Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation

Lorrie Blair
Concordia University, Canada

The *Teaching Writing* series publishes user-friendly writing guides penned by authors with publishing records in their subject matter. Blair’s practical book gives graduate students the tools they need to successfully plan, write, and defend their thesis or dissertation. Each chapter addresses a rite of passage common to most graduate programs: selecting a methodology, conducting a literature search, carrying out research, analyzing data, and preparing for a thesis defense. Combining years of supervisory experience with up-to-date research, Blair addresses issues important to graduate students that are often left out of these guides, including how to navigate the ethics review process and avoid problems related to academic integrity, such as plagiarism, how to select and prepare for a productive meeting with a supervisor, and how to establish an academic track record by presenting research at conferences and publishing in academic journals. *Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation* offers much more than its title suggests. It is a thorough and succinct guide to succeeding in graduate school, appropriate for thesis and research methods courses, and a must-read for graduate students across the disciplines.

“Like a series of productive meetings with a trusted advisor, each chapter of this text provides practical information and sound insight, thoughtfully organized and generously shared.” – Christine Marmé Thompson, Professor of Art Education, School of Visual Arts, Pennsylvania State University

“This will become a ‘must-have’ volume for every graduate student’s bookshelf, with advice for every step of the thesis journey.” – Anne Lavack, Professor of Marketing, School of Business and Economics, Thompson Rivers University

“More than simply comprehensive, this work includes information and considerations that are rarely addressed in other guides, including information related to selecting supervisors and alternative forms of research methodologies and format styles.” – Adrienne Boulton-Funke, Assistant Professor, Art and Design, Missouri State University

Lorrie Blair is a Professor of Art Education at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. With over 25 years post-secondary teaching experience, she has held positions at universities in the United States and Canada. She is active as a supervisor of MA and Ph.D. thesis students and was a recent recipient of the Faculty of Fine Arts Distinguished Teaching Award.

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The Teaching Writing series publishes concise instructional writing guides. Series books each focus on a different subject area, discipline or type of writing. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate courses across the disciplines and can also be read by individual researchers or students engaged in thesis work.

Series authors must have a demonstrated publishing record and must hold a PhD, MFA or the equivalent. Please email queries to the series editor at pleavy7@aol.com
Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation

Lorrie Blair
Concordia University, Canada
PRAISE FOR
WRITING A GRADUATE THESIS OR DISSERTATION

“Like a series of productive meetings with a trusted advisor, each chapter of this text provides practical information and sound insight, thoughtfully organized and generously shared. A uniquely inclusive consideration of the process of graduate research, this is the companion that graduate students crave. Attentive to the academic issues and personal trials that often accompany thesis writing in the arts, humanities, and sciences, Lorrie Blair offers a guide that is comprehensive and clear, sensitive to the distinctions among fields, and sympathetic to the various ways that the process can confuse and confound scholars in the making.”

– Christine Marmé Thompson, Professor of Art Education, School of Visual Arts, Pennsylvania State University

“Dr. Lorrie Blair provides a much-needed book for students pursuing a graduate degree. Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation is a comprehensive guide to the stages of working through the rigors of writing and defending a graduate degree from the initial stages of choosing a thesis topic and supervisor, right through to the defense of the work. Each chapter can be consulted separately, or the whole book read to give a wide-ranging understanding of the issues most pertinent to writing and defending a thesis. This book provides something for everyone involved in that process.

Both graduate students and their supervisors will find this a refreshing and thorough collection that addresses the topic across a wide range of disciplines. I wish this book had been available during my 30 years as a University Professor. With almost 100 graduate students supervised, I know that there are particular topics like plagiarism, how to conduct a literature review and ethical issues that are important for students to really understand as they begin their research and writing. The chapters on research methodology are clear and written to give access to a number of questions that students ask when trying to decide on how to conduct their research and strategies to help make their thesis a reality. This book is a highly readable, informative and welcome addition to academic literature.”

– Kit Grauer, Professor Emerita, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, The University of British Columbia

“Dr. Lorrie Blair’s complex, yet thoughtful and accessible account of the graduate research experience and thesis/dissertation writing process resonated strongly with my recent experience as a Ph.D. student. This book provides a detailed, well-structured, pragmatic guide to navigating the thresholds of graduate work, which reflects the author’s many years as an extremely well respected professor, teacher, mentor and graduate supervisor. More than simply comprehensive, this work
includes information and considerations that are rarely addressed in other guides, including information related to selecting supervisors and alternative forms of research methodologies and format styles. Throughout this book, Blair weaves in a discussion of relevant contemporary challenges and affordances of academic life and professional expectations of graduate students. She discusses potential political land mines to avoid and suggests practical and insightful considerations for all levels of the thesis/dissertation process. In short, this book is a must for graduate students at any stage in their graduate career.”
– Adrienne Boulton-Funke, Assistant Professor, Art and Design, Missouri State University

“Dr. Blair’s writing is up-to-date, clear, and practical without being dogmatic. Her thoughtful analyses of a wide range of traditional and alternative processes prepare readers to make their own informed decisions. I highly recommend it for graduate students as well as faculty advisors.”
– E. Louis Lankford, Des Lee Foundation Endowed Professor in Art Education, University of Missouri-Saint Louis

“Dr. Blair’s book provides a much needed map for graduate students through the many complexities of a Ph.D. program. The chapters on supervisors are especially helpful for providing perspective on a crucial and sometimes difficult to navigate relationship. In my role providing teaching support for Teaching Assistants, I often talk to graduate students looking for perspective or help negotiating their relationship with their supervisor. I am glad I now have this book to suggest as an additional resource in these conversations.”
– Shaya Golparian, Educational Developer: TA Development Programs, Centre for Teaching and Learning Development, The University of British Columbia

“When I received this book, I expected a useful generic handbook that I could refer to my graduate students. However, what I read was so much more! Dr. Blair has produced a rich and detailed map to orient graduate students to the (oftentimes) mysterious process of successfully navigating a thesis and supervisory relationship. Her work is grounded in current knowledge about the issues dogging graduate students today, the building blocks for producing a quality thesis, and the practices and pitfalls of becoming a scholar.

But this work is also infused by the hallmark of a good supervisor. Her understanding of and caring for graduate students shines through. Her subtle wit balances out her sage advice. And most importantly, she surfaces the tacit, unspoken dimensions of graduate education: supervisors to avoid, the order of authorship, and dealing with problems in the supervisory relationship, to name just a few.

