Before you arrive:

- If coming from another country, apply for immigration documents. Guide here.

- You will need housing, and it’s worth to decide well ahead if you want to live on-campus or not. There is plenty of housing on campus (Green College and St John’s provide opportunities to meet other grad students). UBC has a rather long waiting list, so apply early to get a spot.

  For off campus accommodations, the most common place to find housing is Craigslist. Note that in North America “Roommate” means the same thing as “Housemate” does in many other countries. It (usually) does not mean sharing a room. Also note that most of landlords will ask for references, so plan accordingly.

- **STUDY.** If you are doing (or thinking of doing) a PhD at UBC you will need to pass the Qualifying exams. Attempting it each and every chance you get is probably a good idea, and your first shot at it is probably in the first couple of weeks you are here. However, if you don’t feel prepared upon arrival, that is okay too. We all have diverse academic backgrounds and these are very specific exams. That is why multiple attempts are given.

- Create a CWL account.

- Register for courses: Go here, use your CWL login (top right corner), click on the search button (top middle-ish) and find some courses. MATH 5* is probably a good search. Pick some courses for semester one. Talk to your supervisor and/or other grad students for advice on what courses are relevant. You can add/drop courses in the first few weeks, so don’t worry too much about getting the perfect combination.

- Apply for a student card. Do this about 2-4 days before your arrival.

- Arrange a meeting time with your thesis supervisor - preferably in the first day or so after you arrive. You will need them to sign off on paperwork.

- Tell your student mentor when you expect to be arriving - they may be able to meet up and guide you through some of what is to come.

- Print off the following forms in advance (while you have access to a printer) and bring them with you:
  - Direct Deposit form (Note that you need a Canadian bank account.)
  - Mathnet Login Application (Used to get a math dept. email.)
  - Your acceptance letter at UBC (both from the mathematics department, and from the faculty of science). These are occasionally useful for proving to authority figures that you have the right to be here (for example, when collecting your study permit).

- Be aware that paperwork may cause a delay in your first month of funding. Plan accordingly.
When you Arrive:

Get to your **place of accommodation.** If coming from the airport, you have the option of taking the SkyTrain or a taxi into Vancouver. Google maps provides accurate public transit directions; typical fare into the city by taxi is about $35-$50.

Get to **campus.** You will probably want to use public transit for this. Once on campus,

- Get online using the campus wireless internet. **Configure ubcsecure** prior to your arrival. Alternatively, use ubcvisitor.
- Find the mathematics office - Room 121 in the Mathematics Building. **Campus Wayfinding** will help (or other students, or the maps on campus). Talk to Roseann. She will tell you where your office is and help with keys. She can also answer any other questions that you have.
- Meet with your supervisor. Have them sign your **computer login application.** If your supervisor is unavailable, Roseann can sign instead.
- Take your login form to the IT team in Room 222B, almost directly above the mathematics office. Get a login.
- Go to the **UBC Bookstore** and pick up your keys and student card.

**Outside of campus:**

- **Get your bus pass linked.** There might be a delay in activation until you pay your student fees.
- If you are coming from overseas, get your **SIN (Social Insurance number).** The nearest location to do this is **1263 West Broadway.** Bring your passport, study permit, book to read, and your UBC acceptance letter.
- Get a Canadian bank account. Banks closest to campus are Scotiabank, CIBC and BMO, located east of the bookstore. Don’t feel limited to these options, but they are the most convenient. Bring your passport, study permit and student card (if possible). Get a void cheque for your **direct deposit form.**
- Take your SIN number, study permit and direct deposit form to Math office.
- Pay your student fees. This includes accepting any awards and paying the remaining fees. This is done on the **SSC.** This needs to be done before the start of the term.
- The university has mandatory **TEMPORARY medical insurance (International students).** You should apply for MSP (the province’s medical insurance) shortly after arrival. Apply **HERE.** You should also register with **UBC Student Health.** Alternatively, you can go to any drop-in medical clinic in Vancouver. Domestic students will need to look into provincial insurance reciprocity agreements.
1 People to know (and email)

