



Elizabeth Keenan

Columnist at vitae

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Ph.D.s Do Have Transferable Skills, Part 1

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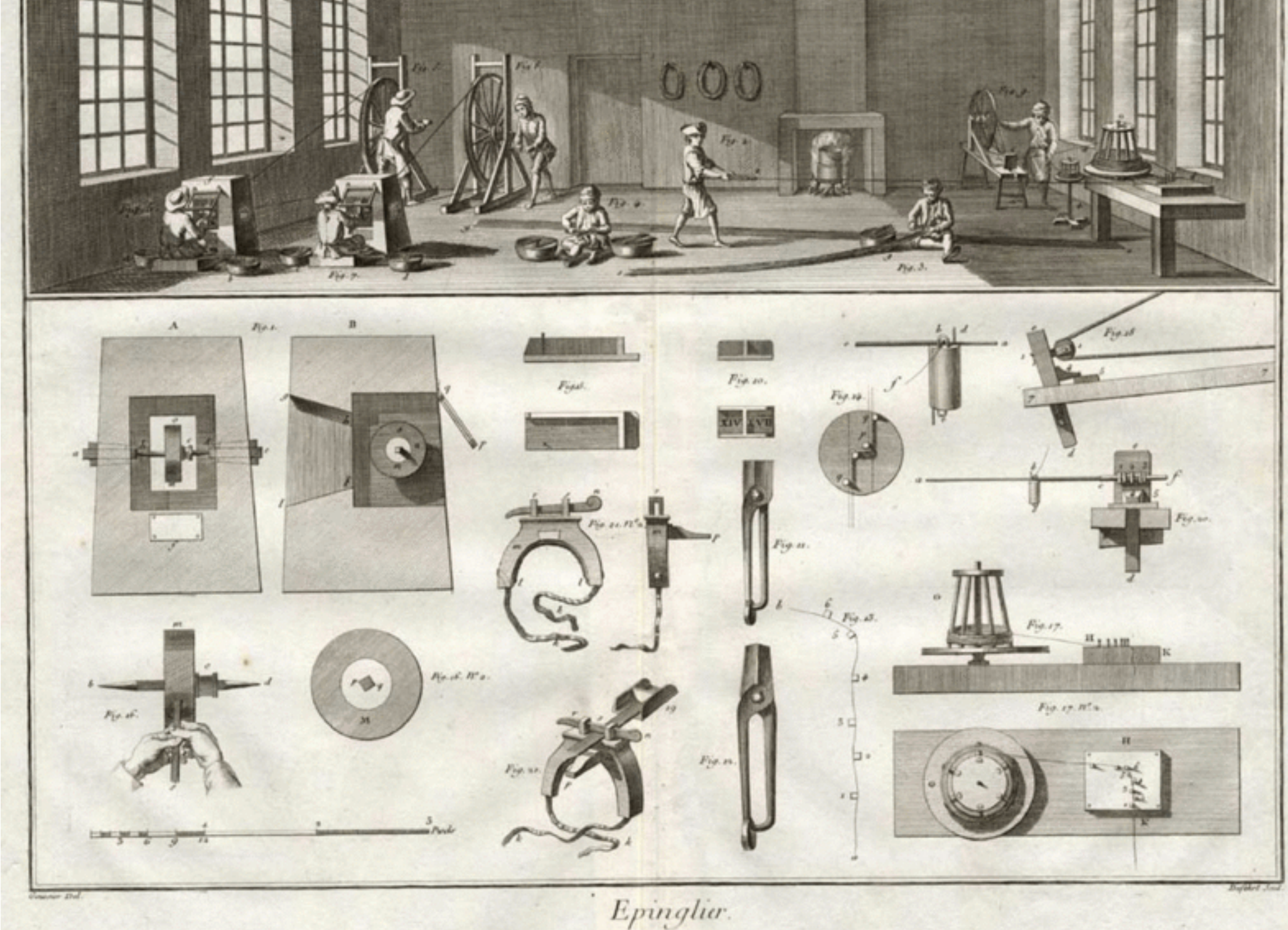


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- Big Lie No. 1: A Ph.D. prepares you *only* for an academic career.
- Big Lie No. 2: A Ph.D. prepares you for *any* career.

If you are thinking about leaving academia — or maybe just having a bad day — you’ve probably heard variations on both of those lies from people trying to help you. Even worse, you might have assumed that if one of them isn’t true, then the other must be.

