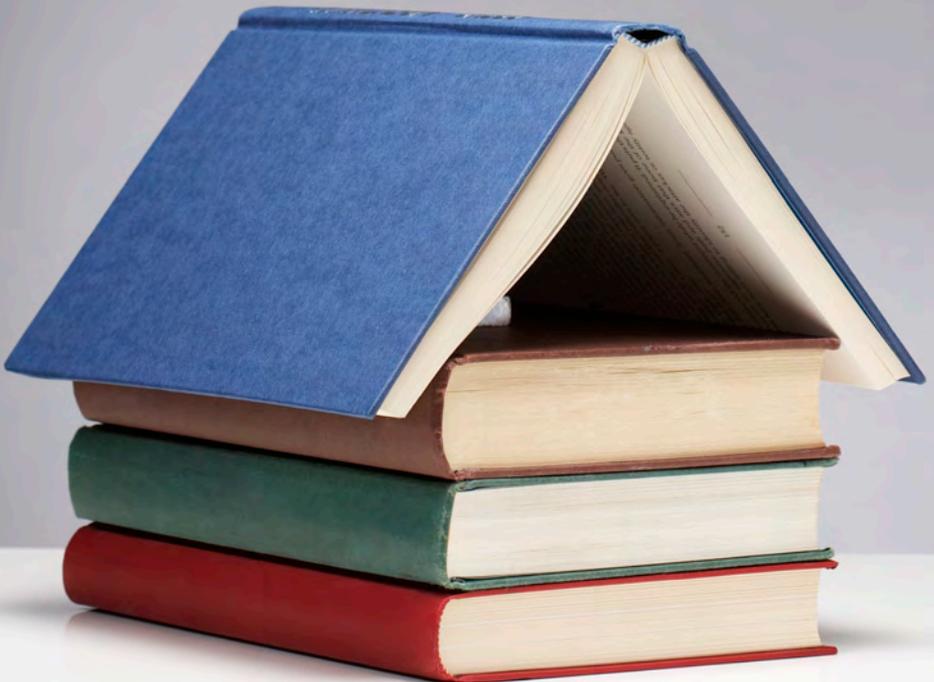


# Tools for Success in Graduate School and Beyond

Building Relationships...Having an Impact



# Introduction

**This booklet is all about success...yours!** Chances are you've framed success in terms of getting your degree or a job. We would like to expand that, offering a model that frames success in terms of developing each of the skills or "tools" outlined here. Our purpose is not only to make you aware of what these complementary skills are, but also offer some suggestions on how to develop them for yourself, while still in graduate school. In doing so, you'll enhance your chances of surpassing others who are similarly academically qualified, particularly in highly competitive contexts such as applying for funding, or interviewing for a job, but who don't have some or all of these important additional skills.

## Why did we choose these particular six "tools?"

Understanding and building on your personal assets or **strengths** goes back to the ancient Greek maxim of "know thyself." Understanding who you are in terms of your innate skills and talents is fundamental to setting up situations for success.

**Social capital** is about belonging to and maintaining strong connections within a group and is pivotal to the saying: "It's not just what you know, but also whom you know."

You can be the most brilliant scholar in your field but without knowing how to **organize** your thoughts you will be neither efficient nor totally effective.

Building a better mouse-trap does not, despite beliefs to the contrary, guarantee that the world will come knocking on your door. Being able to **talk about your ideas** will, however, enhance the chances of that outcome.

Related to which is the importance of disseminating your ideas in environments in which they will have most **impact**. Do you know where or how to do that? We'd like to point the way.

Finally, (albeit something you should do at the inception, rather than the end, of any project) there's the all-important discipline of **evaluation**, or how to know when you have actually achieved a successful outcome.

Each of the following sections is short and to the point, highlighting the most salient information with which to help you broaden and build on these essential life tools. We hope that you will use this booklet throughout your career, referring to each topic as the need arises, and as your needs change over time. This toolkit will be most valuable if you actually follow the suggestions, take time to answer the questions, and actively think about the topics.

# Tool 1: Building on your strengths

Rather than focusing only on your weaknesses, move toward success by identifying and building on your strengths.

