

10 pieces of advice I wish my PhD advisor had given me

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With great affection and apologies to my advisors

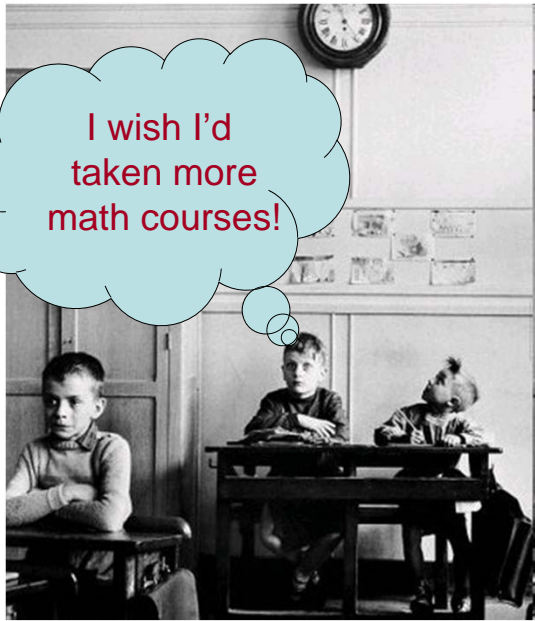


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Columbia University



Yechiam Yemini
CS Department
Columbia University

and a disclaimer.....

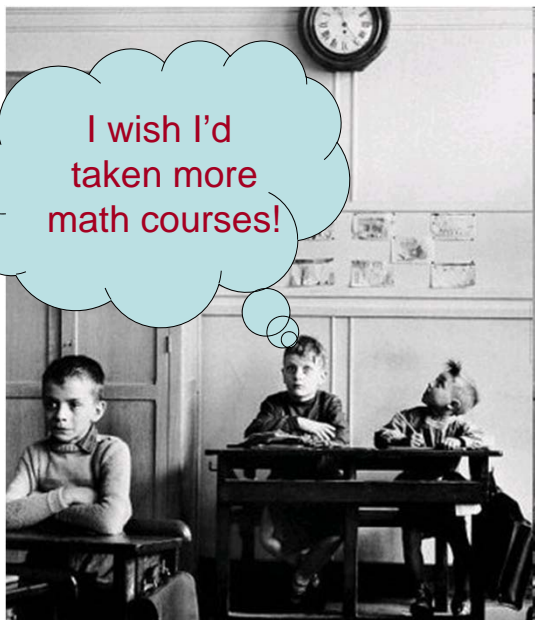


I wish I'd taken more math courses!

study broadly #1

Take math courses!

- ❑ every math course I've taken has been valuable
- ❑ won't have time later
- ❑ research fields draw increasingly on math as they mature
- ❑ theory is timeless!

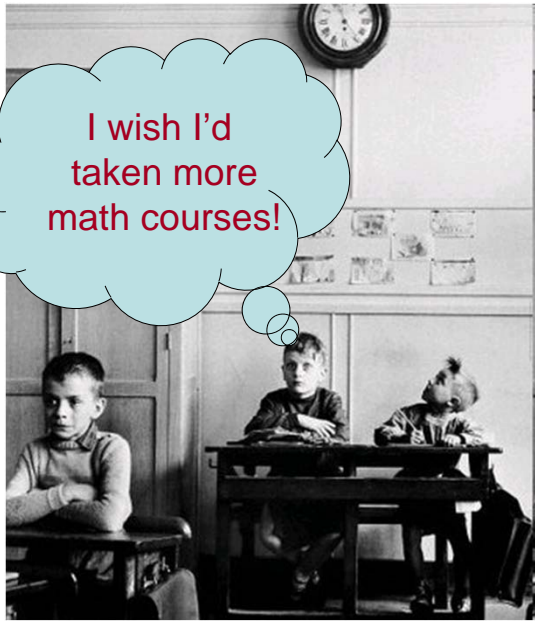


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study broadly #1

Important courses outside CS

- ❑ signal processing
- ❑ control theory
- ❑ information theory
- ❑ nonlinear optimization
- ❑ stochastic processes
- ❑ game theory
- ❑ domains: biology, economics,...

