

What if the relationship breaks down?

Difficulties in your supervisory relationship can have a devastating effect on your research. When problems start, take a step back and identify what is making it difficult to work together – focus on specific professional difficulties, as opposed to the character or personality of your supervisor.

Get an objective, confidential, outside perspective from someone you can trust, such as a friend or Study Adviser.

Ask fellow PhD students who you can trust if they have had similar problems and how they have managed them. Be tactful and discrete – don't moan about or criticise your supervisor in your department.

Try to maintain communications with your supervisor and don't let the relationship deteriorate to a point where you don't talk.

Build up a network of colleagues and peers in your field who can give you additional feedback and informal support in your research.

If necessary, discuss your concerns with your director of research or head of department. If things continue unresolved, consult a Student Union adviser.

It is often possible to change supervisors, but consider this carefully. You owe it to yourself to get the support you need to complete your PhD, but you also need to work effectively with colleagues in your department.

For more information....

See **Postgraduates 1**. Time management for postgraduates

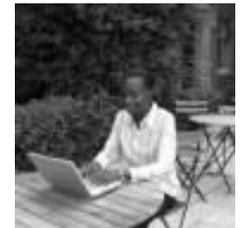
See **Postgraduates 2**. Writing your thesis

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Working with your supervisor



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This guide for postgraduate students explores how to work effectively with your supervisor. It includes advice on:

- Different styles of supervising
- Negotiating how you will work together
- Before, during and after supervisions
- Managing joint supervisors
- What if the relationship breaks down?

Different styles of supervising

Each supervisor has a different way of working. Many supervisors will expect that you can manage your research project from the start, and will leave you to get on with it, until you ask for assistance, but others prefer a much more hands-on approach.

It may be helpful to find out how your supervisor likes to work by talking to other research students who have been supervised by them. For instance, do they prefer regular meetings, or only when one of you feels it's necessary? Do they like you to provide a detailed account of your work so far, or an overview? Considering these things early can help to prevent misunderstandings between the two of you later on.

Establishing how you will work together

If you establish how your relationship will function at the beginning of your project, you will be able to work more constructively together.

Things to consider include:

- The time and frequency of your supervision meetings.
- An overall plan and timeline for your research, as well as how you will agree on interim deadlines.
- Whether your supervisor would like to see regular pieces of work, or just finished drafts, and how they will give feedback.
- What kind of skills and training you need (e.g. statistical or research methods, IT training, language support etc).
- Intellectual property and ethical issues (e.g. if you are working as part of a research team or on human/animal research).
- Your expected involvement in department research activities, seminars, and conferences.
- Your career development – e.g. availability of teaching opportunities.
- Also any times when your supervisor will be away (e.g. on research leave, teaching abroad or at conferences) so you can plan for this and agree how you will keep in touch.

Top Tip: If you are having problems with your work, don't wait for your supervisor to contact you – take the initiative and get in touch. If they don't hear from you, they will probably assume you are doing fine.

Before, during and after supervisions

Prepare for supervisions by considering:

- Your progress and achievements since the last meeting
- Any problems or points you need clarifying
- What you plan to do next

Top Tip: You will get more productive responses if you ask specific questions rather than general ones. So instead of asking “How am I doing?” try something like, “What do you think of the methodology I am using in Chapter 1?”

During supervisions:

- Take notes, especially of any actions or things to follow up.
- Pay attention to the *questions* your supervisor asks, as these are often crucial in helping you think about the direction of your research.
- Take the opportunity to explain and defend your ideas verbally – this is all good training for your viva and helps you work out your beliefs.

After supervisions:

- Email a list of your agreed action points to your supervisor to check there have been no misunderstandings.
- Reflect on what you have discussed – it is likely to trigger more ideas.
- Take your supervisor's advice seriously – you're not expected to do everything they suggest, but you are expected to consider it carefully.

Be prepared for your supervisor to “wean you off” their guidance as your research progresses – e.g. you may ask “Am I going in the right direction?” and they may reply “You should be able to decide that for yourself”. This is a positive sign that your supervisor thinks you are ready to have more independence.

Managing joint supervisors

Having two supervisors gives you an alternative viewpoint which can help you in developing your thinking on the topic. On the down side, it can sometimes prove difficult as you need to juggle two sets of advice.

You will usually find that you have one lead supervisor, while the second supervisor offers a different viewpoint, or provides expertise in a different area of research.

Ensure you keep both supervisors up to date and communicate with both. And never try to play one supervisor off against the other – this only leads to pain!