



## TIPS FOR GREAT STUDENT - SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIPS

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## OUR TOP TIPS: A SUMMARY

**Below is a summary of the tips listed throughout the document in point form. For more details, recommendations, and specifics, please see the associated sections in the table of contents. Each number lines up with the section it is form.**

- 1. Establishing You Student-Supervisor Relationship:** Take time to reflect on your student-supervisor relationship and what will be most beneficial for you.
- 2. Communication:** No shoe fits all, so use this document to help you find a communication style that works best for you and your supervisor.
  - 2.1 General:** Reflect upon other professional or academic relationships and communication strategies that work best for you in those relationships.
  - 2.2 Email:** Remember to use email etiquette.
  - 2.3 Difficult Conversations:** Sometimes unexplainably, life becomes complicated, and you need to take a break, give yourself the time you need to process, regroup, and reflect.
- 3. Meetings:** When planning meetings, think about the type of meeting, how the meeting is organized, and what needs to be done before & after these meetings.
- 4. Deadlines:** It is important to reflect upon the type of deadline (soft, hard, non-negotiable) that has been created, this will help you prioritize and protect your mental health.
- 5. Thinking About Time and Time Commitments:** Take time to reflect on the type of time commitment you want your supervisor to put in, are you willing to match this time commitment and work with them? Or would you prefer something more hands off?
- 6. Funding:** Remember that your supervisor and/or RA supervisor is investing in you and training you, rather than paying you for your work.
- 7. When To Consider Switching Supervisors:** Ask yourself, do your research priorities and goals line up with your supervisor? Is this student-supervisor relationship detrimental to you and your well-being? Does it feel like your thesis is stuck? Or has there been movement/progress?
- 8. Where To Go If Your Supervisor Can't Help:** There are lots of different places to seek support, you can find updated emails and information in your program handbooks, available at the link in section 11.3.
- 9. Gentle Reminders from Other Graduate Students:** Just remember, you deserve to be here, and we believe in you!
- 10. Additional Things to Ask Your Supervisor About:** Supervisors have a wealth of knowledge, feel free to ask them for advice, about conferences, careers, or their experiences.

## INTRODUCTION

The Grenfell Graduate Student Society created this document to support impactful student-supervisor relationships. While other formal documents outline the responsibilities of supervisors and graduate students, this informal document provides suggestions and best practices for current students. Authored by graduate students, the context of this document is for graduate students.

## 1. ESTABLISHING YOUR STUDENT-SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP

It is essential that you work to establish a clear relationship with your supervisor from the onset or as early as possible. Like any relationship, both parties need to ensure that it is mutually beneficial. As a student, you can only control your own actions. Think about the necessary components required to establish a well-balanced student-supervisor relationship. Below are some tips and considerations for setting an excellent student-supervisor foundation.

- Ask the supervisor how they prefer to be addressed: Dr, professor, first name, and their pronouns (see section 11.5 for resources and information on pronouns).
- Have an open discussion about goals and expectations
- Review your Individual Development Plan (section 11.2) to help reflect on what you hope to accomplish from your degree and the steps involved.
- Take time to reflect on your student-supervisor relationship and what will be most beneficial for you.

### Tip from Current Students:

Make a list of your 3 priorities for your student-supervisor relationship. One student listed theirs as: Thesis guidance/structure, career mentorship, and support.

## 2. COMMUNICATION

Communicating with your supervisor is essential. However, we recognize that this isn't always easy. The difficulty with communication can be from a multitude of factors such as: preferences, working hours, communication style, culture. This section highlights some suggestions for how to communicate effectively with your supervisor. No shoe fits all, so use these suggestions and tips to find a communication style that works best for you and your supervisor!

### 2.1 General

- Ask your supervisor their preferences on ways of communicating: email, phone, meeting (in person or online).
- If your supervisor gives you alternative ways of communicating with them, ask when it is appropriate to use it. For example: Your professor gives you their phone number, it is a good idea to ask them if this is for emergencies only or for regular usage.
- Reflect upon other professional or academic relationships and communication strategies that work best for you in those relationships.
- If you are a PhD student, please make sure you use the communication tips for all of your supervisors and committee members.

