***Rights and Responsibilities of English MA/PhD Students and their Faculty Advisors.***

Productive working relations with faculty advisors are vital to the intellectual formation and professional development of graduate students. The direction provided by committed faculty advisors enables students to discover, design, and pursue their research, to navigate professional expectations, and to realize a sense of intellectual ownership in their work. For faculty advisors, working with graduates students is both intellectually and pedagogically rewarding.

There is no single formula for defining a productive advising relationship: faculty have different approaches to the work of advising, just as graduate students need different forms of guidance to learn and to flourish. A productive advising relationship, then, is premised on a match between mentoring and learning styles. The goal of this statement, then, is to not prescribe one particular approach, but rather to identify the basic conditions that should be met in order for *any* advising relationship to be sustaining and sustainable for all concerned.

Accordingly, this statement should be regarded as an outline of best practices and a framework for students and advisers to develop and sustain a productive working relationship. As such, it is meant to be read and *reread*. It will be shared with all new MA/PhD students during orientation and should be consulted again at the point of completing the “request to proceed to the PhD” form, which requires both students and faculty advisers to demonstrate that they have discussed a set of shared expectations regarding communication, deadlines, and feedback. Students and advisers are encouraged to revisit the statement as students complete exams and transition into English 800. Last but not least, if conflict arises in an advising relationship, this statement provides a basis for conversation about unmet needs or misaligned expectations.

The rights and responsibilities outlined below collate around three principles: responsiveness, dialogue, and mutual respect. But these terms do not have singular, unambiguous meanings. For that reason, ***any advising relationship should begin with a discussion of ground rules and expectations*** that lend specific content to these concepts. Such a discussion is absolutely essential to the relationship between the student and their committee chair, though students are encouraged to hold this conversation with all their committee members, as well as to revisit the ground rules with their chairs as they move through different phases of the program (for example, as they move from exam preparation to dissertation research). Issues to be addressed at the outset include:

* Frequency of contact: what is each party’s expectation of how often they touch base and in what form? What happens when scheduled check-ins are missed? (Please note that once a quarter should be considered a *minimum*.)
* How will work deadlines be established and communicated? Is the faculty member comfortable with the student setting their own deadlines, or do they prefer to set the deadlines collaboratively with the student? What happens when a deadline isn’t met?
* What constitutes a draft of work-in-progress? Is there a minimum length or degree of completeness that the faculty advisor requires before engaging with written work? How might the answer to this question vary at different phases of the project?
* What constitutes feedback? How might the answer to this question vary at different phases of the project?
* Given the faculty member’s teaching, mentoring, service, and research responsibilities, what do they consider a reasonable or average turn-around time on work submitted?
* Are there limits on the faculty member’s availability? Many faculty make themselves available to work with students year-round. However, like graduate students, most faculty are paid on a nine month basis and for that reason may choose to limit their availability over the summer months. Similarly, some faculty continue advising responsibilities when on sabbatical leave, while others need to protect the rarity of dedicated research time.
* Are there limits on the student’s availability? For example, many students work multiple or full-time jobs over the summer months and have little or no dedicated research time available, except in summers where they receive fellowship support.
* What are the student’s professional aspirations? Although these aspirations will likely evolve or even shift over time, the faculty member should be aware at the outset of what the student aspires to do with PhD in hand, as this outcome most certainly has a bearing on the kind of research and writing they might choose to pursue and the evaluative standards that should be brought to bear. (Indeed, this is a topic that students and advisors should revisit periodically, as professional goals assume more set and concrete shape.)

This opening dialogue should go a considerable way in assuring that the rights of students and faculty are honored and their responsibilities met. Over the course of an advising relationship, however, dialogue can be challenging: How does one communicate to a student reservations about the quality of their work, for example? How does one communicate to an advisor a felt need for more detailed feedback? Students and faculty can and do turn to peers for advice on such matters, but should also consider the Director of Graduate Studies to be a resource. A DGS has substantial experience with mentoring relationships and can offer concrete advice on how to balance candor with caring and respect. Seeking out advice from the DGS can be helpful in pre-empting more serious conflicts, and enabling students and advisors to de-escalate rising tensions.

