

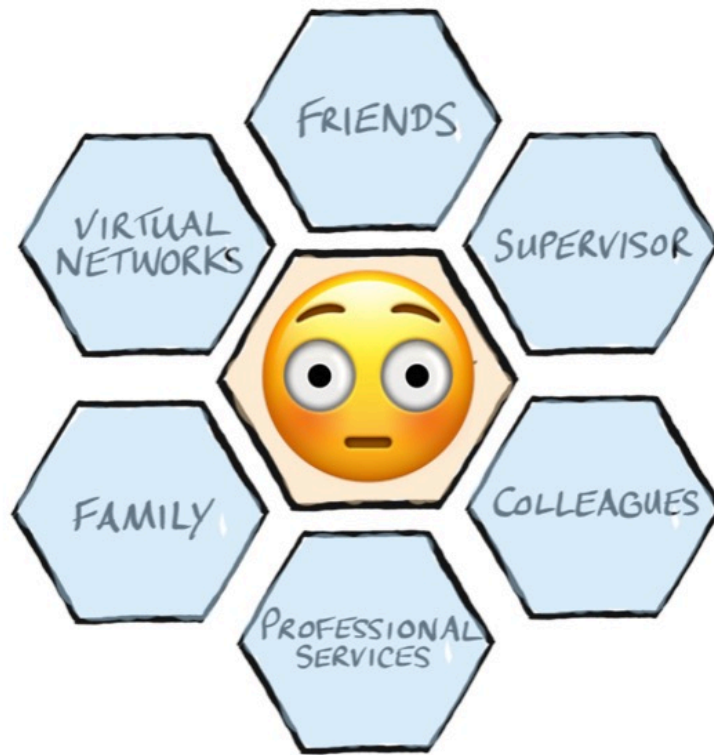
Working with Your Supervisor



Dr Catherine Pope



You are the project
manager of your
thesis!



What we'll cover

- Understanding the supervisory relationship and respective responsibilities.
- Building autonomy.
- Improving and adapting communication.
- Requesting and implementing effective feedback.
- Resolving problems and conflict.

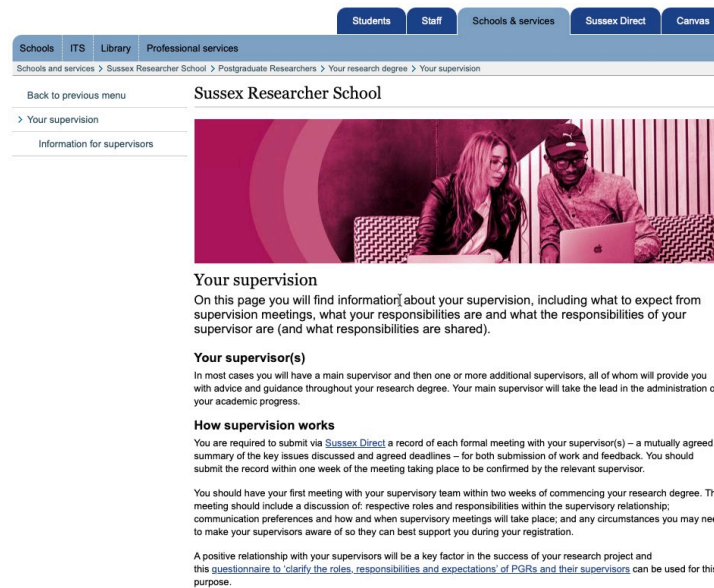
By the end of this workshop, you'll have ...

- An understanding of the supervisory relationship and its challenges.
- Tools, techniques, and templates to help you get the most out of your supervision.
- Transferable skills for other professional contexts.

Session format

- Interactive.
- Group and individual work.
- Feel free to share comments, ideas, and questions.
- 10-minute comfort break around halfway through.
- All slides and materials will be shared at the end.

Regulations and guidance



The screenshot shows a web page from the Sussex Researcher School. The top navigation bar includes links for 'Students', 'Staff', 'Schools & services', 'Sussex Direct', and 'Canvas'. Below this, a secondary navigation bar lists 'Schools', 'ITS', 'Library', and 'Professional services'. The main content area is titled 'Sussex Researcher School' and features a large image of two people, a woman and a man, sitting at a table and looking at a laptop. The page is titled 'Your supervision' and contains the following text:

Your supervision
On this page you will find information about your supervision, including what to expect from supervision meetings, what your responsibilities are and what the responsibilities of your supervisor are (and what responsibilities are shared).

Your supervisor(s)
In most cases you will have a main supervisor and then one or more additional supervisors, all of whom will provide you with advice and guidance throughout your research degree. Your main supervisor will take the lead in the administration of your academic progress.

How supervision works
You are required to submit via [Sussex Direct](#) a record of each formal meeting with your supervisor(s) – a mutually agreed summary of the key issues discussed and agreed deadlines – for both submission of work and feedback. You should submit the record within one week of the meeting taking place to be confirmed by the relevant supervisor.

