

SMARTER STUDY SKILLS

**HOW TO
RESEARCH &
WRITE A
SUCCESSFUL
PhD**

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This means you should make sure your notion of the amount of time your supervisor can spend with you is realistic. After all, postgraduate study is primarily about learning to work and think on your own.

That does not mean that your supervisor can ignore you. It might mean, for example, that you will have to be patient in waiting for feedback on drafts of your work. Normally, you will have a good idea of the context in which your supervisor is working and can adjust your expectations accordingly. Just before a lecture might not be a good time to ask for a considered opinion on your work; in the run-up to an important conference, all of your supervisor's attention might be on putting together his/her contribution; and in vacation periods, he/she may go away from the lab or office for several weeks.



Time your approaches to your supervisor

Be sensitive to your supervisor's working patterns and to any one-off tasks they are doing. If possible, suggest diary dates in advance.

SUPERVISOR AND STUDENT PERSONALITIES

Although there may be times when you will doubt it, supervisors are human beings and hence are fallible. They may be near-geniuses and have heroic research achievements to their name but at the same time they may have difficulty empathising with students or seem rather abrupt. In the majority of cases, this simply requires adjustment on the part of the postgraduate student. Table 10.1 lists some supervisor types, the sorts of qualities they may display and some strategies for accommodating these.

While you will inevitably focus on your supervisor's traits, he or she will also have a view on your personality. The focus may be on qualities he or she is pleased to see, such as being:

- hard working;
- punctual;
- focused;
- technically adept;
- intellectually bright.



What should you do if you do not feel your supervisor is giving you enough of their time?

- 1 Compare notes with others in your department to see whether you are relatively disadvantaged in this way.
- 2 Try to be more proactive in setting up meetings, perhaps by helping to set up diary dates or a regular meeting slot.
- 3 Raise the matter informally at your progress monitoring meetings.
- 4 As a last resort, you might wish to consult the chairperson of the department's research committee, the head of department or your faculty dean. Many of these people will be quite happy to have discussions on an informal basis and you can trust them to respect confidentiality if agreed beforehand.

A supervisor will probably not want to deal with personal matters extraneous to the research itself. Examples might include: lack of motivation; being homesick; financial problems or issues with relationships. Nevertheless, because these issues may have a direct effect on your progress, you should explain your feelings frankly – but don't expect a lot more than sympathy in return. Your supervisor is not a social worker and his or her attention will nearly always be directed to the outcomes of your work. If you need further help, consult the relevant student services unit directly.

There will inevitably be ups and downs in the student-supervisor relationship (**Ch 11**). What is important is to recognise that you share a common goal and may need to compromise a little to achieve it.



What should I do if I have more than one supervisor and they give me conflicting advice?

This is a difficult situation, and one that can only really be resolved by discussion with all parties present. You should confront an issue of this kind as soon as possible as it could lead to huge problems nearer to submission. If things are not resolved easily, it might be a good idea to have confidential chat with the head of department or postgraduate dean (or equivalent).

Table 10.1 Some supervisor types with likely approach to your research, typical supervision styles and suggested strategies for working successfully with them. Note that, as with any stereotyping exercise, the real situation will be more complex: a specific supervisor may demonstrate more than one trait and/or may change between modes at different points in the academic year.

Supervisor type, approach to your research and supervision style	Suggested strategies for successful relationships
<p>The big hitter – an established researcher with a considerable reputation and track record. Able to pick the very best PG students. Will have exceptionally high expectations for work-rate and results. Your research project is likely to fit into a well-established programme of work, possibly as part of an extended group. Unlikely to be able to devote much time for day-to-day supervision and may delegate this to other team members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that your commitment and hard work are evident • Ensure that you stick to your plan and avoid deviation from it as this will not be appreciated • Present the key points from your work well in meetings by taking along a prepared list of queries. Meetings may be brief and feel more like an interview than a discussion, so ensure that you make best use of them • Be prepared to snatch discussions at every opportunity • Seek detailed feedback on your written drafts from others as your supervisor may not have time or feel it is their role to give detailed feedback on grammar, style and word use
<p>The overworked academic – has many calls on his/her time: teaching, administration and, if lucky, research. Probably keen on your project but frustrated by inability to offer you as much supervision as he/she would like. Variable engagement with you, and especially poor during crunch times of academic year, e.g. when teaching or examining.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make good use of 'times of plenty' and develop strategies for times when contact is infrequent • Expect meetings to be re-scheduled or cancelled at busy times due to conflicting tasks. Try to timetable meetings within your supervisor's diary • Expect long waits for drafts to be returned, possibly with variable quality of feedback
<p>The theorist – your project could be part of his/her grand plan and your results could be expected to uphold a pet theory. Will <i>not</i> like any results or conclusions that conflict with his/her predictions. May tend to over-supervise as above.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure you are on very safe ground if you disagree on key issues • Be prepared for conflict with opposing research groups at conferences and during oral exam

