



SECURING A **BAD** CAREER IN PH.D. PROGRAM

3 bad tips for Ph.D. students

Chang Lou, UVA CS Research Symposium 2024

OVERVIEW

- My research area: **failures** in cloud systems and data centers
 - Conducted empirical studies to understand why systems fail

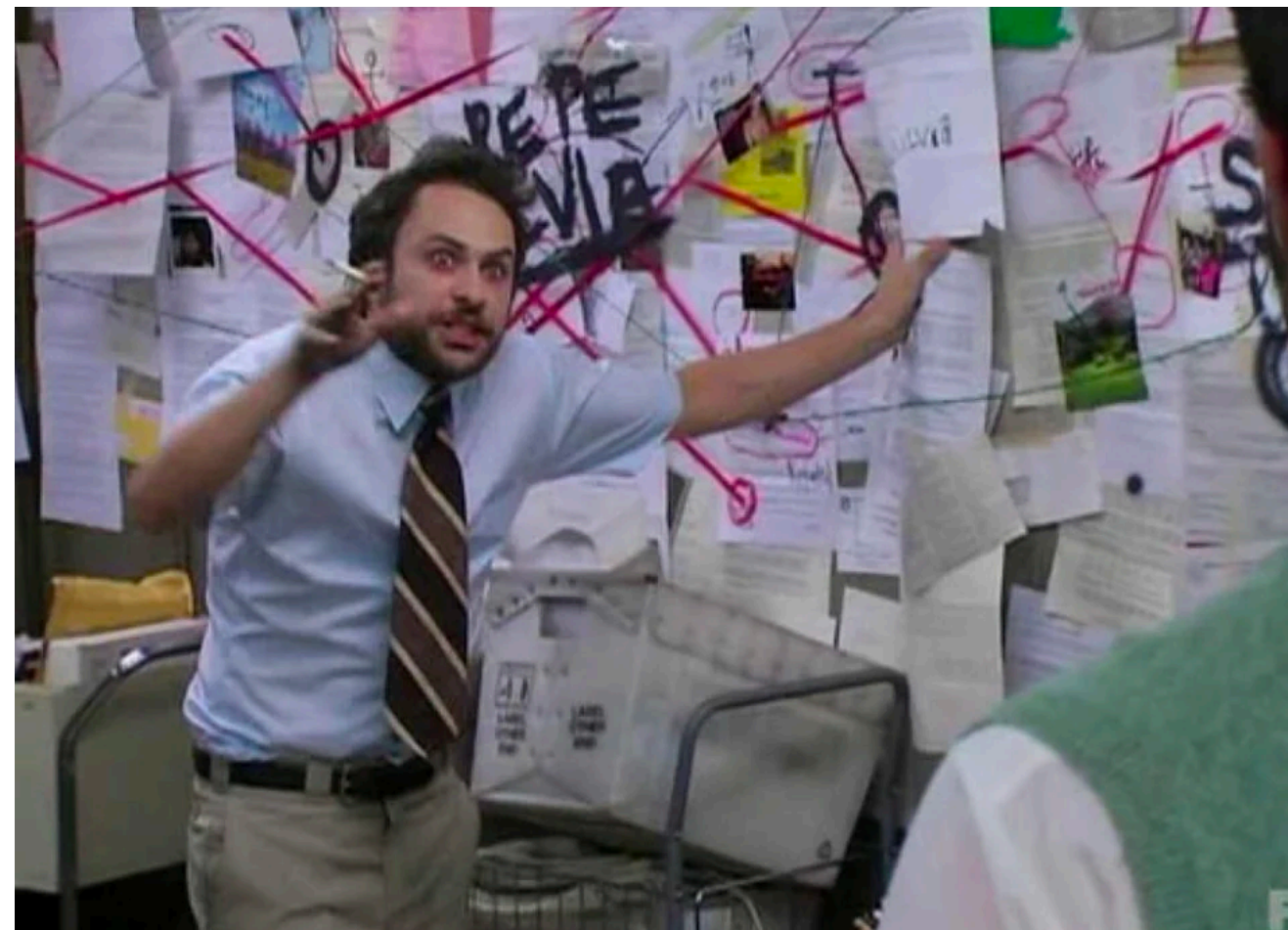
- Similarly, we applied this methodology to understand **grad school**
 - What are some common pitfalls for Ph.D. students?
 - Observations made on past experience



