

# FINDING AND DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR ADVISOR

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## Pre-Quiz: TRUE or FALSE?

1. There is no such thing as an ideal mentor.
2. Success depends on mentor and mentee.
3. Every research advisor is a mentor.
4. A role model is a mentor.
5. My research advisor is my boss so I should take their advice.
6. I should continue to work with my advisor even if I'm miserable and making no progress because their other students are doing fine.
7. I am in good hands if I have one good mentor.
8. There is a well established mentoring plan that will work for all students.
9. I might have to balance faculty world reputation for an advisor who is a really good mentor.



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The nicest person?

A woman?

The only person matching your research interests?

Anyone who will have you?

A great teacher you just had in class?

## **FINDING YOUR ADVISOR**

The oldest and wisest person?

The youngest and most energetic?

Someone you get along with?

Someone you share non-research interests with?

## Research on Mentoring

**Research shows that those who are mentored achieve greater career advancement and higher satisfaction than those who are not mentored.**



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## Who's Most at Risk?

- Students
- People working in jobs considered atypical for their gender
- First-generation professionals
- and more...



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**DID YOU KNOW...**

**THAT FACULTY ARE NOT TAUGHT  
HOW BE GOOD MENTORS?**

## What Should a Good Research Mentor Do?

- Teach you:
  - Basic research skills
  - Tactical planning
  - Strategic planning
- and foster your career development

**A PhD program is an apprenticeship.**



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# What is a Research Advisor?

**Learning to do research – Apprentice relationship: Explains, shows and helps you do research**

- Find research problem(s)
- Get a proper background: literature, skills at critical reading and understanding
- Apprentice research:
  - How to identify problems worthy of Ph.D
  - How to tackle problems
  - Organize and write papers and proposals
  - Give talks



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## What is a Mentor?

- A mentor:
  - acts as advocate for your professional and personal development as well as research
  - develops and lasts over an extended period of time
  - provides help, advice, contacts, and information
  - provides encouragement and acts as advocate

**Research advisor may or may not be a good mentor.**



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## Need Both (or More)

- If advisor is not a sufficient mentor, need to find one
- Could be in department or not
- Could be in research area but in different university or industry
- Can (usually should) have more than one mentor

**A research advisor who is also a mentor is ideal, but you can/should find a mentor elsewhere!**



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## True/False Self-Reflection

1. The nicest/easiest faculty member in my research area may not be the best mentor for me.
2. My research mentor needs to give me lots of positive feedback and not upset me with negative feedback.
3. My mentor should be the most well-known, high-powered faculty member in my research area despite being too busy to meet with me.
4. My mentor needs to be knowledgeable, active, and well-respected.
5. I'm willing to change my research area so I have financial support and a strong mentor to help me succeed.
6. I prefer only one mentor/advisor to avoid conflicting advice from different perspectives.



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# **FINDING A RESEARCH ADVISOR**

## The Process

### Identify your department's typical process.

- At admission time: each faculty member admits students specifically to work with them.
- Once enrolled: students admitted without assigned research advisors. Typically then some combination of:
  - Faculty identify potential students from classes
  - Faculty require trial period through independent study project
  - Students identify preferences and approach faculty



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## Research It!

- Talk to several potential faculty research advisors.
- Talk to students who have worked with them.
- Take classes from them.
- Do a small independent study project with them.
- Consider funding consequences (RA, TA, ??)
- Consider your research interests and career goals.



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## Some Questions to Consider



- Is the person in a research area you like?
- Is their work current and relevant? Funded? Where published?
- How many students do they supervise?
- How long does it take students to finish?
- What is the placement of past students?
- How responsive are they?
  - How long to return written materials?
  - How accessible?
  - How helpful?



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## Some Questions to Consider (2)



- Are students given responsibilities?
- How much freedom does the student have?
  - Learn to do research, find problems
- Does the advisor publish with students? What is the order of names?
- Who presents the papers that are coauthored?
- Do they take students to conferences and help with networking?
- Are their work habits compatible with yours?



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# **DEVELOPING A GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR ADVISOR**

# Interacting With Your Advisor

- Listen to your advisor. They won't always be right, but they have (usually) been doing research for longer than you have, and have successfully gone through the PhD process and the academic job market.
- E-mailing with your advisor. Make sure you answer your advisor's e-mails, in a clear and timely fashion. If your adviser hasn't replied to an important e-mail of yours after a few days, remind them that you are waiting for their reply.
- Meet with your advisor. Meet regularly – don't cancel meetings.
- Feedback. Make sure you obtain feedback from your advisor. This should happen at least once a year, probably in the form of a departmental student review. Can also ask for it more often.
- Keep it professional: It's usually best to keep these interactions on a relatively professional level. If you are in a situation where this doesn't seem possible, seek additional advice and mentorship.



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# Research Meetings

- Go prepared.
- Lead the meeting discussion.

- Agenda: Make an agenda for every meeting with your advisor. Outline each of the topics that you'd like to cover during the meeting and their relative importance.
- Summary: Start each meeting by summarizing the previous meeting. Remind them what you agreed on as next steps, summarize what you've done (and haven't done) since then, and go over your agenda.
- Results: Try to bring results (e.g., graphs, tables, theorems, proofs, figures, demos, etc.) to every meeting. Discuss problems and alternatives, ideally based on explicit examples/counterexamples, data.
- Next steps:
  - you propose the next steps
  - revise / refine with advisor
  - agree on goals for the next meeting
- Write up meeting notes and share with advisor/group

Understand that questions/suggestions from your advisor may prevent you from exactly following this plan. That's ok – you're looking for their feedback!

## Being Assertive as a Mentee

- Discuss longer term goals and strategies
- Discuss your strengths and weaknesses
- Ask for information/resources – classes to take, how to find a topic,...
- Ask for specific training – elevator talk, reviews
- Ask to go to conferences/workshops
- Ask to be nominated for appropriate awards
- Ask for meetings when more needed



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**WHAT IF THE ADVISOR  
RELATIONSHIP IS NOT WORKING?**

# What If It's Not Working Out?

1. Encourage your advisor to be the mentor you need:
  - ask for the support you need: more feedback, career option discussion...
2. Keep advisor, but find mentors elsewhere
3. Ask for a meeting with advisor to discuss situation frankly and agree on alternative approaches
  - clear objectives with timeline, agree on what each will do, evaluate how it went
4. Consider changing research advisors
  - easier to do earlier
  - talk to other faculty about alternatives and funding impact
  - fresh start with lessons learned vs. time
  - don't bad-mouth your advisor even if you switch



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## Advisors and Mentors

- Very special people in your life. Relationships will have lasting effects on your career and your life.
- Mentor relationship(s) grow over time – and may be found in unexpected places.
- These are important relationships and having a match is something that takes some thought.

Take the time to do it right!



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