

Forum

Some Pointers and Reminders in Islamic Studies

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Below are pointers and reminders (in no particular order) on how to go about navigating one's way through the various stages of academic life in Islamic Studies. This document is intended for those who are training to be in, or are already in, the profession. Although in my own words, many of the items listed below are rephrased from counsel given by teachers and friends over the years.



1. Throughout the course of your career, you should always go back to these two closely related questions: *Why* am I engaging in scholarship, and *for whom* or *for what* am I doing it?
2. A life of sustained study and immersion in writing can result in some health problems down the road, often because academics do not always get enough physical exercise. So, always get a good night's sleep, exercise regularly, and have a healthy diet—consider these as a part of your regimen as a scholar.

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3. Have a real and carefully thought-out plan of research and follow it. That is, set realistic goals for yourself, and work towards them.
4. Being a scholar entails your being responsible towards your work and using your talents to the best of your abilities. Discerning what these talents are, and then focusing on them, is essential.
5. Do not aspire to be the greatest scholar or the like. Rather, aspire to be a good scholar who wishes to serve the good.
6. Not every intellectual needs to be in the public sphere, and not everyone in the public sphere is an intellectual.
7. Thinking with a tradition, thinking in a tradition, thinking away from a tradition, thinking without a tradition, and thinking for a tradition—every scholar must come to terms with the traditions that they inherit and with which they interact.
8. Islamic Studies is a very broad field: do not think that it is just confined to the North American academy. Be in touch with scholarly networks in both the east and the west.
9. Seyyed Hossein Nasr once said that a good scholar is someone who can give a lecture at Oxford at the highest academic level, and can also make sense to non-academics who are in the markets of Cairo. This should be taken literally.
10. Keep your ego in check, always. Failing to do so will bring harm to you, the subject matter you study, and inevitably others.
11. Do not get swept away by the various fads and trends in the academy. Be true to your subject and to yourself.
12. If, for whatever reason(s), you are not on board with all of the fads in our profession, do not be scared of what the so-called “movers and shakers” will “do” to you when they find that out. Excel in your scholarship and you will be seen for precisely that by the vast majority of people in our profession.

13. Answer e-mails promptly. It is a sign of unprofessionalism not to do so, and judgements are formed rather quickly by people in our profession when you come across as disorganized, uninterested, tardy, etc.

14. Choose your own interlocutors. That is, you must decide with whom you want to be in conversation in your chosen area of specialization.

15. If you are not trained in political science, do not try to become a political commentator. Stick to your area of expertise and excel in it.

16. Excessive travel to conferences and the like is advisable at the earlier stages of your career. But eventually, you will need to take it easy. As a rule, a three day trip to deliver a thirty minute lecture means something like two weeks off of your research schedule.

17. Have a research schedule and stick to it. That is, guard your time jealously.

18. Constantly remind yourself: "I only have this one life. I must make the best of it, which means using the talents that I have in the best of ways possible."

19. Do not get upset if someone criticizes your work or the work of someone you admire. You will waste your time trying to set this person straight, and in the end you will be unsuccessful. Just keep your head down and focus on your work.

20. If you work on classical Islamic texts, it is good to have a running glossary/dictionary of technical terms (in the languages you work in) that you encounter in the texts that you are studying.

21. The numbers on academia.edu do mean something, but do not pay too much attention to them. Focus on substance.

22. Be on good terms with as many people in our profession as possible, but without being false or desiring something from them. It is basic humanity to be a pleasant colleague and person. And, since academia is a very human enterprise, your reputation, based on the way you carry yourself and present yourself to others, tends to spread very quickly.

23. Avoid those who see no value in your work.
24. Academic conferences are a great place to network, of course. It is important to attend them according to the measure of need.
25. There will undoubtedly be instances in which you do not want to write a particular article or attend a particular conference. Be cautious about walking away: if you do not write that article, will it go to someone else who will do a poor job? If you do not attend that conference, will others miss out by your not being there? In other words, your decisions to turn things down are not always just about “you.”
26. Help people, to the extent possible, whenever you can. Be generous with others even as the hands of destiny have been generous with you.
27. Always keep in mind that “There is nothing more timely than the Timeless.” The more your work is colored by timelessness, the more of an impact it will have on people in the long run.
28. Much of the work of an academic amounts to “work,” properly speaking. But much of it is not *really* work—be grateful for that opportunity!
29. If you are a graduate student, ensure that you publish a couple of your graduate papers in top academic journals. It may make a big difference when you are on the job market.
30. When asking for a letter of recommendation from a Professor or a colleague, it is common courtesy to give them advance notice. Once the results come in, it is also good form to communicate that to them, thanking them for their support.
31. Do not be hyper-active, intellectually speaking: that is, excessively reading and/or writing all the time. Read when you are truly compelled to do so and write under the same circumstances.
32. Do not spread yourself too thin with writing projects and the like. There is only so much that a person can do. As a rule, the less on your plate, the better your work will be in terms of form and quality.

