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A Blog from GradHacker and MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters and Social Sciences Online

### Saying No

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By [Stephanie Hedge](#)

# NO

(<http://www.gradhacker.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/no.gif>)

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I am really bad at saying no.

When someone comes to me asking for a favor, or looking for help with a project, or needing a body for a committee, I always say yes. I have a hard time knowing what projects are worth my time, and I hate disappointing people. I want to be known as a positive person, and I hate to miss out on opportunities. But as I worked frantically to finish my dissertation I found that I didn't have the time, energy, or brainpower to edit that paper, chair that panel, or cover that class. Saying no became the only way I could focus on my own work and get through my degree.

Learning when and how to say no to other people is an important skill for any graduate student. You have unique skills and talents that many people will try to use (and sometimes exploit). There are a [number](http://99u.com/articles/7076/setting-boundaries-saying-no-nicely) (<http://99u.com/articles/7076/setting-boundaries-saying-no-nicely>) of [different](http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/10-quilt-free-strategies-for-saying-no-10000001037820/) (<http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/10-quilt-free-strategies-for-saying-no-10000001037820/>) [articles](http://zenhabits.net/say-no/) (<http://zenhabits.net/say-no/>) online which provide tips for *how* to effectively say no (this [lifehacker](http://lifehacker.com/5984918/nine-practices-to-help-you-say-no-without-feeling-like-a-jerk) (<http://lifehacker.com/5984918/nine-practices-to-help-you-say-no-without-feeling-like-a-jerk>) article is my favorite), so this post is going to focus on *when* to say no by providing questions to ask yourself to help determine whether or not you should say no.

#### Should I Say No?

- **Can I fit this into my schedule without sacrificing my own work, timeline, or goals?** Your own work and responsibilities should always come first: make sure that you have all the time and energy to complete your own tasks. Sitting on a committee is great experience, but that experience is only worthwhile if you manage to graduate.
- **Can I fit this into my schedule without sacrificing my own free time, personal health, or sleep?** Will covering a class for a friend cut into your sleep schedule? Will writing that blog post get in the way of going to the gym? Your own personal wellbeing should come before everything else, so think about what you might have to give up if you say yes.
- **Am I being fairly compensated for my work?** What do you get out of saying yes? Experience? Money? A favor you can call in later? There are lots of different ways a task can be beneficial to you, but you need to make sure that you are getting something in return. Say no to tasks that ask you to use your skills without compensation.
- **Do I know enough about this project?** Before you say yes or no, you should make sure you have all the details and have a good sense of the scope of the commitment. If a colleague asks you to cover their class, are you expected to write and deliver a lecture? If you join a task force, do they meet once a month or one a week?
- **Will doing this make me a more well rounded person or scholar?** Getting different kinds of experience is important, so doing service, research, and teaching activities are good ideas. Try to diversify the activities you say yes to, and say no to repetitive tasks.
- **Will there be similar opportunities in the future?** Just because you may have to say no right now doesn't mean that you will always be busy. Think about whether or not this is a truly unique opportunity, or if you will be able to garner similar experience in the future.
- **Am I able to complete the requested task?** I will sometimes say yes to things I don't know how to do to prevent being seen as ignorant or unskilled, and I then find myself having to learn how to bake chocolate marble cheesecake at 3am. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know how" or "I can't do that" if someone asks you for something outside of your wheelhouse.
- **Can I help someone else say yes?** If you usually say yes, then you may develop a reputation for being a go-to person in your department, and you may find people come to you first. Can you direct them to other students or staff who may have more time or more applicable skills? When my friends ask for help with their writing, I always send them to the writing center first, and I will recommend colleagues for seats on committees. Then I don't have to worry about the task not being completed, and can help spread the work around!

What are your strategies for choosing projects and knowing when to say no? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

## Ten Ways to Say No

*Taken directly from "The Black Academic's Guide to Winning Tenure—Without Losing Your Soul" by Kerry Ann Rockquemore and Tracey Laszloffy, page 119*

Saying no effectively means being clear and assertive. There are multiple ways to say no, and you can choose how you want to do so in any context and interpersonal relationship. By way of example, we offer the following ten ways to say no that range in sentiment and forcefulness:

1. That sounds like a really great opportunity, but I just cannot take on any additional commitments at this time.
2. I am not comfortable with that \_\_\_\_\_ (situation, task, group of people involved).
3. I feel overwhelmed by service right now, so I am going to have to decline your generous invitation.
4. I am in the middle of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_, and if I hope to get tenure, I am unable to take on any additional service.
5. I am not the best person for this. Why don't you ask \_\_\_\_\_?
6. If you can find a way to eliminate one of my existing service obligations, I will consider your request.
7. I would rather say no to your request than do a halfhearted job on the committee.
8. Right now, I need to focus on my research agenda and publication. When I have tenure, I hope to be able to say yes to requests like this one.
9. I cannot serve on your committee right now. But why don't you ask me again next year?
- 10.No. (Look the asker in the eye and sit in silence.)