Working with a Supervisor

A relationship you can build

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Sept 3, 2026

TRANSITION TO GRAD STUDIES WORKSHOP

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN
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MY STORY

I thought I was supposed to already know.



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Your supervisor relationship shapes whether you thrive or stall.

- Affects your research, your progress, and your well-being
- Among the top factors in whether students finish
- Worth being deliberate about from day one





A strong relationship is built,

not simply assigned.

- Success does not depend on the perfect supervisor
- It grows through expectations, meetings, and communication
- These are skills you can practice

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Three habits do most of the work.



Set them early

Put your expectations in a shared agreement, and revisit it as things change.



Come with a plan

Prepare or co-create a short agenda, then confirm the decisions by email.

Ask a sharper question

Turn high-level feedback into one specific, actionable question you can act on.

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POLL

1. Who usually prepares the agenda: you, supervisor, or both?
2. Which feels hardest right now: expectations, meetings, or feedback?

Keep your answer; we will come back to it at the end



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You and your supervisor share the work in different lanes

Your supervisor

- Advises on your research and program
- Monitors and supports your progress
- Mentors you and connects you to networks

You

- Drive your project and meet milestones
- Come prepared and follow through
- Raise questions and concerns early

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1 Set Expectations Early

Clear expectations prevent most misunderstandings

- Most conflict starts with unspoken assumptions
- Name how you will work together, early
- Then you both know what to expect

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Record expectations in a living agreement you revisit

- Meeting frequency and who sets the agenda
- Feedback turnaround on your drafts
- Milestones, authorship, and time away
- Revisit and update it as things change

CGPS Student Supervisor Agreement
https://shorturl.at/DQsrf

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ACTIVITY

Sort a few responsibilities as student, supervisor, or shared

Then write one expectation you want to clarify with your supervisor

https://shorturl.at/vrUnT

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2 Run Purposeful Meetings

You can help shape the meeting with a short agenda

- Progress since the last meeting
- One decision or problem to discuss
- Tasks and deadlines before next time



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Confirm decisions in writing after every meeting

- Email your understanding of the next steps
- Ask your supervisor to confirm or correct it
- Now you both have a shared record



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ACTIVITY

Try it: draft your next meeting agenda

https://shorturl.at/iDrDt

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3

Turn Feedback into Action

Vague feedback becomes useful when you ask a specific question

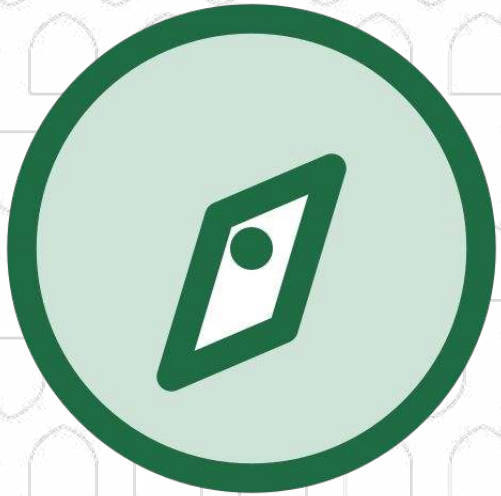
- A comment like "Make this better" is hard to act on
- Rewrite it as a specific, actionable question
- Ask which part is weakest, and what stronger looks like

"This line is weak"

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Trust the process, and ask when the reason is unclear

- Supervisors often see the bigger picture first
- Styles differ, so name the guidance you need
- Give advice time, then check what worked



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ACTIVITY

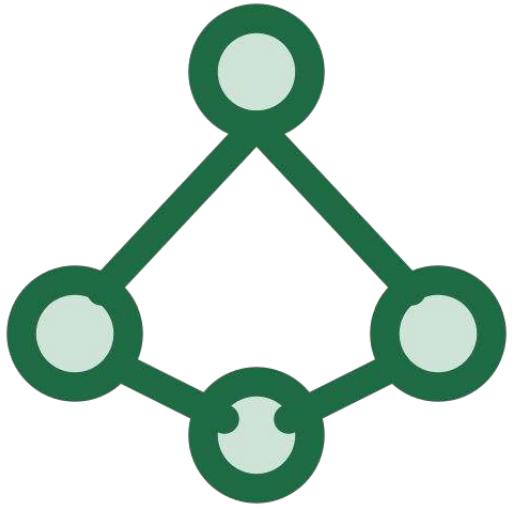
Rewrite it as a specific, actionable question

https://shorturl.at/EniF3

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When it gets hard, raise it early and widen your support

- Raise concerns early and revisit your agreement
- Ask your graduate chair or program for advice
- Use CGPS, the University Library, ISSAC, and GSA
- Build a network of committee, peers, and mentors

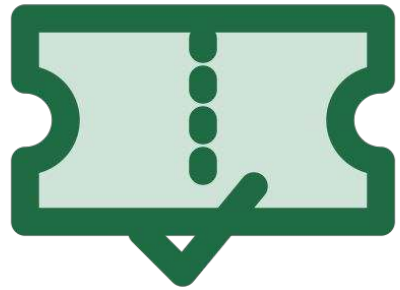


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EXIT TICKET

Your turn: three quick answers before you go

- Name one shared responsibility, and one expectation to clarify
- Write one item for your next meeting agenda
- Turn a needs work comment into the exact question you would ask
- Then circle one action you will take this week



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Pick one habit and use it before

your next meeting

- Supervision is an active, shared partnership
- Set expectations, help run meetings, ask specific questions
- Confirm decisions in writing
- Choose one habit and use it this week

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References

- Council of Graduate Schools (2008). Ph.D. Completion and Attrition. Sowell, Zhang, Bell, and Redd.
- Phillips, E. and Pugh, D. How to Get a PhD.
- Rugg, G. and Petre, M. The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research.
- USask College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Student-Supervisor Agreement and Grad HUB.
- USask University Library graduate learning supports, ISSAC, and GSA .

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Questions/Comments

Thank you!

Grad Learning Supports

Transition Workshops

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