- Roseann Kinsey - Roseann works in the Mathematics office as the graduate coordinator and is a good starting point if you are ever lost/confused on paperwork issues. Actually, no matter what you are lost and confused on, wandering into the mathematics office and asking for help is probably a good start.
  Email: admiss@math.ubc.ca

- Dan Coombs - Dan is the Graduate Student Advisor. You’ll see him during the orientation welcome event. He is the person to talk to if you have any concerns about thesis supervisors or degree requirements (such as the comprehensive exams).
  Email: gradchair@math.ubc.ca

- Fok-Shuen Leung - Fok is the current master of TA duties and instructor training. If you have questions about your TA duty or anything teaching related, he is the person to talk to.
  Email: fsl@math.ubc.ca

- Us - that is to say, Alastair J-L and Clinton Durney. We wrote this guide, and are in the process of improving and maintaining it. We are happy to answer random questions about grad school, or adding to the guide as needed.
  Clinton Durney: cdurney@math.ubc.ca
  Alastair JL: aja107@math.ubc.ca

2 Common Questions

2.1 Administration

What do I need to do in order to Graduate?
Please read either the standard degree requirements handbook, or the IAM handbook. Aside from the Qualifying exam, none of the rules are liable to catch you in the first week.

I have been sent on a quest to talk to/get the signature of the “graduate chair” (or some other title). Who IS that? Where do I find them?
Check out the https://www.math.ubc.ca/People/people.shtml. If that doesn’t work, ask a fellow student. If that doesn’t work, ask the office.

Computers: How do?
Step One: Check the IT FAQ.
Step two: If still stuck, ask a fellow grad student.
Step three: If STILL stuck, email help@math.ubc.ca.

I’m planning to travel, how does health insurance work?
If you decide to travel (especially if your destination is the U.S.) please be aware that the standard MSP insurance that protects you while in BC will no longer apply. Instead, you will be relying on the Insurance provided by the Graduate Student Society. In particular, remember to print THIS and take it with you.
I’m going to a conference! How does travel funding work?
So first off: talk to your supervisor. They are your primary source of funding and have a strong desire for you to go to conferences, learn new things, and show off the research you are doing with them. If they have the funds available, they are likely to help you out with travel costs, but what is covered and how much will vary from situation to situation.
Next: Go on your conference. Keep stacks of receipts and BOARDING PASSES for your flights. Print off any electronic tickets you purchase.
After your conference, take this stack to the Mathematics Office (possibly with calculations for your total). They will email back and forward with your supervisor, and you will be refunded the appropriate costs.
Not that this won’t happen instantly, so please budget accordingly; you may be carrying the costs of your travels for a while. There is also a grad student travel fund that you can use once per degree.

2.2 Academics

What is a thesis supervisor, and how do they work?
Your thesis supervisor is the faculty member who is primarily responsible for helping you find your way through the labyrinth which is research.
When you arrive, you will have been assigned a preliminary supervisor based on what you put down as your research interests.
When you are starting out, your supervisor will suggest research questions, shunt you towards useful papers, and generally help you get started.
Some supervisory relationships are very formal and business like (employer/employee), while other supervisors are more personal. Different supervisors will have different expectations about the amount of work you will do, how often you will meet with them, and the extent to which you will follow their plan or come up with your own research. These are all things to discuss with your supervisor... but probably not the first time you meet them.
Usually, you will meet with your supervisor relatively seldom in your first semester (when you have courses), and then more later on once your schedule is more empty, and you turn your focus to research.
It is in your supervisors interests for you to succeed - both because it makes them look good, and because they are human beings, who remember what it was like to be young researchers. This sometimes means that they will push you and put pressure on you to work harder, write more clearly or attend more seminars. This is their job. When your supervisor gives you advice, listen to them. They aren’t always right, but it is important to listen and think about what they are saying and why.

How many courses should I take per semester?
We recommend taking 2-3 courses in your first semester, and potentially increasing to more if you feel VERY comfortable. When it comes to selecting courses, feel free to enroll in many courses, attending the first few lectures of all of them, and then unenrolling from the all but the best courses BEFORE the add/drop deadline (around two weeks into term). It is VERY important that you drop courses before the deadline, otherwise you will be stuck with them.
What’s with all these seminars, and do I really need to go to them?