You should have your first meeting with your supervisory team within two weeks of commencing your research degree. This meeting should include a discussion of: respective roles and responsibilities within the supervisory relationship; communication preferences and how and when supervisory meetings will take place; and any circumstances you may need to make your supervisors aware of so they can best support you during your registration.

A positive relationship with your supervisors will be a key factor in the success of your research project and this [questionnaire to 'clarify the roles, responsibilities and expectations' of PGRs and their supervisors](#) can be used for this purpose.

<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/internal/sussex-researcher-school/researcherdev/postgraduate-research-policies/supervision>

Understanding the Supervisory Relationship

Supervisory Contexts

- **High-contact** – lab-based, daily interaction. Additional mentorship from other researchers.
- **Structured** – regular scheduled meetings and other interactions, perhaps as part of bigger project or cohort.
- **Sporadic** – little contact beyond monthly meetings and feedback on drafts. High autonomy.

Types of Doctorate

- Traditional thesis
- Thesis-by-papers
- Practice-based PhD
- Practice-led PhD
- Professional doctorate

Group Discussion

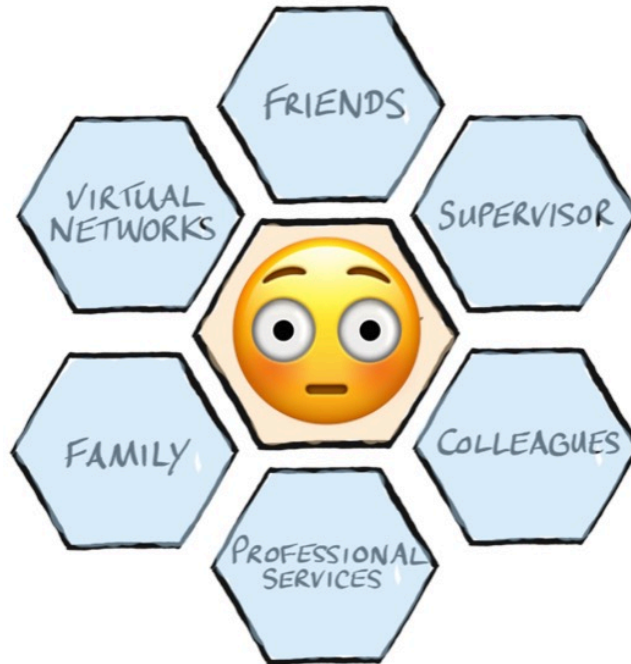
- 1. What do you expect from your supervisor?
- 2. What do they expect from **you**?

Expectations in Research Supervision

Supervisors and research students often have differing expectations of supervision. The supervisor and student should complete this questionnaire independently, then compare their responses. Circle a number depending on whether you think the responsibility lies more with the supervisor or the student. If you think they share equal responsibility, circle 3.

	Supervisor	Rating	Student
1	It's the supervisor's responsibility to select the research topic	1 2 3 4 5	The student is responsible for selecting their own topic
2	The supervisor should decide which theoretical framework and/or methodology is most appropriate	1 2 3 4 5	The student should decide which theoretical framework and/or methodology to use
3	The supervisor should develop an appropriate programme and timetable of research for the student	1 2 3 4 5	The student should develop their own programme and timetable of research
4	The supervisor should ensure that the student has access to the resources and facilities they need	1 2 3 4 5	It is the student's responsibility to identify and locate all necessary resources and facilities
5	It is the supervisor's responsibility to advise the student of all relevant policies, procedures, and requirements	1 2 3 4 5	The student is responsible for familiarising themselves with the relevant policies, procedures, and requirements

Who's on your project team?



Individual Exercise

1. Who's on your Project Team?
2. What kind of support will they provide?
3. Are there any gaps?

What does your supervisor know about you?

- What working style do you prefer?
- Are there limitations on your time that may not be apparent to them?
- Have you encountered difficulty in areas of your research that you haven't brought to their attention?
- Do you need any specific help or adaptations?
- What are your aims?

What do you know about your supervisor?

- What's their preferred working style?
- Are there limitations on their time that may not be apparent to you?
- Do they have major commitments that affect your relationship?

Agree how you're going to work together

- How often will you meet?
- Who sets the deadlines?
- **In what format should work be submitted?**
- **How quickly will feedback be given and by what method?**
- What are the key milestones?

Co-supervisors

- How often will you all meet together?
- Who has responsibility for what areas?
- What happens *when* they don't agree?

Co-Supervisor Responsibility Matrix

Instructions: Complete this matrix with your supervisory team to clarify roles and avoid confusion. Adapt it to suit your needs and PhD type.