**Playing to your strengths** is as relevant in graduate school as it is to any challenging endeavor. But what exactly are “strengths” and how do they differ from competencies and skills? Just as important, how do you continually develop your strengths and use them to enhance your graduate experience?

When we talk about strengths we mean the combination of three things: talent, skills, and knowledge. Talent represents not just what you’re inherently good at, but also what gives you satisfaction. It is demonstrated through the way you typically think, feel, and behave. But strengths are also built from the continual acquisition of new skills and knowledge, making strengths-building a dynamic process. Studies suggest that developing students’ strengths has a positive impact on their levels of hope for the future, subjective well-being, and confidence.

**Find out about your strengths:** Go to: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/> and register to take the Signature Strengths survey developed by Dr. Martin Seligman and Dr. Chris Peterson of the Values in Action Institute. This questionnaire allows you to identify your key strengths from a list including creativity, critical thinking, courage, persistence, teamwork, leadership, and discretion.

**Consider how your strengths have contributed to your life so far:** Take a blank notebook or some sheets of paper and reflect on what it has meant to your life to have this particular set of strengths. How have they impacted different areas of your life? In what tangible ways have you demonstrated them in the past?

**Plan how to apply your strengths in your educational endeavors.** Write down the various educational goals you have set for yourself, as well as the potential challenges you face as you engage in the graduate school experience. In what practical ways might you demonstrate each of your strengths in order to achieve those goals? How might your strengths be applied in overcoming obstacles to your goals?

**Seek out others’ strengths.** None of us is talented at everything. Be mindful of those things you recognize as neither natural nor easy for you. Who among your cohort, faculty, or in some other part of your life embodies a talent that would benefit you as a graduate student? How might you collaborate with them so you can pool your unique strengths to mutual benefit? Through modeling others’ thoughts and behaviors, and embodying their skills and knowledge, you will have taken the first step towards adding new strengths to your personal repertoire.

**Revisit your strengths periodically.** Strengths-building is a dynamic process. Take the time—maybe at the end of every semester—to review what strengths you started with, how you used each of them, which ones were under-utilized, and which are newly acquired. How has focusing on your strengths benefited you? Ask yourself, in what ways are you thinking and acting differently because you are more mindful of the unique talents you bring to bear in your academic activities, and life generally?

#### Suggested Reading:

Buckingham, M., & Clifton, D.O. (2001). *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Clifton, D.O., & Nelson, P. (1995). *Soar With Your Strengths*. New York, NY: Dell.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E.G. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A classification and handbook*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association

# Tool 2: Taking care of your relationships and networks

Resist the common pitfall of isolating yourself from others and focusing exclusively on your work. Take time to cultivate and maintain both your personal and professional relationships.

**Certainly the funding and material resources** that make your research and professional work possible are of vital importance to you in graduate school—but so too are your social and relational resources, also known as “social capital.”

As a graduate student, your social capital is comprised of resources including friendships, connections to relevant and helpful people and colleagues, and a general state of belonging to groups, especially those that matter to you and your progress.

In very real and important ways, your network of friends, peers, and colleagues makes possible the work you do in graduate school. However, we’re not simply talking about creating a standing reserve of people that you can take advantage of when you need them, or connections that can help you find a job (although these may be benefits of a healthy network). What we’re talking about here is a set of reciprocal relationships that benefit the others in your network, as well as yourself. To have a healthy network of relationships, you have to actively give, as well as expect to receive.

## Useful thoughts about networks

There are many different aspects of networks that are relevant, but two in particular may be beneficial to you. First, people tend to form clusters, or what we’ll call “tight networks.” These are comprised of people with whom you have much in common (for example: similar background, purpose, knowledge base, social position). The people in your tight network will be those with whom you spend a fair amount of time and will have the closest personal and professional relationships, such as people you know through clubs, family, your department, or your regular intellectual and professional activities. Tight networks are very effective at helping you build and maintain momentum on projects, and for getting projects done. They are also critical for providing support and a sense of belonging. Moreover, one will likely belong to many different tight networks that are themselves only loosely connected, if at all.

This gives rise to the second important aspect of networks; the power of individual tight networks is greatly enhanced by being loosely connected to other tight networks. There is great value in being able to move between multiple networks, bringing ideas and resources as you do so. Indeed, sociologists who study innovation point out that most new ideas are generated by “idea brokers,” who move between loosely connected networks. This is why interdisciplinary work is often so generative.