To paraphrase the Wizard of Oz: Pay attention to this woman behind the curtain.”
– Rosemary C. Reilly, Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director, Applied Human Science, Concordia University
“Dr. Lorrie Blair’s book is a valuable resource for every graduate student who needs to write a thesis. Filled with practical advice, this book covers the basics including differentiating between the various thesis formats, preparing the proposal, writing the literature review, choosing a methodology, collecting and analyzing data, and defending the thesis. The book also deals with the many interpersonal issues important to graduate students, including finding the right supervisor and dealing with problems that might arise between students and supervisors. The book presents sound advice regarding how to establish an academic track record by presenting research at conferences and publishing journal articles. Finally, the book is an excellent resource on the important issues of academic integrity and research ethics. For graduate students, it’s common to feel overwhelmed when writing a thesis. This short volume, written in accessible language, provides graduate students with the formula for writing a successful thesis by following a series of clearly-defined steps. This will become a ‘must-have’ volume for every graduate student’s book shelf, with advice for every step of the thesis journey.”

– Anne Lavack, Professor of Marketing, School of Business and Economics, Thompson Rivers University

“Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation provides a needed guide to writing a thesis or dissertation in a highly readable format. The content includes many tacit issues such as considerations for choosing a supervisor, insights into faculty rank and what they may mean for working with a supervisor, different thesis formats, the autonomy involved in writing a thesis vs. writing a class paper, and various potential roadblocks students may encounter. Readers will find this an excellent guide; I plan to incorporate it into my next graduate research course.”

– Elizabeth Garber, Professor, School of Art, The University of Arizona

“Approaching the writing of a graduate thesis or dissertation can be a daunting task. Dr. Blair offers clearly articulated direction and nuanced detail that well assist both graduate students and their supervisors. She removes the mystique that surrounds the process, advancing ideas about how to approach decision-making and moving the research and writing forward – the right supervisor, proposal, literature review, methodology, data collection and analysis, along with building academic credentials. Questions are addressed that often graduate students fear to ask about student-supervisor problems. Enjoyment in the process is encouraged in sharp contrast to enduring a heavily straining task. The book is certainly one that I will recommend to my graduate students. Bravo for giving us a well crafted text that graduate students can use for direction and detail in the same way they utilize academic style manuals.”

– Mary Leigh Morbey, Associate Professor of Culture and Technology, Faculty of Education, York University
This book is dedicated to Dr. Terry Barrett, my thesis supervisor, mentor, role model, and friend
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Thank you, Jean-François Frappier, for your unconditional support and belief in me. I could not have written this book without you.
INTRODUCTION

This book was written to give graduate students from a variety of disciplines the tools they need to successfully research, write, and defend their thesis or dissertation. It is for those facing a blank page, having problems communicating with their supervisor, or drowning in their data. It presents frank discussions about the pitfalls and unrealistic expectations that derail thesis research and provides strategies to avoid or remedy them.

Sweeping changes in higher education are taking place in institutions around the world bringing about a fundamental restructuring of how students research and write theses (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). At the master’s level, completion times are accelerated and programs that once took three years to complete now can be done in one. In many disciplines, students are “fast-tracked” into doctoral programs before writing a master’s thesis. Graduate students are expected to produce high quality, innovative research and do so in decreasing amounts of time (Lee, 2007). They are expected to publish their research and apply for grants, while still students. Changes in the labor market and soaring tuition costs are, in part, driving these changes. Online programs have replaced residency requirements, allowing greater access to education and influencing how professors teach and interact with their students.

Attrition rates and time to completion rates for some disciplines have caused more than one author to refer to them as “scandals.” Research indicates that many students who enter doctoral programs do not complete them (Golde, 2005). There are wide discrepancies across the disciplines. In graduate programs in education, for example, the attrition rate is estimated to be between 50–70% and time to completion as long as 12.7 years (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). These surprisingly long completion times and attrition rates are costly and, in many cases, avoidable. Most students who dropped out later regret doing so.

Graduate research is complex and discipline specific. Students working in groups in their supervisor’s lab will have very different concerns than will arts and humanities students who work independently. What works in one discipline, one program, or even with one supervisor, may not work in another situation. Supervisors can change advising styles as they progress through the academic ranks, or work differently with individual students.
Throughout this book, I use qualifiers like “in most cases,” “often,” and “generally” to remind readers there are always exceptions and very few rules.

To obtain a wider view of graduate school, I adopted a research method known as bricolage. Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) describe the bricoleur as a “handyman or handywoman who uses all the tools available to complete a task” (p. 168). The tools I have at hand are my experiences as a supervisor, the stories others tell me about their experiences, and a wealth of recent research about thesis supervision conducted around the world. I use all these resources to provide accurate, up-to-date, and useful advice. When considering the complex world of graduate supervision, the notion of bricolage serves well because as Kincheloe et al. (2011) point out, it “exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and complications of power” (p. 168).

To gain a broader perspective of the graduate experience in other disciplines and universities, I sought advice from supervisors in other disciplines. My goal was to consider a number of thesis supervisory models and institutional contexts in order to represent a cross section of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and applied programs. Those I interviewed supervised students at both the master and doctoral levels. Most had supervised over thirty students and nearly all were enthusiastic about their roles as a supervisor.

A wealth of research has been and continues to be conducted about graduate school, and much of it seeks the voices of students and supervisors, through survey, focus groups, or interviews. I examined the existing literature, paying close attention to studies that report graduate students’ and supervisors’ narratives. Reading the narratives from these published studies challenged some of my long-held assumptions and reinforced others.

In addition to the resources outlined above, I give workshops on building and maintaining effective student-supervisor relationships for students at my university. Often students attending are from a wide range of disciplines, but they ask similar questions. “How long should I wait for my supervisor to answer my email?” “My supervisor doesn’t like me, what should I do?” Their questions inform this book. I am mindful that although I have read over one hundred theses, my reader is writing his or her first. When I told one of my students I was writing this book, he offered this advice: “…remember that often the things that we take for granted as being common knowledge not worth mentioning, aren’t actually as common or as obvious as we think. In other words; include everything!” Indeed, much of the knowledge taken
for granted about how to act and learn in graduate school is tacit. Without reflecting upon them, students and supervisors act out long traditions that make the academy both special and sacred. In this book, I speak openly about tacit academic knowledge.

There are many metaphors used to describe graduate school. Some refer to exams and thesis writing as hurdles to overcome. Dealing with academic regulations is like jumping through a series of hoops, some of which are on fire. I believe graduate school can, and should, be a pleasurable time in one’s life, rather than an ordeal one has to endure. I adhere to a conceptual model of graduate research as a personal journey of discovery.

