

MITOCW | mitres16-9960-effective_meetings_with_advisors_captions

[Morse Code Beeps] [Whoosh] [Helicopter rotor]

Hello, and welcome to Effective Meetings with Advisors.

My name is Evan Kramer.

I'm an AeroAstro Communication Lab Fellow, and I'll be your instructor today.

Here's a list of learning goals for this workshop.

After this workshop, you'll be able to have an approach to help you feel prepared going into meetings with your advisor.

You will have tools to help improve mutual understanding between advisor and advisee, and you'll have strategies for compromising with your advisor when your expectations misalign.

We'd like to begin this workshop with an introductory activity.

We'd like for you to reflect on a recent meeting with an advisor by considering the questions on the worksheet titled Meeting Prep Handout in supplementary materials.

Please pause this video to respond to the questions listed in the handout.

[Alien spaceship beeps]

To set the scope of this workshop, we explicitly define the types of meetings covered.

In this case, the scope is fairly broad in that any meeting with a mentor, such as an academic advisor, research advisor, or outside technical specialist, regarding academic updates is considered.

Specific examples include one-on-one research meeting updates, meetings to review journal or conference paper submissions, or technical presentation dry runs.

So what exactly is considered an effective meeting?

An effective meeting is one in which clear mutual understanding of expectations between advisor and advisee are established.

Some example expectations you, the advisee, may have of your advisor include the frequency of your meetings, the format in which they give feedback on your work, and funding for research related travel, among others.

Some example expectations your advisor may have of you include the extent to which you are physically or virtually present on campus, the amount of time that you have off, quantity and type of research output, and teaching or grading commitments, among others.

It is important to note that you will know if a meeting has been successful if you feel that you have specific and well-defined takeaways and next steps at its conclusion.

To help you maximize the effectiveness of your advisor meetings, here's an approach that you can take.

This block diagram graphically shows the meeting as a shaded gray box with inputs and outputs, and an internal structure.

The input entails the effort you put into the meeting, while the output corresponds to your specific and well-defined takeaways and next steps.

The internal structure of the meeting involves three unique actions in which you share your prepared materials, engage in discussions about your presented materials, and compromise on any misaligned expectations you may have with your advisor.

Note that blue arrows between each of these three unique actions indicate the flow of information and suggests that each of these actions will take place in a cyclic manner.

The following slides unpack the inputs, outputs, and internal structure of the meeting in more detail to provide you with a framework to maximize the effectiveness of your advisor meetings.

The first step to an effective advisor meeting is the effort that you put in preparation before it even starts.

Preparing entails organizing the information you want to share and assessing what information and feedback you want in return.

A helpful way to start preparation is to make an agenda.

This could be in the form of an outline slide covering the main topics that you intend to touch upon at the beginning of your presentation.

Be mindful of the number of topics you list in your outline, by estimating how much time it will take for you to share your material, and doubling this time to account for discussions and compromises with your advisor.

Also note that the amount of detail necessary in the outline varies depending on the type of meeting you're preparing for.

For example, more detailed outlines that include overarching topic titles and subsection names are necessary for longer meetings, including proposal defenses and grant proposal reviews.

For more routine meetings, an agenda can be less formal and as simple as an emailed, bulleted list of topics you intend on covering during the meeting.

During your preparation, you should also consider options for different types of media to share your materials with.

Today, the most common media format is a PowerPoint slide to visualize data and figures.

However, other media types can work well, including a hand-written flowchart for a research story that you share on paper in person, or as a photograph virtually, or a written draft for a paper review, that you share on paper in person, or as a PDF virtually.

You also want to think of specific questions you like to pose to elicit feedback and action items during the meeting.

These are important to think of beforehand since they can guide the types of discussions and compromises you engage in with your advisor.

To practice the initial idea organization phase of the meeting preparation process, complete the worksheet titled Preparing for Advisor - Advisee Meetings, in the supplementary materials.

In this activity, you will practice organizing your thoughts into two categories.

Information you want to share, such as general updates on research, problems you're currently solving and how, results and their meaning, among others; and information you want in return, such as specific feedback on a result, decisions on deadlines for submission, research directions to chart your course for the next month or two, among others.

Please pause this video now to complete the workshop and return once you're finished.

[Alien spaceship beeps]

We now turn our attention to the internal structure of the meeting and start with the sharing step.

Sharing typically happens during the first part of the meeting.

This is your chance to present the material you put so much effort into preparing.

Try to slowly walk through the content you have prepared.

In this sense, walkthrough refers to the acknowledgment that this is likely the first time anyone aside from yourself is looking at the content you're sharing.

So be patient and work hard to ensure your advisor is following by asking if they need any clarification periodically.

Presenting the details of your material is important, but try not to only focus on them.

Remember that the success of your meeting is contingent on you establishing clear, mutual understanding of expectations between your advisor and yourself and having specific, well-defined takeaways and action items at meeting conclusion.

Note that if you find yourself ahead of the curve in meeting content preparation, you could consider sending this information to your meeting attendees ahead of time.

The discussion step takes place after your initial sharing step.

Discussion periods are opportunities for your advisor to engage with the content that you shared.

Discussions are a two way street.

Your advisor will ask questions about the content you shared.

These can range from questions of clarification to questions about decisions you made in carrying out your research.