## Tips for cultivating your networks and social capital:

1. Become aware of the fact that **you inhabit many different networks and groups**, and be self-conscious about the ways in which you inhabit them, what you bring to them, and what they offer you.
2. **Prioritize your relationships.** This may sound cold and calculating, but none of us has time to devote equal amounts of attention to all people, all of the time. Once you are clear on who and what networks are the most important, you will have more time and energy to take better care of them.
3. Look for **opportunities** to actively move between the different tight networks that you inhabit, bringing ideas to each different network, and looking for ways to build connections.
4. **Be generous with your knowledge and your connections.** The most productive networks are ones in which the members share ideas, connections, and other forms of social capital. Such people operate according to a kind of intellectual “paying it forward.” While you need to be sure that you get the credit you deserve, as with the sharing of any other kind of assets, being generous with your social capital can be both personally fulfilling and professionally enhancing.

## Suggested reading:

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Halpern, D. (2004). *Social Capital*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Putnam, R.D. (2001). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

# Tool 3: Getting organized

Organize yourself so that you are more efficient and effective, by taking into account how you think and what motivates you.

**Not everyone needs to have a tidy desk** and an ordered filing system in order to be efficient and effective. Mental clutter is another matter, however, and is often the reason why organization systems never get used or maintained. Indeed, trying to set up such a system for organizing your academic life (or life in general) without cognitive clarity, is like putting the cart before the horse—it's unlikely to get you anywhere.

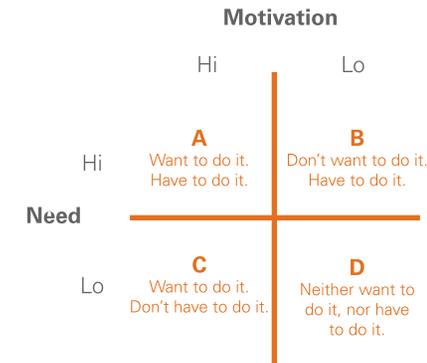
Being organized depends largely on clear thinking around why you are doing something, what needs to be done, and in what timeframe. Organize your mind and the ability to organize all your electronic or physical “stuff” will come naturally from that.

Productivity experts have devised various project management and workflow tools to help individuals organize projects large and small. David Allen, for example, calls this “setting up the right buckets” and makes the distinction between actionable and non-actionable items. These are the things which require you do something about them (like writing term papers, or submitting articles for peer-review), and other things which represent “reference material” such as class notes, background readings, and other archival data. Allen talks about the classic 3 Ds of organization for actionable items—deciding whether to Do It, Delegate It (after realizing you may not be the most appropriate person after all, but also when waiting for an action or decision by someone else), or Defer It (because you don't have the time or resources to complete it right now). The decisions for the non-actionable items are to trash it, hold it in a general review folder, or file it in its own, marked file or folder.

On the assumption that it is easier and potentially less crucial to handle non-actionable items in the way Allen suggests, let us offer another approach to getting organized that can help you answer those key questions of why, what, and when you need to take action on something. This approach factors in your motivation, and hence energy and enthusiasm, for all the things you need to accomplish.

Here are seven steps for making this system for organizing actionable items work for you:

1. Take whatever project you are working on currently and break it down into its constituent parts, i.e., all the individual tasks that contribute to the project as a whole.



2. Assign each of these tasks to one of the boxes (A, B, C, or D) shown in Figure 1, basing your decision on the perceived level of personal motivation and need relevant to each task.
3. Immediately jettison anything that falls into box D—these things are both energy-drainers and timewasters.

4. Focus solely, for the moment, on the items in boxes A and B.
5. Determine what would increase your motivation for items in box B. Would it help to promise yourself a reward for completing these tasks, to find others to share the load, or to think about what this would look like if you did want to do it?
6. Decide, based on your level of energy and the deadline for each task (in relation to the whole project), roughly how much time each task requires for completion, remembering that things you have low energy for always take longer to accomplish.
7. Select tasks from each of boxes A, B, and C (because it's a joy to do things you want to, but don't have to!) and schedule them into your daily or weekly planner. Writing down what you intend to do is more powerful than keeping it all in your head. Make items in box A the first things you do each day, so as to increase your energy for everything else. Follow up with items in box B, then reward yourself at the end of the day or week with items in box C.