Although students travel similar paths, starting with compulsory courses, comprehensive exams, writing a proposal, and so on, they do not always progress in a linear fashion. Some loop back, others take diversions. Some pass though quickly, others become stuck at various points. Yet, most students deal with the same constraints of resources, time, and knowledge (Single, 2010).

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Each chapter in this book represents a rite of passage common to most programs: selecting a supervisor, writing a proposal, carrying out research, analyzing data, and writing and defending a thesis. The book progresses in a linear fashion common to most graduate programs, but each chapter is independent and can be consulted as needed. To use another metaphor, most major purchases such as a car, a computer, or a toaster come with a user’s manual. Some read the manual cover to cover before using their purchase. Others use the manual to troubleshoot and diagnose problems when the car won’t start or the toast burns. This book is intended for both. Reading the chapters in order will help provide a smoother journey. Students will know what to expect and how to prepare. For those in the midst of their graduate journey, it offers advice on how to fix immediate problems.

Chapter 1 introduces various thesis forms and outlines the advantages and disadvantages associated with each form. Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion about selecting a supervisor and guiding questions to help students choose mentor styles that best fit their needs. It also describes the lived experiences of professors, their academic ranks and roles, and the stress that accompanies each.

Chapter 3, the proposal, is in two parts. The first part offers students strategies to unblock and face the challenges of working independently. The
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second part addresses constraints students should consider when selecting a topic of research and proposing a methodology.

The literature review, Chapter 4, addresses types of reviews and offers suggestions on how to assess existing literature. Chapter 5 answers three questions student ask about plagiarism. What is it? How can it be prevented? What happens if I am charged with plagiarism? These two chapters should be read together because students are often at risk of committing plagiarism when citing literature.

The following two chapters take up the issue of research methodology. Chapter 6 provides an introduction to research methodologies and briefly describes quantitative and qualitative approaches. It includes more detailed sections about action research and arts inquiry. The chapter concludes with strategies to write a methodology section or chapter. Ethics are an integral part of the research process, and Chapter 7 details the ethical concerns involved with research using humans.

Chapter 8 addresses challenges students encounter when collecting and coding data. Once data is collected, students then must make sense of the data. This chapter offers a realistic and helpful guide to doing just that. Chapter 9 offers strategies for presenting at conferences and publishing in peer-reviewed journals. It addresses questions of authorship and intellectual property rights.

Chapter 10 is concerned with support writing the thesis and working with one’s supervisor. It addresses student questions such as, how long to wait for an unanswered email, or how to prepare for a productive meeting with a supervisor. Chapter 11 offers advice for dealing with student-supervisor problems. Chapter 12 addresses the final step of graduate studies: the defense.

I hope that by reading this book, many graduate students will become better informed about the various stages in the thesis process. By knowing what to expect in each stage and how to address the demands of the process, the thesis journey should become a little less stressful and perhaps more enjoyable.
CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A THESIS?

A completed thesis or dissertation is a major accomplishment of sustained concentration. It represents setting and achieving a high academic goal. Often the words “thesis” and “dissertation” are used interchangeably and there is no clear distinction between them. In some contexts, thesis refers to that completed at the master’s level, while dissertation refers to the doctoral level. In other contexts, the opposite is true. For pragmatic purposes, I will apply the term thesis to both levels. At the most basic understanding, a thesis is the result of a substantial piece of research and scholarly writing executed with a high level of autonomy. This is the case for both master and doctoral level theses, but a doctoral thesis carries the added responsibility of presenting proof of original contribution to knowledge.

The notion of what constitutes a thesis differs greatly among disciplines. Individual programs determine the preferred format, length, and criteria of an acceptable thesis. These factors change over time and today’s theses are quite different from those written as little as ten years ago (Paltridge, 2002). New methodologies have been introduced and some thesis committees now accept innovative formats. In recent years, theses have taken the form of a novel, a comic book, or a script for a play.

THESIS FORMATS

The student’s field, supervisor, and program largely dictate the choice of thesis format. Some supervisors are amenable to allowing students to extend the boundaries of thesis form and methodologies, while others hold views that are more traditional. Each format has advantages and disadvantages, and the supervisor and committee should be supportive in regards to the format selected by the student.

Monographs

The standard thesis is a single, book-like monograph that contains interlinking chapters, usually an introduction, literature review, methodology, the research findings, and a conclusion clearly identifying
the contribution to knowledge. Some theses conclude by indicating the need for future research and questions or directions that emerged from the research. Generally, a typical master’s level thesis is not more than 150 pages and the doctoral thesis is around 300 pages. Theses as long as 600 pages do exist, but this is not recommended. It is common in the humanities and social sciences to revise the thesis into a publishable book, and a 600-page tome will require substantial reworking.

In the past, theses were bound and students were required to provide copies for the library and program. Often, they gave one as a gift to the supervisor. Today, most theses are published online, which reduces the student’s costs and allows for much greater access.

The major disadvantage of monograph theses is the time they take to write. They can then be published as a book or a series of chapters, but crafting publishable papers from the thesis requires additional work. Chapters rarely conform to the word counts or form of published papers. For this reason, many programs that traditionally required monograph theses are rethinking their practices to include theses by publication.

**Thesis by Publication**

The thesis by publication is a collection of related papers either accepted or submitted for publication in research journals. The papers are linked by theoretical or practical connections that frame the research. The thesis can contain any number of papers, but most thesis committees require between three and seven. It is expected that the papers will have been published in peer-reviewed journals, and that the candidate is the first author or the major contributor of ideas and experimental data. In some disciplines, the first chapter must be published, the second submitted for review, and the last in progress at the time of the oral defense. Other programs expect all chapters to have been published or accepted for publication.

The thesis by publications better prepares students to take on future roles as researchers. As part of their studies, students learn to write for publication rather than complete a monograph, and then rewrite for publication. Each form requires a different set of writing skills, doubling the student’s workload. This model allows for and encourages faster dissemination of research, something that is important in highly competitive fields where information and technology demand innovations. By the time a student would have written and defended a monograph thesis, the topic or research might be obsolete or published by another researcher.
The thesis by publication model responds to expectations of granting agencies that look favorably on the applicant’s track record of published articles. Graduating students with strong publication records hold an advantage over others in securing post doctorate or tenure track positions. Thesis committee members and examiners are impressed or at least reassured of the quality of the overall thesis because the papers have been peer reviewed by external reviewers.

However, publishing a series of papers is no guarantee the thesis will be accepted by the supervisor or examining committee. As with all theses, it must meet the requirements of an original contribution to knowledge. Additionally, to be an accepted thesis, the papers must form a coherent document and be more than a group of single, unrelated published papers. The student must connect the individual papers through an introduction and make theoretical connections between the papers.

