

# Guide to the Adviser-Advisee Relationship

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## What Is Advising, and Why Is It Important?

As an undergraduate student your goal was to obtain knowledge. While this is also true as a graduate student, in graduate school your priorities change somewhat. Understanding historiographical developments and historical arguments and learning how to conduct research and write compelling scholarship takes precedence over memorizing facts and acing tests. Your new goal is to contribute knowledge to your field of study. Graduate school is the professional training venue where you learn the skills you need to be successful in your chosen discipline. In order to do that, you must gain a nuanced understanding of the norms and expectations in your discipline.

While you will be working with many professors, there will be one or two who will be designated as your primary adviser(s). Your adviser is typically assigned by the department or program when you are admitted, and plays a vital role in preparing you for your future career. They will provide advice about which courses are appropriate for you to take, assist with mapping out objectives and requirements, and generally assist with your academic plans. An adviser will also steer you in your professional development you as you progress in your academic program and transform from student to colleague.

A positive relationship with your adviser is important as a graduate student not only because of the knowledge and skills that are shared between adviser and advisee, but also because of the many other aspects of professional socialization and personal support that are needed to facilitate success in graduate school and beyond. A productive advising relationship will:

- Support your advancement in research activity, conference presentations, publication, pedagogical skill, and grant-writing;
- PAvert you, via open communication, to upcoming requirements, challenges, and opportunities to reduce your sense of being caught unprepared, which in turn will assist you in dealing with stressful or difficult periods in your graduate career;
- Provide you with professional experiences and a network of contacts which may improve your prospects of securing professional placement; and
- Reassure you that someone is committed to your progress, someone who can give you solid advice and be your advocate, which can help to lower stress and build confidence.

As you read this guide, bear in mind that the History Department has relatively few requirements for both students and faculty, and that there is a great degree of variety among advisers.. Due to that wide variability, you will find that specific items we discuss may or may not pertain to your particular situation. Also keep in mind that you are, foremost, a member of the Department, and that though an adviser is essential to your professional development, you have a place in this program even if you find yourself briefly between advisers (such as in the process of changing adviser).

## Your First Meeting

At a large research university like ours, you need to understand that your adviser has many irons in the fire. Advising is merely one of many responsibilities they have been given. It is unrealistic to expect that your adviser will lead you through every aspect of your academic journey from day one to Commencement. It is your responsibility to learn about the program and necessary

requirements, engage your adviser, and show the necessary commitment to the rigorous training for the duration of the degree program to which you have subscribed.

Many graduate students feel hesitant about initiating contact with a faculty member, especially in the early stages of graduate school. That makes sense: you are putting yourself in something of a vulnerable position, asking them to take you on as a student. Remember, however, that this is also a part of their job, and that for many of them, part of the appeal about being at a research university is the opportunity to train graduate students. Try to hold both aspects of this in mind as you approach potential advisers for the first time.

A key part of having the confidence to engage your adviser is to know yourself. Understand what it is that you need to thrive as a graduate student and to be successful.

You can start process of understanding yourself by undertaking a critical self-appraisal. Ask yourself, and discuss with people who know you well, such questions as:

- What are my objectives in entering graduate school in history?
- What type of training do I desire?
- What are my strengths?
- What skills do I need to develop to become the kind of historian I want to be?
- What kinds of research or creative projects will engage me?
- How often do I need feedback in order to feel comfortable that I am progressing as desired?
- How much independence versus oversight do I need to feel comfortable with the work I produce?
- Might that change over time?
- What type of career do I want to pursue?

## Challenges Facing Faculty

Advising is an essential aspect of a faculty member's success in the same way that teaching, research, and publication are, and for similar reasons: it benefits students and faculty alike to ensure the quality and commitment of the next generation of scholars. Effective advising advances the discipline because graduate students often begin making significant contributions even before they complete their degrees. Faculty know that graduate students with good advisers are more likely to have productive, distinguished, and ethical careers that reflect credit on the advisers and enrich the discipline.

