

4 Supervision

Or, PhDs, marriage and desert islands

Could that fellow have me whipped?

When you become a PhD student, you embark on what is likely to be an intense relationship, both personally and professionally, with your supervisor. It's likely to be different from your previous academic relationships, because as a research student you'll take up much more of your supervisor's attention and time. You can't hide among the other students the way you could on a taught course if you wanted to keep a low profile for whatever reason; you're a visible individual as a PhD student.

Similarly, your supervisor is going to be a lot more important to you than your undergraduate project supervisor, who was only one member of staff among many.

A good relationship between student and supervisor needs work by both parties. It isn't your supervisor's responsibility to make everything all right; it's up to both of you to work together. Many doctoral students encounter unnecessary problems because they make classic mistakes in dealing with their supervisors. Unfortunately, our experience is that most students don't think this relationship through, and that most supervision problems are predictable and preventable. So, it's time to start thinking things through . . . If you've already thought these things through, then you will be much more likely to be viewed as an asset to your supervisor and the department, and to finish with a happy ending.

Most PhD horror stories have their origins in the supervisory relationship rather than in the research topic or the external examiner. The most common cause is that the student didn't take the supervisor's advice. Less common, though not unknown, is horror due to an incompetent supervisor. The current

trend is for PhDs to be supervised by more than one supervisor, which reduces the risk of your having a rogue incompetent supervising you; in addition, departments normally pay keen attention to students' performance at stages such as the transfer seminar, where incompetence is usually spotted and subsequently investigated.

The relationship between student and supervisor is about as close as many marriages, and lasts as long as many marriages. It's a fairly good analogy in several ways. One important issue is compatibility. Nobody in their right mind would expect to have a happy marriage if they married the first single person they met; similarly, you can't expect that your relationship will be equally straightforward with every potential supervisor you might meet. Likewise, it's not your supervisor's job to put up with every unpleasant idiosyncrasy of every idiot who wants to do a PhD with them. As a student, you are an apprentice, not a customer who is always right.

Also on the subject of rightness, there isn't a single type of 'right' student or 'right' supervisor, any more than there is a single type of 'right' partner. There are various types of supervisor, and various types of student; each type of supervisor will be well suited to some types of student, and less well suited to other types of student. At this point, the marriage analogy starts to become somewhat strained. In the old days, a high proportion of students signed up to do a PhD with a specific supervisor; now it's increasingly common for students to sign up with a department, and then to be issued with a supervisor or, more often, a supervisory team. A closer analogy for this situation is two or three survivors shipwrecked on a desert island and having to learn not just to get along with each other but also to work constructively together, regardless of whether they would have chosen each other as companions if they had had a choice. Sitting on the beach complaining that the other survivors aren't perfect human beings isn't going to get a fire lit; similarly, sitting at your desk expecting your supervisor to be perfect isn't going to get your dissertation written. You have to make the most of what you've got, unless the situation is completely pathological (discussed in more detail below). Note that this is an active process, not a passive one: you don't simply put up with the situation that you first encounter, but instead you identify the resources you've got and then put them to the best use you can. With this in mind, it's a good idea to assess yourself in relation to your personality and your needs as a student, so that you can assess what you would like from your supervisor and how to set about obtaining those things in a way which suits you both. Relevant factors usually include your need for technical support; your need for emotional support; your need for guidance and structure in planning the work; your ability to handle criticism; and your ability to deliver on time, to the agreed standard.

It's also a good idea to ask yourself which of your characteristics (a) will make you awkward for anyone to supervise and (b) are likely to lead to problems with a particular type of supervisor. You should then think about which of these things you are willing to improve and what the implications are for how you approach your supervisor and your PhD.

The role of the supervisor

Another fruitful area for misunderstanding involves what services supervisors are supposed to provide. Students seldom think much about this.

One common misconception is that the supervisor is a purely technical resource, there to provide expertise in (for instance) the obscure area of Unix programming that you are studying for your PhD. Students with this misconception typically encounter problems when their supervisor doesn't have the answer to an obscure technical question, such students typically complain loudly that the supervisor is incompetent, and then wonder why they receive so little sympathy from the department. The purpose of the PhD is to demonstrate that you can operate as an independent researcher and uncover new knowledge; if you expect your supervisor to know more than you about every aspect of your PhD, then you have missed the whole point.