## 2.2 Emailing

Emailing is often referred to as a necessary evil, but there are ways to make it more manageable and less painful. Emailing with your supervisor is an important way to communicate about research, academics, and life. For a book on email management, please see section 11.4.

- Have a lot to communicate to your supervisor? Consider making a list of topics and corresponding thoughts to make it easier to organize.
- Have a conversation about how long you should expect to wait for a reply.
- Think about the time you are sending emails, if you work late in the evening consider setting an auto-send for a better time for your recipient.
- Prioritize what emails need to be sent, read, and responded to.
- Remember to use email etiquette.
- Email management is a task you should build into your working schedule and if you are struggling with this, chat with your supervisor about their strategies.

## 2.3 Difficult Conversations

There are many reasons that difficult conversations may come up, and it's important to think about how you react to it and how to move forward. This section highlights some of the anecdotally most common difficult conversations and our suggestions on what to do:

### *When communication is breaking down:*

Before overreacting or panicking, take a second to put everything into perspective. Think about other circumstances surrounding the communication breaking down: is it midterm season? Is there a new covid outbreak? Or was there a miscommunication?

Remember that empathy is an important characteristic and understand that your supervisor's response times may be unrelated to you! However, sometimes communication will break down and needs a reset. Try discussing what is and is not working with your supervisor, communicate what you require, and ask how to help improve the situation. Student-supervisor relationships are

### Email Etiquette

The way you communicate via email is extremely important! While it can be informal and casual you should always be clear, respectful, and professional. Below are email etiquette tips:

1. Make your subject clear and concise
2. Refrain from using unnecessary shorthand or slang
3. Respond to emails sent to you
4. Use professional language throughout the email
5. Use a readable font and colour
6. Take formality cues from your recipient
7. Think about the tone of your email and how your recipient will respond
8. If upset or angry, sit with your email for 24 hours before responding or sending
9. Remember sometimes it's better to have a meeting than send an email

### **The golden rule of email etiquette:**

Emails have consequences and impacts, so never send an email that you're not completely comfortable with.

like all relationships; they take work from both people. It would be best if you took accountability for your own failings/contributions to the breakdown of communication. Remember that one small breakdown in communication does not mean a complete breakdown of the student-supervisor relationship!

### ***When you need help:***

Asking for assistance is challenging, whether this help is with a personal or academic issue. Realizing you need help is an important first step! Fear of being perceived as vulnerable is normal, especially within academia. Overcoming that fear will make it easier to ask your supervisor for help. This help may include asking them to review a document, delay a deadline, or advise on a situation.

Do not worry about your supervisor being disappointed. Even if they cannot help you with this specific issue, it will allow them to better support you in the future by anticipating similar situations.

### ***When life is hard:***

Sometimes unexplainably, life becomes complicated, and you need to take a break. Our best advice is to give yourself the time you need to process, regroup, and reflect. The amount of time you take to can differ and could range from 1 minute to 1 week. However, it's important to communicate this to other people who may be expecting things from you. Depending on your comfort level, you can disclose as little or as much detail as necessary with your supervisor. If in doubt, just let them know you have hit a roadblock and are a bit delayed.

### ***Mental and physical health***

Like the other topics, when having a conversation about mental and physical health, you only need to share what you feel comfortable with. One suggestion would be to share just enough information that gives context to the support you require and its possible impact on your timelines/work. Regardless of how much you want to share, it is important to remember that supervisors are not

#### **Tip from a Supervisor:**

Try using the glass / rubber ball analogy to help prioritize things! If you have a bunch of balls, you can drop rubber ones, but you can't drop glass ones. Consider what can or cannot be dropped when having difficulties.

