

Working with your committee

Your committee is composed of scholars with different sets of expertise to support your thesis work. Your program will have guidelines about how often this group should meet (typically 1-3 mandatory meetings a year). Outside of these meetings, you may meet individually with committee members, or consult them individually or as a group. Each program has guidelines about the composition of your committee. Typically, there are 3 or 4 members, including your supervisor. Many programs require at least two members to be affiliated with that program.

When working with the committee, my general rule of thumb is that the student and supervisor should take the work as far as it can go before involving a committee member. This means that any written work which is circulated to the committee should reflect revisions and approval from the supervisor. Similarly, while you should feel free to consult your committee members outside of formal meetings, your supervisor should be the first stop for any questions or requests.

Committee meetings can be difficult to schedule. Plan and schedule these meetings well ahead of time. Be thoughtful about how to use these meetings to best effect. Knowing that a committee meeting is coming up can be a strong incentive to produce work.

The student is in charge of planning and leading the committee members. The supervisor is available for consultation and assistance as needed. The supervisor might have their own suggestions about what to add to the agenda.

Ideally, a clear agenda and written work should be circulated about 2 weeks ahead of a committee meeting. Any paperwork that the committee members need to review (e.g. the mandatory supervisory committee meeting form) should be included in this package. Two weeks provides time for the committee members to read the work and come prepared to discuss. If the written work is very long, you may wish to provide it earlier, or at least let the committee members know when it will be coming so they can block time in their calendars to read it before the meeting. If you have specific areas you would like feedback on, don't hesitate to include a memo that identifies how committee members can best focus their comments. Regarding Agendas, if there are multiple items for discussion, it might be helpful to allocate a time limit for each of them, to make sure that all items get covered.

It is helpful for the student to begin the meeting by providing an update on work accomplished since the last meeting. A quick run down about general progress (e.g. course work completed, comprehensive exam status) is helpful. Most of the meeting time should be spent discussing thesis research. The student should be prepared to lead this conversation, starting with a very brief summary of the written work that was circulated, just to make sure that everyone is on the same page. If there are particular questions or areas for discussion you have identified, indicate those.

Some students like to use slides to organize their presentation of work to committee members. This is not necessary, but can be helpful.

The role of the supervisor during committee meetings is to participate in the discussion. Most supervisors will also help steer the discussion back on topic when needed, provide extra context to committee members, or help contextualize comments. I usually also take copious notes, to share with the student later on.

After the meeting, the student has a few responsibilities: ensure that the signed committee form makes it to the program office, follow up on any revisions or suggestions made on the work, and write and circulate meeting minutes. Minutes are very helpful after committee meetings because the discussions can be long and free-ranging. Since committee meetings happen infrequently, minutes also help refresh the memories of all involved at the next meeting, ensuring that time is not wasted re-hashing issues that have already been settled. They will also help remind all committee members of any task that arose in the meeting. Minutes should be circulated by the student shortly after the meeting, and then sent again in the meeting package for the next meeting.

TLDR:

- Your committee is on your side, but using them to maximum effect requires planning and organization.
- Your supervisor is your first stop before consulting any committee members.
- Circulate all paperwork at least two weeks in advance.
 - Supervisory Meeting Form
 - Agenda
 - Minutes from last meeting
 - Written work for discussion
 - Memo about written work highlighting areas for attention or feedback (optional)
- Write up minutes after the meeting and circulate to ensure that everyone is in agreement about what was decided and understands the tasks they have committed to. These minutes should also be re-circulated before the next meeting, to refresh memories.