Getting What You Need From Your Research Advisor

1. Focus on your intellectual passions
Seek topics you’re really excited about. This is your driving force and will propel you toward greater happiness in grad school. Graduate school is tough. It’s better to work on something that you’re passionate about rather than something to please others.

2. Speak to Professors
During the first semester (or earlier), begin speaking with professors and their graduate students about their research to see if you are interested in working with that particular professor for your research project. Look up the professor’s work on the web and read a couple of their publications before you speak with them. Find out what their current research topics are.

3. Approach faculty
Approach faculty you’d like to work with. However, realize they may not know you and will want to learn more about your skills and interests. They may ask you a variety of questions about your proposed area of research. Be prepared to answer basic questions about your topics.

   - Not all faculty operate the same way, so you have to honestly ascertain whether being with someone famous will be worth the possible price, as they may not be available to you in the manner you seek.
   - Some faculty are more hands on, requiring weekly meetings, some may only see you semi-regularly, some only a couple times a semester. Most faculty are very busy so you have to be organized when you do go to see them.
   - New vs. Tenured vs. Near retirement. Newer faculty are under pressure since they are usually seeking tenure. They sometimes push students to work long hours, produce significant results, write grants, etc. Tenured faculty are usually busy keeping their research going, giving talks, etc. They are usually slightly easier to deal with regarding their expectations of you and your productivity. Faculty near retirement vary. Some remain active in research even after they retire. Some slow down considerably, so there may not be as strong a push from them to get you a job, publications, conference presentations, financial support. Try to politely inquire what their plans are if you’re approaching a faculty member near retirement.
   - The Faculty member’s belief in you is very important. This is one of the most significant components to a successful advisor relationship. (Your belief in them is equally important.)

4. Create a Timeline
- Create an academic timeline and get “buy-in” from your advisor regarding your academic goals. Observe what senior level students are doing. Ask questions. If appropriate, create additional goals and timelines. Some advisors will be active in guiding you, some won’t.
- Find other faculty or academic mentors you trust to give you advice & see them regularly. Your advisor may be too busy to give you all that you’ll need.

5. Communicate with Advisors
- What if you are not getting what you need from your advisor, and it’s impacting your progress, or your health? You could possibly stick with it, but may need to find a different faculty member to serve as a co-advisor. Make sure to communicate well with both advisors. You may need to switch advisors, but this takes careful planning. Get advice from a trusted source before proceeding.
- How to manage co-advisors? This is an increasingly common practice, but takes extra communication by you to make sure everyone agrees with your project, methodology, details, etc.
- Have an agenda when you meet with your advisor. This way you get all your questions answered and issues covered. Discuss your goals, interests, exams, problems, interest in doing research talks, attending research conferences & doing additional collaborations. Follow up with an email to clarify what was discussed.
• Keep your advisor up to date on your progress (emails and regular meetings).

6. Learn to write well
• Take extra writing classes if necessary. (Try UC Extension.) This will enable you to better accomplish things necessary for current and future success (presentations, publications, grant proposals, etc.).
• Learn how to write grant proposals for funding your work or the work in the lab. This can help support your graduate studies and is good preparation for funding your work in the future--very important for pursuing life in academia.
• If applicable, begin writing up your results in conjunction with your advisor for publication in research journals. It is very impressive to have publications as a graduate student. These are looked upon as an indicator of your future potential.

7. Don’t isolate yourself from the department
• Go to social functions, retreats, serve on committees, etc. It’s important to stay visible to the faculty & staff, as well as other students in the department. This may be difficult at times, but could help you in the long run.
• Have friends/allies in your department and outside your department for advice, mentoring or fun. These contacts are important for dealing with an absent or difficult advisor and will make your graduate school experience more fulfilling.

8. Take your work seriously
When doing a research project, make sure you put in the time required (or more), work hard, consistently, independently, but also as a team player. Don’t be afraid to be innovative and creative in your thoughts. Sometimes the best innovations occur by accident. Learn new data or language programs as necessary. Do supplemental reading if you think it will help you. Don’t be afraid to make a mistake or take a risk. Some of the best innovations occur from people taking risks, making errors, and learning from them. Take your work seriously. Take yourself seriously.

9. Go to conferences and present your research
Graduate students presenting a paper can apply for funding from the Graduate Division. For conference travel details, go to: grad.berkeley.edu/financial/fellowships/. Have your advisor review your work before you present it. Do a good job when presenting your work at a conference. People will get to know you and associate your work with the faculty member you’re working with. This will help later with getting a job.

10. Plan ahead
• Plan more than a year in advance to apply for dissertation fellowships. These fellowships will greatly enhance your progress toward finishing.
• Put yourself on a timeline to finish. Get buy–in from your advisor regarding this so that you both agree on the timeline. Work one day at a time. Try not to look too far ahead. Tell yourself to do the work today for today. As long as you accomplish something each day, you’ll make progress.
• A little before your last year, think about what kind of job you want or where you’d like to teach so that you can begin preparing for the job market.

11. Career advice
Some advisors will give you good career advice. Some won’t give you any or will give you partial advice. The Graduate Division sponsors a 5 week summer course called the Summer Institute to prepare you for pursuing an academic career. For more information visit: gsi.berkeley.edu/programs-services/workshops-seminars-institutes/ Also the Career Center and the Graduate Diversity Program can help with career advice and post-doc planning.

12. Public Speaking
If you’d like to improve your public speaking skills (good for passing orals, and also for job interviews), consider working as a GSI the semester prior to your exams, or join Toastmasters (an organization that assists with public speaking). Make sure you practice with friends and colleagues in mock exams before taking your qualifying exam.