Publishing a paper involves a number of factors outside of a student’s control. This format means the student must please members of the field, who may be less sympathetic than her or his thesis committee. Meeting the requirement of a number of publications may take considerable time. The rejection rate for top-tier journals is high and some do not allow for multiple revisions of a paper. In these cases, more time may be spent crafting a research article than actually crafting research.

At times, reviewers take months to return manuscripts to the editors. This means the paper is in limbo, neither accepted nor rejected. Students must either wait for the review or withdraw it before submitting it for consideration to another journal. Reviewers may be in disagreement over required changes or require major modifications. One reviewer may accept a paper with fairly minor modifications while another will ask for substantial changes. Usually, the editor will help negotiate these contrasting views.

Professional Doctorates

Professional doctorates embed research into the student’s professional practice. Since the emphasis is on concerns related to the practice, research can be carried out within her or his own organization. This type of research is used most often in fields such as medicine, education, engineering, social work, and business. The research and thesis brings together knowledge gained from professional practice and academic theories, and students are expected to make contributions to both. In order to complete a professional doctorate, students are required to carry out research but the professional
doctorate thesis can take many forms, including a monograph, a portfolio, or a series of published reports (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Publications may be single authored or collaborative reports, depending on the regulations of each university or department.

The advantage of the professional doctorate is that research compliments the student’s working life (Fenge, 2009). The research is likely to be personally meaningful, which encourages completion rates. The main disadvantages associated with professional doctorates are that conflicts of interest and ethical tensions may arise during the research and writing process. For those with professional experience, occupying the role of a student blurs the normal boundaries of both the work and academic environment. Fulfilling the requirements of both roles may take a particular level of sensitivity. In addition, as a researcher, students may be hesitant to reveal findings that show their organization in a bad light. Revealing these findings can have a negative and lasting impact on the student’s professional career that continues beyond the thesis defense. However, the professional doctorate can provide a real world application to research and bridge the theory/practice divide.

Thesis and a Creative Project

The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) was long considered to be a terminal degree for artists and writers. Usually, those teaching and working in arts related fields, such as literature, creative writing, theatre, museology, and media arts, did not pursue a doctorate in art, nor were they required to hold the degree to obtain a teaching position in art schools (Milech & Schilo, 2009). Those who wished to continue their studies enrolled in programs leading to a Ph.D. However, as the arts entered universities, faculties and granting agencies began to debate what constituted creative research. Scholars began to ask what a production-based doctoral thesis might entail. There are lively, and ongoing debates about the format, goals, and purpose of the written component that accompanies a body of art.

In Australia, and some other countries, the written component of a production-based thesis is referred to as an “exegesis.” There are three widely used exegesis models: the context model, the commentary model, and the research question model (Milech & Schilo, 2009). The context model is the most traditional of the three, and requires students first to create a cohesive body of artwork, and then write a document that contextualizes and situates it within the larger art world. According to Milech and Schilo, the thesis “rehearses the historical, social and/or disciplinary context(s) within
which the student developed the creative or production component of her or his thesis” (p. 6). Creation is viewed as the practice whereas the written component is considered to be the accompanying theory. The commentary model describes the process the student went through to create the work, and retains the theory/practice divide (Milech & Schilo, 2009). The research question model explores the same question independently through production and a written component, with each component using a different language to answer the single question. Together, the two parts form a cohesive whole. While I agree with the premise and merit of this model, I believe it requires an undue amount of work, requiring an artist/scholar to be the master of two languages. It denies the power of artwork or creative effort to stand on its own. I am not alone in my questions about the goals and use of the exegesis. Bourke and Neilsen (2004) note that students question whether they should be required to validate their creative work through writing. Those who advocate for alternative and art-based theses take up this issue.

**Alternative Forms**

At the 1996 American Educational Research Association conference, Howard Gardner and Elliott Eisner, both leaders in education research, debated the question, “Should novels count as doctoral dissertations in education?” (Donmoyer, Eisner, & Gardner, 1996). Eisner, arguing for the affirmative, won the debate and by 1999, the first novel as dissertation appeared (Dunlop, 1999). North American educators began to theorize about arts-based research, resulting in a proliferation of books advocating for this method (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). Comics, films, plays, and a variety of other forms have now been accepted as theses.

Biklen and Casella (2007) end their book, *A Practical Guide to the Qualitative Dissertation*, with a caveat to students considering writing what they call a non-traditional thesis. They warn that a non-traditional thesis demands more of a student than does one written in the tradition of the discipline, and students who choose to take on this endeavor make an already challenging task more difficult. Students who, for example, choose to write a novel must know their research well. Additionally, they must know the conventions of the novel form, and they must be able to write their research findings in that convention. Similarly, Kamler and Thompson (2006) warn, “Bad poetry does not achieve the goals of either enhanced meaning making or a successful representation of a scholar on top of their material” (p. 143). Biklen and Casella also suggest that producing a non-traditional thesis can
affect the student’s future career. They warn this kind of thesis may lower one’s chances of employment because these theses may be viewed as suspect and unscholarly.

At issue for Kamler and Thompson, I believe, is that art is a subjective form and in our postmodern times, it is difficult to judge the quality of art. Moreover, their statement implies that students write bad poetry. It is possible a student will write good poetry and perhaps good poetry can achieve more than would a standard thesis. Barone and Eisner (2012) note that the arts have the capacity to reach a wider audience than does traditional academic writing. While I agree with Biklen and Casella that writing or drawing the non-traditional thesis can be more challenging and more time consuming than a traditional one, there may be good reason to take on the additional challenge. I recently supervised a master’s level student whose thesis explored the pedagogical capacity of drawing comics. Her thesis was presented in a comic book format. Jacob (2014) wrote her thesis in a traditional manner, and then reworked the data into a comic book. The comic added an additional layer over the text, increasing the reader’s understanding. However, I remarked to her that if she had simply written the thesis, she would have completed it six months faster. She replied, “Yes, but I wouldn’t have loved it.”

Most universities now make theses available online, affording students the opportunity to peruse theses written by former students in their department, as well as those from graduates of universities around the world. Taking time to examine other theses provides students with an idea of what topics and methodologies are current in the field. Students can also note writing tone and structure used in their discipline. In choosing a thesis format, it is wise to have supervisor support. Additionally, considering the time they wish to spend crafting a thesis and reflecting on their goals for the future are both important elements in choosing a thesis format. Innovative formats require more time than the tradition theses, but students may wish to take on this challenge. Students may not love their thesis, but writing it should be a pleasurable experience.
CHAPTER 2

FINDING THE RIGHT SUPERVISOR

INTRODUCTION

The process of writing a thesis begins long before one sits down to put words on paper. It begins with the choice of what to study, where to study, and most importantly, with whom to study. Although graduate students interact with many professors, their primary relationship is with their supervisor, and this relationship plays a major factor in their success or failure during their studies and beyond earning the degree. Even if readers are already enrolled in a graduate program, this chapter provides the departmental and institutional context in which the supervisory relationship takes place. For students still searching for a supervisor, this chapter provides some strategies and guiding questions to help them make their decision.

