



Research Mentoring Institute

Getting the most from your mentor: a short guide

A good mentor can do much more than help you with course content or lab techniques; your mentor can guide you to valuable resources, offer you insights and understanding into the culture of the discipline, introduce you to important professional networks, and even alert you to funding opportunities.

In order to receive the best your mentor has to offer, however, you need to know how to be a good mentee. Sometimes all that means is showing up (actually going to office hours, for example!), and sometimes asking the right kind of questions and creating opportunities for your mentor to share her or his insights and knowledge.

Following are some tips to help you get the most out of your mentoring relationship.

Meeting with your mentor

- Initiate meetings with your mentor; either visit office hours or, if your schedule conflicts with regular office hours, ask for a standing appointment (either weekly or on alternate weeks). When possible, adjust your schedule to accommodate your mentor's, not the other way around!
- At the beginning of the mentoring relationship, communicate clearly and discuss your goals for your time together. Be sure to ask your mentor what kind of expectations she has of you, too.
- Respect your mentor's time by coming to your meetings prepared and leaving promptly.
- Take responsibility for keeping notes and creating a record of what is discussed at your meetings.
- Invest time in learning about the mentor's research. Read her or his faculty profile on the department website and familiarize your self with your mentor's publications.
- Honor any commitments made to the mentor. In other words, keep your appointments, show up on time, and turn in good work!
- Consider sending your mentor regular summaries of your progress (but keep them very brief unless she asks for more detail).

- Always be sure to express your appreciation for the mentor's time, counsel, and sharing of opportunities with you.

What should I say?

If you are working in someone's lab, there will probably be numerous things to ask about process and technique during office hours. Be sure you approach your mentor as a source of knowledge—and recognize that knowledge is different from information. In other words, seek explanations that deepen your understanding, not just quick answers.

You can also ask broad questions about the field of research (such as whether there are other labs working on similar projects).

You should also ask career-related questions—this is especially important for juniors and seniors applying to grad school. Here are some good examples :

- What are the best programs for graduate study in your field
- What are the important characteristics (personal traits/qualities) and skills (education and training) for someone entering this field?
- Are there minors/electives/special knowledge and skills that would be helpful in making myself more competitive?
- What has your educational and career path been like? (You can break this one down into smaller questions such as “Where did you do your graduate work?”, “Where was your first postdoc [or teaching position]?”, etc.)

And here are some more:

- How has the field changed since you first started your career?
- What trends and challenges for this field do you see the future?
- How important is it to have connections to industry?
- How do you get funding for your research?
- What professional associations or organizations are useful to belong to?
- What magazines, journals, and/or web sites are important to read in this field?
- What are the things you find personally rewarding in your career?
- What are the things you find frustrating or disappointing?

Don't overwhelm your mentor by asking all these questions in one sitting. Instead, find appropriate times to naturally weave the questions into your normal conversations.

Remember, the only “bad” question is the question that is not asked!