Key: L = Leads (primary responsibility) | S = Supports (secondary input) | C = Consulted (informed and asked for input) | I = Informed (kept updated but not actively involved)

RESPONSIBILITY AREAS

Research Design & Methodology

Area	Supervisor A	Supervisor B	Supervisor C
Literature review guidance			
Research questions refinement			
Methods selection			
Ethics applications			

Writing & Communication

Area	Supervisor A	Supervisor A	Supervisor C
Chapter structure feedback			
Writing style guidance			
Academic voice development			
Conference presentation prep			
Publication strategy			

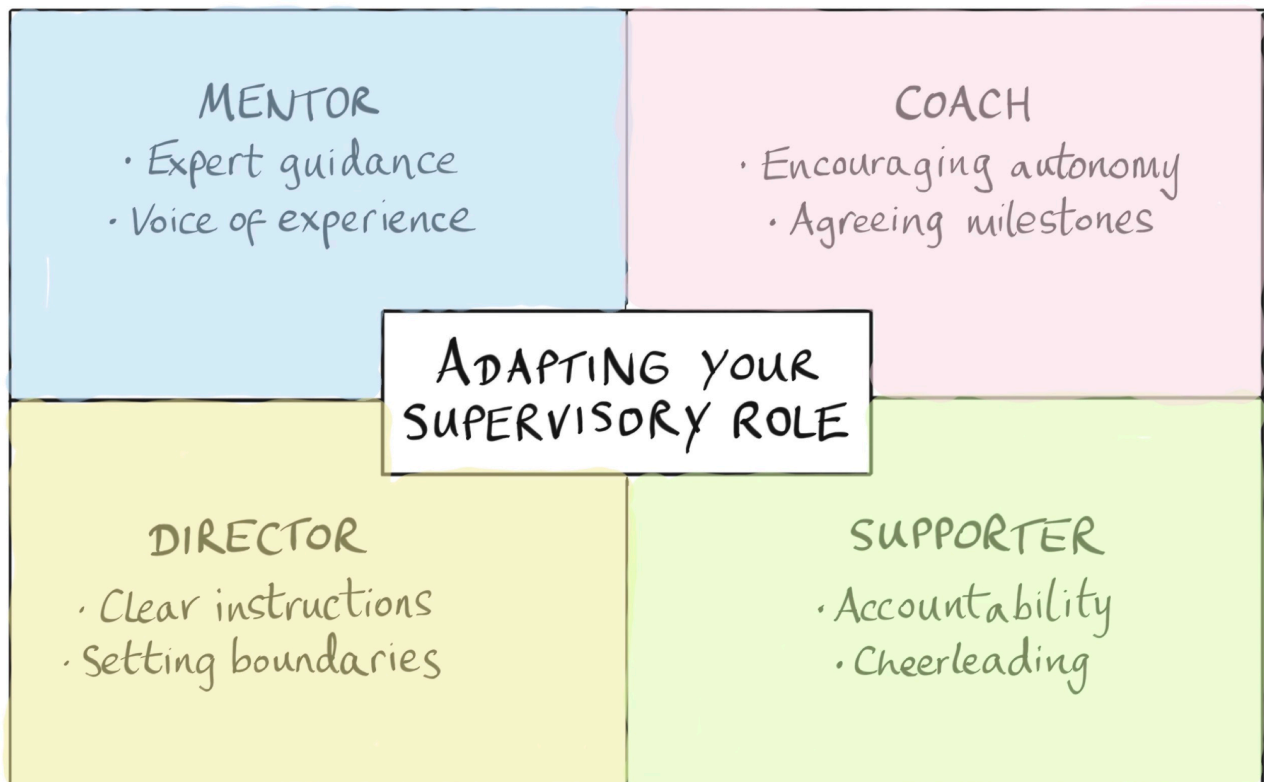
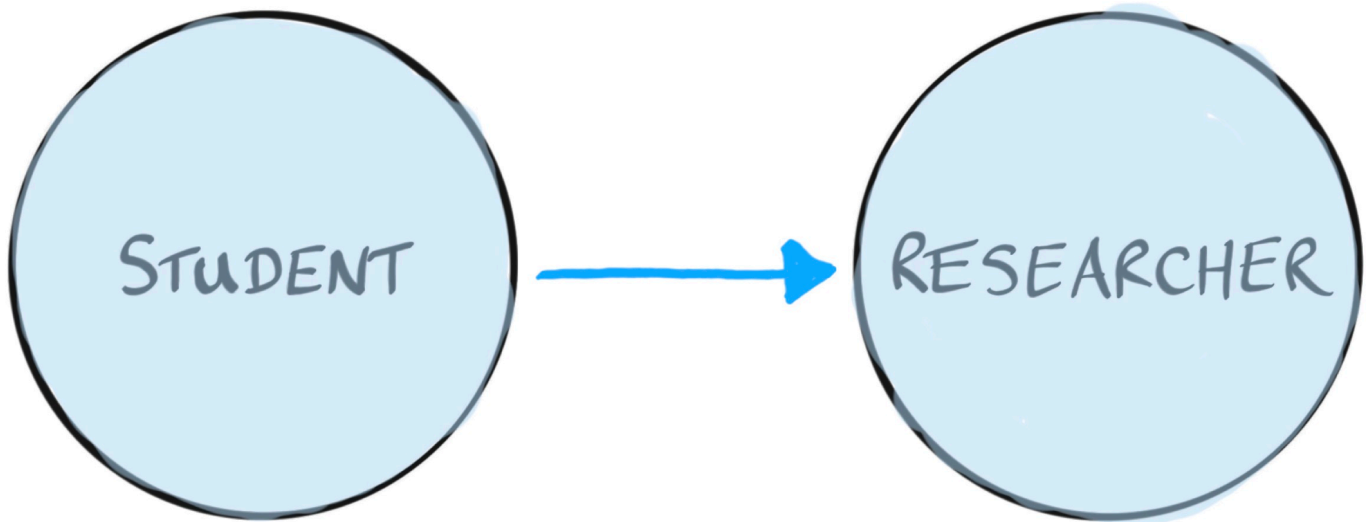
Summary

