

Harvard Sociology Department

Doctoral Advising Conversation Guide

Drafted by the Working Group on Advising

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Goals of the Guide: Advising relationships are central to the doctoral student experience. To support successful communication, this conversation guide aims: to offer a sense of questions students might ask at different phases of the doctoral program, including questions they may not yet have considered; to normalize frank conversations between advisors and advisees; to provide a common departmental resource to encourage equal access to quality advising; and to give students examples of how to frame requests for support they might need.

The guide is meant to be a practical document, which doctoral students might consult at various stages of degree progress. We have provided a wide range of potential questions in recognition of students' varied needs, not because we expect that each student-advisor pair will work through each question. The guide should be considered a constructive springboard (not a one-size-fits-all checklist) for future advising conversations. Every advising relationship is unique, and students should feel free to customize their approaches. The guide is not exhaustive and includes duplicate questions—placed under different subheads or worded in different ways—reflecting the utility of some questions in multiple advising contexts.

Review of Contents: Mirroring, more or less, the doctoral student timeline from G1 year to job search, the guide begins with establishing advising relationships and then provides questions to consider when nearing major milestones, forming committees, and forging research collaborations. The guide concludes with questions around the job search and then offers trouble-shooting scripts for requesting support throughout the doctoral student journey.

We hope that this will be a living document. If you have suggestions for how the guide might be revised or expanded, please tell the DGS!

I. Establishing a Relationship with an Advisor

A. Expectations of Advisees

1. How often do you expect us to meet or be in touch [at student's current stage]?
2. What can I do to ensure our meetings are productive? (e.g., Do you want something in writing before the meeting? How soon before?)
3. Is there anything that "successful" advisees (i.e., those with whom you've had a productive working relationship) tend to do?
4. Do you have any advisee "pet peeves" I should know about?
5. Do you expect advisees to TF or RA for you in some capacity?
 - a. At what stage of the program do your students typically RA for you?
 - b. If I am interested in working for you as an RA, what can I do to increase the chance that happens? If you don't have RA positions available, do you mind if I pursue them with other faculty?
6. If either of us wants to modify our relationship, what's the best way to bring it up?

B. Logistics

1. How should I get in touch with you about setting up a meeting? (e.g., going through your assistant, emailing you directly, signing up for office hours)
 - a. Do you prefer a standing meeting (e.g., monthly), or to schedule meetings as needed?
2. How do you prefer to communicate (e.g., email, phone/Zoom, or in person) for...
 - a. Giving comments on written work?
 - b. Discussing a specific question about my research (e.g., where to submit a paper, a modeling strategy, a sampling decision)?
 - c. Brainstorming QP/dissertation ideas?
 - d. Career and professionalization discussions (e.g., what fellowships I should apply for, advice for applying for jobs, coursework and other training I should pursue)?
3. Are you okay with students stopping by your office without a meeting?
4. If I'd like you to provide written comments on a draft or write a letter of recommendation by a particular deadline, how much notice do you need?
5. How long do you typically take to respond to a draft/something I've asked you to read (if not tied to a specific deadline)?
6. How long should I wait to follow up if I haven't gotten a response to an email or request for written feedback?
7. If I have an urgent issue/question/deadline, what's the best way to reach you? (e.g., Is it ever okay to text, call, or drop by your office?)

8. If I'm asking for a letter of recommendation, what information and materials do you need from me? Will you send a confirmation when the letter is submitted? In what circumstances should I work with your assistant versus directly with you?
9. Do you control any student office space? If so, how do you allocate offices?
10. Is there anything I should know about your upcoming availability? (e.g., sabbatical, heavy administrative load, upcoming tenure decision)
11. When you are on leave, how will our advising relationship change? Is there anything I should do differently in how I communicate with you? Is it possible for us to meet regularly?
12. How do you typically work with students who are off campus for a semester or more?

C. Style/Philosophy

1. How do you understand your role as an advisor (or chair, or committee member)? What are your goals?
2. Do you consider yourself a more "hands-on" or "hands-off" advisor?
3. How does your advising style/approach change at various stages in the program (coursework, QP/dissertation, job market)?
4. Note to students: tell your advisor anything about your circumstances, preferences, and identity that you want them to know about up front. For example, it may be valuable to share your own communication preferences (email, in-person meetings, etc.) and to describe the sort of support and working relationship you're looking for in an advisor.

