

[Morse Code Beeps]
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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 you're 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 is three categories of questions
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]