Suggested reading:

Allen, D. (2001). *Getting Things Done: The art of stress-free productivity*. New York, NY: Viking Penguin

Morgenstern, J. (2004). *Organizing From the Inside Out*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.

# Tool 4: Effectively communicating your ideas

Develop the habit of talking about your ideas to a range of audiences. Cultivate the ability to communicate your ideas in a way that makes an impression and motivates others to talk about them too.

**Academics are notoriously reticent about promoting themselves** or their ideas. The prevailing view tends to be that if ideas are good enough, there is no need to hype them or get in people's faces about them. To a large degree that's true—if an idea is powerful, compelling, and useful, there is no need to hype it. BUT, there is a definite need to let others know about your ideas, and in a way that they will both remember them, and want and be able to tell others about them.

Here are some ways to make your ideas easier to talk about, and easier for others to spread the word.

**Name it:** Give your idea a name, so that someone can refer to it as something other than “that idea” or “Bob’s idea.” Have a catchy, memorable way to finish the sentence: “I’m working on \_\_\_\_\_.” Actually have two ways—one for those within your field who will understand and be impressed, and one for the general public (especially those who might potentially fund you) so that they will understand and be impressed.

**Tag it:** A tag is a slogan or a motto that encapsulates both the essence of the idea and its promise. GE “Brings good things to life;” the Graduate School asks “What do you want your degree to mean?” and The University of Texas at Austin has the slogan “What starts here changes the world.” Think in terms of memorable or inspiring lines, or at least ones that are intriguing.

Both the name and the tag are good ways to put words into peoples’ mouths, which makes it easier for your idea to spread.

**Focus on benefits:** What difference will this idea or project make?

Academics are good at talking about the topics they do research on, but not nearly as good at talking about the benefits of that research. Benefits are those things that will be made possible by virtue of the research, such as important discoveries, the development of new methods, or applications that help the general public.

**Make it concrete:** Give examples of ways that your idea has worked and/or visualize what it will “look like” when it succeeds. Tell it like it is, which means not being afraid of explaining things in simple, everyday language. Simple is good, because that means people will get it. It is always better that they spread a simple understanding than not spread the more nuanced meaning you’d like them to. You will always understand your idea better than anyone—but that’s not the point.

**Tell a story:** Quick stories are excellent ways to show what your idea means in practice—real examples of what’s really happened are excellent ways to bring your idea to life for others.

**The benefits of getting it not quite right**

If you keep track of how people “get it wrong” when they spread an idea of yours, that can present you with a tremendous resource for influencing your network. People will “distort” or modify an idea according to how they are making sense of it, what’s appealing to them, what’s not appealing to them, or how they want to “own” the idea themselves and thereby become part of its power.

Pay close attention, therefore, to how people talk about your idea, and then capitalize on that. If they get it wrong in ways that are detrimental to its power or are just wrong, then correct them. But more often than not, the nuances will make the idea more flexible and fluid. If you continually ask yourself why someone would translate your idea that way, you can gain valuable insight into how they think, how they approach problems, what their values are, and what’s likely to motivate them to support you now and in the future.

**Suggested reading:**

For a useful online article on how to write an elevator pitch, go to:  
<http://www.businessknowhow.com/money/elevator.htm>

Wagstaffe, J.M., & Bean, B. (2002). *Romancing the Room: How to Engage Your Audience, Court Your Crowd, and Speak Successfully in Public*. Three Rivers Press

# Tool 5: Making an impact in the marketplace of ideas

Understand that, in a “marketplace of ideas,” it’s important to know who can help you spread your ideas, why they would do this, and the channels through which you can best make an impact.

**First, realize that we are all in the business of spreading ideas**, but that people often do very different things with those ideas than you may have anticipated. For example, in an academic context, some of the things that people may do with your ideas include:

**Applying them:** People take your research and use it in their own context. Your work has an impact because it enables others to “solve” specific, timely problems.

**Learning from them:** People take your ideas and gain the wisdom and knowledge that you have created. There may not be an obvious use, but that’s not what they’re interested in right now.

