

Extract from

Constructing a Good Dissertation

**A Practical Guide to Finishing
a Master's, MBA or PhD on Schedule**

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Other than you, no one will make as big a contribution to the quality of your dissertation as your supervisor. Getting along in an amicable and professional manner helps – a lot.

FOUNDATION 1 SUPERVISORS

Supervisors come in different shapes and sizes, and they have different advising philosophies: Some have a hands-off approach; others like to micro-manage their students' work. Some are friendly and sociable; others are all business. Some will see you as their junior student; others as a colleague-in-the-making. Virtually any style will make a good fit with someone, but whether or not that someone is you may seem like luck. There are, however, quite a few things you can do to improve your luck.

INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF SUPERVISOR

The first thing you should do is to find out whether you have, in any way, a say in who will become your supervisor. If you're doing your degree via correspondence, you will almost certainly have no say in the matter whatsoever. If that's the case, or if you already have a supervisor, skip the next few paragraphs. If on the other hand, you *do* have a say, no matter how small, read on. It's worth putting a bit of effort into the matter because a good match between you and your supervisor really can help you complete your dissertation more quickly and result in a better work.

The main criteria for good supervisors are that they be competent in what they do and that they see their primary role as helping you fulfil the requirements for your degree. You're looking for someone who will prepare and support you during the planning, research, and writing stages of your work, and possibly even afterwards with letters of reference, contacts, and so on.

Having a busy, world-renowned expert as supervisor is less important than having someone who is generally knowledgeable in your field and has the time, ability and willingness to help you along. A possible exception is if you're planning on pursuing a career in academics. Then it may help to have someone who can introduce you to your colleagues-to-be. Bear in mind that an interest in what you're doing helps, but too much of an interest can also be a disadvantage. You don't necessarily want your supervisor to direct your work in accordance with their interests at the expense of yours.

- ☛ Be careful not to insult a direct expert in your department by excluding him or her. If you're planning to avoid a direct expert, be creative in how you go about it. This kind of thing can often be peacefully solved by tweaking the emphasis in the dissertation, finding time or geographical constraints, or including the expert as a 'special supervisor'. He or she is probably not looking for extra work either, so it's mainly a matter of allowing everyone to save face.

It is important to make sure that you'll be able to get along with whoever becomes your supervisor. Some personality types just don't mesh well. You don't want to be constantly irritated or on your guard around your supervisor. There's no profit to be had in that. Also spend some time actively finding out as much as possible about your potential supervisors.

The advising styles of supervisors rarely change dramatically from student to student, so your first source of information about potential supervisors is students that they have worked with in the past and those that they are currently supervising. Find out how satisfied they are, how much attention they get, how to the point the supervisor is, and so on.

Be careful to check whether potential supervisors easily set time aside for their students. The busier they are (and prominent in the field usually means busy), the less time they will have for students. Check also how many students the supervisor that you're considering has. Four hours per week divided by four students is a lot more than four hours per week divided by fifteen students. This point is important. You're going to need that time. Find out if they are quick to return drafts and what is in the returned drafts – nitpicking, or sensible and substantive comments?

Look also at their track records – what percentage of their students finish? Do many have major rewrites or outright failures? If you link your fate to a particular supervisor, in all likelihood the same statistics will apply to you. Supervisors have reputations in departments. Make it your business to find out what that reputation is.

Once you've found a supervisor or supervisors that you would like to work with, speak to them. Tell them you would like them to supervise your work and make the case why they should. Spend some time planning this one. Even if you can't choose your supervisor directly, if the two of you agree that you want to work together, something can often be worked out. If necessary, consider changing the emphasis of what you want to do in your dissertation to make it possible. It's that important.

MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

Because your supervisor is so important to you, you need to actively work at keeping the relationship healthy and productive. When you interact with your supervisor, realise that to a large degree, that person holds your fate in their hands. Purely practically, the first thing to bear in mind when dealing with supervisors is this: An alienated supervisor won't help you finish quickly.

Treating the relationship as the professional relationship that it is will make things easier for both of you. You should take the lead in setting the tone for the relationship.

It's more important to you than it is to your supervisor, and besides, you can determine your behaviour. You can only influence the behaviour of others.

