

Professor Asher's Thoughts and Tips on How to Handle the Challenges and Fun of the MA Program

A Master of Arts degree in IDSC is challenging, but *fun*.

You should be prepared to work harder than you worked as an undergraduate, and differently than as a development professional or field staff. You will certainly read more than you may have done before and be expected to write clearly and in accordance with academic and professional standards. I hope that acquiring these skills will feel like an adventure and give you a sense of accomplishment and pleasure when you master them.

Another adventure lies in meeting people at IDCE and at Clark who you may become friends and colleagues for the long haul. In two years, you may or may not solve global problems or bring about tangible social change. But you will engage in a process of learning and discovery about the field as much as about yourself and the people around you.

Here's an overview of some of the challenges of this learning process, how to handle them, and to have fun!

1. Undergraduate Preparation: A strong undergraduate background in the social sciences and international work or field experience is ideal preparation for the IDSC MA program. If your undergraduate grades were weak or you have no background in social theory, be prepared to do some extra work so that you can get the most out of your classes.

2. Reading and Writing skills: Yes, you will be expected to read a LOT, including critical literature on development and social theory that may be new to some of you. Sometimes it will be difficult to get through the amount of reading and fully understand the substance of what you read. But how exhilarating it will be when you finally do (and you will) "get it"!

In your classes you will be expected to engage in a wide variety of writing—article annotations, reading or literature reviews, research papers, professional or policy reports, and possibly examinations. You may have forgotten how to write prose in a manner that is clear and coherent while simultaneously being professional and academic. Or it may be a skill you have yet to learn. So, be prepared to put time and work in to improve your writing skills. It has been said that weak writing skills are one of the greatest barriers to success in graduate school. Reading your peers' work and sharing your work with them is invaluable in improving your writing.

See my [Guidelines and Checklist for Written Work or Professor Asher's 20 Commandments!](#) to get further help on reading and writing.

3. Developing your Research and Professional Interests, and your final MA project: This may seem the most daunting part of what you have to do, but it is among the most

fun. It involves lots of trawling through literature, reading, writing, and asking yourself a million times “What am I interested in?”

To address that question you will have to ask these multiple times: “What are the different ways in which this topic has been addressed? What’s been said about it? What do I think about it? What ideas do I find exciting and what arguments convince me? How do I fit into those conversations? What do I want to say? How will I substantiate my claims?”

The research process can be frustrating but fun (that’s my keyword for everything) and there’s help and support available. Use the readings, advice and instructions you get through your classes, your professors and peers to develop your interest. Participate in the Program, Department, and University life outside the classroom in order to develop your research interest, professional networks, and friendships.

See my guidelines for the [Literature Review Essay](#) for specific help on how to begin doing academic research.

4. Academic and Professional Etiquette or the Mutual Support Network: You already know that the tasks you have to undertake in your masters program will be challenging (and fun!). Know also that you should seek and receive support to address these challenges. Learning what support is appropriate to seek, from whom, and how to ask for it is what I call “Academic and Professional Etiquette.”

At IDCE, as in any graduate or professional setting, you are part of a network, a community. This includes faculty, staff, and peers—all of who are also facing their own set of challenges. They want you to succeed and they want to succeed themselves. The network of support is supposed to be mutual. So, learn to navigate it.

Be curious and be a sleuth. What do others around you do? How can they help you? What’s the best time and way to approach them? What are you expected to do? Answers to these questions are everywhere—in your syllabi, in the graduate handbook, on Clark’s web pages, on office doors, in the emails you receive, on notice boards. Some answers may be hidden or cryptic. A good sleuth can find the answers!

Etiquette isn’t about being “proper” (to have fun try saying this with what Indians call a “pukka sahib” English accent!). It’s about mutual respect while learning to know what you want and getting it.

5. Managing your Time and Pacing yourself: Ah, time. My advice is don’t wish for more as you will only fill it up with more tasks. Instead, learn to manage your time and your tasks. (Yes, yes easier said than done.) Be patient with yourself with this challenge as with the ones above. Take breaks—both mental and physical. Discover your rhythm and style and be true to them. But remember to be true to your network and community by respecting deadlines and fulfilling your responsibilities. Then take a deep breath and enjoy the graduate school ride! It can be fun!