

More important than your thesis topic is who your advisor is

MIT 的 Bill Freeman 教授曾经给所有的 CSAIL 同事发过一份邮件，问他们对这样一个问题：要想在研究上有所建树，一个 researcher 需要的最重要的 quality 是什么？谈谈自己的想法。其中《Introduction to Algorithms》的作者之一 Charles Leiserson 教授回了一封有趣的邮件，读来令人忍俊不禁：

Bill,

I'll tell you a joke instead.

A rabbit is caught by a wolf. The wolf is about to eat the rabbit, but the rabbit protests, "I'm only a few weeks away from defending my Ph.D. dissertation. I have worked so hard, and everyone tells me I have so much promise. It would be a shame to kill me when I have such a bright future of research contributions ahead of me that will benefit the world." The wolf says, "You're writing a Ph.D. dissertation? What is it on?" The rabbit replies, "It's entitled, The Superiority of Rabbits over Foxes and Wolves." The wolf says, "That's about the stupidest thing you could have said. I'll eat you right now." The rabbit says, "Wait, wait! Come to my den and read my thesis draft. If you don't agree with my conclusions, I will willingly give myself up to you." So, the wolf goes off with the rabbit to the rabbit's den ... and the wolf never comes out.

A few weeks later, the rabbit is caught by a fox. The fox is about to eat the rabbit, but the rabbit protests, "I'm only a few days away from defending my Ph.D. dissertation. I have worked so hard, and everyone tells me I have so much promise. It would be a shame to kill me when I have such a bright future of research contributions ahead of me that will benefit the world." The fox says, "You're writing a Ph.D. dissertation? What is it on?" The rabbit replies, "It's entitled, The Superiority of Rabbits over Foxes and Wolves." The fox says, "That's about the stupidest thing you could have said. I'll eat you right now." The rabbit says, "Wait, wait! Come to my den and read my thesis draft. If you don't agree with my conclusions, I will willingly give myself up to you." So, the fox goes off with the rabbit to the rabbit's den ... and the fox never comes out.

A few weeks later, the rabbit is out and meets up with his old friend the muskrat. The muskrat says, "I hear you finally earned your Ph.D. Congratulations!" The rabbit says, "Yes, I just defended my Ph.D. thesis a few days ago." The muskrat asks, "What was your thesis topic?" The rabbit answers, "The Superiority of Rabbits over Foxes and Wolves." The muskrat says, "That's quite interesting. Can I read it?" The rabbit says, "Sure. Come to my den." They enter the den, and the muskrat sees the bones of foxes and wolves all over the floor. In the corner is a large lion.

Which brings us to the moral of the story: More important than your thesis topic is who your advisor is.