

# Talk to me: Good communication with your PhD supervisor / scientific advisor

By [Joanne Kamens](#)

Few scientists in the training stage are lucky enough to have the perfect advisor (aka PhD supervisor PI, boss). The reality is that most scientific advisors receive little to no training on how to be good mentors. You may want to take a look at a companion post to this one called "[Getting the Most Out of Supervisor Meetings](#)" but first, here are suggestions for approaching some common communication binds.

## What if my PhD supervisor / advisor won't find time to meet with me at all?

The first thing to realize is that you shouldn't take it personally. Your advisor is a busy person—probably even busier than you are. If she always comes late or often reschedules, remind yourself that this is the nature of her role and not a slight to you in particular. So now that you aren't so angry, here are a few things you can do.

Have you told your PhD supervisor / advisor how much you value these meetings? She may just need to hear that the meeting is important to you, and useful for you—she may be assuming you are relieved to meet less often!

Ask her if there is a way to have the meetings happen more reliably—is there a time of day or a schedule that would work better for her? Or, depending on her availability and flexibility, perhaps you could commit to a particular day without nailing down the time so there is a larger window to make them happen? But be careful, this strategy can backfire depending on the PI.

Finally, if your PhD supervisor has an Administrative Assistant—become his friend! This key person can help you schedule meetings that will really happen and can keep you apprised of openings. Ask the Administrative Assistant when the last meeting of the day is scheduled. Bring a paper, sit there reading it and wait for the last meeting to end.

Even if your advisor has to run out, you can usually talk with her while she packs up and rides the elevator. It might only be 10-15 minutes, but sometimes that is all you need. Alternatively, choose the very first meeting of the day. You may have to wait a few minutes before your advisor arrives, but bring a paper to read and be patient.

## My PhD supervisor / advisor never seems to be listening to me—what can I do?

It is just smart to tailor your presentation to the listener as much as possible. You need to learn what kind of information makes your advisor engaged and interested. Get advice from other lab members about what you can say and how you can present your data to get the most feedback and interest. If your advisor gets too caught up in the details, start bigger picture and work back to the raw data as necessary.

This is called “180 thinking” as in 180 degrees, a term coined by communications consultant [Susan Bates](#). As you prepare for the meeting, think about the questions you expect your advisor to ask. Write them down and prepare answers in writing. Practice your answers so you can be clear and concise when those or related questions come up.

## **What do I do if my supervisor is constantly checking email while we’re meeting?**

This is annoying and, in my opinion rude. Sadly, I hear this complaint all the time. The most you can do is to say, “Maybe we should talk another time if you are busy?” But in the end, try your best to ignore it and heaven forbid you should do the same thing — don’t bring your phone into the room with you at all.

## **What if my advisor makes me feel stupid every time we meet?**

You are not alone...many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows experience this regularly or occasionally. You should try to train yourself to enjoy talking with smart, experienced scientists and learn all you can from them. Keep in mind that the PI likely does not think you are stupid, even if his demonstration of knowledge, or lack of agreement with your ideas makes you feel that way. This is an important time to start building your own scientific self-confidence.

It is never ok for your advisor to be abusive or to undermine your efforts to grow and train. If you have an advisor that only provides cruel or demeaning feedback, you should probably try to move to a different lab. Better yet, do enough research to prevent choosing a supervisor like this (see my webinar [How to Choose Your Next Lab](#)). If it is too late or if your circumstances will not allow a change, then actively seek other mentors and collaborators to support your training.

## **How will I know if my supervisor is doing a good job communicating with me—what does a good advisor look like?**

Knowing what good advising with strong communication looks like can help you in a few ways. It will help you understand how to adjust your behavior and communication style to be more successful communicating with your supervisor. It will also help you understand what preparation you need to do to get ready to be a successful lab head. Finally, it might help you identify other mentors that can help you gain the skills you need to be a successful lab leader.

There are two excellent resources to learn more about good advising. The first is the [HHMI resource center](#) and in particular an outstanding resource called [Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty](#). The second is the [Publications & Resources](#) section on the National Postdoctoral Association website.