
So you are doing a PhD in Economics ...

Ali Shourideh

May 14 2021

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Thankfully you are not the first!

- We've all done it!
 - It can be painful; it can be wonderful.
 - My main goal: make it as pleasant and productive as possible.
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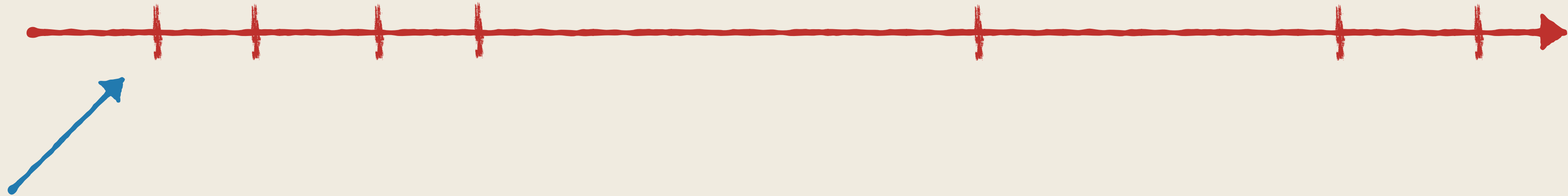
Hurdles you face

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Core and advanced
courses

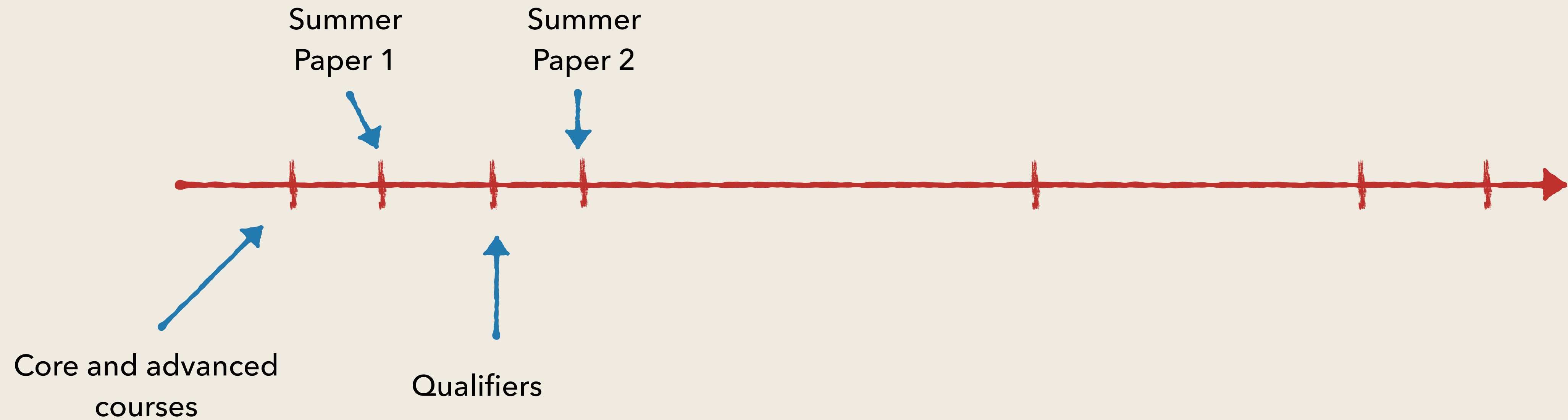