Once you have a supervisor, do take into account that, while your supervisor can help you in many ways, she really only has a limited amount of time to spend on you. This has at least two consequences: First and foremost, it means that you need to take responsibility for planning your dissertation, setting the pace, and keeping your supervisor in the loop; you must take control. Secondly, it means that you need to know how to get the most out of the time your supervisor can give you.

In order to create a comfortable working atmosphere and to maximise your return on the time that your supervisor devotes to you and your work, you should:

- Help your supervisor know how he could best help and support you. Know the same for yourself, incidentally. Give it some thought... Where are you strong? Where do you anticipate needing support? What is your preferred mode of working? Do a quick SWOT analysis on yourself – your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats – and share the results.
- Take responsibility for your dissertation process, and be proactive; it is your work after all. Try to sort out minor issues yourself. Supervisors don't have the time to deal with constant small issues. When you do need help somewhere, make sure that you have given it some thought/done your homework before bringing it to your supervisor.
- In a related point: Don't overburden supervisors with demands for their time. By all means use them when you need them, but keep it brief and to the point, otherwise a strained relationship and suboptimal service are to be expected.
- If you're going to be out of contact for a while, short but regular emails to inform your supervisor about your work are essential. You don't want to drift apart and have her wondering what you are doing (or not doing).
- Keep to agreements and deadlines, and schedule regular meetings with your supervisor. As far as meetings are concerned:
 - Plan them well in advance, and confirm just before the event. Aside from being professional, this gives you deadlines to work to and it allows you to manage your time.
 - Put everything you want to discuss on paper and have that paper with you. You don't want to forget anything. Also let your supervisor know beforehand what you want to cover. If making and sharing an agenda seems too formal, include the issues you want to discuss in an email when setting up the meeting.
 - During the meeting, make notes. Otherwise you will forget some of the things discussed.
 - After the meeting, send an email to your supervisor covering the important points that were discussed. Be especially sure to note approvals, changes to be made, tasks to be done and deadlines, and give your supervisor an opportunity to respond. Finish the email with something along the lines of "I think this covers the important parts of the meeting. If I've missed anything, please let me

know.” Having it in writing reduces possible confusion, gives everybody the chance to respond, and creates a paper trail. It is a good idea, and polite, to cc all who were present.

- Make the (chapter) drafts you hand in relatively decent. In other words, edit them once or twice for flow, clarity, relevance and the like. If you hand in unedited work, you’ll be more likely to get back trivial, grammar-related comments that you could easily have figured out yourself. You also risk your ideas not coming across clearly. You want substantive content-related comments, not aesthetic comments or requests for clarification. Supervisors differ in exactly what they expect a draft to be, so find out beforehand and cater to that.

If you have specific questions about a draft, attach those as a note. It also helps to include a preliminary table of contents with a brief description of the chapters that you are not handing in when you hand in a chapter for comments. Be sure to include your thesis statement and an outline of your method. This gives your supervisor a much-needed context for what she is supposed to be doing.

- Take criticism constructively. It’s not a war, it’s not about egos; it’s about finishing. Try hard to understand the point that your supervisor is trying to make, then judge. If in doubt, ask. If you really disagree, don’t slog it out verbally; turn to email: It’s a calmer way of communicating, and it leaves a paper trail.
- Make agreed-to changes immediately. This has two advantages – firstly, your supervisor sees the fruit of his labours, and secondly, if you do it straight away, while it’s fresh in your mind, you’ll get it right the first time round.
- Keep your relationship with your supervisor honest and open. Don’t imply that you’ve read or researched stuff you haven’t, or have written pieces that you haven’t, in the hope that you’ll catch up by next time. That type of thing leads to avoidance and ultimately a strained or non-existent relationship. If there’s a problem, bring it to the table; be confident and in control. If you’re not, identify where and discuss that with your supervisor.
- Do try to make your supervisor feel appreciated. Advising students takes a lot of time and work and is not greatly appreciated or rewarded in the academic world. So if your supervisor comes up with a really good idea or goes out of her way for you, let her know you noticed, and say thank you. They don’t hear that too often.

