



*EXPECTATIONS OF PH.D.  
STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS*

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**What does your supervisor expect from you?**

**What should you expect from your supervisor?**



The supervisor expects you to be independent.

You should expect to be supervised.

The supervisor does not want you to always ask “what am I going to do next?”

You should be supervised regularly as opposed to whenever it is convenient for your supervisor or once you have nearly completed your dissertation.

The supervisor would like you to have ideas and proposals.

You should expect the supervisor to make (written) comments not only on the details of the work but also on the overall progress of the study.

The supervisor would like you to show original thought and incentive.

**Our tip:** The Ph.D. is personal. Your supervisor should not be looking over your shoulder all the time. It is your research, and you should be independent to choose methods, style, resources, etc. Nevertheless, you belong to an institute and a research group, and your supervisor is in a powerful position concerning your work and progress. You have to stay within the framework defined by the ETH

policies and those aspects that your supervisor considers to be important.

If you find out you are supervised too little or too much, do not hesitate to raise the issue in discussion. Take responsibility for ensuring that regular meetings take place between you and your supervisor. Be sure that these meetings include the following:

- a definition of aims for the next stage of your work.
- a review and an evaluation of previous goals.
- an evaluation of your work in the framework of the total Ph.D. project and according to your supervisor's standards.

**The supervisor expects you to produce written work.**

For minor problems, a discussion based on notes, data and diagrams, or an oral presentation of your work may be sufficient, though the supervisor expects to receive something written at regular intervals, and especially prior to discussions concerning central themes and advances within your project. Furthermore, the written work presented to your supervisor should not be in draft form, but rather developed and well written.

**You should expect your supervisor to read your work in advance of a meeting.**

Expect your supervisor to correct and comment on your written work and not only assure you that s/he has read it. Expect her/him to read all of the work submitted, and to allocate an appropriate amount of time to discuss it with you.

**Our tip:** Ask your supervisor to make written comments on the manuscript or proposal and to include an overall evaluation, to give you a clear perspective of your achievements thus far.

Write progress reports for describing recent experimental or other research work, as well as for commenting on and concluding parts of your research project. Primarily, it helps you to scrutinize your own work.

Show the first draft to somebody else first and ask for advice and comments. This person can be either another academic or a fellow

research student with whom you can create a mutual self-help relationship. Consider all constructive criticism.

Writing your progress reports in a comprehensive and easily readable way is good practice for writing your publications and finally the dissertation.

**The supervisor expects to have regular meetings with you.**

Regular meetings concerning the actual work can occur weekly, monthly or even half-yearly. It is important that they are regular. Formal tutorial meetings / progress reports are less frequent and are expected to be well prepared and accompanied by a written report.

**You should expect the supervisor to be available when needed.**

You should not restrict yourself to the scheduled meetings alone. If you feel the need to talk with your supervisor about something urgent or important, do not hesitate to request a meeting.

**Our tip:** If you get “stuck” or find yourself at a dead-end, do not waste time waiting for the next scheduled meeting.

Clarify how often you will meet in the beginning of your cooperation with your supervisor, how you should arrange other urgent meetings, what kind of progress reports are useful and when you are to submit them etc.

Give your supervisor time to prepare herself/himself for the meeting (especially for formal tutorials) by allowing a reasonable amount of time between arranging the date and the actual date.

Do not skip meetings! They are intended for you to test out ideas and to obtain guidance when you need it. If things are not going well, talk about it with your supervisor instead of hoping that everything will be sorted out before the next meeting.

To avoid misunderstandings, keep a written record of points agreed upon during a meeting and actions to be taken and send your supervisor a copy. Fix the goals to be aimed for in the following period.

**The supervisor expects you to be honest when reporting on your progress.**

Of course, a supervisor prefers that everything goes on well, but s/he also prefers to be informed if something goes wrong.

**You should expect your supervisor to be an advisor and not a judge.**

The supervisor is not only there to praise you for your excellent work or condemn you for your poor progress. She / he should be able to ask the right questions and make useful suggestions.

**Our tip:** If there is a problem, if you are blocked, if you have personal or any other kind of problems which interfere with the continuation of your work, then let your supervisor know about it now.

Do not cheat. Your supervisor will not be fooled if you pretend that everything is fine and talk about work done, new ideas, next steps to be done without ever presenting anything tangible in the form of precise figures, graphs, results or written work.

You will most certainly be judged instead of helped if your supervisor finds out that s/he has been treated as a fool.

**The supervisor expects you to follow her/his advice when you ask for it.**

As obvious and reasonable as this expectation may seem, it is often not followed. The supervisor wants to see that you make good use of the help offered to you and that her/his opinion is taken seriously.

**You should expect your supervisor to be constructively critical.**

The supervisor should criticize and provide feedback in a constructive way supported by reasonable arguments.

**Our tip:** Do not be too defensive when receiving criticism from your supervisor. Both of you must defend and substantiate your arguments and opinions. Ask for explanations in more detail for those criticisms you disagree with. All feedback is useful!

If your supervisor suggests something and you have a different opinion, talk about it. Decide upon a solution together rather than ignoring the suggestion.

Accept praise, too, and allow it to give you a positive feeling about your work. Do not simply accept it if you get no comments on major achievements you have made. Ask why!

**The supervisor expects you to surprise her/him and become an expert in your field.**

**You should expect your supervisor to have a good knowledge of the research area.**

The supervisor expects you to be excited about your research and convey your energy and enthusiasm to the people working with you. You are expected to become an expert in your research topic and to know, at the end of your dissertation, more than your supervisor about your own topic. You are expected to contribute new ideas.

Your supervisor should have a good knowledge of the research area you are working in and to be able to understand what you are doing and supervise you effectively. Your supervisor should be able to introduce you to experimental work.

**Our tip:** If your supervisor is not an expert in your research area, find out who is and how you can get access to these people. Often, the supervisor has lost contact with laboratory work and cannot provide you with technical help. Do not hesitate to ask for help from other Ph.D. students or researchers who have the expertise you need.

As your research proceeds, you should expect the balance in the relationship to your supervisor to change from one where the supervisor is guiding and directing your work to one where you are in control of what you are doing.

As you gradually get more expertise, become better informed and perhaps more skilled in specific techniques, methods and areas of investigation, you must show it to demonstrate the progress you are making. Do not hesitate to sell yourself!