

Department of Plant Science

STUDENT-SUPERVISOR LETTER OF UNDERSTANDING

Welcome to the Department of Plant Science, Macdonald Campus, and McGill University. The Plant Science Department at Mac covers many exciting and innovative areas, with research ranging from basic to translational. You are a valued addition to the unit, which is why this document exists.

WHY A “LETTER OF UNDERSTANDING?”

Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) requires that the Supervision Letter of Understanding be completed by all PhD students. This letter is intended to define mutual expectations between a supervisor and graduate student supervisee, which play an essential role in the success of the graduate student in the course of their studies. It is something that should be discussed and agreed upon together, and will serve as the context on which to base research, day-to-day conduct in the lab, and completion and defense of your thesis. It does not replace or supersede official [McGill University Regulations and Policies](#), and is not intended to be legally binding.

HOW-TO:

We advise that you and your supervisor(s) sit down together and prepare this letter, in a one-on-one meeting (with coffee would be nice!), in the first days of your program.

The material on the following pages provides a framework for composing the letter through discussion between the supervisor(s) and the graduate student.

Part 1: the supervisor(s) and student review and discuss each of the points listed, checking off each box to confirm that the items have been discussed and understood by both people.

Part 2: the supervisor(s) and student discuss any lab or research-specific topics that are not covered in Part 1, noting the main points of their discussion in the space provided.

Part 3: Signatures, to show that both parties have discussed the above points, and come to mutual consensus.

Once you have finished the letter, the supervisor(s) and student supervisee date and sign it, then the student must upload it to the [myProgress](#) file. The letter should be completed prior to the start of any research and no later than the end of the first program term. Revisit it as needed, as you will find that the supervisory relationship will evolve as the student progresses towards the degree.

Contact the Graduate Program Director, Department Chair, or a GPS Associate Dean if the student or supervisor(s) have questions or concerns regarding the graduate program or this letter. You can also refer to Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies' Graduate Supervision website www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision

PART 1 | GENERAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

According to the [McGill University Expectations for Graduate Supervision](#) and the [Plant Science Handbook](#):

(Check off each box as acknowledgment).

Supervisors should:

- uphold and transmit the highest professional standards of research and scholarship (see [Expectations](#))
- provide guidance in all phases of the student's research.
- meet with their students regularly.
- provide prompt feedback when work is submitted, including drafts of the thesis, and manuscripts.
- clarify expectations regarding collaborative work, authorship, publication and conference presentations.

Supervisees should:

- comply with the policies, procedures, and regulations established by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the Department of Plant Science.
- inform themselves of program requirements and deadlines.
- work within these deadlines.
- communicate regularly with the supervisor and committee.

Both supervisors and supervisees should:

- organize and schedule an in-person meeting with the advisory committee at least once annually.
- disclose and discuss any potential conflict of interest (actual or perceived) that may arise, so that it can be appropriately managed.
- demonstrate appropriate professional judgment, collegial behaviour, academic rigour and integrity at all times and in every facet of the graduate program.
- strive to maintain an environment of collegiality, respect and inclusion across all members of the research group.

PART 2 | SPECIFIC TOPICS

With the above roles and responsibilities in mind, the following topics are included in the Letter of Understanding, with the objective of avoiding frequent causes of miscommunication and misunderstanding.

1. SUPERVISORY MEETINGS:

1.1 How often or when will the student have meetings with the supervisor(s)?

1.2 What kind of support or assistance can students expect in meetings?

1.3 Will the student present a written summary of what is agreed to in meetings? How many days after the meeting?

1.4 How will the student access the supervisor(s) for unscheduled meetings or advice?

2. RESEARCH ADVISORY MEETINGS:

2.1 Will the supervisor be responsible for forming the research advisory committee?

2.2 Will the student be responsible for scheduling their research advisory committee meetings?

2.3 How often or when will the student have meetings with their research advisory committee?

2.4 Will the student present a written progress report before research advisory committee meetings? How many days in advance?

2.5 Will the student be responsible for obtaining the committee members' signatures on the progress reports?

2.6 Will the student be responsible for uploading the progress reports onto myProgress?

3. EXPECTED PROGRESS:

3.1 Program details: Start date: Expected thesis submission date:

3.2 When will the student provide a written proposal and give a seminar on the proposal?

3.3 When will the student give a final seminar on the project?

3.4 How many hours per week is the student expected to spend in the lab or field and on the project as a whole?

3.5 How long should students' coffee and lunch breaks be? How many breaks may they take per day?

3.6 Will the student be entitled to extra vacation time in addition to the vacation leave equivalent to university holidays and an additional total of fifteen (15) working days in the year?

3.7 When will the student take the WHMIS training?

3.8 Is the student expected to attend departmental seminars or other departmental activities?

3.9 Is the student expected to apply for teaching assistantships?

3.10 What additional part-time employment can the student have?

4. RESOURCES AVAILABLE:

4.1 Where will the research be conducted (e.g. phytorium, greenhouse, Lods agronomy research center, horticulture research center, plant pest control level 3 laboratory, imaging facility, farm, etc.) and at what times of the day/week/year is access to space and equipment normally available? Who books the equipment if necessary?

4.2 Where will the student have personal bench space or a desk?

4.3 What additional teaching, demonstrating and skills development opportunities will the student have?

5. DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION:

5.1 Outline briefly the amount and type of data expected for the thesis (including sample size, tests or analyses).

5.2 What are the approximate dates for completion of lab/field work or other data collection?

5.3 What will be the role of the supervisor in obtaining and analyzing the data each year? (Examples: initial training, continuing active assistance, passive supervision)

5.4 Is the student required to keep a lab notebook, to organize large datasets?

5.5 Indicate the approximate dates of submission of the first drafts of the Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results and Discussion sections of the thesis or each chapter.

5.6 How many drafts of each section of the thesis/manuscript(s) will the supervisor(s) review? How quickly can the student expect feedback?

5.7 When preparing the data for publication, who will write the first draft of the manuscript, who will be corresponding author and what will be the order of the authors?

5.8 Can the student expect to attend/present at national or international conferences? (Give details)

6. STUDENT FUNDING BEYOND THE TERMS OF THE ADMISSION OFFER LETTER:

6.1 Is the student expected to actively apply for external funding/scholarships? If yes, for which ones?

6.2 The funding package offered to graduate students varies from student to student, as a function of needs and merit. The admission offer letter contains a formal funding offer for a defined period. In the eventuality that the student cannot graduate in the indicated period, the student can expect the supervisor to:

- 1) Maintain the same level of funding until degree completion (if funding allows)
- 2) Provide an adequate level of funding (if funding allows)
- 3) Terminate funding

6.3 If the student is successful at obtaining external funding, the supervisor will:

- 1) Maintain the same level of funding as outlined in the offer letter
- 2) Complement it with a top-up
- 3) Not provide any funding

6.4 Supervisors and supervisees understand that the salary/stipend of a student cannot be modulated according to the student performance. Salary/stipend can only be reconsidered upon two unsatisfactory progress reports signed by all members of the research advisory committee.

Yes

No

PART 3 | SIGNATURES

The student and supervisor(s) listed below have reviewed, discussed, and understood these expectations and guidelines. Any questions or concerns about this document and its contents, even after signing, can be brought to the attention of the Graduate Program Director, the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences' Associate Dean (Graduate Education), or to a GPS Associate Dean, and will be treated confidentially.

Checking this box indicates that the individual has read and understood this form, and that the information provided within is true and accurate to the best of their knowledge.

Check here:

Supervisee (Graduate Student) signature

Date

Supervisor (Professor) signature

Date

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