II. Progress, Funding, and Professional Development

- A. If I aim to graduate in 20XX, when do I need to hit particular program milestones (e.g., prospectus defense, submit a dissertation draft)? Does that seem feasible?
- B. What should I aim to produce this semester? (If no program milestones are coming up immediately)
- C. This semester, I'll be taking [required courses]. What other courses do you recommend I take this semester?
- D. I'm currently [describe current responsibilities: coursework, teaching, collaborative research, independent research, service, etc.]. How do you recommend I prioritize my time this semester?
- E. I have a lot of different research ideas, and I'm not sure yet what substantive topic / method I want to pursue. Is it time for me to start focusing? If yes, how can I make progress on that?
- F. Do you think I should submit to conferences this year? Which? What about presenting in workshops?
- G. I'm looking ahead to funding for the coming years.
1. In addition to [fellowships you know about], are there others I should apply for this year?
 2. I'd value your comments on my fellowship application materials before submitting them. The submission deadline is [date]. By when would you need to receive my materials?
 3. I plan to TF next semester. How should I think about ranking courses?
 4. I'd like to fund myself for a semester/year through RA work. What considerations should I keep in mind? How would I go about doing so?

III. *Preparing for Program Milestones / Forming Committees*

A. Early Stages of Research Idea Development

1. When do you like to weigh in on students' project ideas? At the very beginning, or once they are more developed?
2. When we meet, do you prefer that I send you something written or some discussion points in advance?
3. What early materials, if any, would you like to review? (e.g., IRB application, funding applications, an outline or short memo)
4. How do you recommend I go about deciding on a QP/dissertation topic? How should I seek feedback from you on my ideas?

B. Advising Roles / Committee Formation Questions

1. When you are chair, how do you think about your roles and responsibilities? When you are a committee member, how (if at all) do you view your roles and responsibilities differently?
2. How, if at all, do you work with students with whom you don't have an official advising relationship?
 - a. If you are not a member of my committee, would it still be appropriate for me to meet with you periodically for advice on [career, method, etc.]?
 - b. If you are not a member of my committee, would you consider writing a recommendation letter for me?
3. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to work with a student/serve as chair or as a committee member?
4. Are you open to serving on a committee where you have methodological, but not substantive, expertise (or vice versa)?
5. Are you open to serving as a co-chair?
6. What are your thoughts about bringing in an outside committee member (i.e., faculty from another department or university)?
7. Do you have preferences about the number of committee members?
8. Are there particular areas of expertise you think should be represented on my committee?

C. For Committee Chair

1. Do you want to see drafts first, before they go to the full committee?
2. If I'm aiming to complete my [QP/dissertation prospectus/dissertation] by [date], when do you want to see a first draft? How many subsequent drafts do you expect to see?
3. When should I identify the other members of my committee?

4. Is there a limit to the number of drafts you'll read?
5. If I get conflicting advice from you and from committee members, how should I handle it?
6. Are there particular areas of expertise you think should be represented on my committee?

D. For Committee Members

1. Do you follow the "strong chair" model? (i.e., prefer to defer to the committee chair when there's a difference of opinion)
2. How far along should a draft be before I send it to you? (e.g., do you only want to review things the chair has signed off or weighed in on first?)
3. Is there a limit to the number of drafts you'll read?
4. [For outside members:] Have you ever served on a Harvard Soc committee before? If not, what information about norms/processes can I share with you?

E. Interpretation of Program Requirements

1. The CHD Handbook says [item] is due on [date]. What do you expect from me on that date? (e.g., does an outline count as a draft?)
2. For the preliminary draft of the QP/prospectus, a memo is permitted with the approval of the chair. Is a memo acceptable to you?
3. What do you expect to see in my QP proposal/prospectus? (e.g., length, format) Do you expect to see preliminary results? A draft sampling strategy? A draft interview protocol? Should I include "back up" ideas?
4. [Defense / milestone deadline] is coming up. Can we go through your comments on my last draft, so I understand which ones need to be addressed prior to [the defense / approval]?
5. [Milestone deadline] is coming up. I think I might not have an approved QP/prospectus by that time. I think I can address all the revisions you suggested by [date]. From your perspective, would that deadline be acceptable?

F. QP-Specific Questions

1. If everything goes well with the QP, do you expect/anticipate serving on my dissertation committee, or do you view these as two separate projects?