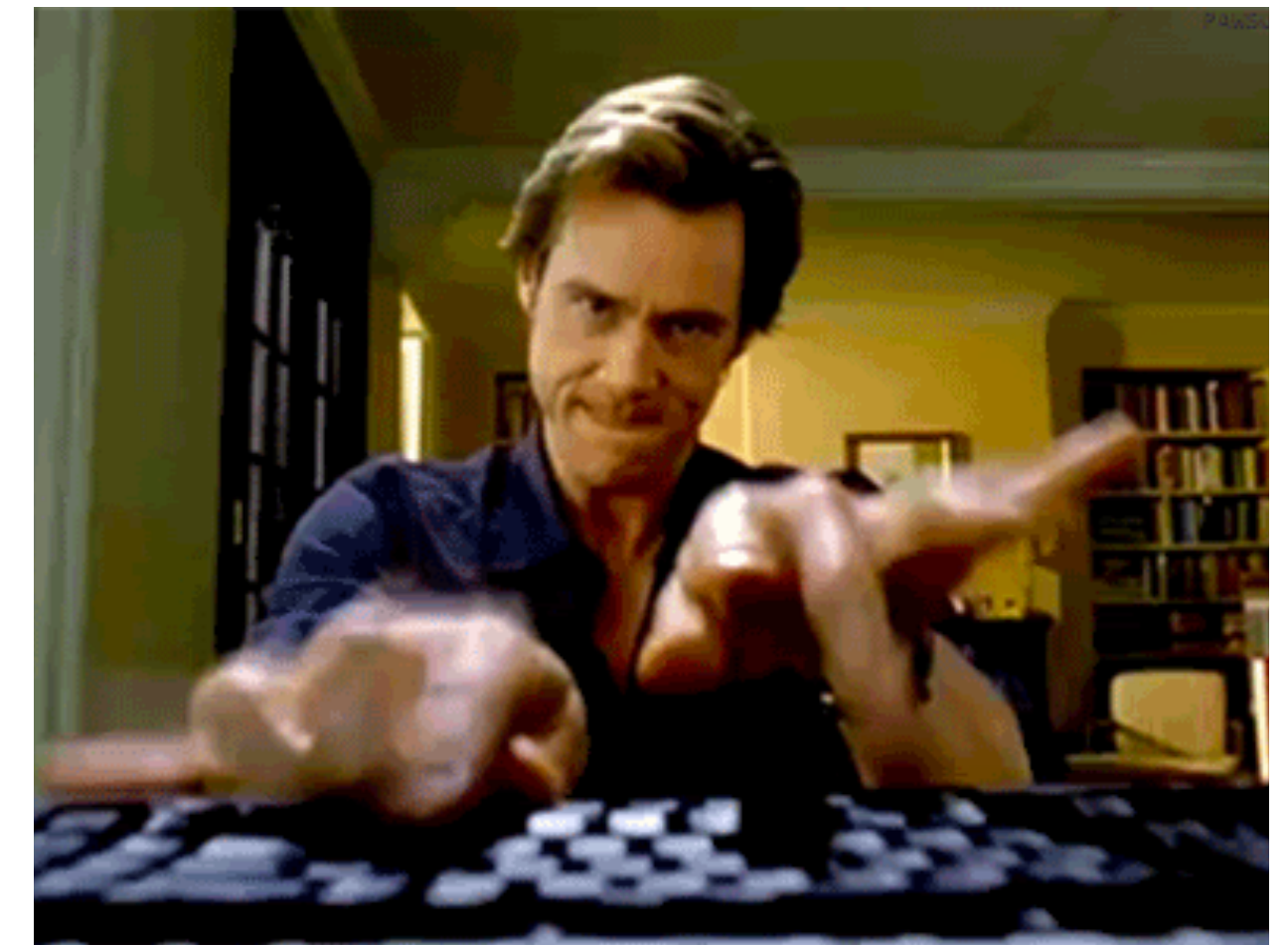
OVERVIEW



Advising Relations



Time Management



Work-life Balance

HOW DO YOU VIEW YOUR ADVISOR?