## **2.4 General Tips for Difficult Conversations**

1. Don't rush into having difficult conversations! Give yourself time to reflect beforehand.
2. Write up the points you want to bring up during the conversation beforehand.
3. Be clear about what you feel and need.
4. Use "I" statements such as "I feel" or "I need."
5. Try to think about potential solutions and outcomes but remember to be flexible. You can brainstorm solutions together!
6. Do not ambush your supervisor with a conversation, give them notice and as much info as possible.
7. Consider your supervisors perspectives, goals, and commitments.
8. Don't only prepare for the worst outcome, try to stay positive!

mental health professionals. Respect their boundaries in what they are willing to do to support you. For mental health supports and resources, please see section 11.

### *Learning and Working Styles*

Learning and working styles are different for everyone but having discussions about your learning styles and how to make them work with each other is beneficial. Things to consider when reflecting on and building your student-supervisor relationship:

- When are you most productive?
- What does/doesn't work for you?
- Are certain days better for certain tasks such as emails versus writing chapters?
- Ask these questions to your supervisor as well (they have their own learning and working styles too!).
- Take a quiz to reflect on your learning style/preferences!

#### **Tip from Current Students:**

"My supervisor and I discussed how we aren't morning people and they let me know that they go on daily walks and I've adopted that practice to help get my brain working by mid-morning!"

### *How to Hold Each Other Accountable*

Accountability is hard and often feels intimidating, but accountability is important in building a great student-supervisor relationship. It is important to remember that accountability goes both ways and does not need to be aggressive! Below are ways to have some accountability:

- A good first step is making a list of action items and reviewing it with your supervisor to confirm both of your action items and deadlines.
- Supervisors will hold you accountable by checking in on you before/during/after deadlines. If a supervisor checks in with you, do not over think the reasoning and doubt yourself that they don't trust you. Treat it as an opportunity to share how everything is going and be honest if you are behind/struggling!
- Supervisors can also miss deadlines and forget to do things, checking in with them is a great way to hold them accountable and send a gentle reminder.
- Try to use language such as: "Checking in" "Bumping this up in your inbox" "Wondering"
- Holding yourself accountable and being honest when it's not working will ensure that you and your supervisor have a good working relationship.



### *Reference Letters*

Although asking for a reference letter shouldn't be considered a difficult conversation, we recognize that many students have stress about asking for reference letters both while they are a student and after. Below are things to consider when asking for a reference letter:

- Ensure that you ask as early possible, a 2-week minimum is best practice.
- Give your supervisor a clear deadline for completing the reference letter.
- Provide your updated CV, specific topics to note, and the overall theme needed for the reference letter.
- Provide information about the position/scholarship/reason for the reference.
- Remember that reference letters are a normal part of a supervisor's job, and they understand why you need to ask for them!
- If you are asking for a reference later after graduation, introduce yourself and provide an update to your supervisor about what you have done since graduation.

### **3. MEETINGS**

An essential aspect of your student-supervisor relationship will include planning regular meetings that work for both of your schedules, this requires clear communication. Consider some of these tips for scheduling meetings:

- What type of meeting schedule will work best for you and them?
  - Some options include regularly scheduled meetings (biweekly, monthly), drop-in meetings (during office hours or other discussed times), on a need basis, or semesterly meetings.
- How is your meeting organized?
  - Do you have an agenda?
  - Build in time to talk about non-school items (life, the weather, extra-curricular activities, etc.)
- Where are you meeting? (pros/cons of meeting on vs off campus, virtual, etc.)
  - Options include meeting on campus, off campus, and virtually!
  - Due to the pandemic, virtual meetings cannot always be avoided but there are benefits to meeting in different ways.
  - On campus meetings are great for formal meetings, reviewing documents on a screen and drop-in meetings.
  - Off campus meetings are a great way to be more informal, deep chats and serve as a great reminder to supervisors that students have a life off campus. However, it can be difficult to meet off campus because of a lack of privacy and effectiveness. When meeting off campus, pick public spaces and only do so if you feel comfortable.
- Creating an agenda



- You don't have to create a formal agenda, but at the very least creating a list of topics you want to cover is a great way to ensure meetings are effective and so you cover everything you need!
- Creating action items and deadlines (Deadlines are discussed more in-depth in the next section!)
  - Don't forget to review these before ending your meeting.