- Discuss expectations as early as possible.
- Avoid assumptions around responsibilities.
- Agree how you’re going to work together and schedule reviews of this arrangement.

Any questions or ideas? 💡

**Building Autonomy in the
Supervisory Relationship**

THE DOCTORAL TRANSITION



Based on Hersey-Blanchard model

Coaching

- Directing creates dependency.
- Coaching helps develop autonomy.
- Your supervisor shouldn't be providing solutions.

As a researchers, you need to ...

- Solve problems.
- Overcome obstacles.
- **Learn to trust your own judgement.**
- Develop confidence.
- Become independent.

Remember

- You'll be far more committed to a solution you've devised.
- And it'll be easier to defend in your viva.
- The harder your supervisor works on providing a solution, the less effective they'll be!

Any questions or ideas? 💡

Improving Communication

You set the agenda

PhD Supervision Meeting Agenda

Date:

1	What I've done since the last meeting
2	Any questions/difficulties that arose
3	Feedback points to discuss
4	Agreed actions & deadlines
5	Next step

Asynchronous communication - text-based

- Email (keep it brief and focussed!)
- Slack/MS Teams
- WhatsApp/Signal/Telegram
- Shared documents (Google Docs, Notion, Overleaf, GitHub)
- Project management platforms (Trello, Asana, Monday.com)

Asynchronous communication - audio/visual

- Voice notes.
- Screen recordings (Loom, OBS) – excellent for showing work or explaining complex ideas.
- Video messages (quick Zoom recordings, phone videos).
- Collaborative whiteboards (Miro, Mural, even simple shared drawings).

To consider and discuss...

- When to use each method – what's a more natural extension of current methods? e.g. a supervisor who gives a lot of written feedback might be happy with collaborative documents, but resistant to videos.
- Trial periods to test new tools/approaches before committing.
- Reasonable response times.
- Boundaries between formal and informal communication channels.
- Make sure it's a win-win and that the benefits are clear to everyone.

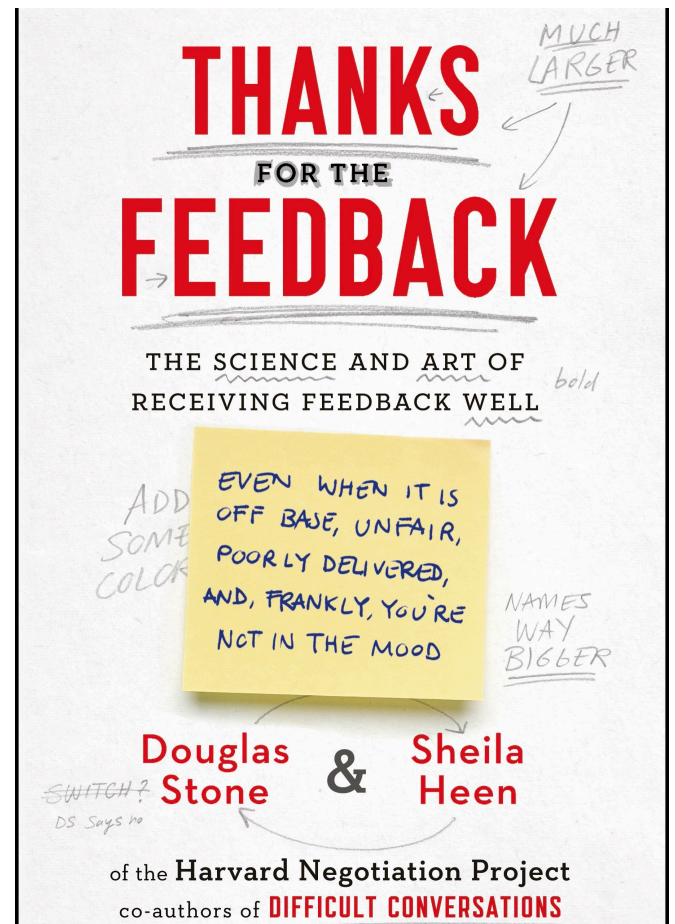
Summary

- You set the agenda – decide what you need from your meeting.
- Think about how you communicate between meetings – what's most appropriate and effective?
- Review your approach for each stage of the PhD.