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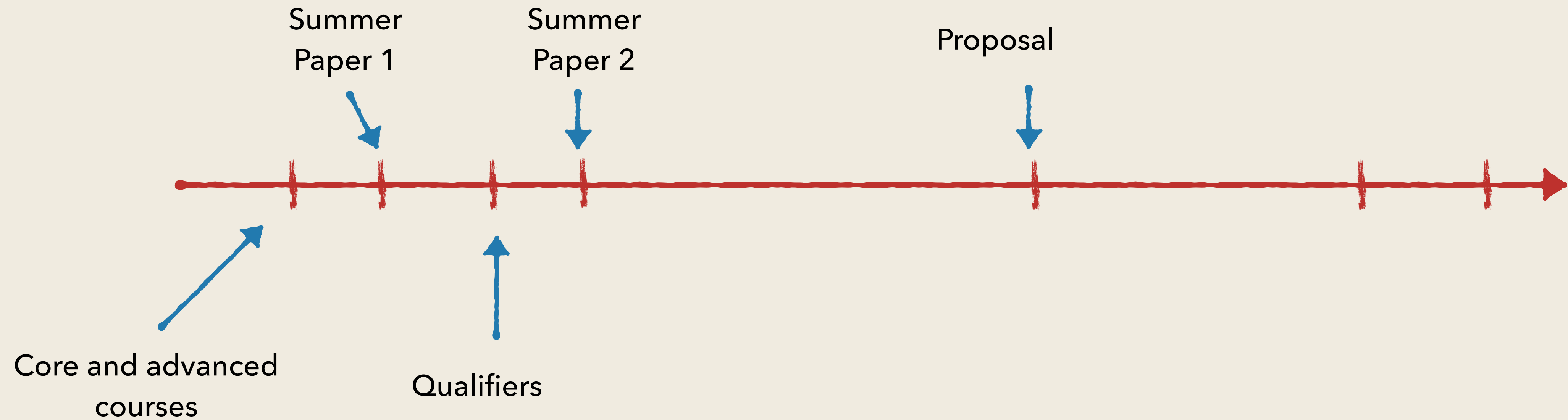
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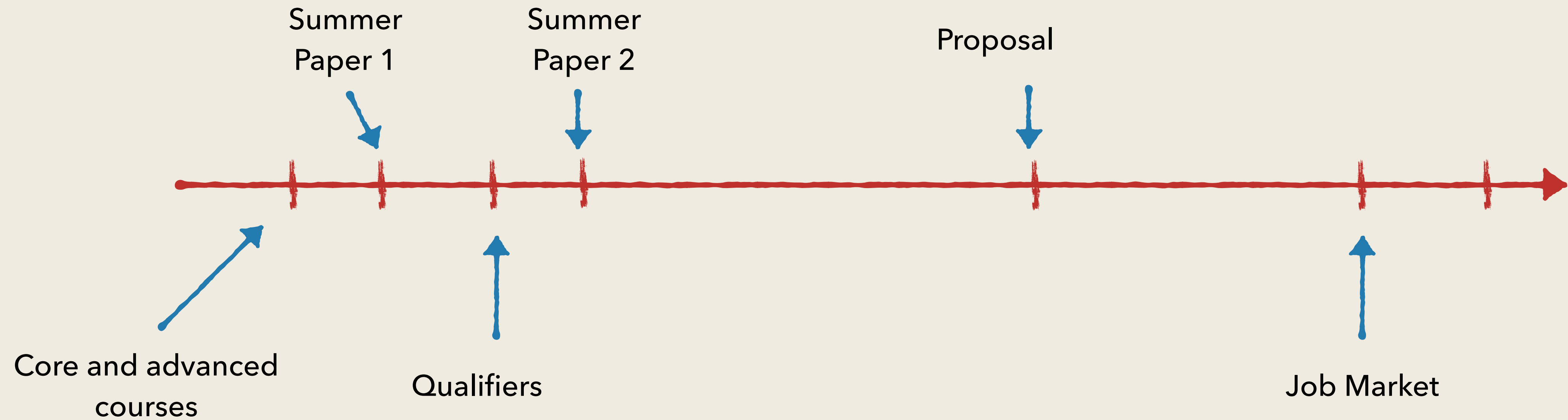
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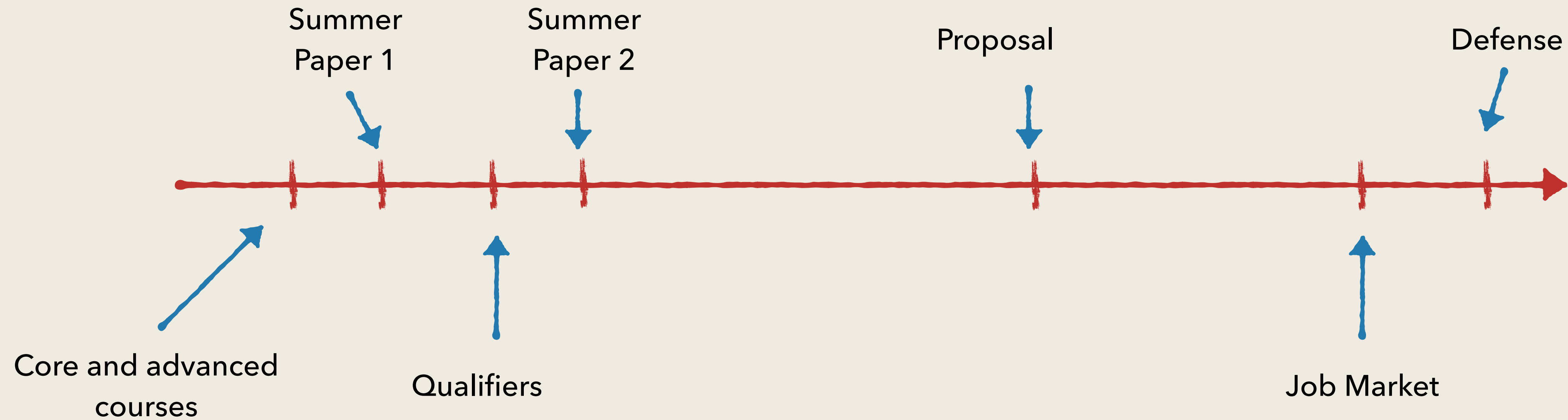