There are many different ways to supervise a PhD, and many different roles which a supervisor can have: each student is different and will require different support. At one extreme is the student who can be pretty much left to get on with it, with supervisory meetings being something that both parties enjoy, and where each party learns from the other. This is rare, but it does happen. Such students don't always have brilliant academic grades from their first degree; what they tend to have in common is a willingness to learn for themselves and good judgement about when to stop and ask for feedback. At the other extreme is the student who doesn't take the initiative about anything, who needs constant feedback, active encouragement and who appears to expect a worrying degree of spoonfeeding. For students at the first end of the spectrum, supervisors will often be very busy behind the scenes, trying to find funding for the student after they graduate; for students at the other end of the spectrum, the supervisor may have different priorities.

The minimum supervisory role involves filling in the relevant forms as you progress through The System, writing annual reports, liaising with the organization where you are doing your fieldwork etc. Beyond that, there are numerous possible roles, which may or may not be relevant to your case, and which will probably be invisible to you.

Other roles include:

- **Specific technical support:** for instance, skills training in using the library or specialist software; pointers to relevant literature; providing contacts with other researchers; guidance on structuring the thesis; training in critical reading.
- **Broader intellectual support:** for instance, helping the student develop skills in discussion and critical thinking; providing high-level knowledge about the field and about research issues in the field; providing specialist expertise in conducting studies in the field.

- **Administrative support:** for instance, finding funds; finding other resources; protecting you from political and administrative difficulties within the institution; publicizing your work.
- **Management:** for instance, providing a structure (meetings, deadlines, goals); deadline creation and enforcement.
- **Personal support:** for instance, career advice, emotional support and counselling.

If you're feeling cynical about this, it's worth remembering that the student's performance reflects on the supervisor who has to undergo, among other things, institutional procedures and reports (including scrutiny of PhD failure rates); supervisors' meetings; peer scrutiny at transfer seminars; research assessment exercises; and scrutiny from funding bodies.

Why do people become supervisors? It's certainly not for the money as supervision is almost never remunerated. And it's not for release from other tasks, since workload planning almost always underestimates the time supervision takes. There are many reasons, ranging from a direct order from the head of department, via a feeling of duty, on through mercenary self-interest (such as using the students to further the supervisor's career), to idealism and a love of working with students.

Whatever the supervisor's motivation, it's in both your interests to get along. Whatever the moral rights and wrongs of a particular issue, it's very much in your interests to make the relationship work; failing your PhD is much more of a disaster for you than it is for your supervisor, so expecting your supervisor to do all the running in your relationship is not an advisable strategy. It is, as usual, a good idea to try seeing things from their perspective. If you were asked to supervise an undergraduate project, what sort of student would you want to supervise and what sort would you not want to supervise at any cost? Once you've thought about that for a while, try looking long and hard at your own behaviour from that point of view: how often have you missed a meeting, turned up late, turned up unprepared, expected your supervisor to do all the thinking and so forth?

You are ultimately responsible for your work: your supervisor is not. Taking your share of responsibility in the supervisory relationship is good practice for the dissertation and viva, where the burden is on the student to communicate – if the thesis is unclear to the examiner, it's the student's problem, not the examiner's. So practise on your supervisor. Decide what you want from the PhD and from the individual meetings, and communicate this to your supervisor.

As with marriage, it's worth putting the effort in, because the relationship is likely to last at least three years, and a good supervisory relationship will benefit you for the rest of your career. Also as with marriages, it can be useful at times to remember that supervisors are human too – they'll have bad days and human failings. Be realistic and forgiving in your expectations and the chances of a happy ending for you both are much better.

Practical ways of establishing a good relationship with your supervisor

As usual, try looking at it from the other person's point of view – most of the answers will then become pretty obvious. Supervisors are research-active academics and research-active academics are hideously overworked. PhD students take up time, which is the supervisor's scarcest resource, and are in that sense a liability. A sensible student will reduce their liability rating; a good student will find ways of being a positive asset.

Reducing the liability rating mainly involves basic professional courtesies. It's your PhD, not the supervisor's; if you can't be bothered to work on making it happen, why should they? Making it happen includes making supervision meetings work: you should take the initiative in setting up the meetings, circulating relevant information in advance, drafting an agenda and coming with a clear set of things to report and questions to ask. Something which is easily overlooked is that you should also minute the meeting, recording decisions and actions, and circulate those minutes afterwards, then check that the actions are in fact done. A related issue in many organizations is keeping logs of meetings for The System.