Any questions or ideas? 💡

Getting Constructive Feedback

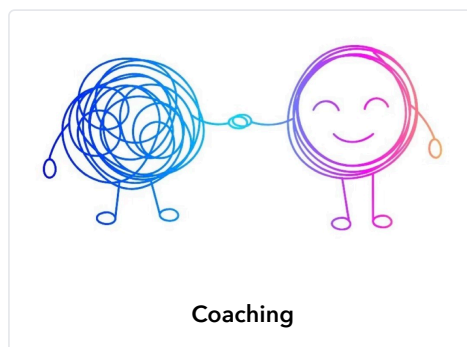
"When we give feedback, we notice that the receiver isn't good at receiving it. When we receive feedback, we notice that the giver isn't good at giving it." 🤔



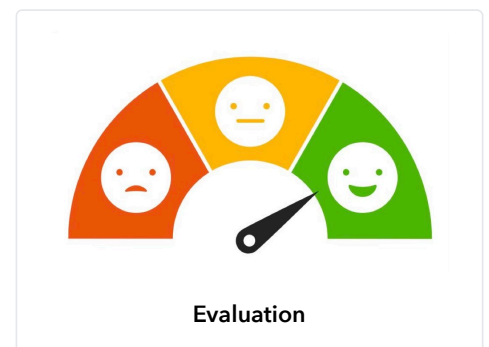
Different kinds of feedback



Appreciation

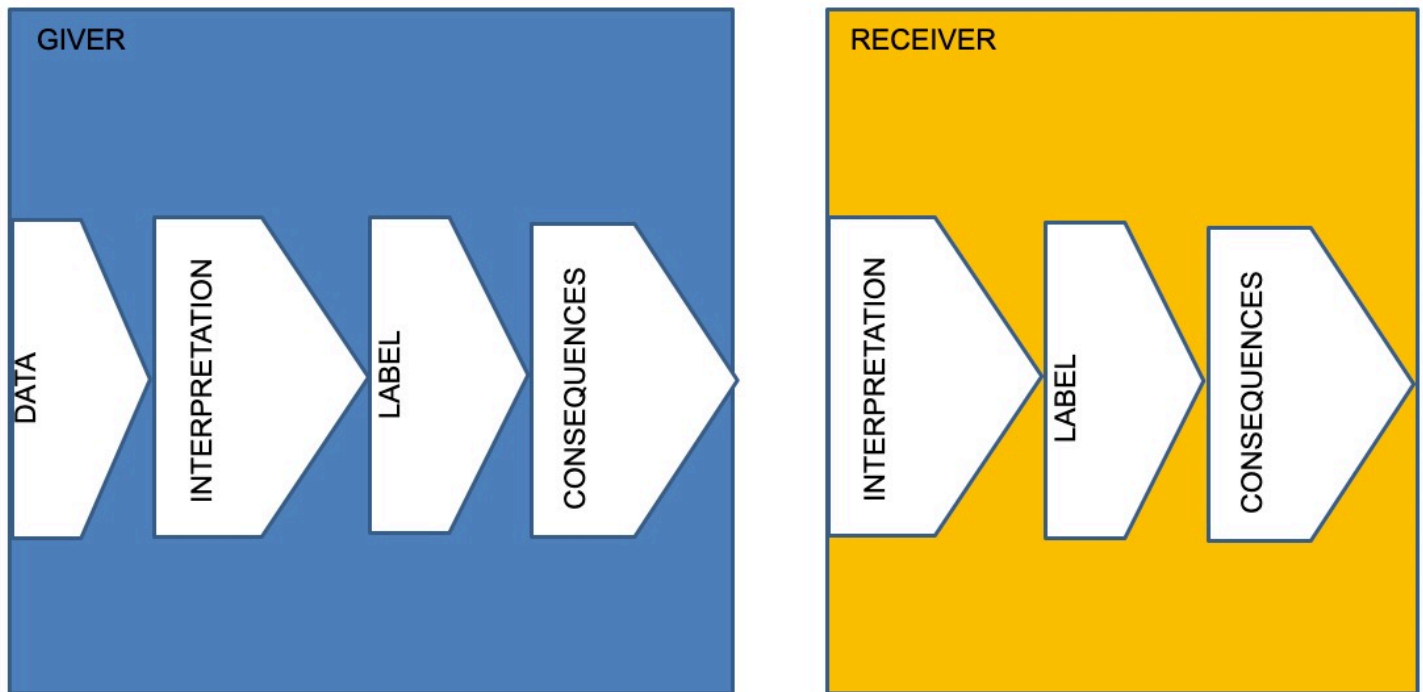


Coaching



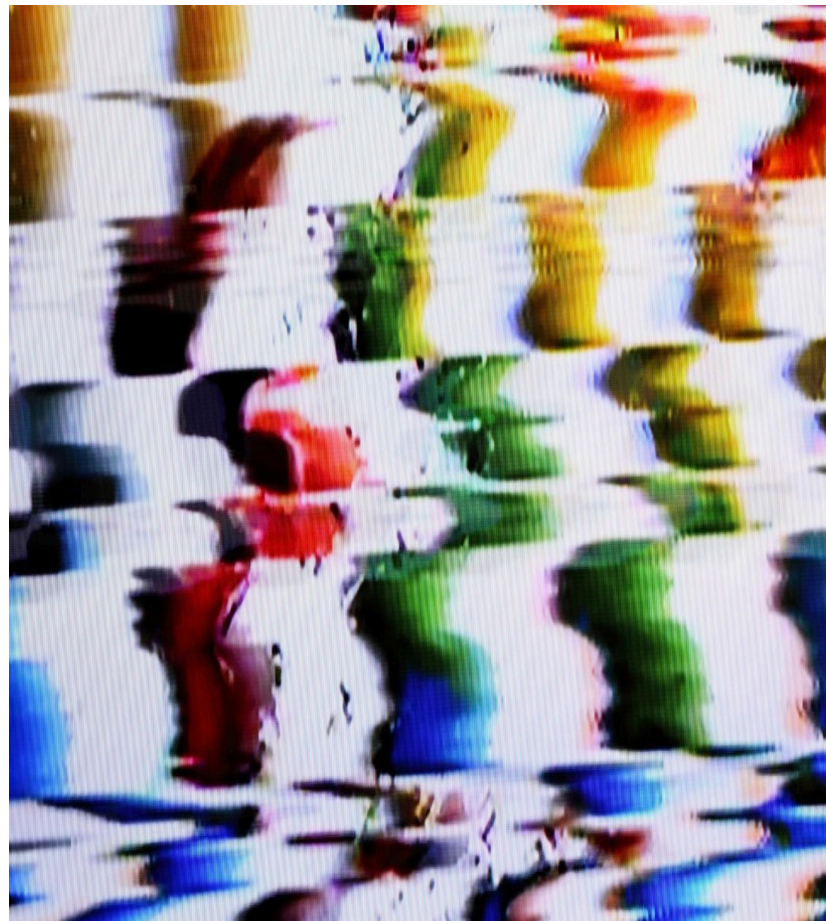