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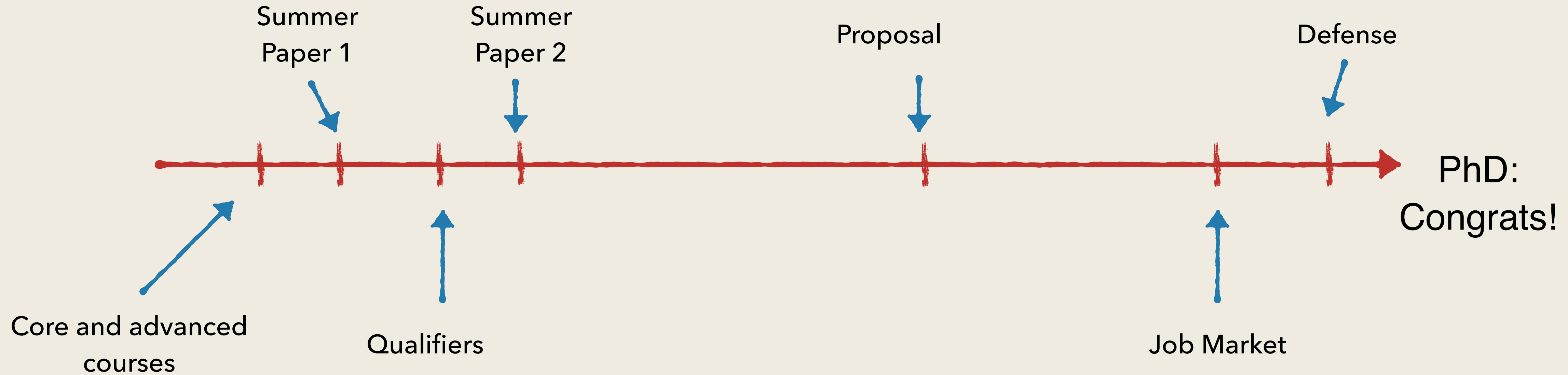
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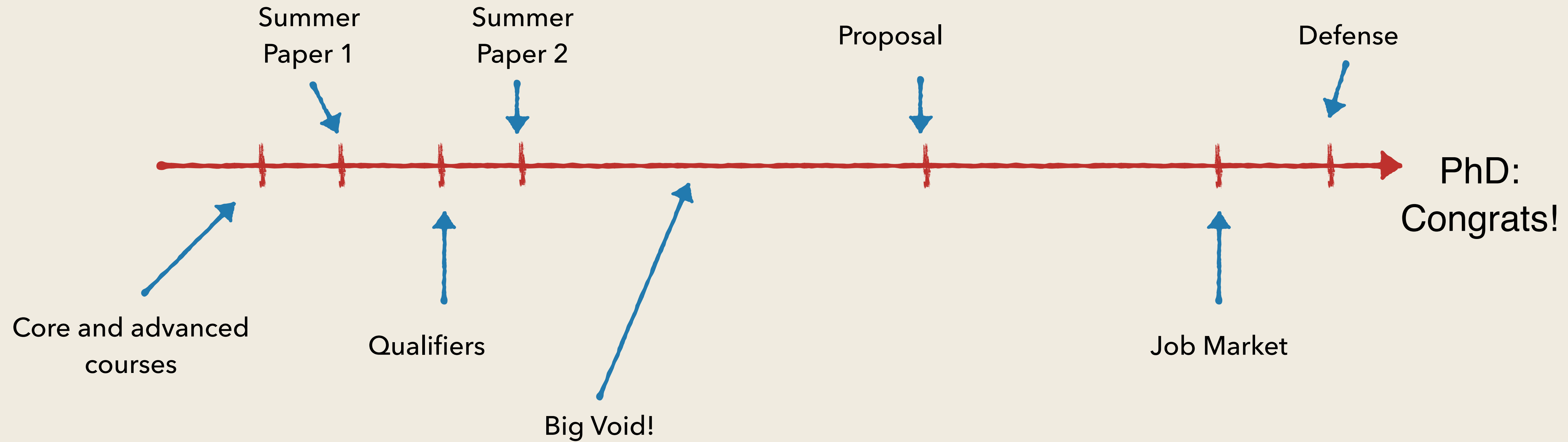
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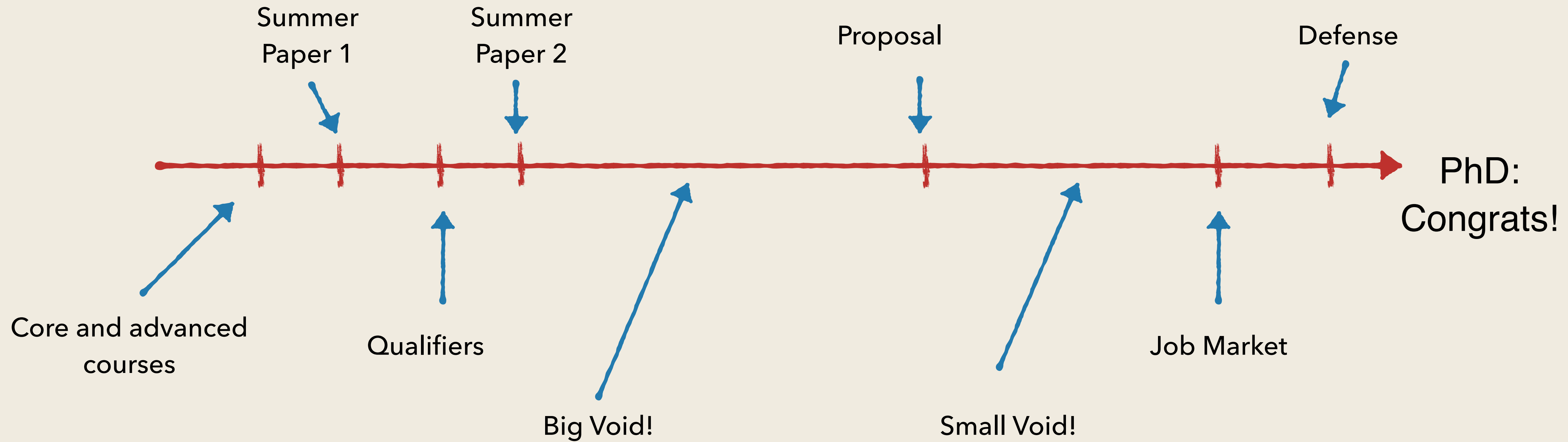
