

HOW TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL COMMITTEE MEETING

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Disclosures

- No conflicts of interest

Committee Meetings

- Key for monitoring progress of graduate students in thesis-based programs
- Ideally, the meetings are helpful to all attendees

Supervisory Committee Duties

- Section 4.4 of Graduate calendar
- Assist with planning approval of student's courses, research, thesis proposal
- Track, guide and formally evaluate progress (committee meeting reports)
- Depending on program, may engage in other activities (e.g., comprehensive examination)
- Act as internal examiners of the thesis & final oral defence

Committee Meetings

- These meetings are the key opportunity to:
 - Document your progress and think deeply about your project
 - Forum to communicate about your work (written, oral)
 - Successes, challenges, struggles
 - Time spent on task is a key predictor of performance
 - Meetings become easier if you are continuing to present your work in other settings and if you are writing up your research as you go along
 - Research meetings
 - Scientific conferences
 - Publications

PhD Committee Meetings

- University wide expectations (Masters committees – similar roles)
- Track date (completion or expected completion) of comprehensive requirement
- Track research ethics approval
- Field trips (if relevant)
- Component to be completed by student
 - Details of progress made towards completing degree
 - Courses
 - Comprehensive
 - Thesis proposal
 - Research
 - Chapters written/revised
 - Conference presentations
 - Publications
 - Other program requirements

PhD Committee Meetings (cont'd)

Supervisor's report on progress

Committee's assessment of progress and recommendations, including specific goals, areas for improvement

Thoughts on Committee Meetings

- These meetings are a key opportunity to:
 - Get expert input and opinions from faculty who have important and relevant knowledge (don't exclude getting guidance from other mentors)
 - committee meetings are essential to define and refine goals and objectives of graduate work as graduate students progress
 - Help ensure that an Masters or PhD project isn't overly ambitious
 - Time frames to do the thesis work are realistic
 - If students are encountering unanticipated challenges or difficulties, the meeting is an excellent opportunity to get more guidance and reappraise what are now realistic expectations (such as what will the student do for the next meeting)
 - Need to plan timing of next meeting, transfer (if relevant), permission to write up thesis

Know the Expectations to Properly Prepare

- 1) Program level – see handbook for helpful guidance on the expectations of written and oral components of your committee reports (e.g., page limits, references, figures, length of oral presentations, recommended literature)
- 2) Student networking
 - An example of a prior student's report can be really helpful
- 3) Spend time with your supervisor, going over what they expect, what they will offer to support you as you prepare
 - Student – faculty discussion framework can help
- 4) Your committee members might also offer to help
 - McMaster has ONE primary supervisor but sometimes committee members will supervise certain components – don't be afraid to ask!

Supervision guidelines for graduate activity

- Helpful information, posted at gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/resources/graduate-supervision/
- Outline expectations about commitments, importance of communicating with your supervisor to meet timelines and deadlines, need to manage your time, preparation for meetings
- Offer guidance for what to do if you have concerns about your supervision
- Emphasize importance of collaboration, communication, respect, seeking guidance, timely (not immediate) responses from your supervisor and committee
- Importance of acting ethically, honestly and safely in graduate work
- Links to regulations for more details

Students should expect to spend a lot of time on their committee report and presentation

- Committee meetings are key milestones
- Shouldn't do a rushed job
 - Talking to other students about how far in advance they prepare can be helpful
 - This should be a major focus of your graduate work!

My personal style of guiding

- Discuss who to invite to be on a student's committee with them before I invite faculty to be on a committee
- I offer my own students extensive feedback on their first report before other committee members see it (need lead time in case extensive editing is needed)
 - I will edit their draft once, highlighting what is great, what needs improvement
 - Subsequent meetings: willing to discuss broad issues to help them prepare
 - Its their report.....I don't offer to do any editing before they share their report with their committee

My personal style of guiding (cont'd)

- Support the “dry run”
 - Helpful for students to present to their research group a dry run of their slides for their upcoming committee meeting (or defense)
 - Encourages them to be concise and informative
 - Helps students prepare to be questioned
- Presentation
 - Needs to focus on important issues
 - If decisions need to be made, highlight them
 - Cannot possibly cover all figures and details of the written report

Always include key elements

- Key background information
- Hypothesis/research question
 - Aims, sub-aims
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussion

What's the research question?

- Make sure your hypothesis is testable and that it is addressing a question of importance
- Ask if you can improve the question so that your research will have greater impact/relevance
- Sometimes questions need to be revised as the research evolves.....

Hypothesis

- Needs to be testable
- Should build upon important, unanswered questions
- Doesn't matter if your hypothesis turns out to be right or wrong...