When we go to classes, we end up seeing a really well polished version of mathematics - where everything makes sense and fits together. Unfortunately, mathematics research is not like that, and hence classes can give a biased picture. Seminars give a more accurate picture. There’s no need to go to all the seminars, but it is probably a good idea to go to some (perhaps one per week, when you can).

In seminars (especially at first) it is normal to feel lost and confused, or like you don’t understand what is going on. This gets better over time - both as you learn more mathematics, and as you get better at following seminars. Even when you have practice though, do not be surprised if you can only follow the one or two thirds of any given mathematics seminar. Mathematics is a big field. Someone whose study is distant from yours will probably spend the last one-two thirds of their seminar talking to the people who are studying very similar problems.

I need to make a poster for an academic conference.

To design the poster, might we recommend Overleaf (formerly Latex Online), which has a bunch of templates, and allows collaboration with other students (if needed). For printing the poster, there is UBC printing services. Another nearby alternative is UBC copysmart over in the village.

What is the grad Tracking Survey, and how do I fill it out?

The Grad Tracking Survey is a twice yearly survey thing that the department gets you to answer. Strange but true, this is a really good place to put down your honest feelings about research, how you’re going, etc. People actually read it. If you have a plan (“This semester I’ve got lots of courses, and expect to focus on them”), or if you don’t, both can be discussed.

The Qualifying exam is scary, what do I do?

So, first off - yes, yes it is. Secondly, for those who don’t know what we are talking about, the Qualifying Exam is an exam which must be passed by all PhD students within two years of enrolling.

Different people will have different levels of preparation for the Quals, depending on how well your past courses align with the contents of the exam. This is fine.

We recommend that everyone considering a PhD at UBC should take the Quals every chance they get (even if you are currently enrolled in Master’s). If you don’t pass it the first time, do not be alarmed. There are various courses here at UBC which cover each of the major fields you need, and there will likely be a number of other PhD students studying towards the Quals along with you.

What is a thesis Committee and how do I get one?

Your thesis Committee is a collection of lecturers (other than your supervisor), who both advise you and evaluate your progress.

The easiest way to get a committee is find a lecturer you like (or one recommended by your supervisor), and ask them to be on your committee. For this we recommend participating in classes and seminars. This does not simply mean GOING to classes and seminars, this means actually getting involved in them. Ask questions. Get to know your lecturers, and figure out which of them have expertise in areas that are useful to you.

Even without thesis committee concerns, getting to know your lecturers is a good idea. They can advise you in academic and mathematical matters, and in extreme cases, class projects
and such can be coiled out to become minor papers.
Remember: You are no longer an undergraduate. In some sense you are no longer a student, you are a (very) junior colleague.

How do I do research?

Everyone works on different problems, and in different ways... so this FAQ can only be of limited assistance. As far as general advice goes, a few things that may help are:

- Break tasks up into smaller tasks. Preferably tasks that don’t involve to much decision making. “Read Turing (1952)” or “run simulations varying parameter five” is a suitable level of granularity. “Solve thesis problem” is not.
- Figure out when and where you work best. Some people like coffee shops in the morning, some people prefer the office in mid afternoon. Experiment a little bit.
- Document your research. In a large project it is easy to lose yourself in details and hard to keep everything important in your mind. Get a notebook or write consistently your daily progress in Overleaf. This encourages you to stay on track, and can be used for meetings with your supervisor, and/or the write-ups for publications.
- Foist off tasks involving willpower and organization on to your computer. Plugins such as StayFocusd and Leechblock will block out facebook and webcomics during working hours. Citation managers such as Zotero and EndNote will help you keep track of what papers you are reading, and find them again later. Web of Science Citation Alerts are also pretty helpful.

2.3 Life

How do I find my way around campus?

First off: use Campus wayfinding. On a more personal level, spend a few afternoons shortly after arrival wandering around on and off campus looking at things and enjoying the sunshine. Explore. Find some good study spots, some good food spots, etc. Don’t worry about where you are going and just get to know the layout of the campus.

If you want particular destinations to inspire your travels, then might I recommend the forestry building, Robson square, The Rio Theater (and the adjoining Commercial drive). Alternatively you could set yourself the scavenger hunt of finding: three waterfalls, three spiral staircases, a whale skeleton, the statue of a king, a statue of a raven, giant botanical diagrams, and the site of the first building on campus.