BAD TIP 1.1: ADVISOR IS YOUR MANAGER

– Principle: show your capability from independence

- Never ask help from your advisor
- If they don't reach out, you shouldn't
- It is fine to ignore their advice



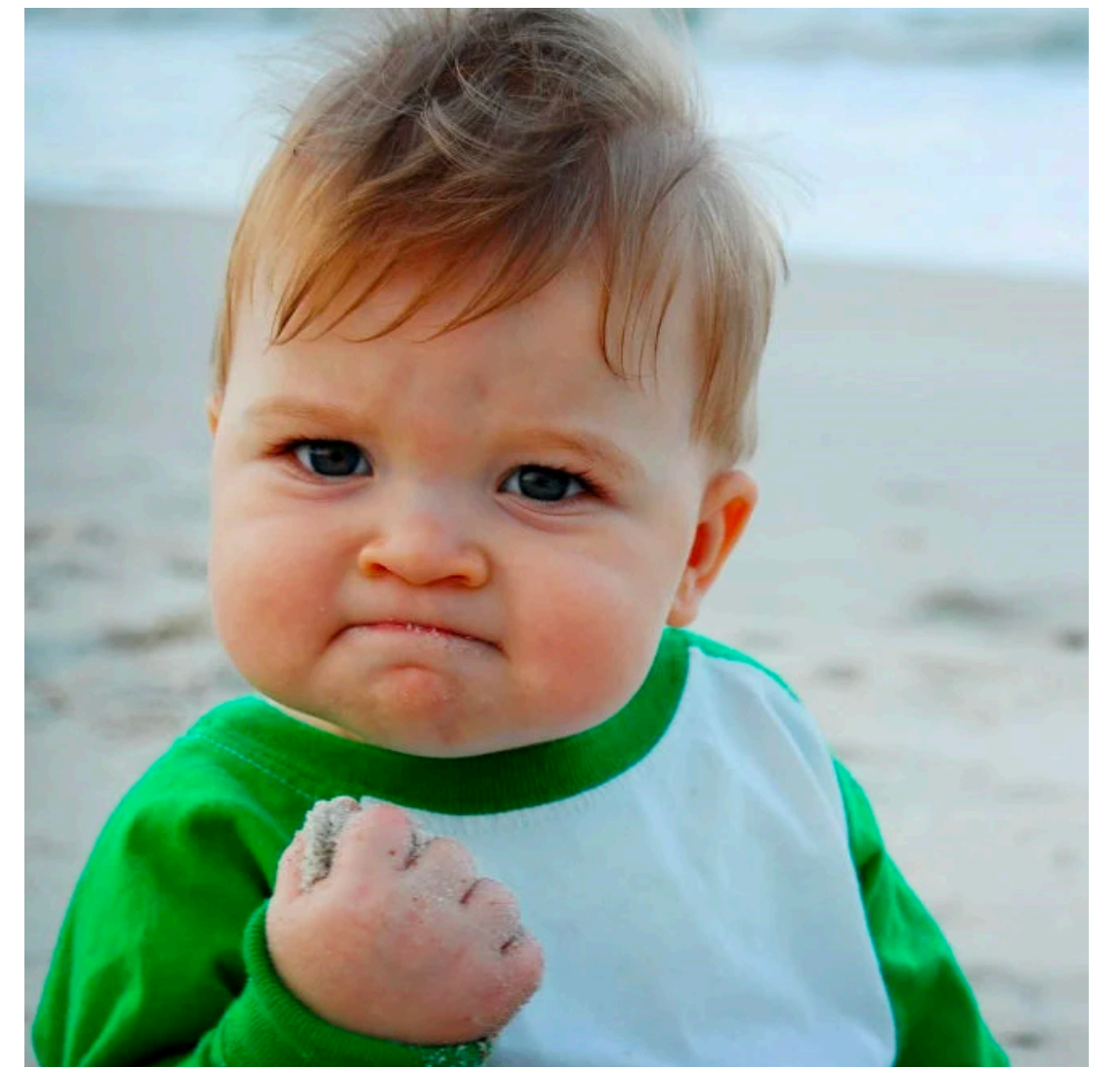
BAD TIP 1.2: ADVISOR IS THE ORACLE

- **Principle: just wait to be spoon-fed**
 - Advisor is always right, follow each concrete instruction precisely
- **Never disagree with your advisor**
 - It is disrespectful and you will be kicked out of school