ADVICE

In terms of advice: By and large, if it’s from your supervisor, take it. He probably does have a point somewhere, and your job is to finish your dissertation, not to challenge the *status quo* with your work. If this really bothers you, find a compromise. This is not the same as being a complete pushover: It is your work after all, so make your points, but do be open to the advice of professionals.

If you really cannot accept any part of what your supervisor says, prepare for a long, drawn-out battle and/or an alienated supervisor. Also be prepared to lose the battle. So rather be sensible, diplomatic and willing to make some concessions. It can

be hard, given that it's your ideas and research, but remember your final goal: You want to get out of there with your dissertation approved in the minimum possible time. You can do whatever you like after that.

The only exception to the above is if the advice concerns something fundamental, like changes in your thesis statement, method, or data sources, and you know with *certainty* that following the advice would seriously weaken your dissertation or make it close to impossible to complete. This is an unlikely scenario but, should it happen, your first step is to put your concerns, with reasons, on paper and discuss that with your supervisor. If you can't get to a mutually acceptable solution, get an arbitrator, possibly the head of postgraduate research in your department. Whatever you do, don't make the matter personal. It's not.

The odds are close to zero that anyone will query you later about the point in your dissertation that you and your supervisor disagree about. If the disagreement causes a major breakdown in the relationship, the cost of sticking to your guns is probably more than you want to pay.

If the advice is from someone who doesn't hold your fate in his or her hands, do what seems most sensible to you. If the advice seems to warrant it, then by all means run it past your supervisor first.

CONFLICTS

If the above advice is followed, the chance of getting into serious conflict with your supervisor is very low. But sometimes things do get out of hand, contrary to all expectations and planning. Conflicts of whatever nature are best handled diplomatically. Identify the core of the problem *without* involving your ego or emotions. Think about possible solutions, and then go and talk to your supervisor, openly and frankly. Hidden stuff tends to add up over time, so it's best to put your concerns on the table, plainly but diplomatically.

If this doesn't work and you feel that you really can no longer expect your supervisor to be on your side, don't try to patch up the impossible. It's too risky. Find a graceful way out and get another supervisor. 'Graceful' means: Try hard not to burn bridges – the power balance is far too skewed in academia for you to engage in a power struggle with professors.

But remember – changing supervisors should be your last resort. It's a serious step, and one that should not be taken lightly. Supervising students well may not lead to great rewards in academia, but too many students deserting a supervisor does have a negative impact. If you *must* change your supervisor, follow departmental procedures, be open with your next possible supervisor about why you want a different supervisor, and ascertain whether they have a problem with the situation or have a stake in it *before* appointing them.

If you have more than one supervisor, be careful. Make sure that it is clear who is in charge. Once that has been established, both in your eyes and in the eyes of all your supervisors, hand in drafts only to the main supervisor (unless instructed otherwise by her, of course). If you don't, you might end up trying to please two masters at the same time, which is always difficult and often impossible. Besides, if it is not clear who is in charge, the risk of disagreements between supervisors is greatly increased, and that has the potential to escalate horribly. And as the Kenyan proverb puts it, when two elephants fight, it is inevitably the grass that suffers. That's you.

Do draw on the other supervisor/s for advice and help; they're there for a reason after all. Also be sure to keep all supervisors up-to-date on your progress, either verbally or by email. You don't want to slight anyone. Once you have had all your chapters approved by your main supervisor, then and only then should you hand the entire thing to your other supervisor/s. Take note of their comments and, *in consultation with your main supervisor*, implement them.

CONCLUSION

The relationship with your supervisor is an important one. It's in your best interests to be realistic about that and to work at keeping the relationship amiable and productive. And for better or worse, as with working at any relationship, that means working on yourself. Having said that, if you do so, you can expect much better results than if you just let it all drift. Your supervisor will take you and your work much more seriously.

Supervisors spend a lot of time on their students and generally enjoy seeing them developing their ideas and producing good work. They also have a stake in the outcome of the dissertation: When your work goes to an external examiner, your supervisor has essentially said, "I, in my capacity as supervisor and professional academic, believe that this dissertation is ready to be examined by an outside professional." *They want your work to pass.*

You're on the same side. Bear that in mind: It should affect how you manage your relationship with your supervisor.