Running meetings properly is a rare skill, so we've summarized the key points here – this particular skill is valuable in most walks of life.

Several days before the meeting, the organizer of the meeting should:

- circulate the agenda;
- check that the venue is still available. If it isn't the supervisor's office;
- remind people of the time and place of the meeting;
- circulate any briefing material, including minutes of the last meeting.

During the meeting, the chair of the meeting should:

- record the date and the parties present;
- check that everyone agrees with the minutes of the last meeting;
- check that actions from the last meeting have all been done;
- record any decisions made, including milestones and deliverables (and check that everyone agrees with this record);
- record any actions agreed (and check that everyone agrees with this record);
- fix the time and place of the next meeting.

After the meeting:

- the organizer should write up the minutes and distribute them;
- everyone should do what they have agreed to do.

There are different types of meeting, suitable for different purposes. The description above relates to formal meetings, but PhDs also require informal

meetings when you explore ideas or discuss your longer term career plans, or work through a problem which is bothering you. These usually take place over the legendary cup of coffee.

Some classic irritating habits which students often show in relation to meetings include the following:

- failing to take deadlines seriously;
- failing to respect the supervisor's time pressures (you are but one demand among many);
- dumping demands on the supervisor at the last minute instead of allowing them time for reading, thinking, enquiring etc.;
- expecting the supervisor to read every draft, usually by the next day;
- expecting the supervisor to organize everything;
- organizing things without consulting the supervisor (independence is good up to a point, but you need to check you're being independent in the right way).

Dealing with your supervisor

There are various strategies which students can use to make life better for all parties in the PhD, but which are not as widely used as they should be. These include:

- exchanging favours, such as tracking down an obscure reference for your supervisor in exchange for some advice about a job application (but make sure that the exchange is agreed explicitly, so you both know where you stand);
- showing explicitly that you value your supervisor's knowledge and experience;
- trying to do something the supervisor's way, but setting criteria and a date for evaluation of the success of it (especially if you're reluctant);
- not just refusing to do something you don't like, but offering an alternative instead;
- being scrupulous about giving credit where credit is due (e.g. when you publish papers);
- finding out about your supervisor's research – surprisingly few students do this, even though their supervisor's research is probably one of the most valuable resources available;
- allowing your supervisor to be human – tolerating human weaknesses, and making the most of your supervisor's strengths.

What to put in

The supervisory relationship is a two-way one: you are supposed to be actively learning, not passively waiting to be told all the answers.

At the most academic level, you should be actively finding things out and actively generating ideas. One sign that you're doing a proper PhD is that you are finding out things which are new to your supervisor; another is that your supervisor finds at least one of your ideas sufficiently interesting to merit genuine engagement and discussion. It's useful as well as courteous to give your supervisor a précis of what you've found, and to offer full copies of any material that the supervisor would like to read in more detail.

At the implementation level, you should be generating ideas about specific research questions to ask and specific research methods to investigate them. You should be doing this increasingly as the PhD progresses and you learn more. Your supervisor will probably advise against most of these ideas; what you need to do is to assess the reasons for this advice, rather than going into a corner and sulking. One thing which most students never consider is that a good supervisor will be generating ideas about their own research all the time, and discarding the vast majority of them on various grounds. If you expect to have a higher hit rate than your supervisor while you're still an apprentice, then you're being a bit silly.

What to ask for

There are various things that you should ask for, with appropriate courtesy, at various stages of your PhD.

From an early stage, you should ask for appropriate training, both in research methods relevant to your research and also in other areas which will help you – for instance, many students would benefit from assertiveness training and relaxation training, as well as time management and numerous other ancillary skills. You should ask specifically for skills advice if you need it (e.g. what is the form of a conference paper; how does one read a paper and make notes about it?). It's particularly helpful if the supervisor can work through an example with you, rather than just telling you how to do it. A lot of students are embarrassed to ask for this sort of advice on the grounds that they think they should already know it. That's a faulty assumption. The point of the PhD is that it's about learning these skills; if you had them already, there wouldn't be much point in doing the PhD.