The structure of this statement is symmetrical: a section on students and a section on faculty advisers, organized in such a way that student rights imply faculty responsibilities and faculty rights imply student responsibilities. However, it is important to note that the *stakes* in the advising relationship are *not equivalent* for faculty and for students: the consequences of a poor advising relationship (or a breakdown in that relationship) are simply not the same for the adviser and the student. Faculty generally have multiple advising relationships, and while faculty invest time and energy in mentoring, the success of any particular advising relationship is not critical to their own professional futures. For the student, on the other hand, the advising relationship is key to their professional development and dysfunction in that relationship may therefore raise serious apprehension about realizing their professional goals, or even about completing the degree. Even as the statement emphasizes reciprocity, it is vital that faculty remain sensitive and accountable to this power differential.

**Section One: The Student**

*Student Rights*:

1. Students have a right to expect timely answers from faculty advisors to all communications. (The definition of timely should be determined by the student and the faculty member at the outset of their working relationship. However, any communication should be at least *acknowledged* within a week of receipt, and if it requires further engagement or response, a timeline for further communication should be provided.)
2. Students have a right to expect a timely response on work submitted (based on prior agreement regarding turn-around time).
3. Upon submitting work, students have a right to discuss with faculty advisors the kind of feedback they would find most useful or productive.
4. The process of exam preparation and dissertation research sometimes involves being stuck. Students have a right to expect that faculty will meet with them and offer guidance and support as they work through such intellectual impasses.
5. Barring emergencies, limits on faculty availability should never come as a surprise. Within the boundaries of what can be foreseen, students have a right to know well in advance when circumstances may limit or delay a faculty member’s responsiveness.
6. Students have a right to know and to understand the standards to which they are being held, and to discuss these standards with faculty advisors if they perceive them to be unreasonable or counter-productive.
7. Students have a right to know when a faculty advisor believes they are not meeting expectations, or perceives other significant problems in their working relationship. Relatedly, students have a right to be informed if a faculty advisor has concerns about their preparation to pass the qualifying exam or dissertation defense. In all such instances, written notice should be provided to the student, along with an in-person meeting.
8. Students have the right to change advisors and/or to reconfigure their committee if their research interest shifts or the advising relationship proves consistently unproductive. Sometimes such a reconfiguration may occur by the mutual agreement of the advisor and the student and entail having another willing committee member step forward to chair, while the former chair remains as committee member. Sometimes a reconfiguration might involve removing a chair or committee member altogether. If a committee member is asked to step down, the committee chair might provide advice on how to proceed with the request. If a chair is being replaced, the DGS can provide guidance on how to approach the conversation and, if requested, may be present to mediate the exchange. While any changes to the student’s committee should always be carefully considered, students should also be aware that committee reconfigurations happen with some regularity. Such reconfigurations are not anomalous, nor do they carry any negative consequences for the student’s reputation.
9. Students have a right to expect professional and respectful conduct from faculty advisors at all *times*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Student’s Responsibilities:*

1. Students are responsible for timely replies to all communications from faculty advisors. (The definition of timely should be determined by the student and the faculty member at the outset of their working relationship. However, any communication should be at least *acknowledged* within a week of receipt, and if it requires further engagement or response, a timeline for further communication should be provided).
2. Students are responsible for regular communication with their advisors to update them on progress or on obstacles encountered– at a minimum, once per quarter. If work is stalled or delayed, communication is all the more important.
3. Students should seriously engage with their faculty advisor’s directions and comments on their work. Revisions of previously submitted work should reflect that engagement.
4. In constructing timelines for meeting benchmarks or completing the degree, students should build in adequate time for faculty to read and respond to their work.
5. Students are responsible for tracking application deadlines and requesting letters of recommendation as early as possible and well in advance of deadlines: three weeks’ notice should be considered a minimum. If preparing the letter of recommendation also entails that the faculty member read new work, early notification is essential.
6. Students should conduct themselves in a professional and respectful manner with faculty advisors at all times.

**Section Two: The Faculty Advisor**

*Faculty Rights*

1. Faculty advisors have a right to expect timely responses to all communications from their advisees. (The definition of timely should be determined by the student and the faculty member at the outset of their working relationship. However, any communication should be at least *acknowledged* within a week of receipt, and if it requires further engagement or response, a timeline for further communication should be provided.)
2. Faculty advisors have a right to expect regular updates on student progress (minimally, once per quarter).
3. Faculty advisors have a right to expect that students will consult with them on key changes to or developments in their research, and seriously engage their advice, as well as their comments on all written work.
4. Upon receiving student work and after consultation with the student, faculty advisors have a right to determine what kind of feedback is most appropriate given the nature or stage of the student’s project.
5. Faculty advisors should be afforded sufficient time to review and respond to student work in advance of impending benchmarks.
6. Faculty advisors should be afforded adequate time to write or to update letters of recommendation (at a *minimum*, three weeks).
7. Faculty advisors have a right to expect professional and respectful conduct from students at all times.

