

Navigating Relationships & Conflict

A Guide for Graduate Students

Throughout your degree, you may experience a number of formal and informal supervision scenarios; your primary supervisor, lab manager, a postdoctoral fellow, a member of your advisory committee, or even a more senior Graduate Student in your lab. This guide discusses how to manage the various supervisory relationships you will have while at Western, what to do when conflict arises and what resources are available to you.

Understanding and Managing Expectations

The student-supervisor relationship is one of the most important you will face. You and your supervisor must be able to communicate, share concerns/ideas, collaborate, and understand each other's responsibilities and expectations. As with any relationship, conflicts and disagreements can happen. Conflict commonly happens when expectations are misaligned or not fully understood. When considering the student-supervisor relationship, it's important to define and discuss expectations at the start of your degree.

Areas of Discussion

This list incorporates common areas where expectations may be misunderstood or not clearly defined in the student-supervisor relationship.

- ❑ **Supervision:** supervision/learning style, composition of supervisory committee, degree milestones, course registration, and
- ❑ **Meetings and Communication:** how you wish to meet (virtual, in person), who may attend meetings, the frequency and length of meetings, what is expected of the student to prepare for regular meetings, and how best to communicate between meetings (such as in writing or in person).
- ❑ **Funding and Employment:** external funding and scholarship competitions, fellowships, industry sponsorship and placements, and teaching assistantship.
- ❑ **Research Activities:** health and safety requirements, lab operations and responsibilities, research participation and working hours, project/degree timeline, expected research output, attendance and participate at conferences, and research ethics.
- ❑ **Research Ownership:** authorship, publication, data ownership, and intellectual property.
- ❑ **Professional Development:** student and supervisor goals – both short term and long term; desired career direction/outcomes.

Reasonable and Realistic

At Western, the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies provides a [Graduate Supervision Handbook](#) which includes information about Supervisor and Student Responsibilities. Be sure to compare your expectations against the responsibilities listed to ensure your expectations are within reason.

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Conflict versus Harassment

Conflict

Conflict can be defined many ways: a clash of interests or ideas, an argument, or an extended struggle. At its core, conflict is a disagreement. When considering the student-supervisor relationship, conflicts tend to arise when expectations are not met or understood, or due to other interpersonal challenges.

Harassment

Harassment means "engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcomed". Examples of harassment include but are not limited to:

- demeaning/derogatory remarks
- conflicts that keep resurfacing
- scapegoating
- tampering with someone's workstation or work
- withholding necessary information/resources/training
- imposing impossible and unnecessary deadlines and expectations

If you feel you have experienced harassment at Western, you may report your concern to the Human Rights Office: <https://www.uwo.ca/hro/>

When Things Go Wrong

Given the close and sometimes intense nature of the supervisory relationship, problems may arise. Ideally, attempts to resolve problems or concerns happen as early and informally as possible.

Step One: Discuss your concerns with your Supervisor

- **Meet face to face.** Schedule a meeting with your supervisor to discuss your concern. Avoid the temptation to try to deal with issues over email or through other virtual platforms. In person meetings usually generate better resolutions and miscommunications are less likely to occur.
- **Don't limit the meeting time.** Allow sufficient time for your meeting. Effective problem solving takes time so make sure you block off enough time to have a good discussion. If your supervisor says they are only available for a short time, reschedule for another mutually convenient time.
- **Be prepared.** Make notes of your concerns beforehand. If your list of concerns is very long, prioritize – what issues do you need to resolve right away?
When preparing your list of concerns, ask yourself the following questions:
 - What are the specific obstacles in the way of my progress?

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- What steps have I taken to overcome these obstacles?
- What do I need from my supervisor to enable me to move forward with my work?
- **Be prepared to state your needs.** Remember – your supervisor isn't a mind reader. It is your responsibility to clearly (and politely!) tell your supervisor what you need from them to be able to move forward.
- **Listen carefully and respectfully.** Don't argue your position without knowing "why" your advisor is asking or telling you to do a certain thing that you think is unfair.
- **Learn something.** If miscommunication is a recurring problem between you and your supervisor, try to find out why. Are you unknowingly contributing to the problem through words or gestures?
- **Identify solutions.** Once you and your supervisor have articulated the problem(s), try to come up with some problem-solving strategies that work for both of you.
- **Summarize.** After the meeting, write out a summary of the key points made during the meeting. It's important to make sure that you and your supervisor recognize the issues raised and what actions or agreements are in place to address the concerns raised.
- **Have a plan.** Some people find it helpful put in writing a plan of action. Ask your supervisor if they would mind if you did this to again clarify the options/steps toward resolution that you have identified.

