

**Graduate Program, Institute of Parasitology
LETTER OF UNDERSTANDING**

Dear _____,

As a new member of the Institute of Parasitology, we wish to welcome you and to ensure that your introduction to the Institute gets off to a good start. The Supervisory Letter of Understanding, now required by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) for all graduate students in thesis programs, is based on the premise that defining mutual expectations between a supervisor and a graduate student plays an essential role in ensuring that the graduate student has a successful and enjoyable experience, and that expectations of both the supervisor and the student are clear.

The document below is designed to provide a framework for composing an individualized letter resulting from discussion between the supervisor(s) and the graduate student, thus establishing a mutual understanding of the guidelines that will govern their working relationship. This framework will be helpful both for planning and completing the thesis. It does not replace or supersede official McGill University statements of policy and procedures and is not intended to be legally binding.

GPS requires that the document be dated and signed by the supervisor(s) and student and then uploaded to the student's *myProgress* file, under PhD Letter of Understanding. Ideally, this document should be completed in the first term, no later than the submission of the first Progress Tracking Report. It should be revisited every 12 months or as needed, as it is expected that the supervisory relationship will evolve as the student progress towards the degree.

The Graduate Program Director, Institute Director, or GPS can be contacted if the student or supervisor(s) have any questions or concerns regarding their graduate program or this form. Reference can be made to the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies [Graduate Supervision website](#).

Remember: work hard, have fun, and stay safe!

Signing of this Letter attests to compliance with:

1. University regulations and guidelines governing graduate students and supervisors

- General University policies, procedures, and guidelines (<https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/policies-and-regulations>).
- Policies regarding all students (<https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/>).
- Policies defined by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in the *Graduate e-Calendar*(<http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students>)
- The McGill Expectations for Graduate Supervision (included below).

2. University regulations on the ethical conduct of research (<https://www.mcgill.ca/research/ran-welcome/research-policies-and-regulations>)

3. University safety regulations, established by Environment Health and Safety (<http://www.mcgill.ca/ehs/>).

4. Policies and guidelines of the Parasitology Graduate Program, documented on the Parasitology Graduate Studies site (<https://www.mcgill.ca/parasitology/graduatestudies>).

IDENTIFICATION

Student Name:	McGill Student ID #:
Program & Year (MSc1/PhD2):	Program Start Date:
Supervisor Name:	Supervisor Dept. (if outside Parasitology):
Co-Supervisor Name (if any):	Co-Supervisor Dept. or Unit:

OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS

Research Project

Short description of research project.

Operational Expectations

Working hours, and necessity of work outside regular hours; group meetings; general lab duties; record keeping; assistance from and to other personnel/students; policies on authorship of publications, within the norms of the discipline and University policies on research ethics and intellectual property.

Supervisory Responsibilities*

Frequency of student-supervisor meetings; training role of the supervisor, including time-frame for review of the student's written work, extent of involvement with preparations for committee meetings and comprehensive examinations, and of grant/scholarship applications, manuscripts and theses; role of the co-supervisor (if any).

*A supervisor may not terminate supervision or payment of any stipend without just cause, documented due process, reasonable notice, and approval of the GPD, RAC or Chair.

Student Responsibilities

Limits to paid work* and activities off-hours; policies on TA positions; academic, technical or language training required; expected attendance at journal clubs, workshops and seminars, aside from official requirements of the Parasitology Graduate Program.

* In order to maintain full-time status, a graduate student should not work more than 180 hours per term over 15 weeks, and a maximum of 12 hours per week. Graduate e-Calendar.

Other Comments

Any other points important to the supervisor or student.

Signatures

I am aware of and understand the contents of this document, policies and regulations regarding graduate students and supervisors, of the Parasitology Graduate Program, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and McGill University.