Remember, though, that faculty members need to balance the many demands that are made of them. A partial list of their responsibilities may include: teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, advising undergraduate and graduate students, serving on dissertation committees, conducting research or working on creative projects, writing grant proposals, writing books and articles, reviewing the work of their students and colleagues, serving on departmental and university committees, and fulfilling duties for professional organizations. The pace of these demands does not let up over time. Junior faculty face the pressure of preparing for tenure review, which means they must be engaged in active research. As faculty become more senior, and their national and international prominence increases, the demands for their time and energies only grow.

Faculty who are members of marginalized groups may face additional challenges. They are often asked by the administration to serve on committees on behalf of the university due to their unique perspective on issues. Their time can also be taken up by students seeking them out as additional mentors not only because of their research and professional interests, but also because of their gender and/or race. Be sensitive to the heavy load on these faculty members and try to be as efficient as possible with the time they give you.

## Establishing an Advising Relationship

Academic advising for graduate students is provided in a number of ways during the course of the degree program. The first step in establishing a firm footing for it is to be prepared for your initial meetings and have realistic expectations. The objectives of these initial meetings are to make a positive impression and to establish a working rapport. Keep mind that the advising relationship is one that evolves over time.

Don't approach these meetings as if you are asking someone to be your adviser—an initial conversation is simply the first step. Do approach them with both humility and professionalism; you are there neither to worship a great scholar and beg their approval, nor to judge them as a consumer would a product or service.

You are ready for an in depth conversation once you have examined your own academic and professional goals and familiarized yourself with the professor's past and current work. Come to the meeting ready to initiate a conversation that will reveal what the faculty member would like to know about you and give them a sense of who you are as a student and a scholar.

### *Mutual Interests*

Faculty will want to know if you have research, scholarly, academic and or creative interests similar to theirs. Make certain that you know how your prior academic, professional, or personal experiences might relate to their interests. Ask about current work and discuss the ways in which these intersect with your interests as a graduate student.

### *Goals*

Faculty want to work with motivated students who are not only eager but also signal that they want to move onto the next level of their professional growth with the mentor's guidance. State your goals as you see them right now. Ask about ways you can further explore these goals through reading, coursework, research projects and professional training.

### *Initiative*

Take action rather than wait to be told what to do. For instance, ask questions about issues recently discussed in class or about a visiting scholar's presentation. Solicit suggestions about other people and experiences that will help you develop your skills and knowledge. Come prepared with ideas about next steps and ask their opinion on them.

### *Skills and Strengths*

Show why this person should invest in you. Talk about what qualities you would bring to a professional relationship--research or language skills, creativity, analytical techniques, computer skills, enthusiasm, and commitment.

### *Availability*

To understand how much time the professor will be able to give to you, inquire about his or her other commitments. How frequently will you be able to meet? Ask about the faculty member's plans at the University. Does the professor anticipate being at the University during the entire time in which you are a student here? Will he or she be away from the department for extended periods (on sabbatical or on a research project) and if so, what arrangements could be made to stay in communication?

### *Expectations*

Ask how often you might expect to receive an assessment of your general progress, and the nature and format of these evaluations. Determine what the professor considers to be a normal workload. How many hours does he or she think you should be spending each week on your research or creative project? Does the professor prefer to communicate through e-mail, in person or by phone? What kinds of feedback do they typically give on written work?

### *Potential Support*

Depending upon your program and funding commitments, you may have questions about opportunities for teaching or funding through grants. Ask about whether research assistant (RA) opportunities might arise and at what point you might receive guidance with the grant writing process.

### *Drafts*

Discuss the professor's expectations of what first drafts should look like before they are submitted. Find out if he or she is willing to accept rough drafts, and about preferences for revisions and editing.

### *Publishing and Presenting Presentations*

Determine to what extent the professor is willing to help you prepare your own articles for publication. Similarly, find out what kind of support the professor might be willing to offer as you prepare for conference papers or to organize conference panels. Is the professor willing to devote time to prepare your research or creative work for presentation?