*Faculty Responsibilities*

1. Faculty advisors are responsible for responding to all student communications in a timely manner. (The definition of timely should be determined by the student and the faculty member at the outset of their working relationship. However, any communication should be at least *acknowledged* within a week of receipt, and if it requires further engagement or response, a timeline for further communication should be provided).
2. Faculty advisors are responsible for responding to student work in a timely manner (based on prior agreement regarding turn-around time).
3. The process of exam preparation and dissertation research sometimes involves being stuck. Faculty have a responsibility to meet with students and offer guidance and support as they work through intellectual impasses that are a part of the mentoring pedagogical process.
4. Within the limits of what can be foreseen, faculty are responsible for apprising their advisee well in advance when they will be unavailable to the student or only able to respond with delays. In cases when an advisor anticipates a longer period of unavailability (e.g, a sabbatical quarter or quarters), faculty are responsible for meeting with the student and developing a plan to ensure that such interruptions of the advising relationship will not negatively affect the student’s timely progress.
5. Faculty advisors are responsible for defining the criteria by which they evaluate a student’s work. They should be open to discussing the relevance of these criteria to the student’s intellectual commitments and professional goals.
6. Faculty advisors are responsible for communicating with a student in person and in writing if they feel the student is not meeting expectations. This includes the responsibility to communicate candidly if the advisor is not confident in a student’s ability to successfully complete exams or defend the dissertation. While faculty should make every effort to communicate such reservations with care and consideration, they should bear in mind that withholding criticism is not supportive when it means letting the student proceed unaware to an exam for which they may not be prepared. Students have a right to expect that they have the confidence of their advisors, and thus to know if their work has not elicited that confidence.
7. Faculty advisors should understand service on student committees as a long-term commitment and should not consider stepping off student committees (unless requested to do so by the student) without good and substantial reason, grounded in a student’s repeated failing to meet their responsibilities. A decision to resign from a student committee should be grounded in careful consideration of the impact on the student and on faculty colleagues who will be asked to assume an additional advising burden. Any decision to resign from a student committee should be discussed beforehand with the DGS.
8. The agreement to serve on a student committee entails supporting that student in efforts to secure funding (teaching appointments, grants, and fellowships) and professional employment. Thus faculty advisors have a responsibility to provide their students with letters of recommendation, as well as with guidance on matters of professionalization, including conferencing, submitting publications, and applying to academic positions.
9. Faculty advisors should conduct themselves in a professional and respectful manner with their students at all times.

***Mediating Conflict:***

It’s important to acknowledge that student and advisor alike typically have much invested in the advising relationships; sometimes frustrations can emerge, resentments develop, and tempers flare. In such instances, either/both the student and the advisor should immediately reach out to the Director of Graduate Studies, who can either step in to mediate the conflict, or assist in identifying an appropriate mediator. If either the student or the advisor does not feel comfortable going to the DGS, they may begin with the English Graduate Program Manager or another member of the Graduate Studies Committee. Alternately, or if these initial conversations do not offer resolution, the student or the advisor may contact the English Department Chair or the UW Office of the Ombud (<https://www.washington.edu/ombud/contactus/>). In any meeting with the DGS, the faculty advisor, and (or) the Department Chair for the purpose of conflict mediation, students are entitled to name and to bring to the meeting a peer advocate. The English Department Graduate Student Organization can provide a peer advocate to any students who request one.

1. We use the shorthand “professional and respectful” conduct to describe basic workplace norms: while disagreements are a normal part of any workplace, angry or aggressive speech or body language is always inadmissible. One may comment constructively on a person’s work, but the discussion or evaluation of personality is damaging and inappropriate. Privacy should be respected: no one should be required to divulge personal details, expect insofar as they feel comfortable doing so and the information is relevant to their working relationship. Especially in any supervisory relation, the boundary between the personal and professional should be respected: sharing news of life events (such as a marriage, for example, or travel plans, or a personal loss) is expected and appropriate, but students should not be placed in the position of being made confidants to intimate knowledge of their advisor’s private life that the advisor would not wish publicly shared.. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)