Student:	<i>Print Name</i>	Signature:
		Date:
Supervisor:	<i>Print Name</i>	Signature:
		Date:
Co-Supervisor:	<i>Print Name</i>	Signature:
		Date:
Unit Head:	<i>Print Name</i>	Signature:
	<i>(If Supervisor is not in the Parasitology Dept.)</i>	Date:

The student and supervisor shall retain copies of the signed Letter of Understanding, and submit the original to the Graduate Program Coordinator of Parasitology. A copy will be uploaded to the student's MyProgress site.

SUMMARY OF POLICIES

Financial Commitment

- Student scholarships, stipends paid from the supervisor's grant, University Graduate Excellence Fellowships (GEFs) and/or teaching assistantships provide support to enable graduate students to concentrate on their higher degree work. Supervisors and the Institute of Parasitology try to provide support to students. However, it is not guaranteed and supervisors will indicate what funding can be provided in a given period. Usually, the level of funding can only be indicated for a year at a time. Stipends, scholarships and GEF funds supports full-time research towards the degree.
- The student is responsible for seeking alternate sources of funding through scholarships from the University and external granting agencies. Students must report all funding, external or internal, to the Graduate Program Coordinator.
- The supervisor is responsible for providing sufficient resources for the student's research project.
- Students may request an unpaid leave of absence for medical, parental, personal/family health or military service, on a term-by-term basis for up to one year, and requiring appropriate documentation.

Research Progress

- Regular reviews of student performance are mandatory (*Graduate e-Calendar*, Research Progress Tracking).
- The student's **Research Advisory Committee (RAC)** consists of the supervisor(s) and two other faculty members, for Ph.D. and one other faculty member for MSc. The RAC should have appropriate expertise to evaluate progress, and is established within the first semester of study.
- The first RAC meeting must be held within the first six-months, and at least once each following year. Failure to hold annual RAC meetings will be **grounds for withdrawal**.
- The student is normally responsible to arrange RAC meetings, and submit the evaluation reports signed by the student, RAC members and GPD to the Graduate Program Coordinator of Parasitology.
- If an evaluation is "unsatisfactory", the student must have another RAC meeting in 4 – 6 months to address concerns. A second "unsatisfactory" will be **grounds for withdrawal**.
- A failure in two RAC evaluations will be **grounds for withdrawal**.
- Supervisor approval is normally required to submit the M.Sc./Ph.D. thesis, First Seminar, Thesis Proposal and Final Seminar. In the event of disagreement between the student and the supervisor, the student may appeal to the Graduate Program Director.

Timeline and Comprehensive Examinations (Research Seminars, Thesis Proposal)

- Residency requirements, timing of Comprehensive Examinations, and expected times to completion are on the Parasitology Graduate Studies site.
- Degrees must be completed before the end of M.Sc. year 3, and Ph.D. year 7. Registration beyond year 3 for M.Sc. and year 7 for Ph.D. (time limitation) will not be allowed.
- M.Sc. students may request to transfer (fast-track) to the Ph.D. program up to the second semester of their second year, without completing the M.Sc. thesis.
 - Transfer requires permission of the supervisor, and a "Pass" grade in the First Seminar (PARA 606) presented to and evaluated by the Department in the second semester of the first year.
 - Applicants must have a CGPA of 3.5 or higher in their MSc program and show ability to complete research at the Doctoral level.
 - After fast-track, students enter the doctoral program at the **Ph.D. year 2 level**.
- Ph.D. students must pass the First Ph.D. seminar (PARA 710) in the second semester of the first year.
- Ph.D. students must pass the comprehensive examination (PARA 701) at the latest in the second semester of the third year, evaluated by the RAC. The examination may be taken a second time if not passed, but a second "Fail" grade will be **grounds for withdrawal**, with the possibility of submitting a M.Sc. thesis instead.
- Ph.D. students must pass the final seminar (PARA 711) presented to and evaluated by the Department, around 3-6 months before submission of the thesis.