Don't overlook key methodological issues

- Sample size considerations
- Sample size calculations
- Choice of best statistics or other analytics

Expect to spend a lot of time on your committee report and presentation

- Need to give in depth consideration of:
 - Background knowledge
 - Key issues to address (stating these can be both art and science)
 - Set the stage....
 - Framing your question(s)
 - Keep them simple, clear
 - Complement with specific aims, subaims
 - Developing a research plan, with rational lines of investigation, proposed methodologies
 - State your progress with learning the methodologies
 - Gathering and summarizing data
 - Think about what your findings means, what new knowledge your work is contributing to the field, what you should do next, any new questions you want to tackle
 - YOU SHOULD ENJOY DOING THIS WRITING!

Whenever possible, start thinking in publication quanta.....

- Will your work produce one publication (reasonable for a Master's...might just be your thesis) or multiple publications (that takes careful planning...)?
- Look carefully at what papers in that field typically contain
- As you go along, try to create figures and figure legends that are comparable to what your field publishes as that is great for your reports, thesis and publications!
- Keep about what journals you will likely submit your work to
 - Top choice, second choice
- If you are publishing papers and abstracts, they can become the most important way to track your progress for committee reports

The best advice that gets ignored

- Work on integrating the work you are doing for committee meeting with preparing your thesis
- Start writing your thesis in your first term and spend considerable time on it, every term
 - Won't have that awful hurdle to the end.....avoids procrastination...

The best advice that gets ignored

Initial focus: in-depth review of the literature

- Want to be aware of important information (and have a good understanding of the field) in advance of planning and doing experimental work
- Narrative is longer in your thesis than in a committee meeting document
- You might want input early on topics that you need to review in depth to set the stage for your thesis work
- Some programs formalize this
 - If yours doesn't, that doesn't mean you can't talk to your committee about wanting to have this as one of your own goals
 - Could you turn this work into a great review article for your field?

The best advice that gets ignored

Getting all the right details into your methods

- Helpful for planning and documenting, regardless of whether you are doing a traditional or sandwich style thesis.
- Get those needed details as you go long (e.g., details of suppliers of reagents, organizing and documenting appropriate references for the methods you are using)
- Some projects are **plan plan plan plan plan then do** (e.g. clinical trial studies)
- Others are **plan do plan do plan do plan do plan do** (e.g., many wet lab projects)
- *Be careful to analyze data as you go along (don't want a nasty surprise)*

The best advice that gets ignored

Summarizing and synthesizing results

- Prepare tables and graphs that are publication quality as you go along
 - If you are preparing figures for publication, harmonize your efforts
 - Look at author guidelines for figure preparation early!
- Describe the results, but also think carefully about what they mean, how they fit into the big picture of your project and what is going on in the field
- Think carefully about the best ways to analyze and present your findings
- Ask constantly: are there major strengths and/or major limitations to my data/approach? Is there a better way?
 - Better to make quick and timely adjustments
- Think carefully about the best statistical approach (and understand the rationale)

The best advice that gets ignored

Discussion of your work

- If you are publishing papers for a sandwich thesis as you go along, you will indeed work on this as you go along
 - Unlike a paper, a thesis can discuss several chapters of results in the discussion
 - It is better to look at what may be relevant in the literature early, not late
- Simultaneous work on the discussion sections of your committee reports, papers and thesis can optimize use of your time
- Challenge yourself
 - Can my reports and thesis include visuals - models, tables or diagrams – including in the discussion?
 - Identify important unanswered questions, given the new knowledge you generated or new knowledge that has emerged during the work on your thesis

marginal or unsatisfactory meetings

- It isn't like getting an F on a course (it won't show on your transcript) but to succeed, you need to pay careful attention and get back on track to succeed
 - Potential for “two strikes and you're out”
 - Look carefully at the rules in Graduate Calendar and your Program Handbook
- Look carefully at the written guidance from the meeting
 - It is hard to remember all of the oral feedback
 - Verify with your committee that all of the key points that they feel you need to address for satisfactory progress are articulated in the written report
 - Can you make a plan or checklist to address each/all issues? Consider making a timeline. Review the feedback/progress regularly!
 - Make sure follow up meetings are scheduled
 - Meet with your supervisor
 - Did the committee suggest that you seek help from other persons for certain issues?

Being proactive with recommendations for improvement, particularly after a marginal or unsatisfactory report

- The academic head of your program (or program area) might be able to give you additional guidance
 - You or your committee might want to recommend that they attend your next committee meeting
 - If your committee doesn't require it, you may want this extra support
 - If you are running into serious difficulty early, it is timely to reflect on your goals or reset your personal expectations
- Getting negative feedback can help you get back on track to finishing your degree and to getting your work published in important journals

Letting your Committee Know Your Personal Goals

- So you started off with a Masters....do you want to transfer? Ideally, you should be deciding early....
- If you are trying to get into another program (e.g., Medical School), think about timeline of when you have to have defended your degree...
 - Might want to have a committee meeting early that year
 - Committees are sometimes flexible – might give permission to write up after getting an update/summary of progress if the student had a full committee meeting recently that documented what was outstanding to complete

Acknowledgments