When you are at a later stage and have some findings to discuss, you can ask your supervisor to recommend (or introduce you to) other experts who might help. This needs to be done with discretion. Your supervisor will probably not introduce you to someone who will steal and publish your ideas (a frequent source of generally unfounded nightmares for PhD students), but you do need to have enough knowledge of academic etiquette to handle such encounters properly.

What to tell your supervisor

You should keep your supervisor informed:

- about the state of your work;
- about what interests you and what concerns you;
- about outside opinion: report feedback from talks and papers accurately and promptly; be specific about both compliments and criticisms;
- about decisions and turning points (the supervisor can often provide helpful insight and forestall hasty misjudgements);
- about life circumstances: let your supervisor know about personal or practical matters that are affecting your work, preferably before they turn into a major issue.

Things you can do for yourself

There are also various things you can do for yourself. You should keep your supervisor briefed about all of these, in advance. This is partly common courtesy and partly practical self-interest (so that the supervisor can stop you if you're about to do something remarkably stupid on your own initiative).

Another thing worth doing is to assemble an informal 'committee' of people (both staff and students, both in the department and external) who are able and willing to help with your PhD. The key thing to remember is that this is to complement your supervisor, not as an alternative to your supervisor. The informal committee can be helpful for things ranging from low-level logistics (e.g. babysitting) and low-level practical skills (e.g. learning how to use your computer properly) up to general emotional support and specific academic advice on topics complementing your supervisor's advice (e.g. help translating foreign language articles about your area of research).

Another thing you can do is to give seminars and/or circulate draft papers. This both gives you experience and provides you with feedback.

In brief, there are a few cardinal rules about dealing with your supervisor which are subtly different from the three golden rules of public presentation described elsewhere in this book. When dealing with your supervisor, you should:

- be honest;
- be articulate (say what you mean and what you need);
- be informative (keep the supervisor informed);
- be respectful;
- be adult (i.e. responsible for yourself).

Supervisor caricatures

Although every supervisor is different, there are, to paraphrase Evingoli, patterns which fall within a frame and we have categorized some classic types

of supervisor below. The descriptions contain a fair amount of caricature, but also enough accuracy to be worth noting. We have divided them into generally bad, tolerable and good, though this interacts with personality types – a particular student might get along well with a supervisor whom every other student in the department finds intolerable.

The generally bad

The catatonically: does nothing unless asked; apparently without emotion; supervision is wholly reactive, as they wait for the student to run the meetings, make suggestions etc.

The sexist/racist/general bigot: Women/Welsh people/arts graduates just don't have the thrust and drive for research'.

The slave driver: makes all the decisions; treats student like a lackey; publishes student's results and forgets to include student's name on the authorship list.

The generally tolerable

The assembly line manager: ('crank 'em out') produces PhDs to a formula; directs students into topics (often subsidiary to one of the supervisor's funded projects) over which the supervisor has control; usually runs an empire. Will probably see you through a PhD efficiently but impersonally; will probably drop you if you become a liability; will not be very interested in whether the PhD topic you do is the right one for your future plans.

The good buddy: tries to run supervisors in the pub; spends lots of energy on discussing interesting but extraneous topics; knows all about your personal life. This may sound fun, but such supervisors may not be able to provide the structure you need and may make you feel uncomfortable about the degree of their intrusion into your life.

The formal traditionalist: stiff, formal, plays strictly by the rules; may be good for teaching you the formally correct way of doing things. On the negative side, often expects their name on all papers regardless of amount of personal input; usually does not welcome any discussions outside research; often has condescending assumptions about students.

The absentee: usually over-committed, but sometimes actively hiding. If faced by this, you need to find out which category they are in. Over-committed people can sometimes be excellent supervisors if you can catch them (they are often over-committed because they're so good that they're dragged into all sorts of responsibilities); actively hiding supervisors are unlikely to be of much help to you.

The schoolmaster: sets assignments, guides with a firm hand, has strong ideas about how things should be (may provide necessary structure in the first year, but may not give you enough room for growth in subsequent years).

The novice: you may be your supervisor's first student. This doesn't mean that you won't pass, or that the supervisor won't be useful. Usually these days novice supervisors are part of a team for their first student, so you're unlikely to end up with a novice as your sole supervisor. Novices can be very conscientious and keen, because they're keen to get it right, but they will probably not know as much about *realpolitik* and the field as someone more experienced.