Evaluation

Receiving feedback

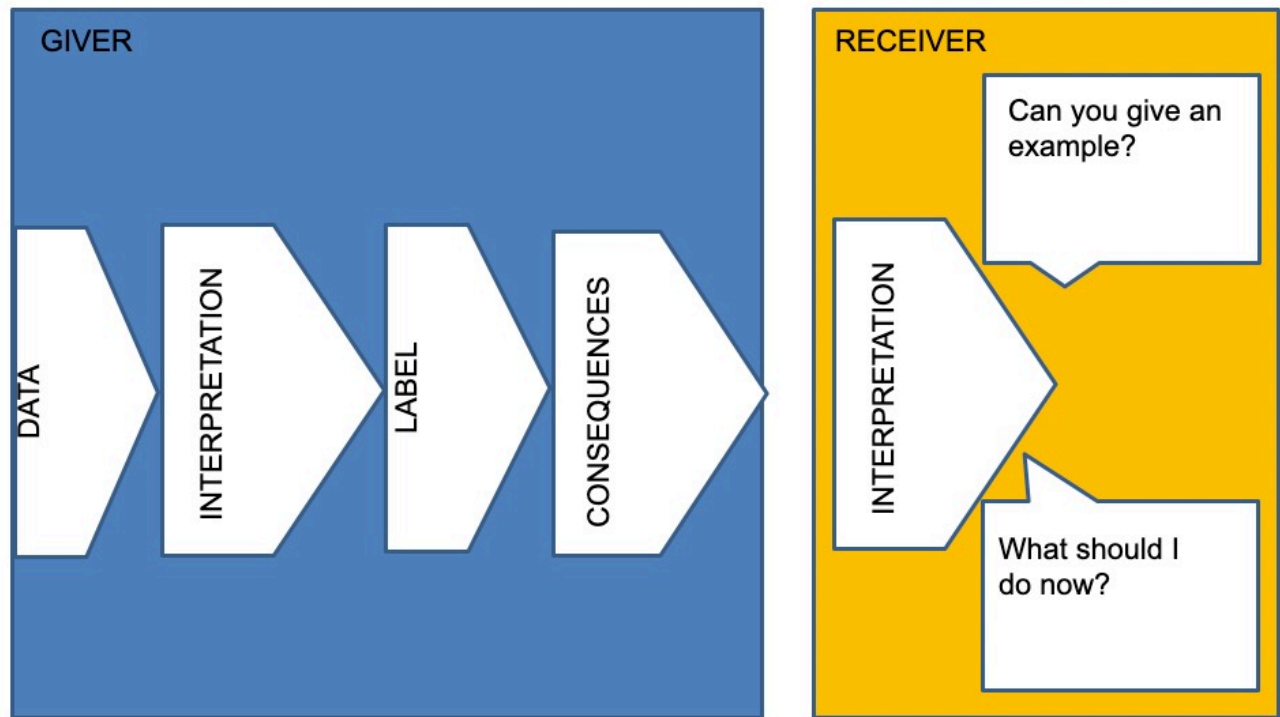


Interference in the feedback

- What the supervisor says: "This writing style isn't academic enough."
- What they mean: "You're almost there, it just needs some more signposting. The argument is good."
- What you hear: "You're not really an academic - you're an imposter." 🤪



Receiving feedback



What sort of feedback do you need on writing?