You will then have the opportunity to provide clarification and or additional details about the content that you shared.

Your objective at this stage is to establish mutual understanding between your advisor and yourself of all the content that you shared so that you can establish mutually agreed upon expectations going forward.

This brings us to the compromising stage.

Compromising entails meeting somewhere in the middle between two proposed paths.

Note the use of the word somewhere.

It may turn out that the eventual path you end up taking is exactly the one you or your advisor suggested.

Compromising doesn't always entail combining aspects of two proposed paths.

Your advisor may have thoughts on how to approach a task, but you may have the most relevant problem specific knowledge.

While it may feel challenging at times when your advisor's proposed path forward isn't initially aligning with yours, remember that the fact that they're sharing their thoughts in the first place is a demonstration of their investment in your work.

This realization can help spur constructive conversation instead of a defense oriented approach.

It is important you propose a compromise only when you clearly understand how your advisor suggestions fit into your work.

While you may be the person in the lab performing the work, your advisor likely has several more years of relevant work experience on the subject compared to you.

So there may be underlying rationale for their suggestion, based on their own experience, that you'll want to distill before suggesting an alternative approach.

Perhaps most importantly, knowledge of your own priorities is key, as they can help reach compromises that mean the most to you.

This ties back to the preparation step.

For example, there may be a specific solution method to a problem you want to pursue to gain experience.

You might suggest fitting this solution method into your advisor's suggestion of a more holistic change to your methodology, to ensure that you gain the experience that you're looking for.

Before practicing compromises through an activity, it is worth noting that the approaches covered in this workshop should be tailored to your specific advisor.

Trying different approaches with the tools we're providing can be an efficient way for determining what works best.

For example, for an enthusiastic advisor with strong feelings for their own suggestions, you might try compromising on several or several smaller aspects of a topic instead of on a singular central aspect of a proposed path.

Or for a more transactionally oriented relationship, you might adopt your advisor's exact proposed path in one topic in order to feel comfortable advocating for your own suggested path in another topic.

You might also consider talking to senior graduate students in your lab to gain insight into how they effectively communicate with your advisor.

This brings us to the Canned Questions template, which can be found in the supplementary materials.

This resource provides general question structures that can be used during a meeting with an advisor.

There are three categories of question sets outlined in boxes; namely those that are meant for communicating your desired expectations, distilling an advisor's expectations, and negotiating with an advisor.

These questions are written in a form where you can essentially drop in whatever specific topic you're discussing, without changing the function of the question.

For example, a question for communicating your desired expectations could be, "I'm hoping to conduct unit tests before running a complete subsystem test.

Does this align with your expectations?" These questions don't have to be used in isolation, either.

Stringing together multiple question structures can be effective, too.

For example, combining question structures 2A and 1C results in a complete train of thought that is both seeking clarification of an advisor's expectations and communicating your desired expectations.

Just to clarify, you're asking me to proceed with the full subsystem test.

Is that correct?

I ask because I'm hoping to get some experience setting up and conducting software unit tests, and I'm wondering if that aligns with your expectations.

Remember that the key to finding success with these question structures is to always maintain a level of respect in your communication with your advisor.

Being mindful of your tone and using positive language can be the difference in making an effective versus ineffective meeting.

Please pause this video to take a moment to review the question structures in the canned question handout if you haven't already.

[Alien spaceship beeps]

Let's take this opportunity to practice using the canned questions in the canned question handout.

Return to your responses from the introductory activity and use the question structures from the canned question handout to first clarify a miscommunication, second, distill your advisor's expectations, and third, negotiate a compromise.

Remember to add in positive language and respectful tone where appropriate.

Please pause this video to complete the activity and return when finished.

[Alien spaceship beeps]

We've touched on compromising over the last few slides, but there are a few additional ideas worth noting.

These ideas fall under the umbrella of strategic compromising, which can be thought of as a way to thoughtfully approach the compromising process.

First, when it becomes clear that you and your advisor have unaligned expectations, try to think from your advisor's perspective.

Why would they be suggesting their proposition?

This may be a good place to use some canned questions to distill your advisor's underlying motivations, such as funding constraints or administrative or bureaucracy pressures that you aren't aware of.

Second, know what your non-negotiables are prior to your meeting.

Identifying aspects of your research that you are not willing to compromise on can help you communicate your perspective clearly, confidently, and concisely.

Third, seek common ground.

Looking for areas where you and your advisors goals align can help smooth out the compromise process, especially at the beginning of negotiating.

Finally, focus on the big picture and be open to feedback.

If it seems like your advisor is adamant about something, it may be most strategic to just go along, especially if it doesn't violate your non-negotiables or alter the big picture of how you envision your graduate school experience.

Remember that your advisor is supposed to have opinions, and the fact that they are engaging with you shows their investment in you as a student.

That concludes this workshop on effective meetings with advisors.

You should now be able to implement an approach to help you feel prepared going into meetings with your advisor.

Improve mutual understanding between your advisor and yourself using tools presented in this workshop, and use strategies for compromising with your advisor when your expectations misalign. I hope you find the presented tools and resources useful in your upcoming meetings.

This workshop was created and presented by Fellows of the MIT AeroAstro Communication Lab.

You can find other workshops related to technical communication in our MIT OpenCourseWare repository.

Thank you.

[Morse code beeps]