<p>The at-a-distance manager – a supervisor primarily by name only, appointed mainly so you can fulfil university or external requirements. May not be interested in your project or be able to contribute much. Meetings will be infrequent and you will largely be expected to work by yourself.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand your situation from the start and lower your expectations • Try to make use of whatever alternative support networks are present in the department or university • Press for meetings and discussions and be prepared to ask questions or to be referred to someone who can help • Be prepared to make contact with outside experts, e.g. by email
<p>The one who'd rather be doing your research – your project is a pet topic but time and status no longer allow him/her to carry out the work. May over-supervise at times – interfering in your work, expecting impossibly high standards for someone of your experience, dictating approaches and expressing irritation if you do things in your own way. May take over when work due for publication.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try your best to work to his/her standards • If you disagree with the expected approach, be prepared to present a well-argued case for your preferred method • Don't come to rely entirely on his/her analysis and interpretation – you must be able to defend your own thoughts under oral examination
<p>The father/mother figure – often an experienced and noted researcher in the twilight of his/her career. Relishes opportunity to pass on wisdom in a supportive, friendly manner. Approaches may be slightly outdated but will generally be sound.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure any information provided is up-to-date – supervisor may be a little stuck in the past • Keep up to date with current literature in your area • Relish the opportunity to learn from all his/her wisdom and knowledge – 'old' does not necessarily mean 'out-of-date'
<p>The technocrat – has built current career on knowledge of a specific approach, technique or instrument. May expect you to be as methods-savvy as him/her. Methods may churn out results but may be limited in applicability.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware of other approaches and try to fit these into your work to 'round' your experience • Take advantage of results-churning by writing plentiful papers – the window of opportunity may be narrow • Try to gain a wider knowledge of the topic beyond the immediate methodology

Continued overleaf

Supervisor type, approach to your research and supervision style	Suggested strategies for successful relationships
<p>The would-be superstar – highly ambitious, and your work may be part of his/her grand plan for advancement. Likely to be impatient and will expect results yesterday.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work hard – you may be able to coast-tail on his/her upwards trajectory, possibly moving between institutions along the way • Resist tendency for quality to suffer in the demand for instant results <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – keep your own standards as far as possible, as you will be judged by them
<p>The introvert – a talented researcher but one who lacks people-skills. May have succeeded so far as a loner and may be a reluctant supervisor (see below). Not good in meetings or in passing on wisdom and personal advice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work at making him/her comfortable in discussion • Be prepared to gain information in short sharp meetings
<p>The slightly reluctant supervisor – may have been pressed into having you as a student, may resent the commitment of time involved and may not be entirely interested in your research topic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to be as pleasant as possible and to minimise his or her workload by preparing well • Try your best to enthuse him or her in your subject material • Try to find other sources of advice and encouragement
<p>The novice – new to this task. Likely to be keen, friendly and interested. Research field may be fresh but uncertain. May not have developed the required person-skills for supervision and may be unfamiliar with procedures, rules and regulations. May be paired with a more senior co-supervisor.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take advantage of the enthusiasm a novice supervisor can provide • Capitalise also on other sources of advice and encouragement: most universities will arrange for co-supervisors for staff unfamiliar with this role • Be prepared to double-check on procedures and timing • Recognise that, although the age differential between you and this type of supervisor may be narrow, you need to keep a certain amount of distance and avoid over-familiarity

THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE IN WRITING UP YOUR WORK

Communicating your work in writing is a vital part of any postgraduate study programme (**Ch 25**) and you can expect your supervisor to take a keen interest in this. In all probability, you will gain mutually from this writing by enhancing your respective CVs and reputations. Perhaps because of the importance of placing your work on record, the interactions that take place during this process often involve some thorny discussions and it is important that you understand the reasons for these.

How much will your supervisor help you in writing up?



Misunderstandings on this issue can act as a major source of dissatisfaction. International students particularly, who may be paying large fees for the postgraduate experience, might expect that this is in part a payment for help with writing up. It isn't, normally. Moreover, most supervisors will be unable to have the time to help with putting your ideas into scholarly English. For this, you may need to consult a specialist writing centre in your university.

While you will be asked to sign a statement to the effect that your thesis is all 'your own work', there is necessarily an element of collaboration between student and supervisor. You will be expected to write your thesis, taking into account feedback provided by your supervisor. The *viva voce* exam is designed to ensure that the thesis is your own work, and that you fully understand what has been written. Despite the need for autonomy, you should have a legitimate expectation of guidance and constructive criticism concerning your efforts.

However, your supervisor may insist on including material you do not agree with or insist on removing material you think is important. Before getting too annoyed with this, do bear in mind your supervisor's experience and wisdom. He or she may well have good reasons for adopting a particular stance – perhaps sensitivity to the 'political' aspects of your research, or knowledge of the key figures working within your research area (that is, potential examiners or referees) and how they might react to what you propose to write.