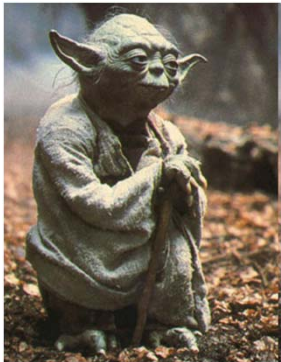


study broadly #1

- ❑ you will never again have so much “relaxed” time to study, learn, think

Sorry for that piece of bad news... but it's true

Choosing, defining a research problem #2



A fool can ask more questions in a minute than a wise man/woman (or a Yoda) can answer in a lifetime

pick your problems carefully!

- ❑ what's the fundamental issue you're solving?
- ❑ will the problem be of interest five, ten years from now?
- ❑ focus on fundamentals in a world with an increasingly short attention span

QoS

- multicast
- congestion control
- P2P
- sensor networks
- energy

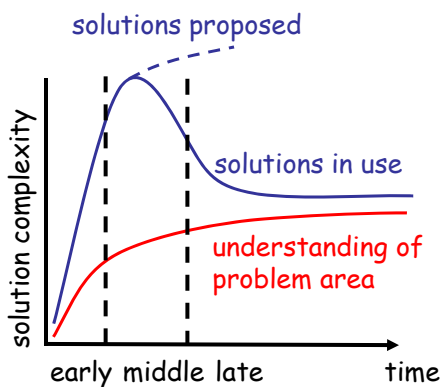
Choosing, defining a research problem



There are lots of smart people out there!

- ❑ avoid crowded areas unless you have a unique talent, viewpoint
- ❑ low-hanging fruit has been picked
- ❑ researchers working on “next big thing” are not in the crowd.

Choosing, defining a research problem

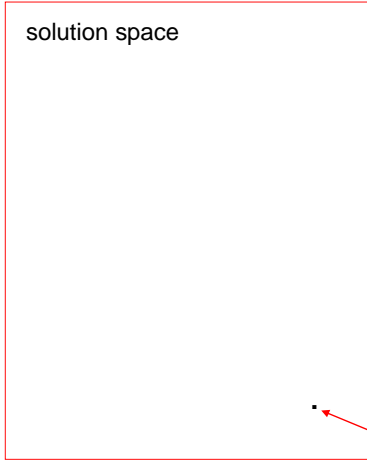


- ❑ complexity, sophistication are themselves not of interest (except to purist)
 - ❖ means, not an end
 - ❖ how is the “story” changed in the end?

[adapted from Hluchyj 2001]

Choosing, defining a research problem

solution space



avoid point solutions

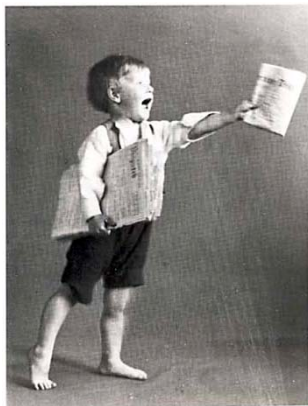
- ❑ insights that cut across solution space vs point solution
- ❑ what broader conclusions can be drawn from your work?



You are here (but shouldn't be)

Publishing

#3



- ❑ publish where you will get mindshare, impact
- ❑ there *is* life beyond sigcomm, infocom
- ❑ quality over quantity: avoid LPU's
- ❑ PhD dissertation != magnum opus
- ❑ don't be driven by conference deadlines

Time: your most precious resource #4



time

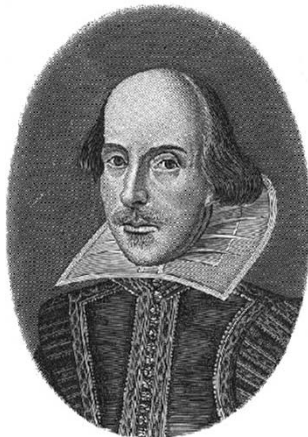
- ❑ give yourself time to think
- ❑ manage your time carefully: consciously choose how you spend your time
- ❑ life/work balance