- Structure?
- Arguments?
- Flow?
- Style?
- Grammar and spelling?

Being specific

- “This is an **outline** of my argument. I need to know whether it’s convincing and logical.”
- “This is an **early draft** of a chapter. I’d like feedback on the structure and flow. I’ll address the writing style later.”
- This is my **fourth draft**. I’ve finalised the argument, structure, and flow, but I need your thoughts on whether the **writing style** is clear.”

Summary

- Work out what kind of feedback you need.
- Communicate this to your supervisor (provide examples, if necessary).
- Give them feedback on their feedback! (Good and bad)

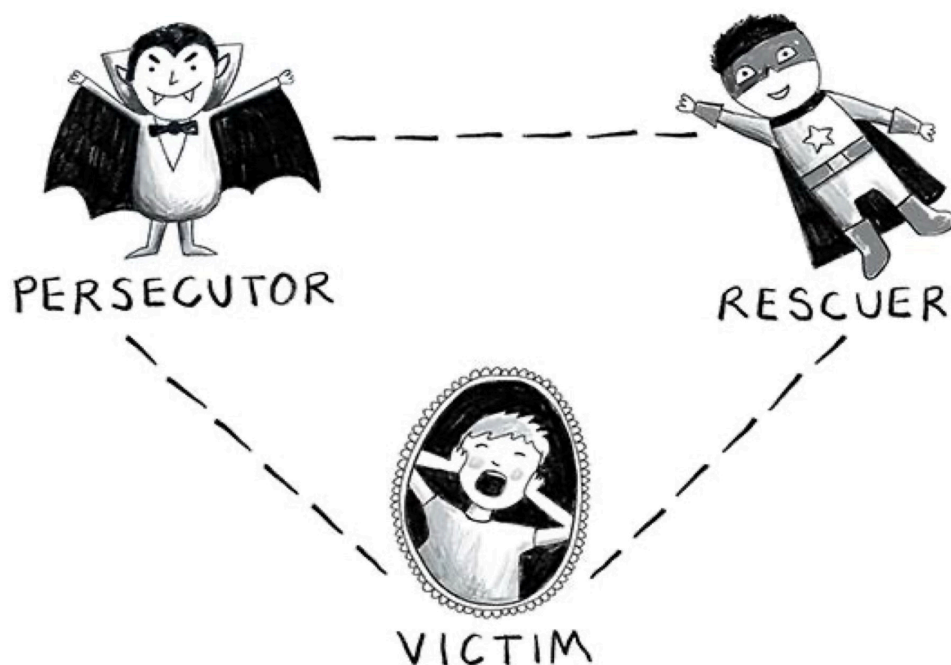
Any questions or ideas? 💡

Resolving Problems

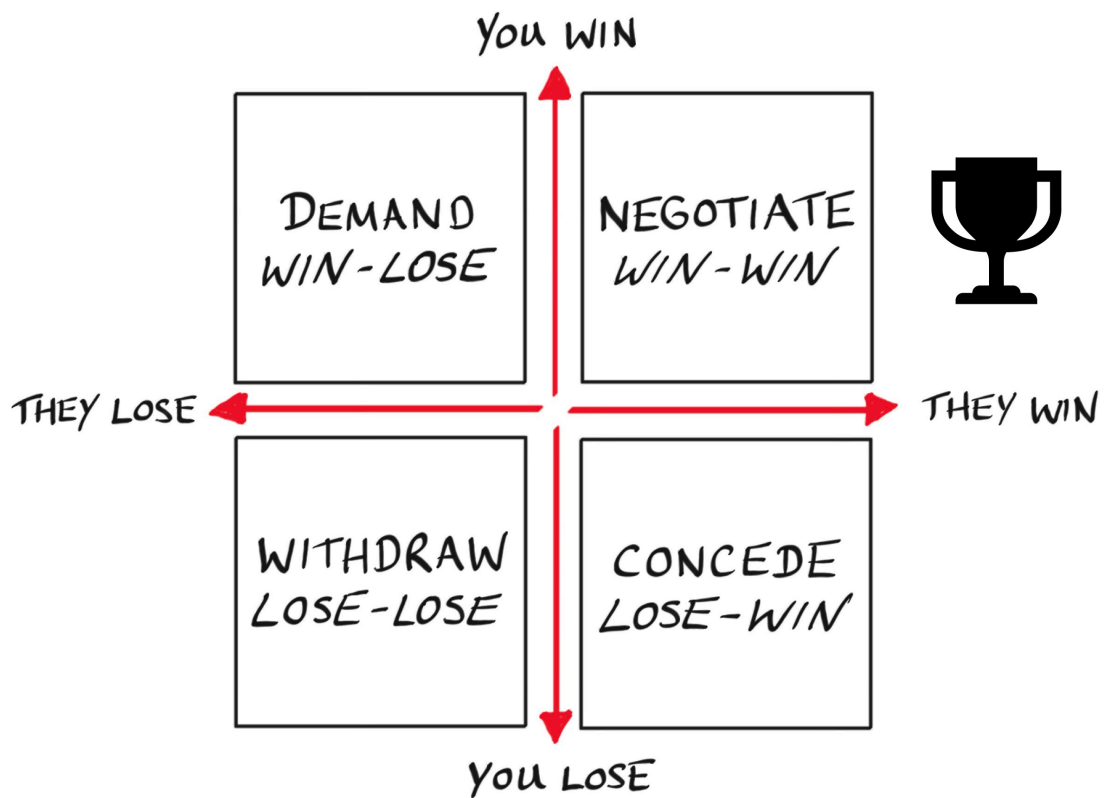
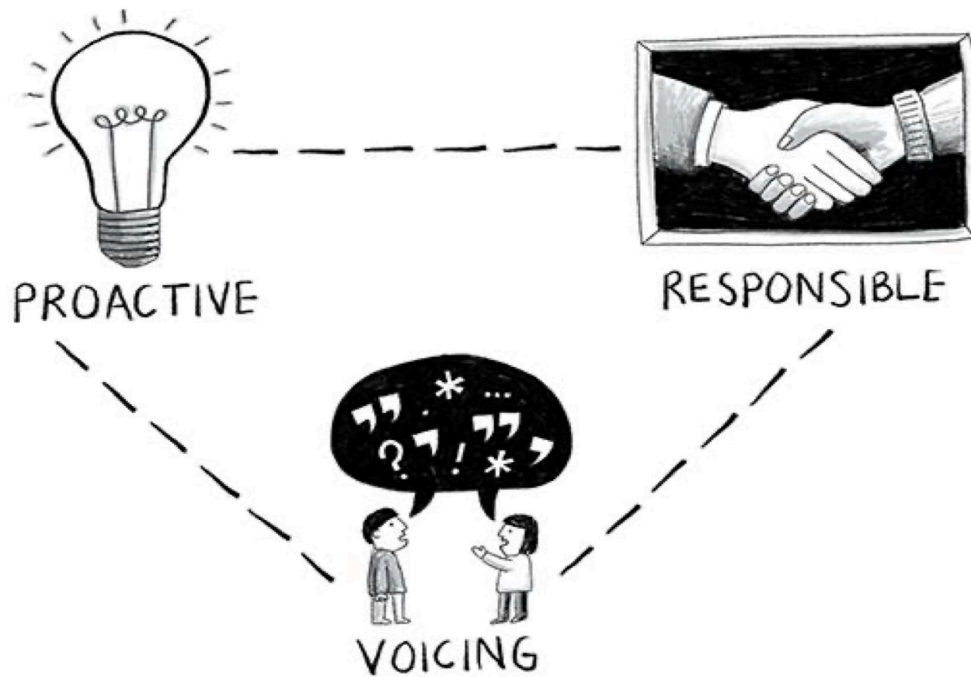
If things go wrong ...

- Describe the situation that bothers you, being as specific as you can (for instance: "When you're unclear, I go back to my desk confused about what to do next").
- Express your feelings about the situation ("When I am confused I get stressed I find it difficult to write anything").
- Empathise with the position the other person is in ("I realise you have strong views and want to give me your best advice").
- Explain the consequences ("But if I stay this stressed and confused I am going to get behind in my work").
- Specify what you want from your supervisor ("It would be very helpful if you could establish in advance the available options and then explain their advantages and disadvantages in a way that helps me make a decision on what to do").

The Drama Triangle



The Winning Triangle



Above all ...

- Don't take it personally.
- Talk to someone.
- Follow the procedures.
- Be persistent.
- Don't quit.