In any meeting with a faculty member who may be a prospective mentor, always respect his or her time. Be sure you know how much time is available to you in this meeting, and be aware of how quickly time is passing as you try to cover these topics. If you need additional time, schedule another meeting to discuss remaining items and learn more about each other. If you decide that you would like to develop a professional relationship with a faculty member after these initial meetings, wait until you have something substantive to discuss before you schedule another meeting. Always remember to thank them for their time and let them know the progress you are making in pursuing suggestions they gave you.

## Your Responsibilities as an Advisee

Having established your advising relationship, you must then maintain this relationship in a professional manner. It is imperative to show by your attitude and actions that you are a responsible junior colleague. As a graduate student, it is your responsibility to develop and demonstrate your abilities to be an independent scholar and researcher.

You should remember that your adviser may not share your perspective. For example, some faculty see their role as one of assisting with revising articles for publication and preparing you for conferences, but not sympathizing with your personal crises. Other faculty may see their role as your cheerleader for the long term, ready to listen to your private concerns but not to spend hours assisting you with analyzing your data. So, be realistic and sensitive to your adviser's style of advising and learn where you can find the kinds of support that your adviser does not offer. Faculty are more likely to respond to requests for specific types of assistance that they know they can provide. Analyze what you need and explicitly ask for assistance that will help you address that need. If you ask for an excessive amount of help, you run the risk of having faculty feel they are doing your work. What is "excessive" will vary by professor and discipline. Discuss this with your adviser if you have any concerns. Keep in mind the following general guidelines for professional behavior as a graduate student.

### *Work Plan*

- Develop a work plan that includes both short-term and long-term objectives as well as a series of deadlines for completing each step.
- When modifications seem necessary, discuss these with your adviser and agree upon a new work plan.
- Contact your adviser at regular intervals to discuss your progress. Do not give in to the impulse to avoid your adviser when you are struggling.
- Take initiative in finding and pursuing additional training and experiences you need in order to achieve your professional goals.

### *Meetings*

- Show up for scheduled meetings on time.
- Meetings will be most productive when you accept responsibility for leading the meeting. Your role is to raise the issues and questions while the professor's role is to respond.
- For each meeting, be prepared with an agenda of topics that need to be discussed and prioritize them so you are asking your most important questions first.
- At the conclusion of the meeting or through e-mail, summarize any agreements that have been reached. Also restate what you will be doing and what the adviser committed to do to assist you. Ask them to respond if they disagree with anything you have stated. Follow up on what you agree to do.
- If your mentor is facing a work emergency at the time of your meeting, offer to reschedule the meeting, shorten it, or handle the matter over e-mail. Be flexible, but remain committed to getting what you need in a timely manner.
- If you need to cancel a meeting, make sure that your message is left in a manner that reaches the professor. Do not rely solely on one form of message.

- If you want to reschedule a meeting, do so well in advance of the planned time. Do not cancel a meeting the day-of simply because you failed to prepare adequately or “don’t feel like it.”

### *Critique and Editing*

- Clarify how often the faculty member will give you feedback about your general work and your progress.
- Read the books or articles your adviser suggests, and let them know what you thought about them.
- Ask when you can expect them to return papers.
- Find out if they tend to provide a lot of comments or very few, so that you won't be taken aback later on.
- Do not submit a draft to a faculty member in its roughest form (unless otherwise instructed by the professor.) Seek the professor's input once you are confident you have a presentable draft. Be sure to proofread the document carefully. If you have doubts about the quality of your work, ask a more advanced student to read your paper first. Ideally, this person should be familiar with both the professor and the topic so they can make remarks about the content and style.
- Do not ask professors to reread an entire paper if only certain sections have been revised. Instead, mark the new or edited sections by underlining them, putting them in boldface, or by using a different font.
- If you disagree with a particular criticism, demonstrate that you are willing to consider that point. If after thinking about it for some time you still disagree, demonstrate your ability to defend your ideas in a professional and well-thought-out manner.
- Take criticism and edits seriously, but do not take them personally. Your adviser is not trying to wound you or constrain your thoughts; they are trying to train you to think and write as a historian—to ask questions, marshal evidence, form an argument, structure a paper, and write with a style in keeping with the conventions of the discipline. When they critique your prose or express skepticism about your argument, focus on how to improve rather than getting defensive.