Programs have customized approaches to selecting a supervisor. Some programs require incoming students to secure a faculty member who will commit to act as a supervisor for their research. In many of these cases, the supervisor provides them with full or partial funding. Other programs accept students and allow them a grace period to find a supervisor. In these cases, admittance is conditional and students who cannot persuade a faculty member to supervise their research are withdrawn from the program. The time allowed for this can vary from two months to several years. Other programs assign all admitted students to a supervisor. The rules and procedures for selecting a supervisor may be found in program descriptions, but this information might not be evident in their application procedures. Many universities have institutional guidelines for students, faculty, and administration. Usually, these guidelines are available from the university’s school of graduate studies and most are posted online. Graduate Program Directors (GPDs) can provide specific program guidelines concerning the procedures surrounding supervisor selection.

David Mumby (2012), author of Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting In, notes that the choice of a supervisor should supersede the choice of a university. This is excellent advice in that graduate research is closely linked to a specific researcher, not an institution. However, not all students are in this ideal situation. Students are not always admitted to
their first choice university or program. For others, personal reasons, such as family responsibilities and financial constraints, limit their choice of where to study. Many cannot leave jobs and instead elect to study part-time at a university near their home. Master’s level students, when compared to doctoral students, have less pressure to “get it right,” simply due to length of their programs. Typically, a master’s level student will spend only one or two years working directly with their supervisor, whereas a doctoral student may spend from four to seven years.

Even for programs that do not require a supervisor for admittance, having a supervisor might increase a student’s chance of being admitted because it is likely that the faculty member may speak favorably about them during the admission process. Additionally, securing an advisor early gives students a better chance of selecting their preferred supervisor. On the other hand, students might meet another faculty member with whom they would prefer to work. Changing supervisors is not a simple matter and, in some cases, doing so can have negative consequences. This point will be taken up in greater detail in Chapter 11.

Most universities and programs use a traditional model of supervision that involves a close working relationship between a student and one faculty member. The supervisor guides the research and serves as a mentor for the duration of the degree. Effective supervisors do more than help students write their thesis. They serve as role models who socialize students and help them understand and adopt the discipline’s values, methods, and ways of constructing knowledge (Fanghanel, 2009). Successful selection means aligning one’s research interests, goals for study, and ways of working with the potential supervisor. The traditional model is well suited for self-directed students who are well prepared for graduate work.

Other programs use a blended approach that augments one-on-one supervisory sessions with group meetings and writing groups. Programs where students work in labs on common problems, such as in science and engineering, most often use the blended approach. Some programs are oriented toward the professional doctorate in which research is carried out in the place of employment and collaborative essays may replace the single authored monograph theses (Lee, 2007).

Who Are Supervisors?

In most universities, supervision is a voluntary activity for faculty members. Faculty members are expected, but not required to work with graduate
FINDING THE RIGHT SUPERVISOR

students. Moreover, students do not always get the supervisor they want. Busy and popular supervisors may not accept additional students, and it is common for supervisors to limit the number of students with whom they work. Supervisors know how many students their labs can accommodate and for how many they can provide adequate funding. Generally speaking, no supervisor is forced to work with a specific student, and in most cases, a student is not required to work with a particular supervisor. However, there are programs that assign supervisors to incoming students based on their area of research interest. This assignment method ensures that faculty members share the workload and supervision is balanced. This also means some students will work with their preferred supervisor, while others may not.

In most universities, only full-time faculty members are permitted to supervise graduate students. Others, such as part-time instructors, adjunct professors, and Limited Term instructors are contractual employees. Their employment usually is dependent on a number of factors, such as the current sabbatical or leave replacements needed and course enrollment. Full-time faculty members, on the other hand, have permanent positions and are likely to be employed for the duration of a student’s program, a plus for students who are happy with their supervisor.

Student Needs

Before turning attention to finding the right supervisor, it is necessary to consider what students want and need from this relationship. Tenenbaum, Crosby, and Gliner (2001) surveyed students at their California university and found three types of help students expect to receive ideally from their supervisors: psychosocial, instrumental, and networking. To their list, I would add the need for financial aid. For Tenenbaum et al. (2001) supervisors meet their students’ psychosocial needs when they convey empathy for their concerns and feelings. These supervisors allow and encourage students to discuss concerns regarding feelings they have about their competencies and academic abilities. They encourage students to talk openly about personal anxieties and fears that deter them from working and are open to sharing their own personal stories about how they overcame similar obstacles. In a narrative describing her doctoral work, Lakkala (2012) illustrates how her supervisor provided psychosocial help. She writes,

She paid attention to my feelings when she had to give feedback that demanded changes … She discretely anticipated the emotional reactions the various phases would cause. Along with the process, I had to learn
that my feelings of incapability and being wounded were inevitable. (p. 14)

Supervisors provide instrumental help when they give assistance to improve students’ writing skills, help them organize and deliver a conference presentation, and explore their career options. Supervisors can help their students find the right venue for publications, and mentor them on how to write and submit a paper for publication. Networking help involves introducing students to other researchers in the field. It may also mean writing letters of reference for jobs and grants. Supervisors can advocate for students in departmental decisions about teaching and research assistantships, and provide other means of financial support. Many pay travel expenses, which permits their students to attend conferences and network with other researchers.

Asking themselves what they most want and need from a supervisor and then identifying the faculty member who is best is suited to meet those needs will prevent future disappointments with a mismatched supervisor. For example, students need to understand which is most important to them: personal supportiveness or professional competence. This is not to say that the supportive supervisor is not or cannot be an expert in her or his field, or conversely, that the professionally competent supervisor is not supportive. Being a top researcher, however, takes concentrated time and the rewards usually involve travel to attend conferences and keynote speaking engagements. It takes focus to conduct research and a supervisor’s time is finite. Students who need a great deal of psychosocial support should not choose supervisors who are best suited to offer networking support. Instead, students who are highly motivated to publish and present work, and who hope to get a university position, are best mentored by active researchers.

