



# TENURED RADICAL

The 3.0 edition

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## The Ten Commandments of Graduate School

August 21, 2013, 10:50 am

By Claire Potter



So you are starting graduate school, eh? Against all of our best advice here in the blogosphere, you are determined to embark on the scholarly life. Well, you know what I have to say about that?

Good luck and godspeed! Keep your feet dry and your spectacles up to date! Cover your head when the sun is too bright! Don't fly with ballpoint pens in your luggage! Get a cat!



As you make your way through this first year, finally acting on that sense of purpose that coalesced in your undergraduate years, know that there will be times of frustration and sorrow, but that many of us have found this to be a good life all the same. There are, as the foundations say, deliverables. There is the reading. There is the teaching (that sense that you have just taught a really good class? \*Priceless\*!!!) There is the blogging. There are the friends. There are the ideas. And there is the emerging world of digital humanities and social sciences initiatives just waiting for you to make a serious contribution to it.

Is academia in a godawful fix right now? Yes it is. So know that you need to prepare for that, and that you need to be part of the solution not part of the problem. Get involved in conversations at your university about what



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I am Claire B. Potter, Professor of History at The New School for Public Engagement, New York, NY. My specialties are feminism, political history and cultural criticism. Selections from my scholarly and public writing can be found here.

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**Comments Policy:** There will be no purely personal attacks, no using the comments section to tease someone else relentlessly, and no derailing the comments thread into personal hobbyhorses. Violators will be dealt with politely and swiftly.

### Doing Recent History



Contributors to this collection, edited by Claire Potter and Renee Romano, consider the wide range of challenges the practice of contemporary history poses. These essays address sources like television and video games, the ethics of writing about living subjects, questions of privacy and copyright law, and the possibilities

that new technologies offer for writing history. Doing Recent History offers guidance and insight to any

is a fair wage and a fair workload. Don't act like long term contingent or contract faculty are failures. They aren't. Don't assume the tenure system is the best way to organize academic labor: it isn't.

Most of all, the traditional job market is failing, and it will have to evolve. Evolve with it, and if you really want to be a college professor, you better not be picky about where you want to live. You need to be flexible, you need to be ready to change directions if your ideal job in your ideal city doesn't have your name pasted on the front. Or your second place job. Or even your third choice job, in your fourth place city. How things ought to be is not how they are right now, and the sooner you face up to that, the better.

OK, so without further ado, these are the commandments that the Goddess handed to Tenured Radical on a brand-new iPad mini:

Thou shalt not rack up unnecessary credit card debt. You may need to take out student loans to pay for things like shelter, food, medical care and a decent laptop computer. But don't take out loans to pay for things you bought just to make yourself feel better. Try to make a budget for yourself that includes fun and going out to dinner with friends, but not all kinds of stuff you will end up throwing away when you have to move. And just because it's a book doesn't mean you need to own it. One of the great weaknesses of academics is buying books they never get around to reading.

Thou shalt not neglect thy dental or health care. Every tooth of mine that gets worked on in middle age became a problem in graduate school. I am totally serious about this.

Thou shalt find an excellent thrift store. You will gradually build yourself a wardrobe of professional clothes (ok, if you are like me, you will build a wardrobe of black tee shirts) and you needn't buy anything new. Go to the swanky neighborhoods near your university and buy the really nice things other people discarded. If you don't know how to shop, get someone to teach you.

Thou shalt not assume that merit systems are determinative. If there is anything I hate seeing on the Interwebz, it is people claiming that the person who got the job/fellowship/prize isn't as smart or deserving or credentialed as they are. It's the, "Gee I wrote four articles and have a book contract, and \*that\* person only wrote one article and a review

researcher considering tackling the not-so-distant past.  
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essay” syndrome. I always wonder, Hmmm....maybe you didn’t get the job because the other person was nicer. #Everthinkathat? Academic success is not about racking up points and head to head competition. It’s about other people making choices that you have no control over. Do your best work, and then let it go.

Thou shalt have an excellent professional back-up plan. Tape this to your mirror. Keep your eyes peeled for opportunities to learn things that will give you options if that dream job — or any tenure stream job — does not materialize. Things digital, things foundation oriented, things administrative. Yes, the Ph.D. program is designed to educate you, but this is the moment to educate yourself.

Thou shalt become an excellent colleague. Be generous with the others in your cohort. Look for people’s good sides and try to ignore their annoying qualities. And if you must, be honest with someone, whether it’s a hygiene issue or something that is just getting on your nerves. Beginning any comment with, “Hey, it’s probably just me, but.....”

Thou shalt join thy professional organization. It is a false economy to be out of touch with what is going on in the larger world of your field (particularly if it’s not a terribly large world, like Scandinavian Studies or something.) While you are at it, keep educating yourself about academia in general by reading [Inside Higher Ed](#), [this publication](#) (some of the best blogs are free, but a two year subscription is cheaper than a month of your cable bill), and academic blogs (particularly those in your field that will alert you to books long before the reviews appear in a journal.) There are many voices: listen to all of them, decide what you think and what you care about. Professionalize yourself. Even if you end up leaving academia, you will know why — and how to use your experience to do something that suits you better.