The lightweight: neither a profound researcher nor a deep thinker, but may well be a conscientious supervisor; lack of innovative flair may not impede their ability to recognize good ideas or nurture a good student. If your supervisor is of this sort, then make use of what skills they *do* have.

The boffin: loves technical detail and gadgetry; phenomenally knowledgeable but loses sight of the big picture (don't get lost in technical detail – look elsewhere for strategic advice).

The bumbler: well-meaning, knowledgeable and committed, but slightly inept, absent-minded or insensitive (ignore the presentation and concentrate on the substance).

The Zen master: gives cryptic advice, often via anecdotes, parables and obscure references; may give little help with structure or detail, but may work well with a strong student who can handle independence and who can appreciate the insights behind the inscrutability.

The generally good

There is only one type of generally good supervisor:

The idealized academic: respected researcher; experienced supervisor; approachable; reasonable; balances guidance with license and specific support with spoonfeeding. If you have one of these, you should show appreciation via visible professionalism, and learn as much as you can from them.

Most supervisors are combinations of two or more of these types, and play different roles at different times. A supervisor who's perfect in the first two years may not be able to support you through dissertation writing. Recognize and use your supervisor's strengths. Recognize others who can shore up your supervisor's weaknesses. Recognize the difference between a normal, imperfect supervisor and a supervisor gone wrong.

Strategies for when things go wrong

When, not if, in something which lasts as long as a PhD, and which involves learning new skills and engaging in a long-term relationship with a fallible human being, something *will* go wrong. The key questions are what that thing will be and what you are going to do about it.

Most difficulties in the supervisory relationship are 'cock-ups' rather than 'conspiracies'. Always start from the assumption that all parties are acting in good faith. As is often the case, prevention is the best cure: if you have good work habits (e.g. networking effectively, keeping good records, letting other people know what you're working on, publishing internal and external reports promptly, communicating clearly and promptly), then many difficulties can be avoided altogether. Good habits will also make early diagnosis easier. Good communication can usually sort problems out before they become serious.

A classic example is dealing with the supervisor who is never available. Make friends with your supervisor's secretary; get to know your supervisor's schedule; and make sure your supervision meetings are on that schedule. Discuss the problem with your supervisor. Explain your needs. You may not be able to reduce the travel schedule of an international expert, but you can probably work out means for remote communication, so you can still get advice when your supervisor is away. Use your informal committee to fill in when your supervisor is otherwise occupied – and keep your supervisor informed about developments.

If you are convinced that you have the wrong supervisor and you can articulate *exactly* what quality or problem is irredeemably fatal to the supervisory relationship then you'll need to find a new supervisor. It's crucial that you find the replacement before rocking the boat, otherwise you'll destroy the relationship you have, and you'll have ruined your reputation with everyone else. The point is to find a better match, not to throw verbal rocks at your present supervisor. So find positive reasons for the change (different research specialism, better personality fit). The more diplomatically you handle the transition, the better it will be for you and for everyone else involved.

There are some classic problems that are usually fatal to the supervisory relationship, sometimes immediately, sometimes late in the PhD, when change is most difficult. These are in a different league to the inevitable misunderstandings, arguments, disagreements and suchlike that occur in any PhD.

The really serious problems include the following:

- **isms:** sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, etc. Most institutions have procedures for dealing with this. Whether or not you want to become embroiled in formal procedures, you should find a new supervisor.
- **Intellectual property issues:** 'absorption' or theft of work, obstruction of research, suppression of results. Good habits (like letting people know what you're working on, writing up results promptly) can help here, but sometimes they are not enough.
- **Non-communication:** when no matter what you try, you can't get through.
- **Harassment:** sexual harassment, bullying, damaging insensitivity. Again, most institutions have procedures for dealing with this, or at least a trained person to help you deal with it.

