn't become a habit. Keep in mind that the longer you stay in emergency mode, the harder it becomes to return to your regular schedule that includes time to take care of yourself.

> **Exercise: Make Your Outline**
> 1. What does your ideal day look like? First, I want you to write a paragraph describing what a great day looks like for you. Then, convert this paragraph into a rough outline for your day.
> 2. Which work, study, and self-care tasks do you want to fit into a week? Take a template of a week,[19] for example a blank Excel sheet, iCalendar, or Google Calendar, and start to fill it with these tasks. Make sure you leave enough time between activities so you can move from one task to another. Don't plan more than 75% of your time. We will discuss setting up a weekly template in detail in Chap. 3, but for now, I want you to get a grasp of how a good week looks like for you. Now that you know what would be a good week, try to implement this schedule. Try it out, journal about it, and then improve what did not work for you.

2.6   Summary

The take-home message of this chapter is: set yourself up for success right at the beginning of your PhD studies. Get your paperwork sorted out, get to know your new environment, make clear agreements with your promotor, start to keep track of your work, store your data in an organized way, and organize your days around your optimal working hours. While you might want to hit to ground running, the first weeks of your PhD are the right time to make sure you put the right pavement on the road to support you in the long run. If all the advice in this chapter seems like too much, then start with the basics (adjusting to your new place and discussing expectations with your promotor), and take it from there – one element at a time.

---

[19] I'm not giving you a template to fill in here, because I want you to try it out for real right away. Do you use apple devices, then use iCal. If you are on Google and Android – then use Google Calendar. If you don't like tech gadgets that much, you can make a timesheet in Excel or a Google Drive spreadsheet.

Further Reading and References

1. University of Leicester. (2016). *Formal meetings with your supervisors.* http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/zone/early-stage/supervisory-meetings
2. Noordam, B., & Gosling, P. (2006). *Mastering your PhD: Running in place.* http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2006/11/mastering-your-phd-running-place
3. Lantsoght, E. (2013). *Five best practices for getting started with research.* http://phdtalk.blogspot.com/2013/05/five-best-practices-for-getting-started.html
4. Lantsoght, E. (2014). *PhD Talk for AcademicTransfer: Getting started with working in a research lab.* http://phdtalk.blogspot.com/2014/01/phd-talk-for-academictransfer-getting.html
5. Vanderkam, L. (2010). *168 hours: You have more time than you think.* Portofolio.
6. Rath, T. (2013). *Eat move sleep: How small choices lead to big changes.* Missionday.
7. American Heart Association. (2014). *American Heart Association recommendations for physical activity in adults.* http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/PhysicalActivity/FitnessBasics/American-Heart-Association-Recommendations-for-Physical-Activity-in-Adults_UCM_307976_Article.jsp#.V-GJVa0rjVI
8. Lantsoght, E. (2013). *Silver linings: Creating nurturing morning routines.* http://phdtalk.blogspot.com/2013/09/silver-linings-creating-nurturing.html