### *Professional Development*

- Attend departmental lectures and other activities such as job talks, ask questions, and introduce yourself to speakers when appropriate,
- Join professional associations and societies and volunteer for service roles within them.
- Attend conferences and use these opportunities to network with others.
- Seek out opportunities to present your work in your department or through outside conferences, publications, performances.
- Attend teaching workshops and discipline-specific pedagogy classes.
- Take advantage of formal and informal opportunities to improve your understanding of disciplinary politics, research responsibilities, and professional ethics.

### *Portfolio and References*

- Maintain a professional portfolio that serves to document your accomplishments, including writing samples, project abstracts, and a CV.
- When requesting a reference, give ample time, offer easy ways out for faculty who may not feel that they can write you a strong recommendation, and provide updated copies of your curriculum vitae and the location or copy of your portfolio for materials that can amplify the CV.
- Leave clear written instructions as to when the letters are due and to whom to send them. If you have several letters, create a calendar for your mentor that lists application deadlines.
- Provide a short description about the fellowship, grant, or program for which you are applying.
- Provide details about how you are structuring your application and what points you would like your mentor to emphasize.
- Submit these materials with enough advance time for your mentor to write a letter (if they have not written for you before, request letters six to eight weeks in advance; if they regularly write for you, still provide at least two to three weeks' warning.)
- In case the professor misplaces the application materials, keep extra copies of all forms.
- Ask how your mentor prefers to be reminded of deadlines, if needed.

Clearly establish with your adviser a set of expectations and essential commitments. Problems in advising relationships most often occur because of misunderstandings and lack of explicit communication. Some people find it helpful to specify a mutual agreement about their respective roles and responsibilities.

### *What to Do if Problems Arise*

If the terms of an advising relationship have been clearly established at the outset, there should be few problems between you and your adviser as you move through your graduate program. Nonetheless, few students make it through graduate school without any advising challenges. These challenges can arise externally—from situations in your personal life, or your adviser's--or internally, from tensions that emerge in your approach to scholarship or even your personalities.

In the case of external challenges, such as the birth of a child or a family crisis, be sure to take the initiative and contact your adviser. Discuss your situation, providing the information you feel they need to know and giving them a sense of how much time you might need to attend to your personal life. As soon as possible, provide your adviser with a new timeline for completing your degree. Be sure the revised plan is realistic and that you can meet the new deadlines. Remember throughout this to be patient with yourself and to seek additional outside support.

By the same token, remember that situations occasionally arise for faculty members that could impede your work and progress or their ability to support you. For instance, other demands on your adviser may hinder his or her ability to meet with you or provide prompt feedback about your work. If something like this happens repeatedly, you should talk about this with the faculty member involved. Do this in person, when it first becomes evident that there is a problem. Face-



to-face meetings can lead to more satisfactory results than e-mail, since one's tone and message can be easily misconstrued when communicating online or even by phone.

Sometimes, however, challenges emerge not from outside circumstances but rather from insuperable differences in your approaches to scholarship, teaching, or mentoring. You may find that, despite talking with your adviser, difficulties persist. When this happens, you may need to proceed along multiple courses of action:

First, you need to develop a strategy that keeps your work on schedule while maintaining a professional relationship. Other students who work with this particular faculty member can tell you if the behavior is typical and may be able to suggest some possible resolutions. Your peers can also explain the norms in your department regarding frequency of meetings, turn-around time for feedback, and general availability of faculty. It will also be helpful to identify other faculty members, in and beyond the department, who can talk through research challenges and provide feedback on your work.