Thou shalt not suck up to thy mentors nor have sexual congress with them, nor shalt thou, when a TA, cross the line thyself. Need I elaborate? An excellent way to shred your career right at the beginning is to be part of a sexual harassment suit. Or a co-respondent in someone’s divorce. Here’s another hint: undergraduates and graduate TA’s are not “students” in the same way. Even if you are only a year or two older.

Thou shalt not gossip and spread hurtful calumny, nor write vituperative email, nor bcc when chastising others. Many of the ways you may have behaved on email as an undergraduate will erode your reputation as a

Smithsonian

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The Book (The New Republic)

The Book Bench

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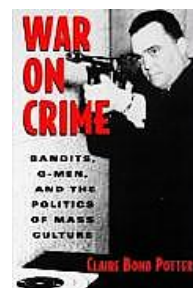
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## Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture



Claire Potter's is the first book to look at the structural, legal, and cultural aspects of J. Edgar Hoover's war on crime in the 1930s, a New Deal campaign which forged new links between citizenship, federal policing, and the ideal of centralized government.

War on Crime reminds us of how and why our worship of violent celebrity hero G-men and gangsters came about and how we now are reaping the results.

[Buy the Book](#)

graduate student. For example: telling tales out of school on the faculty or on other graduate students; expressing resentment and anger to an audience; or writing long, enraged emails that you copy to other people. Particularly in the latter case, that email may be out there forever. Don't assume your university email is private either: make sure you have another account that only the NSA can get into.

Thou shalt use the word discourse sparingly; likewise neoliberalism, and other theoretical catchphrases designed to obscure that thou hast not fully thought through thine ideas. The best part of the first year in graduate school is immersing yourself in the theoretical tools of your discipline or interdisciplinary field. You will feel like a big, wonderful sponge. But, as the wise Carroll Smith-Rosenberg once said to me, "Wear your theory lightly, my dear." Don't sound smart: be smart. Intellectuals don't want to have Michel Foucault, or Michael Warner, or Gayatri Spivak, or Anthony Appiah read back to them: they want to know what you think. Make sure you know, and learn to speak and write it in the most inviting way you can.

Thou shalt remember that this was supposed to be fun. If you aren't having fun, it is essential to find out why. Seek out appropriate counsel.

Most of all, if you think of yourself as an activist, or an intellectual who seeks a broader public, spend some of your time seeking out and acting on credentialing that might allow you to do that as an alternative to a traditional tenure track. More of us need to be out there, rather than in here. Be the change you want to see.

This entry was posted in [Archives](#), [graduate school](#), [graduate students](#), [it gets better](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).



## The Radical Publishing Company

Take a look at "Since 1970: Histories of Contemporary America", a new monograph series edited by Claire Potter and Renee Romano (Oberlin University) for the University of Georgia Press. Interested in publishing? Email Claire here.



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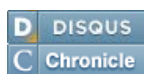
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 **bwogilvie** 1 day ago


Great advice! I would add, as a corollary to #1 and #2, Thou shalt learn to cook. One reason my teeth survived grad school intact was that I cooked most meals from scratch, with little sugar and lots of vegetable fiber, and I didn't drink sugary beverages. It was also easier on my budget than eating prepared foods, or eating out all the time.

50 people liked this. 

 **addision\_m** 21 hours ago

During seminars, thou shalt not dominate discussions, interrupt, scoff, roll eyes, sigh loudly, appropriate arguments about theoretical texts from preface/introduction/secondary sources as one's own (guess what!? We've all read those!). And please, thou shalt give up disgusting energy drink habit of undergraduate days.


48 people liked this. 

 **not4nothin** 19 hours ago in reply to addision\_m


Thou shalt not over-caffeinate yourself. "Casey Jones you better watch your speed."


Espresso, cappuccino, Red Bull or whatever your poison of choice, too much of a good thing is too much.

8 people liked this. 

 **silbey** ★ 19 hours ago in reply to not4nothin

Your words are English but I do not understand their meaning.

16 people liked this. 

 **Para Salin** 45 minutes ago in reply to silbey

Let me see if I can break down not4's English words for you, silbey:

The comments by addision-m ended with reference to disgusting energy drinks. Energy drinks contain caffeine.

One of the first books from the creators of "Piled Higher and Deeper" included a warning not to consume too much coffee - cappuccino or whatnot - while dealing with the sleep deprivation that doctoral students often encounter.

The effects of caffeine are sort of like the effects of the old-time hippie street drug known as "speed."

In the song "Casey Jones" the Grateful Dead warn about watching "your speed."

"Red Bill" is a purposeful misspelling of a popular energy drink.

And the final "too much" line suggests that while 2 cups of coffee may be okay, 20 cups is not.

LIKE



**22108469** 19 hours ago

Thou shalt not lord it over thy less bookish fellows in the laboring classes (particularly those who can fix your broken mechanical and digital devices).

27 people liked this.

LIKE



**sherrymarts** 19 hours ago

Yes, this is all so true!

I would add the rules I learned in graduate school:

1. Never assume anything. Ask, request, probe.
2. Nothing you will have to learn how to do is any harder than what you already know how to do. Even if it seems that way at the time.