Of course, the sensible voice might say that *obviously* the truth lies in the middle, right? But if you’re talking with people inside academia about career options outside it, you might hear fewer sensible voices than you want. As a result, you’ll bounce around, careening from unrealistic expectations (“You could write for *Rolling Stone!*” more than one absurdly optimistic senior academic told me) to utter despair (“I’m sorry, but they’re probably going to give that job to a real editor,” said a mentor when I applied for a job whose qualifications, in retrospect, I matched extremely well).

It’s not because academics are bad at giving advice ([though some are](#)), it’s because the only advice they know how to give is for their own career path (and even then, their “inside” advice may be woefully outdated). For positions inside academe, your mentors can help you craft cover letters, look at your CV, or write letters of recommendation for you. But for jobs outside of higher education? They probably don’t even know their own transferable skills, so they won’t be much help in identifying yours.

But Ph.D.s do have transferable skills — even desirable ones! — beyond teaching and thinking deeply about one topic for an extended period of time. The first step to a successful move outside of academia is identifying your transferable skills. The second, more difficult task is figuring out how you might use those skills in a future career — one that you might actually enjoy. And the third, probably hardest, step is making those skills obvious to those who might hire you. This column is about the first of those three, with two more essays to follow.

A caveat: I’m not a career counselor. However, I am someone who recently transitioned from academia to real estate (more on that in Part 2) and experienced a lot of personal agony along the way.

Skills Are Not the Same As Jobs

When I first started looking outside academia, I had a huge fear. I’d done nothing other than

teaching, research, and writing since my fieldwork days, when insufficient funding forced me into a series of crappy jobs. And I knew I didn't want to be a teacher anymore. Was I going to end up in another crappy job? I didn't want to work at the Gap ever again (despite the possibility of steady pay).

In one of my few nonpanicky moments, I had an epiphany: My jobs didn't matter; my *skills* did. I knew that I had skills that people would find useful — I just had to make them relevant to another career.

A skill is portable, and it is something you practice. Knowing how to do research is a skill (the one that made my bosses hire me, in fact). Writing well is a skill. Patience with students (and senior faculty and administrators) is a skill. Organizing, planning tasks over an extended period of time, working on deadlines, working well with others, public speaking, and critical thinking are all skills.

Look Beyond the Obvious

When I first thought about leaving academia, I had the typical set of transferable skills already in my pocket: I'd been working as a freelance editor and researcher for more than 10 years. It would be super easy to transition into academic editing or journalism full time, right? But then I started talking with my journalist and editor friends, many of whom had faced layoffs and shrinking prospects. That state of affairs was a little *too* familiar for me, and I backed away quickly from the idea that I could sashay into a swanky media job in New York.

I had to do some soul-searching, which was admittedly hard because I wasn't feeling particularly great about myself at the time. If I couldn't find a job writing and editing, what *could* I do? And then I rephrased that question from pessimistic to optimistic. I thought about other things I'm good at: calming people down, listening, translating complicated jargon into simple, digestible concepts. (I taught *a lot* of freshmen.) How could I use those skills?

Volunteer, Volunteer, Volunteer

You may be saying to yourself, “Oh, Elizabeth, you are so naïve! *I have a dissertation to write!* I have no time to volunteer!” To you, skeptical reader, I say: ZIP IT. First, you need a break. Second, you can use volunteer positions inside and outside academia to help you discover and hone your transferable skills.

In volunteer work, you draw on old skills and learn new ones, and it works double duty as a convenient line on the résumé (not CV!). Volunteering outside academia can be low pressure

and low risk. If you find that it's not working out, you can generally leave with few obligations. Volunteering inside academia sometimes comes with more pressure and more responsibility, but can be a great way to learn a lot of new things quickly (Ever plan a conference?).

Skills Sometimes Take Time to Reveal Themselves

When I began my current job, I had to attend a four-week training camp for new real-estate agents. Throughout, one of the instructors kept using the phrase “educating the buyer.” She was a lovely woman, but I thought: “Bullshit.”

Boy was I wrong. I use my teaching skills *all the time* when I work with buyers. I have to guide them through a complicated process fraught with emotion, where they start out as beginners and end as experts. I've now worked with enough buyers to know that it's remarkably similar to guiding students through a senior thesis, only at the end of the semester, they go live in the thesis and I get a commission check.

I'm constantly discovering new ways that my past skills apply, whether it's synthesizing large amounts of information or figuring out how to use database systems quickly and efficiently. My next column in this series will describe the grueling, soul-wrenching, complicated, and eventually fruitful process of thinking about a postacademic career.



[Elizabeth Keenan](#) left academia in 2014 for a career in real estate and to focus on writing.

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