How do I get food?

Places for food: On campus there are many places for food. In particular the Nest, which includes coffeeshops etc., but also a supermarket, and downstairs, “The Delly”. There is also the village (which similarly has food courts... but also small supermarket places).

If you want a full sized supermarket, take the 99 bus east until Sasamat street where you will find a supermarket.

What do I do if I get sick or injured?

You lie on the floor feeling miserable until you either get better or die. Alternatively, there is ubc health services - in particular there is a drop in clinic on campus in the UBC hospital. You can make an appointment online. You can read up on how medical coverage works for grad students HERE.
How much should I be working?
This is (obviously) up to you, although research tends to suggest 35 hours is pretty close to optimal. This will certainly vary person to person, and some weeks you just need to put the extra time in... but don’t feel obligated to spend every waking moment working, especially when it probably won’t improve your work.

How do I meet new people?
Join a club, or a sports team, or get out and explore the town, or do some volunteer work, or talk to your fellow grad students.

2.4 Teaching and TAing

Teaching assistantships: what’s the deal?
Teaching Assistantships (TA duty) is where you will be getting about half your funding while working at the university (probably). A few things to mention about T.A. duty:

- TA duty is your job. Treat it as a job. If you can’t come in to work for some reason, call/email in as soon as possible so people know what is going on. We CAN cover for you... but only if we know if you are around.
- TA duty is NOT your most important job. If your TA duty prevents you going to lectures, talk to Fok (or whichever lecturer/grad student you answer to) and get your duties re-arranged. Your learning and research is more important than your TA duty.
- Check your UBC mathematics email at least once every 24 hours, and REPLY to anything directed to you. “I need more time” is a valid reply, but do reply.
- Watch your hours. If you are marking, keep track of how much time you spend marking, and if you are consistently overshooting the intended number of hours, talk to your course instructor.

Should I teach?
Do you want to teach? Do you enjoy teaching (or want to try)? Are you planning to be a lecturer in the future, or take your skills and work outside academia? If you plan to move into a university setting you will probably need to teach at some point in the future, so practice can be good (especially if you are a PhD student). That said, teaching does take A LOT of time, so be careful not get yourself a teaching position the same semester your final thesis is due. Generally speaking, talking to your thesis supervisor before teaching is a good idea.

What do I need to do in order to teach?
You must take the course Math 599. By the time you finish that, you’ll know the rest.

Where can I hold office hours?
If you are a grad student, you will probably NOT have your own office separate from your peers. This can be a problem when teaching because teachers are expected to hold office hours. You can easily book rooms in the mathematics department or in various libraries.

Where do I get teaching supplies?
The mathematics office has a set of draws full of chalk, white-board markers, pens, and other handy teaching and office supplies. This is also the place you go to restock chalk and white-board markers for your office.
3 Troubleshooting

This is a section full of pitfalls and disasters that we all hope will never crop up... but sometimes they do come up, and when they do, you’ll be glad the answers are here.

I am meant to be doing research, but I don’t know how, or why, and nothing keeps happening because I keep not doing anything, or not knowing what to do, and I am confused.
Yes.
This happens.
If you find a solution to this, please tell the rest of us your secret. Research IS confusing. Welcome to science.

My supervisor is always busy/disorganized.
Learn to figure things out yourself, write concise emails with SPECIFIC questions for your supervisor, and see if you can convince them to give you a regular weekly/biweekly meeting time. In extreme cases, figure out when they have lectures, and arrange to catch them on their way back to their office.
Also, as mentioned previously with the thesis committee, get to know some other Faculty. If you can find other lecturers who can provide feedback or suggest directions, then you will be less reliant on your one supervisor - it is even possible to get a “Co-supervisor” which can be very helpful when your research is bridging multiple areas.