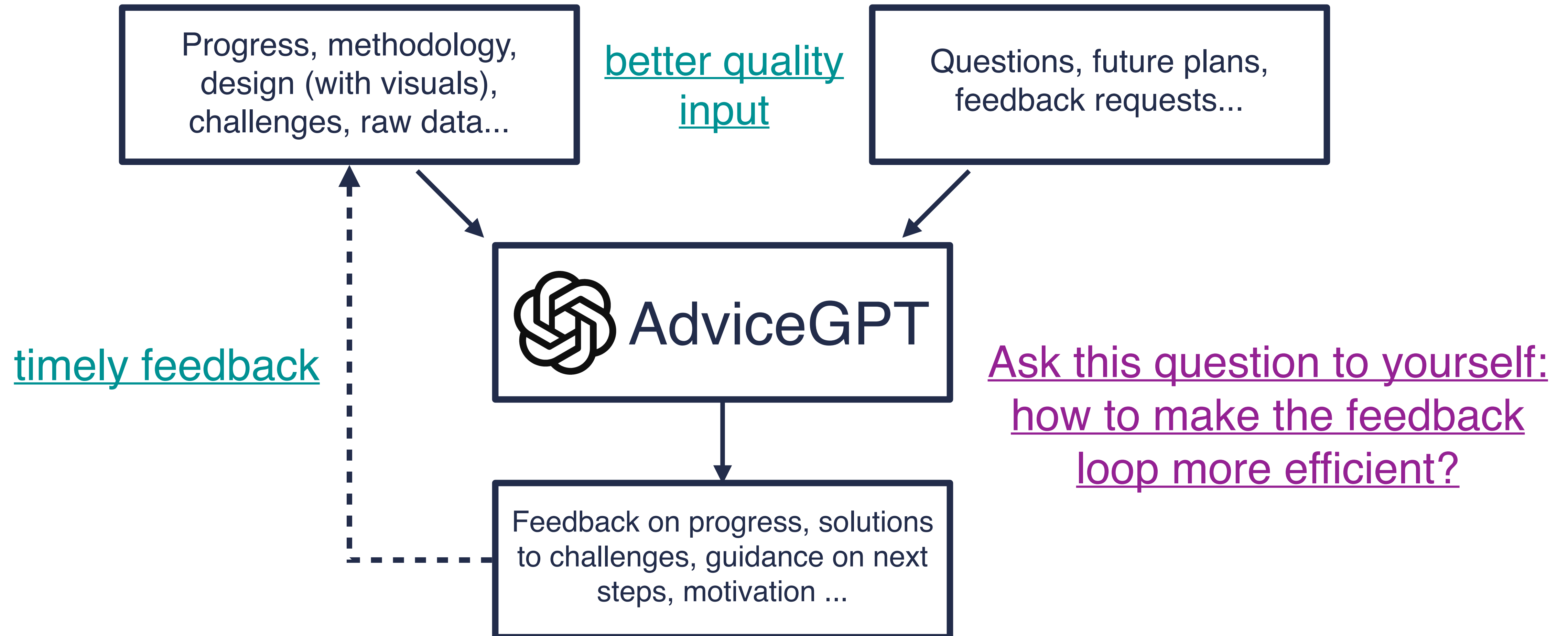


GOOD TIP 1: ADVISOR IS YOUR VALUABLE RESOURCE

- **Principle: proactive, effective communications**
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help**
 - One main purpose of Ph.D. program is to **train** good researchers
 - Take the initiative to win more resources for yourself
- **Advisor is not always right**
 - Dare to voice different opinions
 - Disagreement (with justification) wins respect