Courses

- Course requirements are described on the Parasitology Graduate Studies site (Master's and Doctoral). Course selections must be approved by the supervisor, and changes to the required courses must be approved by the RAC.
- It is recommended that courses should be completed within the first two semesters if possible.

- A passing grade is B– or 65%. A failure in two required courses will be **grounds for withdrawal**.
- All students are required to attend all seminars.
- All new students are required to attend Research Integrity workshops.

McGill University Expectations for Graduate Supervision

Supervising graduate students and postdocs at McGill University is a critical part of academic duties for faculty, as indicated in section 4.1 of the [Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff](#), henceforth referred to as “the Regulations”.

In order to supervise graduate students and postdocs, faculty must complete an [orientation](#).

Supervisors are accountable to the Chair or leader of their academic unit, who is responsible for the allocation of academic duties (section 4.3 of the Regulations). To ensure all graduate students have the opportunity to succeed in obtaining their degree, the University expects all supervisors to meet the university-wide standards delineated below.

Creating a respectful, inclusive, and professional research environment while also being present, providing regular feedback, recognizing limits, and knowing relevant policies helps faculty better support supervisees and prevent potential misunderstandings down the road.

Supervisors have a responsibility to:

1) Build and maintain a respectful, inclusive, professional research environment for their supervisees.

- a) McGill University expects supervisors to maintain a **research environment free from sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination**.

Policy Resources:

- [Policy on Harassment and Discrimination](#)
- [Policy against Sexual Violence](#)

- b) If a supervisor observes behaviour that might constitute sexual violence, harassment, or discrimination, **they must consult the [Office for Mediation and Reporting](#) or the [Office of the Dean of Students](#) to determine how to proceed**.

- Faculty should not assume that problems between supervisees in a lab setting will resolve on their own. Faculty and staff have a shared responsibility to ensure supervisees can learn in environments where they are respected and free from pejorative or offensive acts and comments. Trained professionals in the OMR and Office of the Dean of Students are available to support faculty and staff as well as students.

- c) Supervisors, as representatives of McGill University acting in an official capacity, **have a responsibility to uphold students’ rights**, as explained in [Charter of Students’ Rights, Article 3:](#)

- “Every student has a right to the safeguard of [their] dignity and a right to be protected by the University against vexatious conduct displayed by a representative of the University acting in an official capacity”.

- Supervisors have a duty to accommodate on the grounds of disability and religious belief. In some cases, there might also be a duty to accommodate on the basis of dependent care responsibilities. If you have any uncertainty about what constitutes a reasonable accommodation in a given situation you may contact the Office of the Dean of Students (in all cases) or the Office for Students with Disabilities (in situations involving students with disabilities)

Policy Resources:

- [Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities](#)
- [Policy on Holy Days](#)

- d) Supervisors' words carry weight for supervisees. Offhand comments spoken in moments of frustration can leave supervisees doubting whether they can trust a supervisor to assess work fairly and equitably support supervisees' research and wellbeing. It is important for supervisors to keep the power differential in mind when speaking with supervisees and refrain from mocking, insulting, or undermining language.
- e) **Supervisors, as members of the University, have the right to work in a respectful and professional research environment.** [The Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#) holds that no student shall in a university context:
- "Knowingly create a condition that unnecessarily endangers or threatens or undermines the health, safety, well-being, or dignity of another person or persons, threatens to cause humiliation, or threatens the damage or destruction of property"

Resources:

- **Office of the Dean of Students:** Supervisors are encouraged to talk to the Dean of Students' office when a student or supervisee [exhibits worrisome behaviour](#), including dangerous, threatening, disruptive, or uncharacteristic behaviour. See the [Red File](#) for guidance.
- f) **Supervisors and supervisees must avoid conflicts of interest**, and if one should arise, speak to a department chair or director to implement measures to properly address the conflict of interest. For supervisors, this means ensuring that supervisees are equitably treated (i.e., avoid steps or measures that might be perceived as partiality, favoritism, or bias) and that relationships with supervisees are professional and centred on academic wellness.
- g) Following major conflicts, the best resolution may be to dissolve the supervisory relationship and have the graduate student continue under the supervision of another faculty member. It is critical for faculty to speak to both the Graduate Program Director and the Department Chair when considering whether this presents the best solution for all parties. When approached with a request for a transfer, faculty are expected to collaborate to ensure as smooth a transition as possible, clarifying what will happen to ongoing research, lab access, etc.