G. Defense-Specific Questions

1. What is the process for determining whether I am ready to schedule my prospectus/dissertation defense?
2. The CHD handbook says: "The student must submit a final draft of the prospectus to faculty members on the Dissertation Committee *at least two weeks prior to the scheduled prospectus hearing date.*" Is there anything else I should know about your preferred timeline?

3. The CHD handbook says: “The student is responsible for surveying committee members, in advance, to determine when they are available to comment on the penultimate dissertation draft. A full draft is due to all committee members no fewer than 8 weeks before the student plans to hold the oral defense. During those 8 weeks, the committee will read and comment on the dissertation, and the student may have time to make required revisions. To meet one of Harvard’s 3 annual degree conferral deadlines, the student must hold the oral defense at least 10 days before the FAS Registrar’s Dissertation Submittal Deadline, which can be found on the FAS Registrar’s website.” Is there anything else I should know about your preferred timeline?
4. What should I expect during the session? How long should I plan to talk?
5. What can I expect in terms of post-defense revisions?

IV. Starting a Research Collaboration

- A. What do you envision my role on this project being? Will I be a co-author on associated papers? Will I be paid? Would my responsibilities change, depending on whether I am a co-author or not?
1. If paid, how will my hourly rate be determined? How do I report my hours?
 2. How will authorship order be determined? At what stage of the collaboration do you expect to decide authorship order?
 3. Are there other collaborators on the project? Am I responsible for managing any other members of the team? Do I report to any other team members?
- B. How many hours per week do you expect me to devote to this work?
1. Are there periods when you anticipate I will need to go above this expectation?
- C. How long do you expect this collaboration to last?
- D. How will we communicate about the project? (e.g., regular weekly or monthly meetings, meetings as needed, email communication when possible)
- E. When I have questions about this work, how/when do you prefer that I communicate them to you? (e.g., save them for our next meeting, check in with you via email, drop by your office)
- F. How do you prefer I share results/files? (e.g., Dropbox, Google Drive, email, etc.)
- G. To what extent do you prefer that we keep RA work separate from advising? (e.g., Is it okay to mix the two in one meeting?)
- H. How quickly do you expect a reply from me to an email? To an email marked “urgent”?
- I. Technical questions about project-specific software or equipment you may need
1. Do I need to complete any training?
 2. For quantitative projects, is there a preference for Stata/R/Python/etc.? For any computer-based analysis, if software is not available via Harvard, are you open to providing a license? What should I do if the data/analyses strain my computer’s limits?

V. Looking Beyond Graduate School

A. Planning Ahead / Deciding on a Timeline

1. How should I think about my timeline to graduation? What factors should I be considering (e.g., status of the dissertation, funding, publication record, G-year)?
2. Given that I hope to graduate in 20XX, when should I take DCF?
3. Between now and when I start applying for jobs, what projects/goals should I focus on?
4. Do you think I am on track to defend my dissertation by [anticipated degree date]?
5. What other factors should determine whether I apply for jobs in the coming year? (e.g., particular milestones with publications)
6. Should I consider doing a “soft” or “targeted” search in the year before I do a broader search?

B. Deciding Which Jobs to Pursue

1. What do you see as the pros and cons of pursuing a postdoc?
2. What do you tell students considering non-academic careers?
3. Do you have suggestions for how I might get more information about positions and hiring processes outside academia / outside the US / outside sociology departments? Is there anyone you suggest I talk to? Could you facilitate an introduction?
4. I’m considering focusing my job search on [type of job]. Do you have suggestions for how I can maximize my chances given that focus?
5. I’m tentatively planning to apply to the following jobs: [list]. Does that seem like an appropriate/complete list?

C. Nuts and Bolts of the Search Process

1. Do I need to attend ASA the summer before I plan to apply for jobs? Is it important that I present? What job-related activities should I plan to engage in while there?
2. Are there any other conferences, informational interviews, or networking activities I should plan to participate in as I prepare to apply for jobs?
3. If I apply for a tenure-track job in a US sociology department, what materials will I need to prepare? Are there other materials you know of that I might need to prepare for other jobs?
4. What happens on a job interview? How should I prepare for one-on-one meetings? What questions should I ask during the interview? To whom should I write thank-yous after my visit?
5. When should I begin drafting my materials? What about my practice job talk?
6. What should I present in my job talk? Should I focus on one dissertation chapter or present a more comprehensive overview?