## 4. DEADLINES

Deadlines are an important part of being a student and are a significant aspect of your student-supervisor relationship. It is important to reflect upon the type of deadline that has been created, this will help you prioritize and protect your mental health. Collaboration, which your student-supervisor relationship is built upon requires deadlines.

### 4.1 Types of deadlines

**Soft Deadlines:** Soft deadlines are general dates/deadlines that are given but nothing is contingent on them. If people need to review/provide feedback/approve what you are working on, make sure that they know it is a soft deadline and that you'll update them if it will be later.

**Hard Deadlines:** Hard deadlines are deadlines that it is essential it gets done by a certain date but does allow for negotiation and change if necessary. Changes to hard deadlines must be discussed and agreed upon. Often, they are contingent on something and changing may result in some consequences. Doesn't hurt to ask though!

**Non-negotiable Deadlines:** Non-negotiable deadlines are deadlines that cannot be changed or negotiated, making them essential to meet and understand. This type of deadline is often associated with work/requirements outside your student-supervisor relationship or are deadlines that have timeline or financial consequences. For example, a non-negotiable deadline is one for paying fees or completing specific lab work.

### 4.2 Discussing Deadlines

Having open discussions about deadlines is essential. Below are things to consider when making deadlines:

- Think about the appropriate time to commit to a deadline. It can be unrealistic to pick a day before you understand the scope of the work.
- Consider other factors such as extra curriculars, holidays, and other deadlines
- Be honest with yourself and supervisor!
- Be realistic – unrealistic deadlines will only make you and your supervisor frustrated and stressed.

### **4.3 Missing Deadlines**

Missing a deadline is a dreadful feeling but is normal and happens! Both students and supervisors will miss deadlines from time to time. Life happens, do not be too hard on yourself or your supervisor. Below are the recommended steps on dealing with missing deadlines:

- Take a deep breath!
- If you know you are going to miss the deadline, communicate that as early as possible
- Evaluate the impacts of missing this deadline.
- Communicate with your supervisor about missing this deadline.
- Reflect on what could be done differently next time.
- Work with your supervisor to make a new deadline/plan.

## **5. THINKING ABOUT TIME AND TIME COMMITMENTS**

Relationships are often built upon understanding the time each party can and wants to commit, this is also true for your student-supervisor relationship. Some supervisors like to be very hands on, some prefer a hands-off approach. You may also have your own preferences for collaborating and working as well. There is no problem with either style or type, or anything in-between, but it is important to think about the time commitments within your student-supervisor relationship.

Take time to reflect on the type of time commitment you want your supervisor to put in, are you willing to match this time commitment and work with them? Or would you prefer something more hands off? Reflecting on what you want is helpful to both you and them. Below are things to consider when thinking about time and time commitments:

- What type of feedback are you looking for? Is this a reasonable time commitment for you and them?
- How often do you want to meet?
- How often do you update them?

## **6. FUNDING**

Understanding your funding is an extremely important aspect of being a grad student. It is also a key component within your student-supervisor relationship. We recommend speaking to your supervisor regarding funding as soon as possible and to continue talking about funding.

If you are having troubles receiving your funding into your bank account, please contact the Office of Research and Grad Studies at Grenfell.

### **6.1 Different Types of Funding**

Some funding packages are different than others. However, your funding may involve some of the components below.

- Baseline Funding from the School of Graduate Studies
- Research Assistant or General Assistant positions which require you to work a specific number of hours on a project.

- Teaching Assistant positions which require you to support a specific class through grading, holding review sessions and so on.
- Funding from your supervisor tied to a specific topic or project.
- Tri-Council Funding (from the government based on proposed projects).
- Scholarships (based on excellency).
- Bursaries (based on financial need).

## 6.2 Funding Considerations

There is a tendency to understanding funding as a contract, but it is better to think of funding as a contribution to your own education and training. Below are considerations to keep in mind:

- You have not entered a contract, if you cannot complete work or need to take a break, you can stop (Please inform the necessary people if so).
- You don't have to take on the assistantships in the standard funding package if you don't want to (You should certainly try to finish any that you start).
- Remember that your supervisor and/or RA supervisor is investing in you and training you, rather than paying you for your work.

