

A faint, grayscale background image of a man's portrait. The man has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark bow tie. The portrait is centered and serves as a backdrop for the title text.

The PAPER MILL

Methods to fail Methods II

There exists a fascinating psychological phenomenon that has manifested itself in full force this year in Amsterdam. Having acquired an eight point lead by beating their closest rivals, AFC Ajax were surely set to be crowned Dutch professional football champions once again this spring. The only thing that could stand in their way was themselves, as roughly half a dozen matches against mostly smaller teams remained. And stand in their own way they did. Seemingly suddenly arrested by the Mario Kart-esque pressure of leading the pack, the first couple of subsequent games were only very narrowly won with the remaining ones lost and drawn. Ajax only recovered from this bout of ineptitude in the last round of the competition when the first place position had already been squandered.

The sudden inability to perform is in sports popularly known as the 'yips', but is understood to be caused by the same psychological mechanisms that for example make people freeze (instead of flee) when suddenly confronted with oncoming traffic or that lead to a total mental block during an exam they did study for. As a fervent Ajax supporter I naturally mirrored my favourite football team's behaviour and failed my Methods of PPE II exam. This didn't happen in the typical performance anxiety fashion I just mentioned, but, much like Ajax' end of season demise happened in a rather protracted slow motion collapse kind of way, because this was the only exam I needed to take this year.

As you've all had the pleasure of experiencing Methods of PPE II: Statistics, you know it is quite a different beast than your run of the (paper) mill PPE courses. Where most subjects, especially in the Politics-Philosophy track, require you to read texts and learn to understand and debate the given information, Methods II not only hands you a thick tome full of terrifying texts but also requires you to complete a square ton of exercise sheets. In other words, in this course you're not so much absorbing new information as honing a new academic skill (i.e. coding and doing statistical analysis). It's this at which I seem wholly incapable.

Fortunately I'm not a man entirely without skills, not even a man without discipline or motivation for that matter. The source of my inability stems from the fact that in academia there seem to simply exist no other study options for me than "read textbook" and "summarise lecture slides" and whenever I try to input "do practice exercise" I'm left with an error message. The first year I took Methods II I tried to simply power through with my usual modus operandi. By a hair's breadth I passed the digital exams, but in the end found myself woefully unprepared for the final exam and opted to go for my very first No Show result. The second year I made ostensibly prudent precautions to optimally prepare myself for take two: I planned my electives in such a way to only have to follow one other course alongside Stats and...very quickly fell for the exact same pitfalls and didn't even complete the second digital exam this time round. Last year, on my third try, Methods would take place during thesis season, which posed a daunting task, but also offered enough schedule flexibility to feasibly persevere – which I did not. Parachuted by resit and sweep exam opportunities and propelled by motivation to start the Master's programme I had been accepted to in autumn, I...actually failed again. Though this time it happened partly due to an unforeseen external shock (severe burnout). This year (mental health revalidation aside) I thus had five out of six VU academic periods to prepare for these final six ECTS I need for my PPE degree. And again I fumbled.

Even now there are proximate causes or excuses I can point to that hindered my successful leaping of this academic hurdle – I was super busy with almost becoming the Spitzenkandidat of a local political party – but the pattern of ill-preparedness and lack of dedication remains. Writing this, in the liminal space between failed exam and resit, I'm still not certain how I can best best this challenge. What I am certain of is that not immediately hunkering down for Methods when I encountered the course for the very first time has caused me a lot of unnecessary grief over the years and hence I'd like to provide all the students who have yet to take this crucial PPE step with my extensive knowledge on how **not** to pass the course, lest you follow in my footsteps.

The foundation of not passing Methods II: Statistics lies in underestimation. For the last four years every first lecture has started with the (often freshly replaced) professor stressing that the key to mastering statistical analysis is frequent practice and thus to complete all assigned homework exercises. To not pass you therefore have to refrain from doing this. Doing some of the exercises is fine, but stick to the easier ones (helpfully denoted by an “elementary” symbol). Additionally to fail the course it is crucial to not engage with the exercises during lectures or seminars. Lectures are optional so it's naturally best to not attend these anyway and also the sanctioned number of skippable seminars should be missed. You need to stay adamant in minimising your attendance and therefore also not fall for the lure of the freely accessible tutoring and booster sessions, since while attending these rigorous extra classes, given in small groups with ample personal attention, you won't be getting away with staring blankly out of the window. For failing the course it is also extremely helpful to bet on the resit exam period. If for whatever reason, you can think of an excuse for not being able to pass the exam on the first opportunity, simply forgo trying to give it your best effort, go for an initial No Show result and try again a couple months later. By not going to the exam, you won't even have had the extra practice experience of the examination experience for the resit, allowing you to be shocked by your unpreparedness for the very first time. For the digital exams, betting on a resit after the period has ended is an especially elegant shortcut towards Methods II failure as these exams don't have resit options and you'll either have to try to pass the course with the handicap of the 30% counting 1.0 you did get or spend valuable time begging the professor to create a personal extra resit opportunity just for you. The options are limitless if you think about it.

Methods of PPE II is notorious for being the hardest course of our programme and I'm not at all the first student who has had to dedicate a year of their academic life to clear this hurdle, but it should be stressed that passing the course is definitely doable. Especially if you put away this article and get to work.



Ajax players after the season's last game.



What I should be doing instead of writing this article.