MANAGE (UP) YOUR ADVISOR



BAD TIP 2.1: COURSE WORK >> RESEARCH

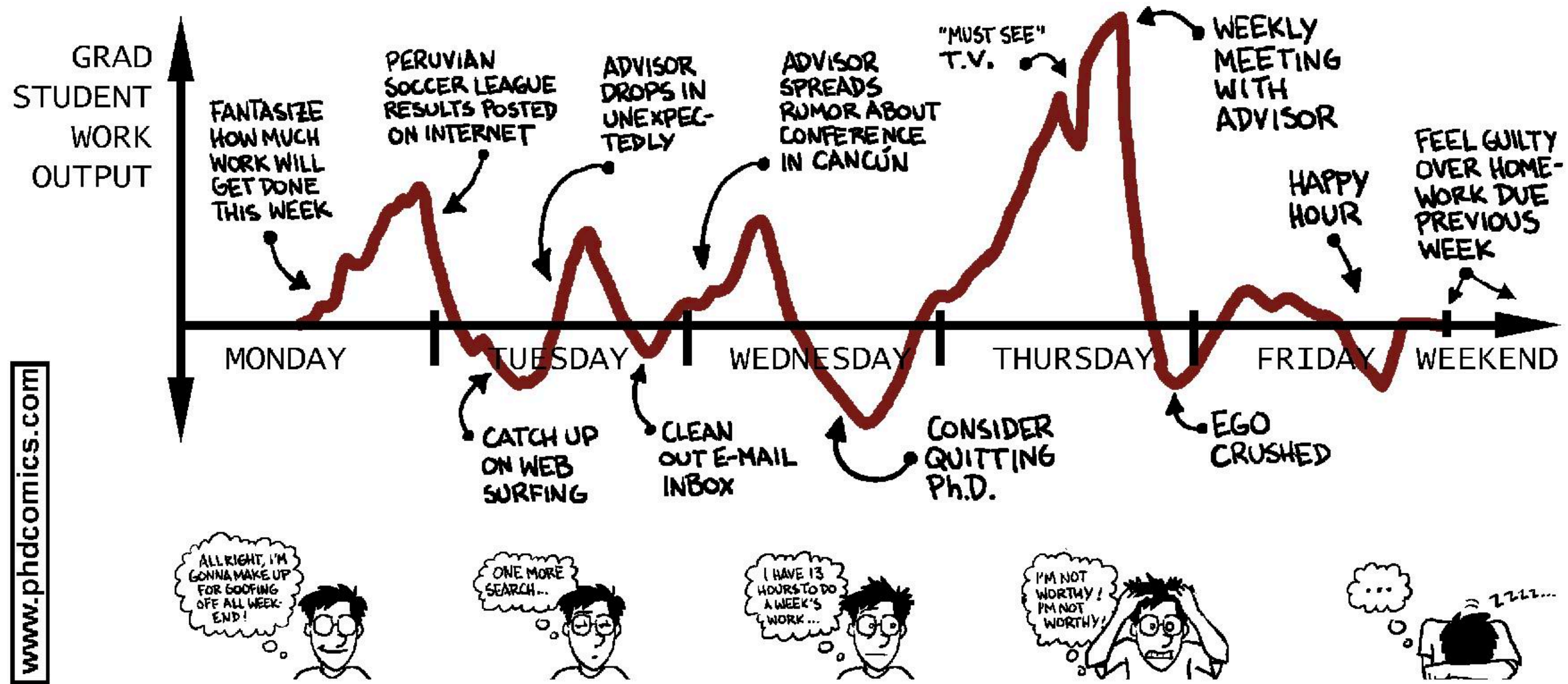
- **Try to spend all your efforts in courses**
 - "I can't meet the paper deadline cuz I need to get A+ for my OS class..."
- **Best Ph.D. students have the best GPAs**
 - Make sure you are the best of the best
- **Graduate as fast as possible with a 4.0 GPA!**
 - Never take courses from unfamiliar areas, which have higher risks



