

“How to Fail Your Research Degree” Tutor Guide



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Introduction

“How to Fail Your Research Degree” is an educational game for 1-4 players or teams.

This game will raise awareness of the risks and pitfalls that can affect a research degree, and the academic skills and activities required for success (or failure!) It is designed for master’s students or first year PhDs and their supervisors but is also useful for other groups who want to brush up on academic research skills and research terminology, for example, early career researchers, final year undergraduates, and those supporting research students with English as an additional language.

The role of the tutor

The tutor is critically important to support the game’s learning objectives. In terms of running the game smoothly, the tutor acts as timekeeper, verbally explains the rules and keeps players on track, helps any teams who are struggling or taking too long during the timed phases, and checks for illegally played tiles during the ‘peer review’ process at the end of each round. Much more importantly, the tutor reinforces the learning outcomes after each round and Event by reflecting on the strength of each player’s research framework (fictional research project represented by the tiles played), on why certain events were disastrous for players – or why some events are negated by a good Plan. It is strongly recommended that the tutor leads a discussion after the game is over to elicit student-based conclusions about the game and what it has taught them about managing a research project, reinforcing the learning outcomes of the game itself, and proposing practical ways to address risks and problems, specific to each class/student.

It is also strongly encouraged that the tutor is reactive to game events and reinforces the light-hearted feel of a fictional project facing disaster – the purpose of the game is to have fun and learn something, not necessarily to strictly follow all of the rules.

DO:

- ✓ Show the rules video and verbally clarify any questions before the game begins.
- ✓ Use the PLAN round as a ‘practice’ round. It is not timed and there are no illegal plays as all tiles have both left and right arrows (but watch out for the Think tiles which have no up arrows).
- ✓ Reflect at each stage and contextualise what you see in ways your students can relate to.
- ✓ Perform the comedy, embrace schadenfreude, but make sure everyone remembers it’s all just a game!
- ✓ Make students read out each Event card in a loud clear voice. This way everyone gets the learning benefit from it.
- ✓ Keep an eye on balance between teams and provide tactical support or “hurry up”s to a team that is lagging behind.
- ✓ Remember that the timed phases are for playing tiles as quickly as possible, discourage discussion until after the clock has stopped.
- ✓ Use the Event cards and Activity tiles to inspire further discussion after gameplay has ended.

DO NOT:

- ✗ Under no circumstances release this game on your students then abandon them to it. The tutor is critical to maintaining the light-hearted focus of the game and ensuring it

runs to time. Without your active support during gameplay they will not have fun and learn little.

- × Sometimes one player will try to 'run' a team – take steps to ensure that everyone on the team gets a chance to read and play cards.
- × In general, keep clear of the players and only step in to help if players are really struggling. They'll get the hang of it by the end.
- × Don't worry if one team appears to be doing really well at an early stage – they'll likely lose plenty of tiles after the first Events phase.

Logistics

The game has been designed to be played within the context of an hour-long tutorial or seminar. You can tweak the amount of time the game takes once you are familiar with it. Typically, playing the game from scratch with 4 teams and 2 Events each round will take around 45 minutes. Playing with 3 Events per round and a little more time for rules explanations will take nearly an hour. Ideally, you will have at least 30 minutes' discussion afterwards, either as part of a longer tutorial or the week after playing.

Solo play is possible but both the fun and learning aspects benefit from at least 3 players. The game supports up to 12 players (with a recommended maximum of 3 on a team). You can squeeze in extra people if you like but be conscious of making sure they all feel included and empowered within their team.

You'll need a large table. Each research framework will take up about 1 metre of horizontal space and about 50cm vertical space.

Common mistakes to watch out for and correct:

- Within one round, Activity tiles can only be placed in one horizontal line. E.g. a pink card can never be placed above another pink card, only to the left or right of it.
- Players can block themselves in by playing a tile with no left arrow at the very left of their framework (ditto on the right). This looks neat but actually prevents them from ever expanding in that direction. It is at the discretion of the tutor how much 'tactical' help is given.
- Activities do not have to lead logically to one another, all that matters in the Activity phase is matching up the arrows and blank edges. The content of the tiles can be discussed later.

Optional game rules

Once you are used to how the game works and what effect tweaking the timings and number of Events cards has on the game, feel free to change any rules you don't like – even during the game!

- A team draws two Event cards that are very similar? Just replace one of them.
- A team has been particularly unlucky? Substitute their next disaster for something less catastrophic.
- Running out of time? Just reduce the number of Events drawn.

Adjusting difficulty

To make the game easier and increase the chances of a range of higher grade results, adjust the number of Events cards each player draws down to two instead of three. This will also

make the game quicker to play. Alternatively, reduce the time allowed to play tiles in each phase to make the game harder. You can also tweak the number of Work Late tiles allowed.

Preventing drop-outs

An optional rule is that a player may never remove her final tile in any section. This prevents any player or team being knocked out and allows the player to keep playing (and even get a good result) after a series of disastrous events. This has advantages for inclusive gameplay but thought should be given to whether it might undermine the lessons learned in the game.

Money

If appropriate, (i.e. cost factors are an important learning objective) a money element can be added to the game. At the start of the game, give each student three money tokens. At the end of the PLAN and each Activity phase, players can purchase extra tiles (e.g. allow players a free choice to add e.g. an important card they are missing, or alternatively the tutor could auction off the tiles in the discard pile to the highest bidder), the tile being played as an extra tile, but otherwise following all the same rules for tile placement. Additionally, a player could 'buy back' a tile which would otherwise be removed for 2 money tokens. These money rules effectively replace the "Work Late" tiles and should be used as an alternative.

Equality and Diversity

The game could easily be adapted to demonstrate equality and diversity issues by introducing a level of unfairness to the game. For example, making one player use a pair of tweezers to pick up and place her tiles, or issuing players with different amounts of money tokens. The equality and diversity agenda should only be revealed to the players in the post-game discussion to maximise its empathic effect.

Non-game variations

How to Fail Your Research Degree has been designed to work as a game but also as a stand-alone learning tool. You can abandon game mechanics and simply use the tiles as a fictional project construction exercise or discussion point. Some ideas for using the resources without game mechanics are:

- After playing the official rules, take the project that failed the most and collaboratively 'rebuild' it to make it successful, adding Activity tiles as you need to, without any timed rounds. Have a look at some Events cards that did not come up during the game. Would the new project survive better?
- Ignore the arrows on the Activity tiles and collaboratively build a fictional project logically, using the content of the tiles. For example, within the IMPLEMENTATION section, Data could lead to Analysis which leads to Interpretation. What else leads to Interpretation in the students' field of study? Perhaps a Resource (Policy) tile from the CONTEXT section?
- Focus on just one section and discuss each element in turn, e.g. How exactly can students set realistic Milestones when planning a project?