7. Which writing samples should I submit? Should I vary that by posting? (e.g., If they only ask for 2 samples, should I still submit 3)?
8. Which recommendation letters should I submit? Should I vary that by posting?
9. What workshops / audiences should I consider for my practice job talk(s)?
10. When, if ever, is it appropriate for me to send an institution updated materials? What about contacting them for updates on their search process?
11. If I get an offer, what should I do next?

D. Their Role in Your Search

1. What materials should I send you to help you write a recommendation letter? How far in advance of the deadline do you need them?
2. How should I coordinate the recommendation letter process? Do you want to know what jobs I'm applying to?
3. Are you willing to review my draft application materials? When should I send them to you? What about draft slides for my job talk?
4. I plan to attend ASA. Do you recommend that I try to connect with institutions that are hiring? Is there anyone you could put me in touch with?
5. Do you recommend I connect personally with individuals at institutions I'm applying to? Is there anyone you could put me in touch with?
6. I'm interested in pursuing a postdoc.
 - a. [For institutional postdocs:] I have to name a mentor, and I think [person] might be a good match. Can you introduce me?
 - b. [For grant-funded / PI-specific postdocs:] Do you know of people or projects who might be looking to hire a postdoc? Could you introduce me?
7. Will you be able to attend one or more of my practice job talks?
8. What updates on my job search process do you want? (e.g., every time I get an interview, periodic updates on what I've applied to and heard back from, when I get an offer)
9. Does anything about your advising rules/policies/style change for the job search process?

VI. Troubleshooting

A. Asking for Support: Some Sample Scripts

1. [Requesting accommodations/extensions:] I'm concerned about [an upcoming deadline or a requirement]. Recently, I have been dealing with [briefly explain situation]. It has been affecting my work by [briefly explain consequences]. How would you advise I meet this upcoming deadline? Would you consider supporting an extension?
2. [General support:] I'm having trouble with [concern, issue, problem, disadvantage, etc.]. Do you have any advice on how I might address this [concern, issue, problem, disadvantage, etc.]? For instance, do you know what support there might be for students in my position? Are there any people in the department or university who might be a resource for me?
3. [Departmental problems:] I've noticed that [concern, issue, problem, disadvantage, etc.], which concerns me because [briefly explain]. How would you recommend I address this [concern, issue, problem, disadvantage, etc.]? Is there anyone I should talk to confidentially?
4. [Funding concerns:] Looking into the near future, I'm concerned that I do not yet have funding for [year 5, the summer, research project, research travel, association memberships, etc.]. Do you know of any money within Harvard, GSAS, or the Department of Sociology that I should consider? Are there any potential funding sources or opportunities that you would recommend?
5. [Research plans disrupted by COVID-19:] I'm concerned about [specific way COVID-19 has unsettled research plans]. I have come up with several possible alternatives. At this point, it would be helpful to connect to share these possibilities and/or brainstorm other options you might suggest. Can we meet to discuss alternatives for moving forward?

B. Addressing a Problem in the Working Relationship (i.e. If Feeling Like You Aren't Getting What You Need)

1. I sense that I need to develop in [area of interest, concern, problem, etc.]. How would you suggest we address developing in this area? Is there any direction you might offer?
2. I am having trouble with [area of interest, concern, problem, etc.]. What would you suggest? Is there any support you might provide?
3. I sense that [description of the ask] would really help me at this stage in grad school. Is this something you might support, given our advising relationship?

C. Renegotiating Terms of Advising Relationship/Research Collaboration

1. [Renegotiating terms of advising relationship:] I have really enjoyed working with you on [project, paper, topic, course, etc.], and I feel lucky to have benefitted from your [positive assessment of strength in the advising relationship, etc.]. Recently, I've realized that I might next need [subject matter collaborator, methodological expertise, greater availability, etc.], and I anticipate another faculty member might be in a better position to provide that. I hope that we can continue to stay in touch moving forward, though, because I value your [other positive aspect of the advising relationship, whatever you might want to reach out to them about in the future, etc.]. Is that something you would be open to?
2. [Renegotiating terms of research collaboration:] I have really enjoyed working with you on [project, paper], and I feel lucky to have benefitted from your [positive assessment of strength in the advising relationship, etc.]. As I look ahead, I realize that I need to prioritize finishing my dissertation, and I won't have as much time to devote to our collaborative research. Can we talk about what the highest priorities are for me to complete in that work, and what might be put on hold or reallocated to someone else?