GRADUATE STUDENT TIPS:
Starting out on a good foot with your supervisor

In principled negotiation, we are encouraged to “separate the person from the problem”. In graduate supervision, it can be helpful to “separate the person from the research”. In other words, both interpersonal and scholarly elements of the supervisory relationship are critically important considerations.

Some graduate students are wholly or partially responsible for selecting their supervisor, others are paired by their department with a supervisor based on research strengths & interests.

In all cases, in the early days of working with your supervisor be curious: ask questions and more importantly, listen to the answers. Clarity and openness are important and so is follow-through. You don’t know what you don’t know…yet.

The Person

Talk to them

- How easy is it to communicate with this supervisor?
  - Do I feel welcomed?
  - Do I know how they prefer to be contacted? (in person; email; text etc.)
  - What happens when I ask a question or try to clarify a point they have made?
- Where is this supervisor on their supervisory ‘path’?
  - Are they a first time supervisor; seasoned supervisor; close to retirement?
  - What other competing priorities might this supervisor have for their time? (i.e. am I sharing this supervisor with many or just a few other grad students?)
  - Have I spoken to any other students who had / have this same supervisor?

Take a minute (or more!) for self-reflection

- What do I need from a supervisor? (deal-breakers vs. wish-list)
  - Do I prefer minimal or extensive feedback? Daily, weekly or monthly interaction?
  - How do I respond to criticism or to change?
  - If I had a personal or family emergency could I communicate to this person my academic needs? (fear vs. reticence)
- Are my expectations realistic (with this supervisor)?
  - What has worked (or not worked) for me in the past when dealing with faculty?
  - Have I made a list of the pros and cons of joining this supervisor on their ‘path’?
  - Have I read the Graduate Supervision Guidelines (SGS)?
The Research

**Spell out academic expectations**

- Is this supervisor open to talking about my/their roles and responsibilities?
  - Do I understand what graduate skills are important to this supervisor?
  - Have I asked about expectations for keeping lab/office hours?
  - Am I clear on initial timelines and how I would to propose changes?
- Does the supervisor understand my research strengths & interests?
  - Have I checked that I understand their research strengths and interests? (don’t assume...)
  - Does it seem like we might work in similar or complementary ways?
- Have we talked about intellectual property issues?
  - Number or frequency of publications and/or conferences?
  - Have I looked at anything published by this supervisor / talked to any student co-authors?

**Consider related issues**

- Am I clear about my graduate funding? Do I have a financial plan?
- Have we talked about any overlap in supervision between academics and employment? (i.e. am I a TA / RA for this supervisor?)
- Is there any more information I need or do I need more time to consider the information?

**The follow up**

**Summarize in writing**

- Have I summarized key pieces of information / discussions in writing and provided them to the supervisor?
  - Does this department recommend a formal signed document of expectations or will an email summarizing our discussion suffice?

There may be times in your graduate studies when your interests do not align with your supervisor’s – remind yourself that conflict can be both disruptive and productive. Pay attention
to early warning signs or feelings of discomfort. Consider talking through your concerns with a fellow graduate student, a department administrator, a trusted faculty member or a G2G Peer Advisor. Your understanding of the person (your supervisor and yourself) and the research will help you to navigate a way forward.

By doing some research as you start your research, you are gathering important information early on that can help you to assess options and make decisions down the road.

**Resources:**

**SGS Graduate Supervision Guidelines** – [Section 3: Choosing a Supervisor](https://www.utsys.ca/graduate-supervision)

**Finding a Thesis Supervisor** By Andrea Portt, PhD student. UofT Family Care Office Intersections blog: Where Work, School & Family Meet.

**Quick Guide to Supervision: Top 10 List – How to be an effective supervisor** Institute for Medical Science U of T website.

**Finding the right supervisor-student match – Tips for forming a successful partnership** By Nana Lee, UofT. University Affairs online, February 7, 2019.

**10 truths a PhD supervisor will never tell you** By Tara Brabazon. Times Higher Education online, July 11, 2013.

**The PhD journey: how to choose a good supervisor** By Matthew Killeya. NewScientist online, February 20, 2008.

**Choosing a graduate program supervisor** By Erin Clow. University Affairs online, March 15, 2016


---