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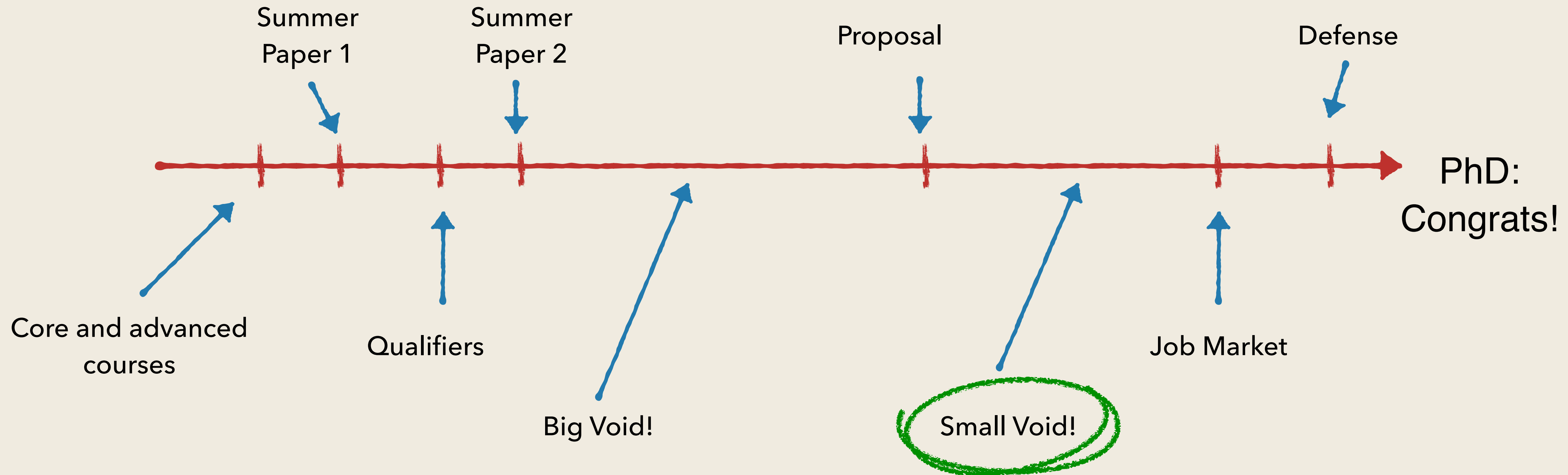
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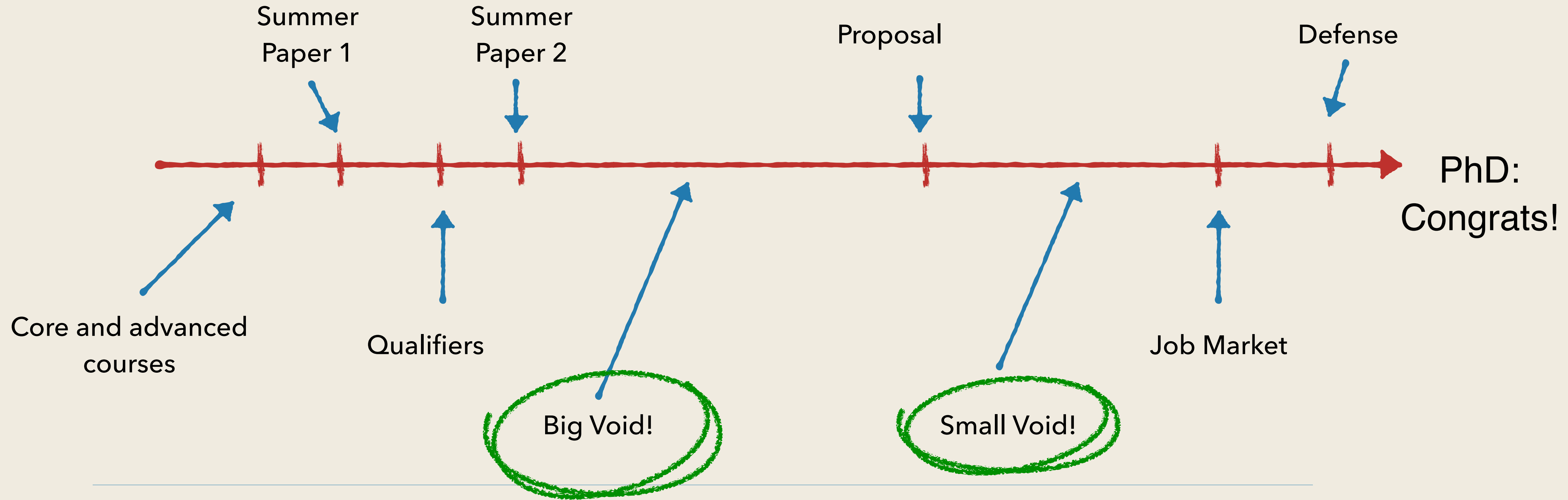
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Hurdles you face