How do you feel?

Think back to your conversation with your supervisor.

Do you think the conversation went well and that your concerns were heard?

- Keep communicating! Now that you've addressed your concerns, continue to communicate with your supervisor to ensure you maintain a shared vision and healthy working relationship.
- If you and your supervisor have made some progress on the issue but you still have more to discuss, schedule a follow-up meeting to continue the discussion.

Or you do feel demoralized, unsupported, and unsure how to proceed?

- Sometimes, despite everyone's best efforts, problems remain unresolved after Step One.
- You may need to seek other supports to help you navigate the conflict with your supervisor

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Step Two: Other sources of support for resolving the problem

If your conversation with your supervisor didn't go well, or you are afraid to approach your supervisor for whatever reason, it is a good idea to seek help in addressing your concerns. Depending on your situation (such as what stage you are in your program or research), you may want to consider the following options:

- **Make an appointment with the Office of the Ombudsperson.** Staff in the Office of the Ombudsperson will listen to your concerns and help you identify specific problem-solving strategies. They can also provide advice and information about other dispute resolution mechanisms.
- **Seek advice from peers.** Discuss your concerns with peers who have worked with the person you are having problems with. Peers are also a good resources for learning about the norms in your department or program (for example; frequency of meetings, turn-around time for feedback, and general availability of faculty). The Society of Graduate Students (SOGS) offers peer support through the Graduate Peer Support committee and the Peer Advisor on Academic Matters.

As important as it is to discuss departmental norms with peers, don't get caught up in gossip. Just because one student experienced something doesn't mean you will.

- **A trusted faculty member.** They may or may not know your supervisor, but they will likely be able to provide you with a fresh perspective and suggest different ways for you to approach the situation.
- **Your Advisory Committee.** A member of your thesis/dissertation committee may be helpful in provided alternative guidance when your concerns are related to research activities or your progression in your degree.
- **Health and Wellness services.** Conflict can be very stressful – make sure you seek sources of support. Talking to a friend or colleague may be helpful, or you may wish to consider making an appointment to see a counsellor through [Health and Wellness](#).

Step Three: Consult a higher authority

When conflict cannot be resolved with your supervisor, it may be time to discuss options with a higher authority. Review your program's policies and procedures for handling disputes (note: many programs do not have such policies) and the administrative reporting structure. The program's graduate affairs assistant may be able to direct you if this information is not readily available.

At this stage you may need to decide whether you wish to continue with your supervision or explore the possibility of changing supervisors. Whatever option you choose you will likely

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need to consider your areas of study and what stage you are in at in your research. Try on different scenarios – what would be the likely outcome if you went through with option A or B? How would you feel about your choice six weeks from now? Six months from now? The best way to make an informed decision is to consider all the options available to you.

Make an appointment with the Graduate Chair or Program Director to discuss what options you have available to you. In this meeting, you can discuss the same points raised in meeting with your supervisor – expect that whomever you consult will ask if you've discussed your concern and what, if any, steps you have taken to resolve them.

If you have good reason to believe that you will be unable to resolve your issues at the department level, either because earlier attempts to resolve the problem have been unsuccessful or because your supervisor is the Graduate Chair, you should consider **making an appointment with the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in your faculty of study or the applicable Associate Vice-Provost of Graduate Studies** to discuss your concerns.

Constructively Ending the Student-Supervisor Relationship

On occasion, a student or supervisor may wish to terminate their relationship – this could be for reasons related to personal circumstances, life events, irreconcilable interpersonal conflict, a change of research focus, or something else; however, a research-degree student requires a supervisor to continue their graduate studies at Western. If after exhausting every avenue for resolving your differences, your relationship with your supervisor cannot be repaired, chatting to a new supervisor may be the best option.

