

GRADUATE SUPERVISION GUIDELINES Faculty Edition



Section 5: Supporting Students to Completion and Beyond

When a student has met all of the program requirements and the research phase has been completed, they are then confronted with the task of writing the dissertation. For some students (and supervisors) this can be a stressful time, particularly if expectations have not been clarified earlier on. Below are some general guidelines that may assist both students and supervisors through the final phases of the research degree.

Completing the first draft of a thesis is challenging for many students. The typical experience of "writer's block" may be compounded with a fear of failure, a reluctance to share their work with others, a lack of experience in writing, through apparently excessive and sometimes contradictory demands of supervisory committee members, or a host of other reasons.

Much has been written on the writing process (and this is by no means a comprehensive list); however, here are a few guiding principles that may help your student through the final stages of their PhD:

- Supervisors should help their students understand that the thesis is a transient stage in scholarly development. While it is required for the degree, it is not (nor should it be) the culmination of an academic career. Optimally, it should be of a quality and quantity sufficient for a clear acceptance at the Final Oral Examination so the student can earn the degree and move on to the next stage(s) of their career.

- Help your students understand that the thesis is a transient stage in scholarly development.
- Encourage your students to start writing early and often.
- Be aware of and encourage your students to make use of the numerous resources available on and off campus to help with writing.
- Let your student know when to expect feedback and alert them as soon as possible if circumstances require the need for more time.

- Supervisors should encourage their students to start writing early and often. Writing a thesis is much easier if started early and if writing is a regular part of the student's academic work. Particularly in the sciences, much of the work may have been written up and published during the program as scholarly articles. Due to the fact that these publications are usually briefer and more constrained, and frequently multi-authored, they may be less intimidating to produce and provide valuable learning experiences for the student. Indeed, more and more, theses are becoming compilations of published material with added introductory and concluding chapters.
- Supervisors should be aware of and encourage their students to make use of the numerous resources available on and off campus to help with writing. The [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication \(GCAC\)](#) programs operated by SGS can be a particularly helpful resource. [Academic Success](#) on St. George campus, UTSC's [Academic Advising & Career Centre](#) and UTM's [Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre](#) provide useful workshops and assistance for graduate students on campus, including regular writing groups that students can take part in.

Constructive feedback on thesis drafts is an important role the supervisor has in promoting timely completion of the degree. Ideally, the supervisory committee should also be available to read and comment on later drafts of the thesis. It is best if the supervisor and student have a discussion early on in the program about what the student can expect in terms of turn-around time so that everyone's expectations are met. Students should provide the supervisor with sufficient warning before drafts are submitted and allow sufficient time for the supervisor to read it and provide comments.

Supervisors have a responsibility to provide feedback within a reasonable amount of time. What is a "reasonable amount of time" is difficult to define, but normally should be defined in days or weeks and not in months. It will depend on the supervisor's other commitments, how lengthy the draft is, and how much it has changed from previous versions.

Being away on research leave should not prevent a supervisor from reading drafts or signing off on the final version of the dissertation. These documents can be sent electronically. In those cases where it does produce a problem, an alternate acting supervisor should be found. Additionally, if drafts have been read and comments acted upon, reading of the final version should be possible within two or three weeks of submission at most.

Graduate Professional Development and career preparation

As a supervisor, you have many opportunities to support your students in their professional and career development. Beyond assisting your graduate students with networking opportunities, conference presentations and preparing their research for publication, supervisors can play an important role in helping to shape the future of their graduate students.

The many graduate professional skills offerings at the University, including the Graduate Professional Skills program at SGS, offer many learning opportunities throughout the year. GPS focuses on building skills beyond those conventionally learned within a disciplinary program, skills that may be critical to success in the wide range of careers that graduates enter, both

within and outside of academia. The program can help students to communicate better, plan and manage their time, learn entrepreneurial skills, understand and apply ethical practices, and work effectively in teams and as leaders.¹

Career Centres on all three campuses ([St. George](#) | [UTM](#) | [UTSC](#)) provide a wealth of services for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. In helping your students prepare for their future, supervisors should encourage graduate students to attend the events and programs offered by [Career Exploration & Education](#), including the [Flexible Futures series](#) designed specifically for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows. The Flexible Futures program includes support for faculty work searches, as well as non-academic career options. In addition to the services that are offered to graduate students while they are enrolled at the University, the services (events, programs, workshops, and appointments) at career centres are available to alumni for two years after their convocation.

Supervisors and graduate units can also work with tricampus career centres to create customized programming for groups of students, alumni, and postdocs. This partnership can include co-creating and co-delivering tailored content. For instance, [Career Exploration & Education](#) has partnered with several departments and faculties to deliver academic dossier creation and review sessions, as well as developing and delivering transition panels or sessions.

Teaching Development

For those looking to pursue careers within the academia, the [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation](#) (St. George Campus) and the [Centre for Teaching & Learning](#) (Scarborough Campus) can help prepare your students for an academic career, and provides many opportunities for graduate students to share teaching resources with their peers. The Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation is home to the [Teaching Assistants' Training Program \(TATP\)](#). Through the TATP program, graduate students can take part in a number of workshops related to teaching or register in the two certificate programs in undergraduate teaching preparation. These certificate programs include an introductory-level certificate in Teaching Fundamentals (TF), as well as a certificate in [Advanced University Teaching Preparation \(AUTP\)](#).

Not all students will end up pursuing an academic career, nor would they necessarily want to. Supervisors should actively encourage students to explore the broad range of career options available to them and encourage them to obtain the skills and knowledge that will optimize their opportunities to enter those careers that the student is interested in.

Notes

1. School of Graduate Studies, "Professional Development: Graduate Professional Skills Program." University of Toronto, 2016. Retrieved from:

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Professional-Development.aspx>