Ideally, most supervisors would possess the skills needed to meet all three needs, but research and personal experience indicate that supervisors usually excel in one of the three areas. Some do not see it as their responsibility to support students emotionally as well as academically. James and Baldwin (1999) warn that taking on the role of a counselor is “exhausting and dangerous” (p. 34). They hold that supervisors and students should maintain a professional relationship. Students need to be clear about their expectations and supervision needs. Some students need and want a close relationship with their supervisor. Others prefer to work autonomously.

Students who attend universities in cultures or countries different from their own have greater needs than their fellow students. This is particularly the case for students who must write a thesis in a second language. These
students may need more instrumental help with writing, particularly with critical analysis and argument construction. Conventions of academic scholarship may differ from their previous degrees in their own country. There may be vast differences in notions of what it means to be a good student. Those in this situation are less likely to know how to navigate university structures and may find that being a student in the new environment is quite different from that with which they are familiar. They may hold assumptions about student and teacher roles that are in contrast with the new learning environment (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). For example, students attending North American universities from other continents may be surprised to find that they are expected to actively engage in dialogue during class, rather than simply attend lectures. Many of these students pay high tuition and fees, and feel intense pressure to succeed. Additionally, students away from home are likely to feel isolated and lack social networks. Many turn to their supervisor as their sole means of support.

Qualities to Look for in a Supervisor

Respect for a supervisor as an authority on the subject and as a leading researcher in the field will go a long way when being asked to revise a draft for the fifth time. Those I interviewed held differing opinions on how much of a domain expert the supervisor should be and answers ranged from “possessing a passing knowledge” to “the leading expert in the field.” Ideally, the supervisor should be knowledgeable about either the topic or research methodology the student intends to explore in his or her thesis. Supervisors with domain knowledge can direct their students to the most pertinent literature and current research. However, the match between the student’s needs and the supervisor’s ability and willingness to meet those needs may be more important than subject expertise.

The research topic is only one factor that should influence who students select as a supervisor. They must be comfortable with the supervisor’s interpersonal skills. For example, students who need positive feedback for motivation should not ask a highly critical professor to supervise. This professor is best suited to supervise students who thrive on having their ideas challenged.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF SUPERVISION

Throughout their academic careers, faculty members have different responsibilities that often correspond to the rank they hold. Their time is
divided between teaching, research, and service, and pressure to meet the demands of their rank greatly affects how and why they work with graduate students. Understanding the institutional context can make students aware of competing priorities, but they should note that these descriptions are generalizations. Professors at each level are individuals and approach their faculty responsibilities and supervisory roles in unique ways. In the North American context, tenure track or tenure stream professors are designated by the rank of assistant professor, associate professor, or full professor.

Assistant professors are newly hired into tenure track or tenure stream positions. They are most likely to have recently completed their doctoral or post-doctoral work. Many are teaching for the first time in their academic career. Assistant professors are given a probationary period, usually around five or six years, to prepare for consideration to be promoted to the associate level. To be promoted, assistant professors must show evidence of successful teaching and research. Evidence of research includes successful grants, peer-reviewed papers, and sometimes, books.

Tenure procedures vary among universities, but most involve a peer review process. At the end of the probationary period, assistant professors prepare a performance dossier, which will be read and assessed by a number of committees, usually starting at the program level. Those who are not awarded tenure usually leave the university. It cannot be understated how stressful the tenure process is for faculty members. Assistant professors are sometimes referred to as “junior faculty” and feel scrutinized at every turn. Adding to their stress, many assistant professors have young children and other family obligations that compete for their time.

As supervisors, assistant professors are likely to be current with research being done in their field and might be more accepting of originality and innovation. They are in a good position to help students select a relevant and timely research topic. This is particularly the case in fields driven by innovation and where technology is always in a state of flux. Assistant professors are often funded by university start-up grants and government grants specifically targeted for new professors. They are highly motivated to publish and are likely to encourage students to publish with them. Supervising master’s students is sometimes required to achieve tenure. At the very least, tenure committees look upon supervision favorably, and success is measured by the completion rates of their students.

During the first few years in the tenure track position, the assistant professor will likely have very little experience in supervising students. They are only a few years from their own graduate work, and research shows that
the supervisor’s previous experience as a doctoral student is a key influence on how they, in turn, supervise (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 1998; Lee, 2007). They may have unrealistic expectations for the students they supervise or be disappointed when their students do not possess the same skill level or work ethic they believe themselves to have had as a student.

Some assistant professors may be unfamiliar with their program’s supervisory cultures and university policies. This may be a disadvantage in that they may be unable to help their students navigate complicated university administrative structures. However, starting fresh can be an advantage in that they may be optimistic and may consider new approaches to supervision. The biggest disadvantage to working with an assistant professor is that they are busy, and in some cases may place their own academic success over that of the students they supervise. In a worst-case scenario, the assistant professor will not receive tenure, and the graduate students he or she supervises will have to find another supervisor.

Associate Professors are usually tenured and may hold this rank either for their entire career or until they are promoted to full professor. Most associate professors are well established in their universities and field of research. Publishing and presenting papers are still important for promotion to full professor and to garner competitive research funding. As one professor recounted about tenure, “Tenure is like winning a pie eating contest and the prize is more pie.” Associate professors are usually expected to provide graduate student support and publication success is a condition for securing additional research grants. Scientists need money for labs, and those who are not successful in garnering grants and contracts are assigned extra teaching duties, or are assigned to teach large lectures at the undergraduate level. In some universities, associate professors are eligible for six month or yearlong sabbaticals. A sabbatical may mean students will rarely see the supervisor, and may not receive feedback.

Once tenure has been attained, the pressure to publish and apply for research grants may be less than for the assistant professor. As a result, they may have less funding to provide for their graduate students. On the other hand, they are in a good position to help students navigate university structures and have more time to devote to them.

Professors refer to all faculty members who teach courses, but not all hold the rank of a full professor. In this case, the title is used as one would use that of “teacher.” Only those who demonstrate sustained quality teaching and research over a period of years may be promoted to the rank of professor. Sometimes they are referred to as full professors. To achieve this rank, those
at the associate level go through a peer-review process similar to tenure at the assistant professor level. In many cases, professors outside of the university evaluate their dossier.

At their best, professors have supervised many graduate students, and importantly, remain active researchers. However, stereotypes of the curmudgeon and absent-minded professor abound. In some cases some professors may be less current in their fields and their network of colleagues may be older and retired. This may be detrimental to their students’ ability to network and gain future employment and they may be less open to innovative methodologies and ideas. With less expectation to publish, and even less incentive to do so, the demands on their time may be less. In addition, if they have children, they are most likely grown, and as a consequence may have more time to devote to their students’ academic and psychosocial needs.