**Adapting them:** Your ideas serve as a spark or an inspiration, and lend themselves to being adapted so that new applications or new areas of research can be developed.

**Critiquing/Evaluating them:** As these terms suggest, people critically evaluate your ideas, oftentimes in terms of their own disciplines or interests. As difficult as it may be to bear criticism, if you are interested in making your work relevant, there is nothing more valuable than a good, fair critique.

Bear these categories in mind as you develop and spread your ideas and they will help you identify your most important audiences, and thus opportunities to get your ideas “out there.”

**Who spreads ideas, and why?** Malcolm Gladwell identifies three types of functions that people can play in the spread of ideas:

- “Mavens” are people who love to collect knowledge and become storehouses of useful information.

- “Connectors” are people who connect people to people, and people to ideas.
- “Evangelists” are people who actively sell ideas and try to “convert” others to see the value of those ideas.

Marketing expert Seth Godin adds that ideas can spread effectively for at least two different, but related, reasons. Sometimes they are spread by sheer volume. That is, by people (typically mavens and evangelists) who like ideas, and like to talk about them to everyone. Other times, ideas are spread because those who share them have credibility and authority, so when they speak everyone pays attention. These folks may not generate as much volume, but they more than make up for that by their authority. It is worth noting that this applies not only to individuals, but to any source.

Generally speaking, the more controversial or contentious your idea is, the better it is to have those with authority spreading it, at least initially. Evangelists tend to be the ones who adopt ideas early on in the process, while mavens may not have a particular stake in spreading ideas, but are invaluable because they are repositories of useful knowledge. This means they may be able to see connections among ideas that even you are not aware of.

## Channels by which ideas make an impact

The first category of channels for your ideas includes ones you’re already familiar with, such as: journals, newsletters, websites, listserves, and blogs. Ask yourself: are you taking full advantage of opportunities to share your ideas in forms other than, but also including, standard journal publications or conference papers?

Another channel to consider is direct communication among people. Whereas emails can provide a useful way to channel your ideas because they can be sent to many people at once, nothing is as effective for spreading ideas as face-to-face conversations. Not only does this allow the recipient to get the information/knowledge they need by asking questions, they are also exposed to the enthusiasm and passion that you or someone else feels about your idea. This can obviously happen at conferences, but don’t forget to take full advantage of the opportunities on a campus as diverse as UT.

Finally, look for opportunities to get feedback on your ideas so that you can learn more about the specifics of how they are being put into practice. This may provide you with a whole new focus for your research or other endeavors.

### Suggested reading:

- Gladwell, M. (2002). *The Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference*. Boston, MA: Back Bay Books.
- Godin, S. (2001). *Unleashing the Ideavirus*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- Rosen, E. (2002). *The Anatomy of Buzz: How to create word of mouth marketing*. New York, NY: Currency.

# Tool 6:

## Evaluating outcomes

Enhance your chances of meeting your most important goals by factoring in evaluation at the inception of a project, rather than at the end.

**If you think that evaluation is only something you do** at the end of a set of activities or goals then you're missing out on the full power of this important tool. Certainly evaluation is a means by which you can determine the success of a desired outcome. However, by factoring in how you will evaluate success at the planning stage of any endeavor, you can use it to help shape and inform the goals and objectives you set yourself. In doing so, you are all the more likely to succeed in achieving your most valued endeavors.

How does this work? When you evaluate outcomes during the planning stage you will know:

- Whether the goals you set yourself are consistent with your values (i.e., are in alignment with what is most important to you)
- What experiences you need to actively seek out in order to achieve your objectives and overall goal
- How each new experience or encounter fits into your game plan
- When you might need to modify any aspect of the original goal – and why.

### Step 1: Imagining the ideal future

Think of the first part of the evaluation process as you would when conducting research. Oftentimes, even before you have begun a research study, someone will ask you, “What do you expect to find?” Steven Covey calls it starting with the end in mind. Do that now. Start by articulating a need you currently have. Write it out in as much detail as possible.

