

## Best Practices for Graduate Students

**Introduction:** When you go from being an undergraduate to a graduate student a lot of things change. The onus of professional responsibility shifts to you as the student-scholar. The burden of staying on track and doing self-motivated work is the responsibility of the student. Although you can always ask your advisors for guidance, you are expected to understand the etiquette and rules of graduate life, and relationships with your faculty. If you don't go to a new school between the undergraduate and Master's level it is especially challenging to avoid falling into the habits of undergraduate status. Here are some guidelines for best practices (note these are not hard and fast rules in most cases, but nevertheless represent how most situations should be handled):

1) You should be doing work on your thesis/thesis project at all times from the start to the end of your degree, regardless of whether you are enrolled in thesis credits or not. Enrolment in thesis credits is designed to give students extra time to focus on finishing a thesis, and is a means to stay enrolled while moving one's effort to more research and fewer formal classes. In thesis credits, part of what you are securing by being enrolled is the opportunity to access all of the university's resources (library, databases, inter-library loan, collections access, international visa status [if applicable], financial aid, scholarships, eligibility for program fellowships, time during which you can do your own work, and access to advising as needed).

2) It is your job to seek out an appropriate thesis advisor. You need to choose a main advisor who represents the primary disciplinary focus of your proposed thesis field/topic. If you plan to write a thesis on a musicology topic, for instance, you would need a musicologist. Obviously whatever you choose needs to fall within the expertise of the faculty who are willing to serve as your main advisor in the program. Secondary advisors may or may not be closely related to your field, and you may invite guest advisors to complement your main advisor's area. Be advised that picking your advisor and changing your advisor may mean adjusting or changing your thesis topic. It is generally considered academically irresponsible for programs to allow students to work in areas with inadequate expertise represented in their main advisor's areas of scholarship.

3) It is your responsibility to come up with your thesis topic. Your advisor cannot tell you which area(s) in which your professional interests should lie. The point of going to graduate school is to study an area of interest to you at an advanced research level. In this case research means whichever thesis or project work is needed to fill the program's requirements. Finding your own topic doesn't mean that your advisor cannot help you refine it, talk through it, etc., but it is your responsibility to come to the table with ideas that you believe represent original scholarship.

4) You will need the support of your main advisor in almost all things. Do not proceed with any steps in your thesis completion, or arrange committee meetings, etc., unless you have had clearance from your main advisor to do so. Since your main advisor needs to be at all such events in order to defend your work, his/her schedule must be prioritised when scheduling such events, although all committee members must be included in all

committee meetings. Generally it is not a good idea to proceed with a defence unless your main advisor has given you approval to do so.

5) If you have concerns, complaints, or other problems with your main or secondary advisors, it is your responsibility as a professional, and as per the Rackham Graduate School guidelines that apply to this program, to talk to your advisor individually before taking further action. Professionalism includes knowing the appropriate contexts to discuss your concerns with others, and with whom this might be appropriate. If after meeting in person with your advisor, and pursuing whichever modifications you both have agreed upon in your professional relationship, you are still dissatisfied, you should talk to your advisor again to make this known, and then consider meeting with the Program Director if additional change or action is required. The Program Director is obliged to have you try to work things out with your advisor directly first, so unless you can demonstrate that this has been attempted, his/her first advice should be to address the concerns with your advisor first. Changing a committee member will also require completion of the committee change request form.

6) Terminating an advising relationship with a secondary advisor should be discussed with your main advisor first, since unforeseeable consequences should be reviewed before you make a change.

7) If you have exhausted consultation with your advisor (main or secondary), and with the Program Director, and you wish to change advisors, you have the right to request a change. However, the following circumstances apply:

- a) You may need to change or revise your topic if the expertise of the main advisor, or the faculty on your committee, changes.
- b) It is your responsibility to promptly and respectfully communicate your decision to your advisor (main or secondary).
- c) The program faculty will have to review your thesis topic and committee membership and re-approve the new configuration.
- d) You are responsible for any delays caused in your degree progress by changes to your committee membership or thesis topic. You are also responsible for the rate at which you finish your course and thesis work.
- e) Note that whether or not you change thesis advisors, instructor assignments to thesis credits are not something that can be modified. Once you register with an instructor for thesis credits, he/she must provide the assessment of your progress that semester in the course.
- f) The program is not obliged to approve committee membership changes.

8) During enrolment in thesis credits and independent studies, the following apply:

- a) Thesis credits are designed to allow for a more intensive phase of thesis work. For a 3-credit course, you should be spending a minimum of 10-12 hours per week on your thesis, in addition to the 3-4 hours per week you'd normally be doing (at a minimum) without being enrolled in ADM 600.

b) In graduate studies, for both thesis credits and independent studies, this level of work is initiated by you, and it is your responsibility to keep your momentum going throughout the semester.

c) Your advisor will be available to meet as often as you need to, but unlike in undergraduate studies, it is generally the student's responsibility to indicate when meetings are needed. However, if your advisor recommends a meeting you should obviously comply. The frequency of your meetings will therefore depend on what kind of student you are, how much time you have for meetings, and how well you communicate your needs to your advisor.

d) When you come to meetings you need to be prepared with a list of things you need to discuss, and a general ability to provide a progress update on your work. If you haven't done any work since your prior meeting, it is probably not yet time to meet again, unless you are stuck on something.

9) Here are some guidelines for expecting communications and work from your advisor:

a) Do not submit drafts/work expecting immediate turnaround, unless your advisor has offered this. Since your advisor will typically not know when you are going to submit something, he/she will likely have other things to wrap up before he/she can concentrate on your drafts/work. Remember that your advisors do thesis advising on a nearly entirely voluntary basis--meaning that it is in addition to all of their existing responsibilities in teaching, research, and service at the university.

b) It is your responsibility to provide the work in the format that your advisor prefers. If this is hard copy then provide it. If this is a word document then provide it. It is a good idea to discuss with your advisor the level of editing accepted before turning something in. However, as a general rule you shouldn't turn anything in if it is not something you wouldn't submit to be graded in a class assignment. If needed, have your peers or people at the writing centre help you edit. Use the tool requested by your advisor to edit your work.

c) Your advisor is responsible for judging/editing your writing style, research methodology, and subject matter. Each advisor has a different way of covering these areas, and it is your responsibility to adapt to his/her methods. He/she will often radically edit both your writing and content. You should comply unless you have compelling reasons not to make the changes. It is part of the learning experience to discuss your differences of opinion on editing, etc. with your advisor, so don't be afraid to point out when you disagree with a suggestion.

d) Ideally you should consult with your main advisor before submitting drafts to your secondary committee members.

### **How will I be graded on thesis-credit courses?**

Generally (unless otherwise specified), this directed research is assessed through your advisor's evaluation of how much progress you made in the semester enrolled. To an extent, the expected progress will vary from student to student depending on his/her timeline of completion. Your advisor will discuss with you at the beginning of your semester how far you need to get in your thesis/project in order to achieve your graduation goals.