GOOD TIP 2.1: TAKING COURSES WISELY

- **As a Ph.D. student, you are eventually judged as researchers**
 - People know you because of your work, not your GPA
 - What matters: recommendation letters from researchers who appreciate your work
- **Strategy: maintain reasonable grades**
 - Almost failed several courses in my grad school..
 - But I made the first successful submission that semester
- **Courses from different domains**
 - Last chance to learn not on your own

BAD TIP 2.2: PROCRASTINATION

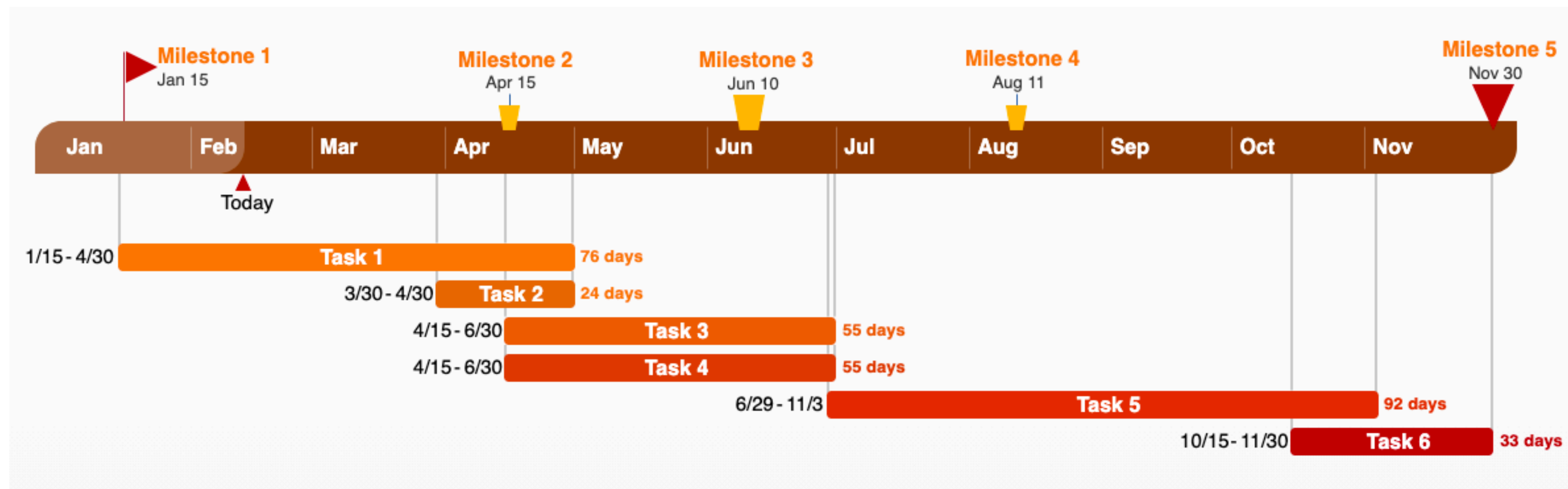


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GOOD TIP 2.2: START NOW

- **Solution 1: start with a two-minute task**
 - Take baby steps first
- **Solution 2: visualize the progress**



BAD TIP 3: WORK >> LIFE

– Two common pitfalls: burnout and isolation



Burnout



Isolation

GOOD TIP 3: A BALANCED WORK AND LIFE

- **Your health matters more than anything**
 - There is still a long path after your get your Ph.D. degree..
 - Developing a healthy hobby actually improves your productivity, e.g., exercise
- **Protect your motivation carefully**
- **People walk further with accompany**
 - Find a buddy to make fun of your advisor together 😊



TAKEAWAYS

- **Manage your advising relation**
- **Manage your time schedule**
- **Manage your personal life**

Got questions? Happy to talk!
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This talk incorporates insights from
other amazing advice for Ph.D.:

[1] How to Have a Bad Career in Research/Academia. David A. Patterson, Berkeley.

[2] Doing a Systems PhD. Steve Hand, Cambridge.

[3] How to Optimize the Mentoring Relationship with Your Advisor. Ryan Huang, JHU.