Second, seek help from other staff and faculty in the department. Administrative assistants, graduate program coordinators, and the DGS can clarify departmental expectations and standards and may be able to provide suggestions on how to resolve problems based on past experience. Administrative staff also should know about other people or offices on campus that can assist you. Sometimes other faculty members in your program can give you advice on how to deal with problematic issues that arise with your adviser. If you want someone to intercede on your behalf, other faculty members can often provide guidance about how to proceed.

Finally, if you are not able to resolve issues with your mentor within the department, you may consider consulting the ombuds office (<https://www.jhu.edu/ombuds-office/>) or referring to the Provost's Office's Policy on Advising: <https://provost.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Policy-on-Mentoring-Commitments-for-PhD-students-and-Faculty-Advisors.pdf>

## Changing Advisers

For all these efforts, not all advisers turn out to be mentors. You may find that the faculty member you thought would be best for advising your course selection, guiding your research, and chairing your dissertation committee is not, in fact, the right one for you. Don't panic. There is no fault in discovering that the first person you thought would mentor you is not a good fit for your objectives in pursuing a graduate degree.

Changing advisers is less common in history than in some fields, but it is nonetheless certainly possible in our department. In all cases, changing advisers is best accomplished if you enter the process with an attitude of respect for your adviser. Here are some basic guidelines:

- Remain professional at all times. Think through the most diplomatic way to express to your adviser --and to others--why you would like to make this change. Avoid doing or saying anything to others in the university community (including your fellow students) that would embarrass you if it were repeated to your adviser.

- Seek the advice of a trusted faculty member and other professional staff to determine whether it is in fact desirable to change your adviser. This is especially true if the relationship has a long history and/or if it occurs at the dissertation phase of your career.
- Before you make any decisions about discontinuing the relationship with your current adviser, approach another suitable faculty member and inquire about the prospect of serving as your adviser. Avoid saying anything negative about your past adviser and explain your desire to change only in professional terms.
- When you do decide to make a change, be sure to inform your adviser promptly, no matter how awkward this may be. Be sure that you try to work out any differences with your adviser before you move on. If you owe your past adviser any work, be sure to discuss this and arrange a schedule for completing all outstanding obligations.
- Be sure to complete or update any formal paperwork that contains information about your adviser.

Not all advising relationships are successful, often for appropriate reasons based in changing research interests or conflicting commitments. As in any work situation some supervisory relationships are more productive than others. Rest assured that the department remains committed to you and your training even as you are in the process of figuring out a shifting adviser relationship or changing advisers entirely. It's up to you, however, to make certain that your behavior is professional at all times if you decide to terminate that relationship and complete your degree under the direction of another faculty member.

## Issues for Underrepresented Students

All of us at the Krieger School know that a diverse graduate student population greatly enriches the scholarly, cultural, and social activities at the University. We are committed to examining the issues which students from historically underrepresented or marginalized populations face, with the expectation that ultimately this will benefit all of our graduate students.

If you are a student from an underrepresented group, realize that the concerns you may have often face others as well. If you are not from an underrepresented group, the following material should still provide you with insight into your colleagues' experiences. Such insight is crucial for all graduate students as you develop and hone your professional skills. While there is, of course, a great deal of variability in the experience of each group, many students tell us about common themes.

### *Need for Role Models*

Students from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups have a harder time finding faculty whose background and experiences may have been similar to their own.

- Work with your faculty adviser to get names of other people in your department, across the university, or at other universities who may have had experiences similar to yours.
- Don't lose sight of the fact that you can receive very good advising and mentorship from faculty who are of a different gender, race or culture. After all, past generations of minority scholars did just that.

- When job openings arise, you may have the opportunity to work within your department to identify qualified job candidates who represent diverse backgrounds. Attend the job talks and meet these potential faculty members.

### *Questioning the Canons*

Students from underrepresented or marginalized groups, particularly those in the social sciences and humanities, sometimes find that their perspectives or experiences do not fit comfortably into the current academic canons. A safe environment is needed to share thoughts and values in the course of exploring and possibly challenging traditional analyses.