Cultural Diversity

In addition to the rank, communication style, expertise, and ability to provide help, other issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age can affect the student-supervisor relationship. Since the 1990s, a great deal of research has been conducted about gender and graduate studies. This research was generated, in part, in response to statistics that show that women are more likely than men to drop out of graduate school, to take more time to complete, and are less likely to obtain a research position after graduation (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Since research indicated that the relationship between the student and supervisor was key to a student’s completion, researchers turned their attention to the impact of same-gender and cross-gender supervision. In an extensive literature review, Smeyb (2000) found evidence both for and against same-gender student and supervisor relationships. Some studies suggest that female students are more satisfied with female supervisors because the supervisors understand the issues that concern female students. Chapman and Sork (2001) support this notion and write that female students who have male supervisors do not have “the same opportunity to ‘bond’ over a beer or at a hockey game” (p. 101). They hold that female students are not afforded the same opportunities to have close personal relationships with male supervisors, as would a male student. This suggests a certain (acknowledged) stereotype that may not be the case. It infers that as a female, I would enjoy shopping with my students, which I do not, and that I do not watch hockey and drink beer, which I do.
As a mother, I am aware of the difficulties women face when trying to write a thesis and at the same time, manage a young child. However, my colleague, a sleep-deprived father of two toddlers, may have greater insight.

Research indicates that female supervisors provide more psychosocial help to female students than to male students and that male supervisors provide less psychosocial help than their female counterparts. (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). They found that male students published more with their supervisors than did women across all disciplines. Other studies suggest that supervisor’s gender makes little difference because senior female faculty members gained entrance into the academy and thrived there because they share the same values as their male counterparts (Smeby, 2000).

For Chapman and Sork (2001), the issue is not simply the lack of buddy relationship, but that these relationships bring with them access to power. This is a problem in the life sciences where studies show women are provided less funding, given less access to elite laboratories, and that women with children are less likely to be hired for tenure track positions than men with children (Sheltzer & Smith, 2014). Women are underrepresented in prestigious laboratories. Sheltzer and Smith found that elite male faculty employ fewer female graduate students, but found no comparable gender bias in elite labs supervised by female scientists. However, with fewer women receiving the faculty positions there are fewer opportunities for female graduate students to have female supervisors.

This same vicious cycle is reflected in discussions about how race impacts student-supervisory relationships. It is a well documented fact that faculty of color are vastly underrepresented in most programs (Felder & Barker, 2013; Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). This paucity of diversity means students have few choices of supervisors. Students of color report racial discrimination and perceive the exclusion in the life of a department (Felder & Barker, 2013). Doctoral students of color note that faculty inaccessibility is a barrier to forming meaningful and effective connections with the faculty (Felder & Barker, 2013). They receive less research and teaching assistantships than their white counterparts (Felder et al., 2014). Some students report faculty members do not support their research when it involves racial or cultural topics. Perhaps the faculty member had no background in understanding of the work, or as reported by Felder et al., there was an “endemic departmental insensitivity and racial stereotyping” (p. 36). Having same race peers and faculty as support is important.
It is clear there is a systemic problem that prevents faculty diversity, starting with faculty discriminating against perspective students. Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh (2013) conducted an experiment to determine if gender and racial bias started before students were admitted to graduate programs. Their study involved 6500 randomly selected professors from 258 institutions in 89 disciplines across the United States. The researchers sent each professor an email request from a fictional prospective student for an informal meeting to discuss their doctoral program. All emails were identical except for the student’s name, which was validated to signal gender and race (p. 5). They found that professors were more likely to respond to Caucasian males than to women and students of color. Asian students experienced the most bias, with Asian women experiencing the worst discrimination. Discrimination is more extreme in higher paying disciplines and in private institutions. Business disciplines exhibited the most bias, whereas Fine Arts exhibited a reverse bias. Milkman et al. (2013) found that perceived minority students received a better response from professors from the same background.

The emergence of the professional doctorate degree has highlighted how age may impact the supervision relationship (Malfroy, 2005). Students who return to graduate study after extensive professional careers may find it difficult to work with a younger supervisor who has less field experience, even when the supervisor is deemed to be an expert in their field. These students may sense that theory and practice are disconnected and may rely on their own experience to argue points. Malfroy, in her ethnographic study of a research centre that focused on environmental health, management and tourism, found that some of the 11 doctoral students who were assigned there reported feeling awkward about their status as students in contrast to their status in their work place. According to Malfroy, these professionals are “having a profound impact in altering traditional hierarchal models of expert/novice” (p. 166).

Clearly, gender, race, sexual orientation, culture, religion, age, and a host of other factors affect the student-supervisory relationship, and the ideal supervisor may not exist. Before selecting a supervisor, it is vital to know that they are supportive of students and respect them. Is the supervisor open and interested to learn about their students’ cultures and values? Or does the potential supervisor appear to be sexist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise unethical? The student-supervisor relationship is long-term and intense, and often lasts beyond the completion of the degree. It is worth taking the time to find the right supervisor.
FINDING THE “JUST RIGHT” SUPERVISOR

Students applying a focused approach are utilizing an essential tool for being admitted to the program of their choice. A well-crafted letter introduces the writer and demonstrates that she or he is familiar with the potential supervisor’s research. This familiarity goes beyond the key words listed on websites or articles. The writer must also demonstrate, and not simply state, that there is a clear match in research interests. They need to do their homework by searching out and reading many publications by the professor. An extensive literature search can provide information about a potential supervisor’s research topic and research methods. It is not a good idea to rely solely on a program’s websites for accurate information because faculty profiles are notoriously out of date and incomplete. Some of the busiest professors do not update their profile.

Letters should be formal and accurately address the professor by his or her title. The title of “Dr.” is preferred, if the person indeed holds a doctorate degree. “Professor” is used for those holding terminal degrees, such as MFAs. Letters must be free of typos and grammatical errors. This is especially the case concerning the professor’s name. Pay particular attention to details, such as capitalization and spelling. For example, the well-known American educator, feminist, and author bell hooks should never be addressed as Bell Hooks.

If at all possible, establish a relationship with a potential supervisor before committing to a program of research. This relationship can start with a letter of introduction from a current professor, or a request to visit the school. For students seeking a master’s degree, professors who teach undergraduate courses can provide suggestions of leading programs and researchers in their field. Potential doctoral students who are seeking a new direction or wish to relocate may rely on their Master’s thesis supervisor for advice. Their current supervisor may be active in the field and can suggest some colleagues with whom the student might work.