2) Be present for and accountable to supervisees by maintaining clear communication channels.

- a) Supervisors should meet regularly with supervisees, honouring the schedules agreed to in Letters of Understanding.
- b) Supervisors and supervisees should keep shared written records when it comes to important decisions about research projects, funding, authorship, graduation timelines, etc.
 - Annual Progress reports provide a framework to give feedback on a student's progress in writing and objectives for the following year in writing and represent a critical opportunity to indicate to students if their work is unsatisfactory.
- c) Supervisors must plan to ensure that graduate supervisees have appropriate supervision during prolonged absences (e.g., sabbatical leaves).
 - Supervisors who are not planning to maintain regular communication with supervised students during a sabbatical or other leave should ensure supervisees have an appropriate interim supervisor (e.g., a committee member) who will stay in regular communication with the supervisee and ensure they progress.

3) Provide supervisees with regular, timely feedback that clearly indicates how to meet their program requirements for graduation.

- a) Uphold the commitments made in Letters of Understanding regarding how long it will take to return student work with feedback. Providing regular updates for students on when to expect feedback is also helpful for ensuring accountability and on-time degree completion.
- b) Clarify expectations ahead of major milestones (e.g., proposals, qualifying examinations, thesis submission, oral defences). **Supervisees should understand how they will be assessed, what is required to pass major milestones**, and the departmental standards for thesis research and other evaluated graduate work.
 - Feedback on submitted work should be clear, substantial, and provide specific, actionable recommendations for improvement. Evaluations of student work must be made principally on the basis of the demonstrated quality of the student's research, and not comparisons with other students or supervisor opinions of the student's readiness to graduate or ability to succeed in a specific subsequent profession.
 - Supervisors must not prevent students from seeking to graduate if they have completed all the degree requirements and their work meets departmental standards.

4) Respect their limits in supporting supervisee wellbeing.

- a) Supervisors are often among the first to notice when a graduate student or postdoc is unwell. **Supervisors should offer a supportive ear while respecting their limits when it comes to addressing student mental health.** The [Student Wellness Hub](#) connects students with help from trained clinicians.

Resource:

- [Tips for talking to a student in difficulty](#)

- b) **Supervisors and supervisees alike benefit from flexibility and understanding** when it comes to balancing work responsibilities and personal wellbeing.

- Supervisors should encourage supervisees to maintain reasonable working hours and clarify expectations that supervisees will take time to rest, recharge, and connect with friends and family.
- Supervisors and supervisees should communicate their availability limits in Letters of Understanding (e.g., unavailable to meet after 3pm, will respond to emails within 48 hours, etc.). Supervisees should respect these limits and make use of available supports to maintain their wellbeing (e.g., Local Wellness Advisors, the Student Wellness Hub, etc.).

- c) **Supervisors must respect their supervisee's autonomy when it comes decisions that impact the supervisee's future.** Supervisees should be able to freely choose to pursue a particular career path, take advantage of professional development opportunities, start a family, take a leave of absence, etc., without fear that their supervisor will withdraw support.

Policy Resources:

- Parental Leave:
<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/policies-and-guidelines/parental-leave>
- Leave of Absence and Vacation Policy:
<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/registration/progress/leave-vacation>

5) Know policies relevant to graduate studies well enough to advise supervisees. If unsure, ask for clarification.

Resources:

- [Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#)
- [Secretariat](#)
- A Graduate Program Director or Department Chair