I have been here for over a month, and everything is awful, and I don’t know anyone, and no one speaks my language and I want to go home.
Ah. Yes. This happens. As it turns out this happens to almost everyone at one stage or another. If everyone around you seems fine, this may be because they haven’t hit it yet, they hit this point several years ago, or because they are fairly good at hiding things.
So, first things first: it is important to remember you are not alone in this feeling. This is something that happens, especially if you are currently dealing with not being around your native language.
Talk to your colleagues about it (especially those who also come from far off lands), complain about the Canadians and their weird habits, and call your mother! (She worries).
Also, even though you probably aren’t in the mood right now, get out there and find some hobbies that will get you out of the house and department (see earlier discussion of meeting people).
My supervisor is scary/mean/pushy.

There are two things to keep in mind:
First, it is your Supervisor's JOB to push you. That does not mean they have a free pass to mistreat you, but it does mean that you can (and in some sense should) expect some amount of pressure to be coming from them.
Second, you have rights. There is some description of them HERE.
If there is a full break-down of communications, or you feel that you are being mistreated then:

- Talk to fellow students, get outside perspectives, get support.
- Talk to a faculty member who you trust (possibly in mathematics, possibly in another department).
- Arrange a meeting with the Graduate Student Advisor (Dan Coombs). If Dan is your supervisor, then you can organize such a meeting with the head of department instead. You are not obliged to attend such a meeting by yourself, and can bring an extra person, if doing so seems needed.

In the case where you and your supervisor can no longer work together (either due to disagreement, or even for other reasons such as their retirement etc.) the department is obliged to help you find a new supervisor (as long as you are in good academic standing).
Despite all this advice, please be aware that you should expect your supervisory relations to be positive! Your supervisor is here to help you, and truth be told, I have yet to hear a story of things going completely pear shaped in the mathematics department (although things can get rather tense during thesis or paper writing).

My supervisor is crazy smart and just figures stuff out in ten seconds while it takes me a week. What do I do?
Close your eyes and repeat after me: “My supervisor is an expert in the field, who has decades of practice. I will not measure my self worth against people who are at the top of the field.”
If your supervisor is Michael Ward, please repeat twice.
Over the course of your research you will eventually become the expert at a thing. This will take some time, and will probably be a super narrow specific thing, but that’s okay. You have time.

If I don’t like/can’t hack grad school, does that mean I’m a failure?
No. Grad school is a weird and very specific thing, which can feel like paradise on some days for some people, but often doesn’t. Do what makes sense for you - weather that means gritting your teeth and bearing through, or finding another way.
We would probably recommend taking a bit of time to think and talk to your peers and thesis supervisor before doing anything too drastic.

I have a deep feeling of sadness in my stomach. What do I do?
Go have a snack. Maybe even a full meal.

I had a snack, but I still feel sad.
Ummm... try going for a run, or a swim, or a dance party, or a day off maybe? Or curl up in a ball on a couch somewhere, with moody music and warm blankets. Or talk to friends, or kick things. Remember, we are allowed days off.
Life is hard, I feel isolated and angry/frustrated/exhausted/betrayed, and its always raining, and everyone is weird and polite and I’ve tried all the things on your stupid god-damn list, and everything is still awful.
Ah. Yeah, okay, that happens too. The list is worth trying, because sometimes easy solutions work... but sometimes they don’t. First off, there are other grad students - many of who will be happy to talk to you, listen to you, give hugs, etc. Second, since we don’t all know/trust our fellow students (especially if we have just arrived, or if issues are serious), there are various mental health services associated with the university. Lots of people use them (they wouldn’t exist if people didn’t use them). They are prepared for numerous types of issues, from the basic SpeakEasy to the rather more extreme sexual assault support center (both located in the Nest). There is a list of other resources available HERE.

I read your welcome guide and it seems really depressing and now I don’t want to go to grad school!
The trouble shooting guide is a long list of things that CAN go wrong, along with some techniques to deal with them. It is not a list of things that will go wrong, nor does it include many of the things that will go right: you don’t need a guide for how to deal with delicious cake, nor for how to deal with sunshine and flowers.

... Actually, its pretty rainy in Vancouver, by the time next summer rolls around maybe you WILL need a guide for that.

There’s a bright object in the sky that burns my eyes and I don’t remember seeing it in Vancouver before. What do I do?
That is the sun. I know, I know, after 8 months of winter it might seem unfamiliar, but I promise, you have seen it before.
Put on some sunscreen, go to the beach, enjoy.