Research conferences are good places to make contact with a potential supervisor. However, graduate students flock to popular researchers like groupies to a rock star. At the end of a presentation, students rush to the podium and surround the professor. It is best to contact the professor in writing before a conference, introduce yourself, and ask for a brief appointment at the professor’s convenience during the conference. The best idea is to visit the campus and meet with several faculty members. Many programs
hold annual graduate symposia, which would provide opportunities to meet
students enrolled in the program, as well as many faculty members. If travel
to the university is too costly, at least potential students should attempt a
meeting through videoconferencing.

Students who are admitted to programs before selecting a supervisor
have many advantages over those who must have a supervisor before being
admitted. The ideal situation allows students to take courses with several
faculty members. Here, students can learn a great deal by noting how
professors interact with all students, how long they take to give feedback and
the nature of the feedback.

For students who are already in programs and seeking supervisors,
a commonly offered recommendation is to ask other students’ advice.
Collectively, students know a great deal about the supervisors in their
program. Each student may know something, and together they can paint an
accurate picture of a supervisor’s style. Fellow students can provide valuable
information if asked the right questions. When asking another student about
his or her supervisor, first ask yourself, “Am I like this person?” Students’
needs differ. A good question is not, “Do you like this professor?” but rather,
“Do you like working with him or her?” This is vitally important for students
who will work for extended periods in labs along side their professors and
other students supervised by the professor. In particular, doctoral students
who completed their Master’s degree at the same institution are valuable
resources. Asking if they remained with their same supervisor is helpful. If
not, ask why they changed.

It should be noted that when students seek advice in this fashion, they are
usually limited to speaking to the more successful students. Students, who
have quit out of discouragement and exasperation are not likely to be found
on campus. It is useful to take note of which professors are busy. Students, it
is said, vote with their feet, and are likely to avoid undesirable supervisors.
To use another metaphor, an empty restaurant is likely to either serve bad
food or offer poor service. On the other hand, high profile researchers who
are in demand as supervisors may not be able to provide their students with
personal attention. A GPD may be able to provide information about how
many students a potential supervisor is carrying, how this compares to other
supervisors in the same program, and how long it takes students to graduate
under his or her tutelage.

For additional information, students can read theses of other graduate
students supervised by the potential supervisor. Nearly all universities require
graduating students to post their theses online. If at all possible, search the
literature to see how many of the supervisor’s master students later went on to Ph.D. programs, noting if they continued at the same university, and if so, whether or not they continued to work with the same professor.

*Supervisors to Avoid*

When I asked my colleagues what kind of supervisor students should avoid, they consistently mentioned the unavailable faculty member. According to them, these professors are interested only in their own careers and their projects. They do not take the time or see it as their responsibility to mentor students. One colleague noted that these supervisors make students “data slaves” and “jerk students from project to project.” However, no one I interviewed could tell me how a student would know who to avoid. Program politics are well known among faculty, but not publicly discussed. Mumby (2012) suggests asking advice from graduate program directors, but they are members of the program and may not be willing to speak badly of their colleagues.

In order to know if the faculty member is available to help the students he or she supervises, one needs to consider what “available” means to all concerned. Do students work well on their own, or do they need to see their supervisor 15 times a day? Does the supervisor see it as his or her responsibility to ensure that students work consistently and meet deadlines? Or, does the supervisor expect graduate students to work independently? Is timely feedback provided on drafts? Will the supervisor read drafts of presentations and papers for publication? Are opportunities provided for their students to co-publish or co-present? Partnerships between students and their supervisors work best when there is a match between the student’s expectations and the professor’s supervisory style.

*Co-Supervision*

Students who choose an assistant professor as their supervisor are advised to ask a more established professor to co-supervise. Some programs require compulsory co-supervision for inexperienced supervisors to ensure a common supervision culture is maintained. Some require students to name a secondary supervisor for continuity should the primary supervisor not be able to see the student to completion. Not all programs recognize co-supervision and require that only one faculty member serves as the primary supervisor. At the very least, having two professors supervise research ensures the student
will have someone familiar with his or her work in place in the event the assistant professor be denied tenure or takes a maternity or paternity leave.

It is important to establish a working relationship with both supervisors and a clear agreement on how to proceed. Otherwise, one has two supervisors to satisfy. Both may read and offer feedback of drafts, but the feedback may not be consistent between the advisors. Progress may be delayed because it may take twice as long to get feedback because each reads the thesis independently, and then must find time to meet to compare notes. It is possible neither will provide feedback, thinking the other has done so. They may have competing ideas about research methods or topics, and the student is placed in an unfortunate position of having to choose the direction. Co-supervision works best when supervisors have a track record of working together. Before committing to co-supervision, note how many times the two professors have supervised together. If professors in the program frequently co-supervise, this usually means the above issues most likely have been resolved.

The Thesis Committee

In addition to having a primary supervisor, many programs also require students to have an advisory committee. This usually consists of the supervisor and two or three other members. The other members can be from the same program or from other related programs. In some cases, faculty members from other universities may be invited to sit on thesis committees. Forming a committee should be done in consultation with one’s supervisor. Supervisors will suggest people with whom they have worked in the past and who hold similar ideas about thesis research. Supervisory groups can remedy certain problems inherent in the close student and supervisor relationship, but that they can also create problems. Committee members do not always agree on the direction research should take or provide consistent assessment of the thesis. It is important that supervisors be able to advocate for their students. Untenured faculty members may be hesitant to disagree with a senior member who is in a position to vote against their tenure.

It is important to learn program protocol concerning how committees function. In some cases, all research is carried out with the supervisor and the committee serves as the examining committee. In other cases, students can consult committee members throughout the research process. When asking faculty members to serve on the committee, consider what expertise or role will be expected from them. What do they bring to the topic or research methodology? It is important to meet with and discuss research interests
with potential committee members. Time is a professor’s most valuable commodity so ensure that it is not wasted. One professor I interviewed spoke of meeting with a student, but not receiving any follow up correspondence. This professor was surprised to find herself summoned to a committee meeting, and as a result, declined to serve. Another was under the impression he was serving on committee only to discover some time later that another colleague had replaced him. If after meeting, it is determined this professor is not a good fit for the committee, be polite, and send a thank you letter. In some cases, committee members must excuse themselves, and students may need to find replacements. In other words, avoid burning bridges. The first thing the committee will review is your thesis proposal. The next chapter focuses on this essential piece of your thesis plan.

NOTE

1 This is a quote from the twitter site, Shit Academics Say. The quote is “Academic life is less like a box of chocolate and more like a pie eating contest where the prize is more pie.” https://twitter.com/academicssay/status/542416581561573378