- Be prepared to show a faculty member the value and relevance of new lines of inquiry. Formulate a strong, reasoned argument about the importance of this question to the growth of your field. Introduce a scholarly article or essay as an example of the work you would like to do. Test your argument by talking with peers and others who could give you helpful feedback.
- Unfortunately, not all students meet with success in doing this. Some students are able to find other faculty who are receptive; others change the focus of their dissertations with plans to resume this interest after they complete their degrees; while still others change graduate programs.
- Be open to hearing other people's experiences, particularly those people whose backgrounds differ from your own. Think about the ways that race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other characteristics help to expand the types of questions that are asked and the approaches used for answering them.

### *Being Categorized as a Single-Issue Scholar*

Some students are concerned that by selecting dissertation topics that focus on such issues as gender, race, or sexual orientation, others will see them as being only interested in these topics for the rest of their professional careers.

- Throughout your graduate school career, demonstrate the breadth of your intellectual curiosity through your contributions in classes, seminars, brown bags and lectures.
- As you develop your advising relationship, be clear with the faculty about the range of your research interests.
- When you go out on the job market, be sure to talk about the full range of your research and teaching interests.
- Ask about others' research interests rather than making assumptions about them based on their personal characteristics or past work.

### *Feelings of Isolation*

Students from historically underrepresented groups can feel particularly isolated or alienated from other students in their departments.

- Ask your adviser and peers to introduce you to students and faculty with complementary interests
- Investigate organizations within or outside the University that might provide you with a social support and a sense of belonging. Some examples are cultural and religious groups, as well as reading groups and professional organizations.'

- Be aware of students who seem to find it difficult to take active roles in academic or social settings and find ways to include them. Take the initiative to talk with them. Ask them about their research interests, hobbies, and activities outside of school.

### *Burden of Being a Spokesperson*

Students from underrepresented groups may expend a lot of time and energy speaking up when issues such as race, class, gender or sexual orientation arise or are being ignored. These students point out how most of their peers have an advantage in not carrying such a burden.

- Seek out support and strategies from others facing this same situation. Plug into other networks in your department or across campus. Perhaps one of the many student groups can help you.
- Don't assume your personal experiences are the norm. Question how race, gender, or other characteristics provide different perspectives from your own.
- When you see students taking on spokesperson roles, tell them and others what you have gained from their contributions to class discussion. Words of appreciation are always valued.

### *Work-Life Balance*

Students, and especially those bearing the extra burdens described above, often express the sense that faculty expect them to spend every waking minute of their day on their work. This perception of faculty expectations, accurate or not, troubles students who find it very important to maintain balance and a sense of proportion in the amount of time devoted to graduate work.

- Seek out role models whom you can talk to about how they balance the differing components of their lives.
- Demonstrate through your behavior and work that you are focused and productive during the times you are in your office or lab.

Keep in mind that many factors shape people's behaviors and attitudes. You can help erase stereotypes by recognizing each student's unique strengths and scholarly promise. Think, too, about the ways you have been socialized and make efforts to increase your awareness and knowledge about these issues-for yourself and for others.

## From Advisee to Colleague

Effective advising is good for advisers, good for students, and good for the discipline. An adviser is there to support you with your challenges as well as your successes, to assist as you navigate the unfamiliar waters of a graduate degree program, and to provide a model of commitment, productivity and professional responsibility.

In most cases, the system works well: students work closely with faculty and learn about the discipline; faculty serve as effective advisers and foster the learning and professional development of graduate students. During the graduate experience, your adviser will guide you toward becoming an independent creator of knowledge, preparing you to become a colleague as you complete the degree program and move on to the next phase of professional life. We have provided here an overview and guidelines that should help you to find, and make the most of, the advising you need for a successful graduate experience. We've also included suggestions for

further reading if you'd like to explore some of the topics raised in this guide, a few samples of documents mentioned here, and a list of related resources at Johns Hopkins University useful for all graduate students.