## 7. WHEN TO CONSIDER SWITCHING SUPERVISORS

Unfortunately, there are times when it is necessary to consider switching supervisors. However, when making this choice there are a considerable number of factors to consider. Below are some things to consider before, during and after switching a supervisor.

**Before:** Deciding to switch supervisors is stressful, below are suggestions to think through before deciding.

- Your research priorities and goals: do they line up with your supervisor?
- Your well-being: is this student-supervisor relationship detrimental to you and your well-being?
- Does it feel like your thesis is stuck? Or has there been movement/progress? If you do feel stuck, reflect on why: is it because of your student-supervisor relationship or external factors?
- Is there a supervisor who may suit you better?
- Would having co-supervisors help the situation?
- Reach out to the graduate officer to discuss what you are feeling and options.
- Will this impact your funding? switching supervisors can have implications for your funding (e.g., if your original supervisor had funding available to support you but you switch to one who doesn't)
- It's often the case that there is no other suitable supervisor available, we recommend speaking to your graduate officer to see what options are available and what could be done to improve the situation.

If your student-supervisor has deteriorated because of sexual assault, harassment, racism, ageism, etc. Please immediately contact your graduate officer, the dean, and an appropriate office of support

- Another option would be to discuss and lean on your committee members!

**During:** If you have decided to switch supervisors, while you are in the process of doing so below are things to consider:

- How are you doing?
- Who are you leaning on for support?
- Do you need support to facilitate this conversation of switching supervisors?
  - o If you do not feel safe or comfortable, please reach out to a graduate officer for support.
- What necessary paperwork needs to be filled out? And has it been signed by the appropriate people?

**After:** After switching supervisors, there are some suggestions on moving forward:

- Ending on the best terms possible: consider writing a thank you email or note for their time
- Establishing a strong relationship at the beginning with your new supervisor, return to the beginning of this document to establish clear expectations and goals

## 8. WHERE TO GO IF YOUR SUPERVISOR CAN'T HELP

Below are resources and suggestions on places to seek advice, help, and support aside from your supervisor. You can find updated emails and information in your program handbooks, available at the link in section 11.3.

- Office of Research and Graduate Studies
- Dean of your school
- Graduate Officer
- Talk to other graduate students
- Student Services
- Thesis committee members
- Trusted professors or colleagues

## 9. GENTLE REMINDERS FROM OTHER GRADUATE STUDENTS

Below are gentle reminders from other graduate students about navigating your student-supervisor relationship!

**On imposter syndrome:** A common experience among graduate students is imposter syndrome and feeling that you don't belong. We recommend talking to your friends and colleagues about this as well. Just remember, you deserve to be here, and we believe in you!

**On anxiety about disappointing your supervisor:** Something many graduate students experience is stress and anxiety about disappointing your supervisor when handing something in, missing a

deadline, or when taking their class. This fear is normal but remember that your supervisor supports you and believes in your work. Getting to know your supervisor as a person can also help!

***On taking breaks:*** It is essential to take breaks and to truly take them! This means logging off your email, turning on your out of office email, and doing things you enjoy that have nothing to do with school. We also suggest taking a day or two off as a break after submitting something big as a reward and way to refresh.

***On remembering your supervisor has a life too:*** It is important that when your supervisor asks how you are doing outside of school, that you reciprocate and ask about them as well. This is important in remembering that your supervisor has commitments and a life outside of academia and supervising you.

## **10. ADDITIONAL THINGS TO ASK YOUR SUPERVISOR ABOUT**

Supervisors have a wealth of knowledge and below are topics that you should consider talking to your supervisor about:

- Conferences
- Networking
- Research Assistantship and General Assistantship opportunities
- Internships
- Career options
- Questions about life in Corner Brook and Newfoundland and Labrador
- Committee members and the selection of committee members

## **11. RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING**

### **11.1 Responsibilities of Supervisors and Graduate Students**

The fundamental principle underlying this statement of responsibilities between students and faculty is that there must be mutual respect governed by high standards of professional integrity and ethics. These written guidelines are meant to identify, at a high level, guiding principles that can apply to all graduate supervisors and students to help both supervisors and students create and maintain a successful relationship, but are not meant to replace student-supervisor communication.