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Student Centre

The Student Centre is at the heart of your student experience. Find out about the help available.

Getting information and support

Whether it's a simple query or support with a more complex issue, there's a wide range of information, advice and guidance available at the Student Centre.

The Student Centre brings together our student support services, who provide confidential, pre-booked appointments in-person or online on a range of issues. They will also be running drop-in sessions, events and other activities throughout the year.

Our dedicated Welcome team are here to help you find the information you need, including:

- [housing and living with other people](#)
- [requesting letters to support your study](#)

Contact us



You can:

- visit our Welcome desk, 8.30am-5pm, Monday-Friday
- call [01273 075700](tel:01273 075700), 9am-4.30pm, Monday-Friday
- follow us on [Instagram](#).

Summary

- Deal with supervisory problems ASAP.
- For personal problems, inform your supervisor, but ...
- Seek appropriate support from your network.

Any questions or ideas? 

Conclusion

Action Plan

- Discuss your expectations ASAP.
- Take the initiative.
- Consider how you can communicate better.
- Deal with any existing problems immediately.
- Identify other sources of support.

**Your supervisory team is an
important but finite resource.
Use it wisely! 🤔**

Any final questions or ideas? What are you going to take away from this session? 💡

Thank you & best of luck with your research adventures! 🙌

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🔗 <https://catherinepope.com/workshops/resources/working-with-your-phd-supervisor/>

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