33. If you find yourself busy on FB or Twitter (or whatever) making unnecessary comments on ultimately trivial matters, say this to yourself: “These remarks that I am making right now are ephemeral—I should rather dedicate my current freshness of mind to something that needs my attention, and which will be better for myself and others.” For example, the energy that you will waste making comments on Twitter would be better used in fixing up a footnote in one of your papers, looking up a reference, learning a new word in French or Arabic, etc.

34. Do not try to put out every fire in academia. In fact, you should probably walk past every fire.

35. Be aware of the types of trends and people in your profession, but do not snoop around and concern yourself with things that do not really matter to you. You will naturally come to know who your allies are, who your enemies are, and everyone in between by virtue of being in the profession for a long enough time.

36. Do not pay too much attention to what your peers and colleagues have “accomplished.” Focus on your own work and achievements and be grateful for them.

37. Only study what truly interests *you* and sparks a sense of wonder in *you*.

38. Work for a limited number of hours a day. After about five hours, most people cease to be truly productive. Four concentrated hours of reading and writing are of course much better than an eight hour day wherein very little real work is accomplished.

39. Do not be lazy when it comes to any dimension of thinking, writing, or teaching.

40. If you are a graduate student, your goal is to get out of graduate school as fast as you can, and with the best possible training under your belt.

41. Aim to publish with well-known academic book publishers and journals. After tenure, feel free to publish wherever you like, while still continuing to publish in “accepted” academic fora.

42. Avoid writing book reviews if you can. If asked to write one, ask yourself this: “Do I *really* have the knowledge to weigh in on this book and its content?”

43. Do not try to speak about a classical Islamic text unless you have read most of the entire work.

44. Never let the peer-review process bog you down. If you write an article for a journal, for example, and it is rejected by an outside reviewer, there can be many reasons for this rejection. It need not be because you have produced a bad piece of scholarship. Peer-review reports are often ideological in nature. In such a case, simply move on and send your piece to another journal for review.

45. Beware of self-admiration when praised by others, and beware of personal ambition when praising others.

46. Do not superficially impose some “method” and “theory” upon the texts that you are studying. Let the texts tell you what their concerns are and let those concerns guide your inquiry.

47. Write clearly and concisely and do not excessively document your work to the point that it becomes a burden upon your reader. Some models of fine form, analytic rigor, and balanced documentation in the discipline of Islamic philosophy include the work of William Chittick, Toshihiko Izutsu, Peter Adamson, and Michael Marmura.

48. Keep re-reading your written pieces until you no longer find any mistakes in them. That means you print out your piece of writing and go over it with a fine-toothed comb as many times as you have to. The final, published product will undoubtedly still have some editorial lapses, but you must do whatever you can to have the form of your paper as perfect as possible.

49. We often give ourselves the benefit of the doubt; why not extend this good opinion as often to our colleagues?

50. Always have an updated version of your CV online.

51. Always acknowledge receipt of e-mails.

52. The best practice with e-mail is to clear out your inbox once a day.
53. If you will be away from e-mail for an extended period of time, use the auto-reply function so that you do not leave e-mail senders in the dark.
54. Try to only accept lecture invitations based on research and writing that you have already done.
55. When invited to give a lecture, ask yourself this: “Will this further my own research agenda, or someone else’s?” If it is only the latter, avoid it. If it is the former or both, then consider accepting.
56. When you have written a paper, it is a good idea to seek input on it by *real* specialists in the subject-matter of your paper.
57. If you give a paper at a conference that does not in some way result from or in a published piece of writing, chances are you have wasted your time.
58. One of the best statements made about “theory” comes from Devin Stewart in his “A Modest Proposal for Islamic Studies.” In the context of the importance of reading Ghazali’s *Ihya’*, he says, “[R]eading this single book would do more to raise the bar in Islamic studies scholarship than fifty Bruce Lincolns and J.Z. Smiths put together.”
59. Theory and Method went up the hill of Religion
in order to explain the matter.
Theory fell down, and broke its crown,
and Method came tumbling after.
60. In the face of academic controversies which result from nothing more than conflicting egos, be like an exalted mountain—above the pettiness down below, and soaring to the heavens up above.
61. Your CV should be organized neatly and logically. Pre-tenure, it is wise to group your articles into ones that have appeared in referred venues and ones that have appeared in non-refereed venues.

62. As a general rule, do not waste your time replying to bad reviews of your books.

63. Do not debate with people in our profession about ideas unless they are genuinely open to discussions that challenge their positions. As 'Ali says, "Give me an intelligent man, and I will defeat him in debate. But give me an ignoramus, and I will lose."

64. Do not mistake certainty for pride and uncertainty for humility.

65. The scholars who endorse your book should, at minimum, represent different perspectives within your area of specialization.

66. Ensure that you have PDF copies of all of your books, articles, reviews, etc.

67. Lines from Rumi for every scholar and student to consider:

Sell cleverness and purchase bewilderment!

For cleverness is conjecture, and bewilderment true vision.

68. In your classes, teach classical Islamic thought by using primary texts in translation. This will ensure that your students get a good education.

69. There is a world of difference between a historian of Islamic thought and an Islamic thinker.

70. Remember the golden rule: if you are interested in everything, you are interested in nothing.