Document Link: <https://www.mun.ca/sgs/responsibilities.pdf>

### **11.2 Individual Development Plans**

Individual Development Plans (IDP's) help graduate students to plan out their degree programs, as well as related short-term and long-term goals. They are meant to be developed in conjunction with the supervisor and then serve as a "shared roadmap" (but not a formal contract) for completing the program and developing the desired skills and experience. IDPs should serve as a basis for

student-supervisor communication and may be rewritten or revised as needed. Please ask your graduate officer for this document as it pertains to your program.

### **11.3 Program Handbooks**

Program handbooks are a great resource that gives an in-depth overview of program requirements and streams. You can find them online here: <https://grenfell.mun.ca/academics-and-research/Pages/graduate-studies/resources.aspx>

### **11.4 Book Recommendation's**

These books are recommended by graduate students on a variety of topics that could help you with your student-supervisor relationship or other skills associated with being a student.

- How Do I write this email? By Danny Rubin
- Inbox Zero: How to Stop Checking Email and Start Finishing It by Ian Charnas
- How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing by Paul Sylvia
- Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation by Lynne Truss

### **11.5 Pronouns**

Learn more about pronouns from different perspective with the links below:

- The Genderbread Person: <https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2015/03/the-genderbread-person-v3/>
- Gender Pronouns and Teaching: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/creating-positive-learning-environment/gender-pronouns-and-teaching>
- Pronouns and Writing: <https://uwaterloo.ca/writing-and-communication-centre/resources-pronouns>

### **11.6 Mental Health Resources:**

Please visit [this webpage](#) or see information below for provincial, national and international services:

- 24- Hour Canada Suicide Prevention Service: 1-833-456-4566 (Canada-wide)
- Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310 (Available to all Indigenous peoples across Canada who need immediate crisis intervention)
- 24-Hour Mental Health Crisis Line: 1-888-737-4668 (province-wide)
- Mobile Crisis Response Team: 1-888-737-4668 (St. John's region)
- Mental Health Services: 1-709-637-7919 (Grenfell Campus);  
or [cps@grenfell.mun.ca](mailto:cps@grenfell.mun.ca) or [healthservices@grenfell.mun.ca](mailto:healthservices@grenfell.mun.ca)
- For people not in Canada, you may find resources local to you at <https://checkpointorg.com/global/>

### **11.7 Learning Styles**

As discussed, there are many learning styles and different ways to approach learning/working. Below are resources to learn more:

- Memorial University of Newfoundland Working Style Quiz: [https://www.mun.ca/springinstitute/institute/Working\\_Style\\_Inventory.pdf](https://www.mun.ca/springinstitute/institute/Working_Style_Inventory.pdf)
- Learning Styles and Study Strategies: [https://ace.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu296/files/Study\\_Strategies\\_by\\_Learning\\_Styles.pdf](https://ace.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu296/files/Study_Strategies_by_Learning_Styles.pdf)
- Understanding your learning style: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/tips-students/self-knowledge/understanding-your-learning-style>

### **11.8 Creating a Work Timeline and Staying on Track**

It is important to stay on track, creating a research and study timeline is a great way to do that! Below are resources and things to consider for staying on track!

- Tips for Making Progress, Staying Well, and More: <https://guides.library.ubc.ca/c.php?g=697750&p=4954582>
- Staying on Track with Theses and Dissertations: <https://writersworkshop.illinois.edu/resources-2/writer-resources/long-term-writing-projects/staying-on-track-with-theses-and-dissertations/>
- A step-by-step guide to keeping track of grad school activities: <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/responsibilities-may-include/a-step-by-step-guide-to-keeping-track-of-grad-school-activities/>
- A complete guide to writing a master's thesis: <https://www.oxbridgeediting.co.uk/blog/a-complete-guide-to-writing-a-masters-thesis/>