Many Approaches to PhD

- Hurdle approach: Focus on hurdles, i.e., use $\beta \approx 0$!
 - Example:
 - Study hard in the first 3 semesters
 - Write some papers in the first and second
 - Focus on quals
 - Big void: time to relax a bit, maybe think about SP1 and SP2
 - Small void: Start thinking about the market
 - **Pro: Passes through the first and second year easier**
 - **Con: Eyes are off of the prize!**
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Backward Induction Approach

- You are here to do research
 - Program is structured to develop independent researchers
 - Backward induction: need to have 1-3 papers
 - Field-dependent
 - Macro/theory: 2-3 papers
 - Applied(IO/labor): 1-2 papers
 - **Alternative to hurdles approach: start thinking about research from day 1!**
 - What does it mean:
 - Read!
 - Talk to others!
 - Think!
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Research

Research



Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Caspar David Friedrich, 1818

Research



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Research



Cliff

Abyss

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Research



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What is Research? Failure!!!

- So much uncertainty: naturally many failures
 - If you ask any of us, we cannot even count the number of times we have failed!
 - The first paper I worked on: found out someone already had done it after one year of working!
 - Theory: Insights could be wrong!
 - Applied: Data does not give you what you were expecting
 - Model could be unsolvable
 - Not enough variation to identify stuff
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Research

- **First step:** need to understand that the papers you read have gotten there only after many many many many attempts and failures
 - Selection bias!
 - First step is important: recognize that it takes many tries
 - So gloomy!!!! Why do even try?!
 - My personal reason: the feeling that comes with discovery!
 - All of a sudden a bunch of things make sense
 - But what about the failures?
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Research - A bit of psychology

- Often our culture rewards outcomes
 - Our job: rewards are rare;
 - how do we motivate ourselves?
 - Solution: Enjoy the process
 - Evidence on happiness measurement suggests this is more long-lasting
 - Easier said than done
 - My solution: break a thought/idea/project into small steps and enjoy figuring out each step
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Research - how to deal with failures?

- It's important to figure out early on if an idea is going to work or not
 - Some flexibility helps:
 - maybe you can adapt your idea to another setting
 - Maybe you can slightly change your question
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Research - Advice

- Not sure I can really give advice! I can share my own perspective
- **Advice 1** - maybe only one:

Talk Talk Talk Talk Talk

- Talk to your advisor; talk to your classmates; talk to other faculty
 - Ideas are shaped very often in conversation
 - You can weed out ideas that are less likely to work earlier
 - **Specially**: Talk to your advisor when you are stuck and cannot make progress.
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Research - Advice

- **Advice 2:**
 - Be optimistic
 - Be realistic
 - Be confident (!!!!)
 - Easier said than done!
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Research - Advice

- **Advice 3:**
 - **Write:** Write frequently as often as once a month
 - **Present:** Make sure you present as many times as possible
 - **Work together:** Allows you to increase the number of papers on
- your resume when you go to the market
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Last Ones

- Mindset: Do not beat yourself up!
 - Think of an athlete: All of them lose at some point.
 - The key thing is to keep your chin up after failures
 - Love what you do:
 - Research is hard
 - If you do not like the subject, you are not gonna put in an effort
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Some Resources for Writing

- The best strategy to learning writing is to write!!
 - Find classes where you can write frequently and someone goes through your writing
 - “The Elements of Style” by William Strunk is a useful short book but does not teach you the big picture
 - “On Writing Well” by William Zinsser is excellent in conveying the big picture ideas about writing
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Keeping Up with Research

- Frequently read the journals:
 - AER May Issue, Journal of Economic Perspective and Journal of Economic Literature are great for new ideas
 - Attend talks as often as you can:
 - [Pittsburgh Social Science](#)
 - [NBER Conferences](#)
 - [AEA's List of Virtual Seminars](#)
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Questions?