Now project yourself into the future, to a time when you will have successfully achieved that goal. What does that look and feel like? Take the time to become completely absorbed in that outcome. What emotions or feelings does that the value of those ideas bring up for you? Does the outcome seem as valuable to you in your mental projection as it does when you first articulated it? What might need to be changed so that this goal and your deeper values are in alignment? Use your imagination as a barometer of how valued the outcome is. If you cannot get excited by the achievement of your goal at this stage, you're not going to have much energy or enthusiasm for the process!

Once you have a clear picture in your head of the result you desire – one that is valued enough to move forward with – proceed to Step 2.

### Step 2: Bringing the future into the present

You may be already familiar with the hierarchy of educational objectives known as Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). This describes six hierarchically-arranged objectives that are widely used by teachers to ensure that they understand and cover different levels of learning, namely: Knowledge, Understanding, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Bloom's taxonomy has been revised by Anderson and his colleagues (2001), and provides a useful structure with which to unpack the different kinds of knowledge you will need to evaluate your goal progress. It will help you know, in advance, what experiences you need to seek out in order to successfully achieve your stated goal.

So, with your end goal still in your mind's eye, jot down answers to the following:

1. What **factual knowledge** do you need in order to meet your goal? Who do you know, or who will you need to find (and then get to know), in order to acquire this information?
2. What **conceptual knowledge** is relevant to a successful outcome? Are there ways in which these pieces of information are linked together or otherwise related, that you need to understand better? For example, is there a generally accepted set of principles or a model that might guide you? Again, who do you know, or who might be able to help you find this information?
3. What **procedural knowledge** is relevant to your goal? Do you know how to do what it is you are setting out to do? Perhaps there are workshops or courses you need to take in order to plug this information gap. Think about taking these before you start taking action.
4. How can you use **metacognitive knowledge** to remain flexible and ensure your success? Metacognition simply means being aware of your own thinking. It involves understanding the contexts in which you are most effective in order to seek them out, thereby setting yourself up for success, at the outset. For example, metacognition includes an awareness of your relationship with time so that you set realistic deadlines for achieving the objectives that move you towards your goals.

### Step 3: Begin the process

Remember, evaluation is a process. By constantly monitoring your progress step-by-step you will be more likely to steer yourself in the direction of a successful outcome. Take the time before embarking on each task or objective to outline what precisely you need to achieve and how you will know if you're successful. Gauge your success according to the vision of your ideal outcome that you created in Step 1. Don't wait until you have achieved your goal only to find out that it doesn't really meet all of your criteria.

**Suggested reading:**

Anderson, L.W., Krathwohl, D.R., Airasian, P.W., Cruikshank, K.A., Mayer, R.E., Pintrich, P.R., Raths, J., & Wittrock, M.C. (Eds.) (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman.

Bloom, B.S., Englehart, M.B., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H., & Krathwohl, D.R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives. The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain*. New York: Longmans Green.

Borich, G. (1985). Decision-oriented evaluation. *International Encyclopedia of Education: Research and Studies*. Oxford, England: Pergamon Press. Gredler, M. (1996). *Program Evaluation*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall/Merrill.

## Summary

In order to help you apply these tools as you continue through the graduate school experience and beyond, we've reduced each section to a "maxim" or general principle. You might like to photocopy and place this list somewhere, so you can reflect on these six tools each day. That way they are more likely to become good habits.

### **Tool 1: Building on your strengths**

Rather than focusing only on your weaknesses, move toward success by identifying and building on your strengths.

### **Tool 2: Taking care of your relationships and networks**

Resist the common pitfall of isolating yourself from others and focusing exclusively on your work. Take time to cultivate and maintain both your personal and professional relationships.

### **Tool 3: Getting organized**

Organize yourself so that you are more efficient and effective by taking into account how you think, and what motivates you.

### **Tool 4: Effectively communicating your ideas**

Develop the habit of talking about your ideas to a range of audiences. Cultivate the ability to communicate your ideas in a way that makes an impression, and motivates others to talk about them too.

### **Tool 5: Making an impact in the "marketplace of ideas"**

Understand that, in a "marketplace of ideas," it's important to know who can help you spread your ideas, why they would do this, and the channels through which you can best make an impact.

### **Tool 6: Evaluating outcomes**

Enhance your chances of meeting your most important goals by factoring in evaluation at the inception of a project, rather than at the end.





THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

# GRADUATE SCHOOL

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