Only "how to" book recommended by Bill Clinton

I've given away 60+

Learn how to write *really* well #5



"No tale is so good that it can't be spoiled in the telling"
Proverb

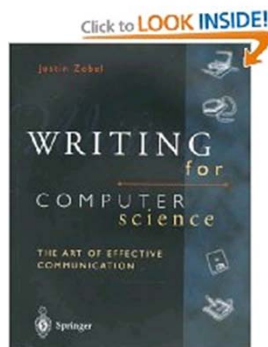
- ❑ can *not* overstress importance of good writing
 - ❖ the most important course?
- ❑ "unfair advantage" in paper selection, proposal
- ❑ best investment of your time
- ❑ study role models

<http://www-net.cs.umass.edu/kurose/writing/>

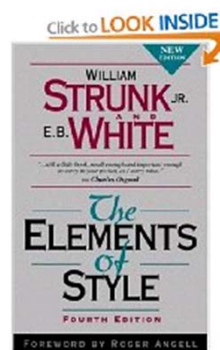
Top-10 tips for writing a paper

1. Every paper tells a story
2. Write top down
3. Introduction: crucial, formulaic
4. Master basics of organized writing
5. Put yourself in place of reader
6. Put yourself in place of the reviewer
7. No one (not even your mother) is as interested in this topic as you
8. State results carefully
9. Study the art of writing
10. Good writing takes time

Recommended reading:



Writing for Computer Science
by Justin Zobel



The Elements of Style
by William Strunk E. B. White
(50 years old – and still a classic!)

Learn how to speak *really* well #6



- ❑ Can't overstress importance of good speaking
 - ❖ important course to teach/take?
- ❑ "unfair advantage" in mindshare
- ❑ convey exciting story/message
 - ❖ thoughtful
 - ❖ engaging
 - ❖ clear, concise
- ❑ practice, practice practice
 - ❖ videotape, critique yourself
 - ❖ study role models

Learn the *process* of doing research #7



apprenticeship

- ❑ our field is a guild
 - ❖ grad student = apprentice
- ❑ it's about more than the results in your thesis
 - ❖ you'll be generating results for a lifetime
 - ❖ knowing process is what's most important
- ❑ why your advisor can't (and shouldn't) solve (or even define) the problem for you

#8

A community of scholars



- ❑ meet people, listen, collaborate
 - ❖ good students, colleagues, friends
- ❑ approach, talk with people
- ❑ interactions with peer students
 - ❖ research discussions
 - ❖ paper presentations
 - ❖ practice talks
 - ❖

#9

Identify role models



- ❑ who does something you care about *really* well?
 - ❖ how do they do it?
- ❑ many role models:
 - ❖ no one does everything
 - ❖ find your balance
- ❑ get a mentor
- ❑ be a mentor

#10

The last word



Have fun – enjoy
what you are doing

Best piece of advice I
ever received (1984):

*“Pick a place, job where you’ll
have fun, enjoy living, enjoy
your colleagues. Without that,
no level of success will make
you happy.” Jack K. Wolf*

Questions!

- ❑ What did I miss?
- ❑ What advice would you give to 1st year student?

What have others added (1)?

- ❑ learn how to deal with rejection
 - ❖ it'll happen now and then, for the rest of your professional life (hopefully not with your partner)
 - ❖ learn from rejection: Why was paper/proposal rejected? What did/didn't reviewers see/like?
- ❑ know your "secret weapon"
 - ❖ what "unfair advantage" do you have over everyone else?
- ❑ learn how to change topics
 - ❖ boring to do same thing for 30 years!

What have others added (2)?

- ❑ learn how to deal with stress
 - ❖ life balance, life changes, too much work
 - ❖ learn how to multiplex - you'll be doing it the rest of your life
- ❑ learn how to read/review/write fast, but well
 - ❖ and follow the 90/10 rule