

Working with a Supervisor

Tips for postgraduate research students

The relationship you develop with your supervisor is a critical factor in a successful postgraduate research program. It is a unique relationship that can be negotiated and fostered in different ways, and may change over the course of your study. It may be influenced by different approaches to learning, and communication styles between you and your supervisor.

This publication outlines some of the essential features of an effective student-supervisor relationship, and suggests some strategies for managing this relationship to make the most of the supervision available to you.

Getting to know your supervisor

Establishing a good working relationship with your supervisor can take time and effort. Get to know your supervisor and talk about how you can work most effectively together. To do this you could:

- ask your supervisor about his or her own experiences as a research student
- talk to your supervisor's other research students about their experiences of working with him or her
- read your supervisor's published articles and papers. This can help you become familiar with their expertise, research methods and techniques, and current research interests. This may also help you understand the logic behind their advice.

Most importantly, clarify and understand what your supervisor expects of you, both in your written work and during supervision meetings.

Supervision styles

The way supervisors provide assistance to students often differs significantly. For example, while one supervisor may provide a lot of direction initially another may expect *you* to take control right from the start. One supervisor may choose to monitor your progress throughout the project while another may encourage you to work more autonomously as the project progresses. Assistance may be ongoing or only as required by you.

Elements of different approaches to working with academic information are identified in the following table. You may find it helpful to consider these questions as a basis for discussion with your supervisor.

Is your supervisor ... / Are you ...		
more interested in detail?	or	focused on the big picture?
a concrete thinker?	or	an abstract thinker?
an intuitive thinker?	or	a reflective thinker?
a person who prefers discussion?	or	a person who prefers written information?
a person who likes to talk through a topic?	or	a person who prefers to reflect on a topic alone?

Establish a way of working together

Consider the following checklist of topics for discussion **early** in the relationship between you and your supervisor. Check off those items you have already discussed and note any outstanding issues that you might take to your next supervisory meeting:

- Time / frequency of supervisory meetings and any other time commitments and responsibilities (How often do you / will you meet? How long?)
- Thesis outline / research plan / timelines and what is needed to complete your thesis
- Skills development including: library skills, computer skills, writing, presentation, statistics, English language skills.
- Facilities / resources available (for field trips, lab work, library, conferences, study abroad, scholarships, etc)
- Intellectual property issues and authorship of manuscripts including work in preparation or submitted for publication
- Ethical issues, including code of conduct for research and human / animal ethics clearances

Making the most of meetings

One of the first things to establish with your supervisor is when you'll meet, how often and for how long. It helps to have a regular time for meeting. This avoids leaving the process to chance and the temptation of postponing work deadlines. Select a time when you're both alert and not likely to be distracted by other demands.

Academic Skills

Think about how you can get the most from each meeting. Consider what you can do before, during and after a meeting to increase the value of your meetings.

Before the meeting

Some supervisors welcome advance emails from students suggesting discussion points and reporting progress to date. Others prefer to respond to questions and concerns as they come up in the meeting. Either way, it's essential that you think about what you would like to cover in a meeting. For example:

- Resource problems
- Complications and progress
- Achievements since the last meeting
- An 'Action Plan' of things to do before the next meeting

Always give your supervisor advance warning of any issues or concerns that might require wider consultation or reflection. Use email for routine reporting, and reserve meeting times for face-to-face discussion.

Don't be afraid to put questions on your agenda for discussion with your supervisor; however, also try to investigate possible answers yourself. Sometimes a supervisor may suggest alternative approaches to your question, or alternative sources for help.

During the meeting

Keep notes of discussions with your supervisor – note questions as well as answers. The questions supervisors ask are often integral to the direction and process of research. They may also be designed to give you practice explaining or justifying elements of the research project. Therefore, interpret questions or comments from your supervisor positively, even if you feel your approach is being challenged.

Take advantage of the opportunity to verbally explain the topic or a particular decision while there are just the two of you.

Remember, your supervisor is your mentor, not your examiner, and is there to support and guide you.

After the meeting

Allow time immediately after a meeting to reflect and make notes. Record topics covered and the main points discussed. Many students find that supervision meetings spark more thoughts, ideas and questions. Your supervisor may also welcome an emailed copy of your notes on the meeting. If so, be sure to list any actions required or decisions made. Schedule some time 2-3 days after the meeting to review your notes:

- Have you implemented advice given?
- Have you done what you said you would?
- Are there any outstanding issues, thoughts or lines of investigation to follow up?

Evaluating your relationship

The nature of the student-supervisor relationship will change as you progress through the different stages of your research project. Be flexible, but continually monitor the relationship to ensure it is meeting your current needs by reviewing the following:

- Are you receiving feedback for your work within an acceptable timeframe?
- Is the feedback you receive from your supervisor practical, positive and constructive?
- Is conversation relaxed and comfortable in meetings?
- Do you have enough time allocated for your meetings?
- Are you able to freely ask questions of your supervisor?
- Can you comfortably discuss problems with your supervisor?
- Are you able to interact effectively with your supervisor through email?
- Are you satisfied with the amount of direction and support your supervisor is providing?

Concerns about supervision

If you are not happy with the way you and your supervisor are working together you should address this as soon as possible. Discuss your concerns, expectations or frustrations firstly with your supervisor.

Talk with other students about their supervision experiences. Compare these and discuss strategies, options and advice. Discuss with the postgraduate coordinator, program manager or adviser within your department or your Head of Department.

Two specific services available to you at UoM are:

- The **Graduate Student Association (UMPA)**: the postgraduate student association that provides support, representation and advice for postgraduates.

www.gsa.unimelb.edu.au 8344 8657

- The **School of Graduate Research**: to confidentially discuss problems and options available to you.

www.gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au 8344 8598

Further References

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Graves, N., Varma, V. (Eds.) (1997). *Working for a doctorate: A guide for the humanities and social sciences*. New York: Routledge.

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Academic Skills