3. Get out more. Make friends with people who aren't graduate students. Volunteer in the community, join an off-campus club or interest group, dabble in local politics. It will save your sanity when everyone around you is stressing out over exams and dissertations.

16 people liked this.

LIKE



**Diana Liverman** 18 hours ago

Thou shalt not ask questions or make comments in seminars prefaced by 'this is probably a stupid question/comment but...' .....do not undermine yourself!

24 people liked this.

LIKE



**adolphus** 18 hours ago

I found the first two mutually exclusive. I wracked up some cc debt and it was almost exclusively health care related and that was from deferring dental checkups to once every 2 years instead of twice a year (though some was to travel to do research or present papers and some car repairs for a car I share with my partner) I am a returning student who is much older than most of my class mates and I noticed most of them were still living off their parents for many of their bills (car, car insurance, health care, phone etc). So maybe your 11th commandment could be to be born to wealthy parents?

12 people liked this.

LIKE



**ioumac** 18 hours ago

A coda to the Fifth Commandment: Thou shalt create, and curate, a LinkedIn profile. This is not only considered crucial in most non-academic professional fields these days, it will also encourage thee to think of thy skills as transferable to another profession, even when thou hast spent most of six years researching the evolution of the imperfect subjunctive in medieval Armenian.

7 people liked this.

LIKE



**Henry Vandenburg** 18 hours ago

Once thou advance to thy candidacy, thou shalt toil in the gardens of thy dissertation no less than six (6) days a week. Thou may takest one day for thy leisure

10 people liked this.

LIKE



**MarjoryMunson** 18 hours ago

I particularly like the unnumbered shalt: Be the change you want to see.

7 people liked this.

LIKE



**minerva9** 17 hours ago

Don't complain about the unfairness of the job market if you aren't willing to move to Martin, TN to teach five intro courses a semester on an interim replacement contract. If you won't even apply for those jobs, you're not serious about making an academic career.

Don't assume you're smart because you're in grad school and have heard of obscure stuff that needs obscure words to explain. No one cares. You probably aren't that smart.

Don't assume that your thesis is so important that it needs to be embargoed. It's not.

I disagree with the advice not to suck up. You should suck up. To absolutely everyone, including those you might deem "beneath" you. Especially them. Never fight with anyone or say nasty things to or about anyone. Don't gossip or participate in cynicism. Always be nice. Volunteer to help out your colleagues.

18 people liked this.

LIKE



**SmallishButt** 16 hours ago

Thou shalt treat departmental staff with reverence, for they contain multitudes (of funding, plum assignments, useful info, etc.).

23 people liked this.

LIKE



**chanceofrainne** 16 hours ago

Thou shalt make friends with the department secretary and cherish thy relationship with that individual higher than precious gems!!!!

38 people liked this.

LIKE



**missoularedhead** 3 hours ago in reply to chanceofrainne

Verily, know that the office staff can make the path smooth or rough. Chocolate is always welcome.

7 people liked this.

LIKE



**chanceofrainne** 16 hours ago

Yes, this is the best advice ever

LIKE



**Jack Lake** 15 hours ago

Law, medical and engineering do stand to use somewhat different advise, although a lot of the above still applies. If it were up to me some additions follow:

Develop good work habits. Without efficient and focused work you get nowhere.

Don't feel too smart. Academia and graduate students are plenty smart, but smart come a dime a dozen; it's not a useful skill.

Take breaks for vacations and leave enough time for thinking. The brain is slow and digests like a cow. Let it work.

Learn to write well. You wont be Philip Roth, but basic skills are important and reachable.

12 people liked this.

LIKE



**nontraditional001** 13 hours ago

Funny and clever!

1 person liked this.

LIKE



**Lana Sumpter** 11 hours ago

Codas to Commandment II. Thou shalt make every attempt to reduce alcohol and tobacco



consumption while you are in graduate school. You cannot afford the copay nor the long-term health consequences. Similarly, skipping sleep and healthy food choices could mean a quick trip to the grave -- you will never get that PhD in your hot little hands if you are rushing to your own death.

1 person liked this.

LIKE



**SRQkitten** 5 hours ago in reply to Lana Sumpter

Sleep is important! Given this is when the brain reorganizes all the new information you are taking in, try to make sure you can get as much as reasonably possible.

And what chanceofrainne said is essential - dept. secretaries and office managers can be a real help if they are valued for the important role they hold. Likewise, having a good relationship with key library staff (inter library loan staff person was one of my favorite folks) and tech support personnel can also make ones way a mite easier.

1 person liked this.

LIKE



**lahope** 10 hours ago

If you are picky about where you want to live, consider a community college.

3 people liked this.

LIKE



**SRQkitten** 5 hours ago

"More of us need to be out there, rather than in here. Be the change you want to see."

YES! There are many options and alternatives to higher education in your postgraduate life. Don't discount these experiences as they may take you down roads of interest that may provide you with opportunities to make change happen in the best of possible ways. Tenure is great but so is implementing programs that change lives for the better.

4 people liked this.

LIKE

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