

The School of Graduate Studies offers the following as a guide only:

Building an Effective Student-Supervisor Relationship

- I. **Autonomy and Responsibility**
- II. **Understanding Roles and Expectations**
- III. **Communication Is Key**
- IV. **Helping Your Supervisor Help You**

I. Autonomy and Responsibility

The best way to begin your graduate program and your relationship with your supervisor(s) is to acknowledge and accept that you are responsible for your own success. Of course, your supervisor(s) are key figures in your academic life but they can only be effective advisors if you are autonomous and responsible for your own choices and decisions.

Meet early and regularly with your supervisor(s) and set the agenda for the successful completion of your degree. Come into your program with a plan and be prepared to revise and adjust that plan as you continue.

What does this “plan” look like? There are a number of samples and templates for what are variously called Independent Development Plans or Personal Research Plans. The online tools and resources at the end of this document have a few places to start.

The important message here is that you need to take control of your program and your research and see your supervisor as your ally.

II. Understanding Roles and Expectations

The first step in taking responsibility for your own program is ensuring you and your supervisor share an understanding of each other’s roles and expectations. You should start your graduate program with an in depth and detailed conversation with your supervisor on this exact topic.

[This guide from the School of Graduate Studies](#) is a great place to start that discussion.

Many supervisors and students then go on to complete (together!) an agreement that puts onto paper the roles and expectations you’ve discussed. A sample of a Letter of Understanding is at the end of this section.

III. Communication Is Key

You must meet and talk with your supervisor about your progress as regularly as possible. As you move through different stages of your program (course work, comprehensive exams, thesis proposal, etc.) the frequency of those meetings might change. Nonetheless, your supervisor can only be a positive force in your success if they know what's happening with you and your program.

There are **4 Key Ingredients** to effective & useful communication with your supervisor:

i. Be professional and respectful.

ii. Be honest and forthcoming.

So they are fully aware of your circumstances.

iii. Be an active listener.

Your supervisor is experienced and there to advise, so you need to listen to their ideas and their suggestions.

iv. Be the one to follow up on all meetings and conversations.

Always send an email summarizing what you heard and what you understood from your communication and that way if there are any misunderstandings then they can be cleared up immediately.

IV. Helping Your Supervisor Help You

Come prepared for meetings with a clear agenda mutually agreed to beforehand. You will have things to discuss, but so will your supervisor. If an important decision needs to be made, think of possible outcomes before the meeting: and more than one possibility. By thinking about possible solution(s) beforehand, you will be able to present pros and cons of each possibility, and make the discussions more efficient.

If you are able to describe the type of supervision that works best for you (hands-on or laissez-faire) or your own writing process, then share that with your supervisor. Supervisors are aware that people require different amounts of oversight and have varied writing processes; together you can come up with an effective strategy for your program.

If something is happening in your life that is impeding your ability to complete your work effectively, your supervisor should be made aware so that they can assist you with resources or suggestions.

Online tools for individual development plans (IDP):

[Tri-Council Agencies IDP](#)

[McGill University IDP](#)

[Harvard University IDP](#)

[Memorial's Guide to Student-Supervisor Responsibilities](#)

[Creating a Letter of Understanding \(click on "Best Practices"\)](#)