If you find yourself in any of the above situations, you must proceed with extreme care and diplomacy. You will need to:

- 1 Find out exactly how supervision is coordinated in your department; there will be a procedure for changing supervisor. The bottom line is that, once it has accepted you, the university has an obligation to find someone to supervise you. There may be a bullying and harassment policy which is applicable. Go about this investigation discreetly.
- 2 Establish the paper trail: write things down, keep all emails etc. Write down the facts, with dates and details, as dispassionately as you can. If there really is a problem, the facts will speak for themselves.
- 3 Consult a third party, confidentially. There is often a designated third party, a 'third-party monitor' (whose job it is to review the progress of the supervisory relationship), a postgraduate tutor (who oversees all research student supervision), a professor or director of research, an equal opportunities officer, a research dean. Sometimes there is an accessible Wise Person in the department, often one of the professors, someone who has been around and knows the ropes and who is kindly and sympathetic. Sometimes it will be easier to speak to someone outside your department. In any case, choose an academic who is experienced and respected as well as compassionate. Speak as calmly and dispassionately as you can, bring along your documentation, ask for advice and listen.
- 4 Call in a third party (not necessarily the same one that you consult for advice). It may be appropriate to ask someone – usually someone senior – to act on your behalf. This person can sit in on your supervision, in order to see what's going on, can intervene with your supervisor, or can help you through the procedures. Choose your third party carefully and listen to the advice this person gives you.

It's usually better not to get into this situation in the first place: a cup of coffee in a tactful way can make an enormous amount of difference (for instance, a cup of coffee with someone discreet who can give you some hints about your potential supervisory team). Assertiveness training can also help prevent some situations arising.

A simple scheme for effective supervision meetings

- **Provide a discussion document:** send something to your supervisors a week before the meeting (this can be a progress report, a study plan, a critique of the literature you've been reading, an annotated bibliography, data, a draft conference paper – whatever represents what you're working on). Having something concrete to discuss always helps, and preparing

- something can be a good way to focus your thinking. Bring copies of the discussion document to the meeting.
- **Provide key publications:** send copies of papers you consider to be seminal to your supervisors in advance of the meeting, particularly if you wish to discuss them. Make sure the full citation is marked on the copy. Providing papers is a courtesy you can do your supervisor, and having them on hand can facilitate discussion.
- **Show up on time:** if you're late, bring sin-offerings, such as chocolate biscuits.
- **Write down your objectives:** know what you want to get out of the meeting, whether it's technical, administrative or emotional. Give yourself a prioritized checklist in advance. It helps to have something interesting to discuss when you enter the meeting – if you don't have ideas, then prepare questions.
- **Check the agenda with your supervisors:** find out what your supervisors want to get out of the meeting. Agree an agenda.
- **Behave well:** listen and consider before you speak. Be prepared to give a candid account of your progress. Ask the obvious questions – they may seem stupid to you, but they rarely are. It's horribly easy to overlook the obvious. Focus on ideas, not emotions. Trust your supervisor and don't take things personally. Make counter-proposals if you don't like what your supervisors are advising – this can help expose discrepancies in your thinking and help you understand the rationale for your supervisor's guidance.
- **Take notes.**
- **Book the next meeting:** set a date for your next meeting before you leave. Set a preliminary agenda.
- **After the meeting, email an action-item summary:** immediately after the meeting, write a list of agreed action items (both yours and your supervisor's), with deadlines if possible, and email it to all concerned, asking for confirmation that you've summarized correctly. Include the date of the next meeting.

Some classic ways to undermine your relationship with your supervisor

- Hiding (yourself, or real or imagined problems)
- Ignoring (advice you don't understand; advice you don't like)
- Mixing (business with pleasure or with personal issues)
- Gossiping (about your supervisor or colleagues)
- Denigrating (your supervisor, department or institution)
- Bypassing (your supervisor, by making decisions without due consultation)

- Assuming (what something meant; what you're entitled to do)
- Sinning (illegal or unethical acts – these are in a different league from the failings listed above)

If in doubt, ask. This is particularly important in relation to assuming and sinning. Students often don't check that they really understand something that they're not quite sure about, and then end up with serious misunderstandings and serious problems. Similarly, students often have mistaken understandings of what is considered reasonable; for instance, is it reasonable or not to phone your supervisor at home without explicit prior agreement? Illegal acts are usually fairly easy to identify, but unethical ones may require much more knowledge. For instance, thanking respondents by name in the acknowledgements section may be intended as a sign of genuine appreciation, but may breach their anonymity and lead to significant professional and legal problems. Commercial sensitivity is another problematic area, as is publication of draft material. If in doubt, ask...