The policy ([SGPS Regulation 11.04](#)) states that a student may request a change of supervisor; however, a supervisor cannot unilaterally dismiss a graduate student. Where a supervisor wishes to dismiss a graduate student, the appropriate process must be followed. All supervision change requests should be made to the Graduate Chair and are reviewed by the Graduate Program. Supervision change requests normally require approval of both the Supervisor and Student, and upon approval the Graduate Chair will normally assist the student in securing a new supervisor.

Tips for a Smooth Supervision Transition

- **Discuss your situation with a member of your Advisory Committee or a trusted faculty member.** Seek their advice about whether a different advisor would be good for you. They may be able to help you clarify your needs and possibly offer suggestions for a new supervisor
- **Do your research.** Make a list of potential advisors who share your research interests. Discuss potential advisors with peers and seek their advice. Talk to your Graduate Chair about suggestions of whom and how to approach. Frame discussions with potential supervisors with positive information, such as new interests and possibilities.

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- **Be professional.** Focus your discussions on your future goals, not past negative experiences or problems. Be diplomatic when discussing your past challenges with your supervisor. Avoid doing or saying anything that could compromise your reputation in your department.
- **Tie up loose ends.** Make arrangements to complete outstanding work with your current supervisor before the change takes place. Make sure you have completed/updated any paperwork that contains information about your advisor (e.g.: funding applications, research proposals, or thesis committee forms).
- **Define expectations with your new supervisor.** Before you transition to your new supervisor, schedule a meeting to discuss and set expectations for your relationship. Develop a plan for your transition and address any program or degree requirements that have been impacted by the change in supervision (e.g. comprehensive exams or funding eligibility).

One Final Reminder

Navigating relationship and conflict is difficult but imperative to your success as a graduate student. Earning a graduate degree is hard work and your relationship with your supervisor is an important one – it's a relationship that is likely to extend beyond the completion of your degree. Your chances of success at the graduate level will be vastly improved if you feel good about your work environment, your research, and your supervision. If you are experiencing difficulties in any of these areas, seek out the appropriate support and explore what options are available to you.

Additional Resources at Western

School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Regulations:

<https://grad.uwo.ca/resources/regulations/index.html>

Graduate Student Handbook: <https://grad.uwo.ca/academics/supervision.html>

Centre for Teaching and Learning – Graduate Supervision:

<https://teaching.uwo.ca/teaching/graduate-supervision.html>

Human Rights Office: <https://www.uwo.ca/hro/index.html>

Office of the Ombudsperson: <https://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/index.html>

Health and Wellness Services: <https://www.uwo.ca/health/>

Society of Graduate Students: <http://sogs.ca/>

TAs and Postdocs at Western – PSAC Local 610: <https://www.psac610.ca/>

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Additional Resources outside Western

McMaster – Template to Address Expectations for Graduate Students and their Supervisors:

<https://gs.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2020/02/Getting-Supervisory-Relationship-Off-to-Good-Start-updated-May-2022.pdf>

University of Toronto Supervision Guidelines for Students - When Problems Arise:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/supervision/supervision-guidelines/supervision-guidelines-for-students-section-6-when-problems-arise/>

Oregon State University – Conflict Resolution Collaborative Model:

<https://ombuds.oregonstate.edu/conflict-resolution-collaborative-model>

UC San Diego – Communicating Effectively:

<https://ombuds.ucsd.edu/resources/effective-communication.html>

Boston University – Communication and Conflict Management:

<https://www.bu.edu/ombuds/resources/communication-and-conflict-management/>

University of Washington Graduate School – What Influences your Mentoring Needs:

<https://grad.uw.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/gsa/mentoring/mentoring-guides-for-students/what-influences-your-mentoring-needs/>

MindTools – Conflict Resolution:

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm

Harvard Business Review – Calming your Brain During Conflict:

<https://hbr.org/2015/12/calming-your-brain-during-conflict>

References

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University of Washington. (2022). *How to Obtain the Mentoring You Need: A Guide for Graduate Students*. Retrieved from <https://grad.uw.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/gsa/mentoring/mentoring-guides-for-students/>

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NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy.