

BEST PRACTICES FOR PH.D. FACULTY

The Executive Committee of the Ph.D. Program in English offers this document as a guide to those practices that we have found most successful in providing respectful, substantive, timely support for students at various stages of their graduate careers. We don't expect all faculty to agree or comply with every practice described here; for instance, some faculty might believe that it is better to be less directly involved with a student's Oral Examination preparation. And we appreciate that, for most of us, achieving all of these goals will be a challenge. Nonetheless, we hope that having an aspirational list like this can at least help faculty to reflect on our practices and how to make them as constructive as possible. We also hope that these suggestions might be useful for newly appointed faculty who are learning how to advise and teach at the Ph.D. level.

Perhaps the best advice we can give students and faculty is to communicate. The participants in an advising relationship ought to articulate their own particular expectations, capacities, and preferences on both sides. A generic document like this can provide overall guidance, but will never be as effective as a specific discussion about deadlines and needs.

For information about administrative policies and procedures, please see the [Practical Guide for Faculty](#).

TEACHING

Course planning:

- 1) The syllabus should contain sufficient information to enable students to plan their complicated lives and workloads.
- 2) The syllabus should clarify the workload expectations of the course, in terms of written, oral, or digital assignments.
- 3) The reading workload should be manageable and appropriate to the goals of the course.
- 4) Each syllabus is supposed to include learning outcomes and the ISBN for required books (in fact, including the ISBN for required books is a federal law that was part of the 2008 Higher Education Reauthorization Act passed by Congress).
- 5) In compliance with the Office of Student Services, faculty need to accommodate students who require alternative ways to access course material and classrooms. This may involve ensuring that texts are available both audibly and visually, or rearranging the classroom to permit wheelchair access.
- 6) The syllabus should represent the range of diverse ethnic, racial, gendered, and sexual identifications in the field it covers, as well as acknowledging the participants' diversity in the classroom.

Student-faculty interactions:

- 1) Faculty should have office hours or remote/in-person appointments in which they are available to students.
- 2) Student-faculty interactions are most successful when faculty treat students with respect and courtesy, both in the classroom and in private meetings. This includes adhering to students'

wishes about pronouns and names, and whenever possible alerting students in advance when difficult material surfaces so that they can prepare.

3) Faculty and students should adhere to the guidelines and expectations established by the syllabus as much as possible, and inform each other when those items need alteration.

4) Faculty should provide substantive written feedback on all coursework papers. Students get the most out of faculty feedback when faculty return seminar papers and conference papers within a month or so (barring, of course, accidents and illnesses).

5) Faculty should be willing to hear and accommodate the genuine needs of students—in cases of illness, family crises, or work obligations—as students should accommodate such needs for faculty.

6) If a student submits work for an INC, the faculty member should read and grade it promptly, changing the final grade accordingly.

ADVISING: ORALS, PROSPECTUS, DISSERTATION

Overall:

1) Students thrive when they are able to meet regularly with faculty. Some find it useful to aim for once a month; if others have different rhythms it is useful to articulate timeframes so that both parties know what to expect.

2) Students do better when faculty respond to their inquiries in a timely manner, ideally within a week.

Preparing a student to do as well as possible on the Oral Exam:

Students tend to get the most of out the Oral Exam process when each faculty member serving on the Orals Committee:

1) reviews his/her list with the student; the chair of the committee should also review all three lists.

2) makes sure the list remains at a manageable size, as appropriate for the number and kind of texts that are on the list. This usually means 20-40 items per list.

3) helps the student prepare for the Oral Exam. Possible preparation techniques include: reviewing the format of the exam, practicing sample questions, soliciting ideas for what the student would like to be asked, meeting with the student on a regular basis before the exam to discuss readings.

Advising a student towards a successful dissertation prospectus:

The advisor should help the student figure out the prospectus format and read drafts. Once approved by the advisor, the prospectus is submitted to the English Program and distributed for review to the two committee members and an outside reader chosen by the EO. The prospectus has a better chance of approval when the dissertation adviser:

1) evaluates the prospectus in terms of whether the proposed dissertation will speak to a current debate or contribute significantly to scholarship in a certain field.

2) reminds the student that the prospectus is an initial mapping and not a permanent, binding statement; as the student begins writing, the dissertation project will and probably should change.

3) helps the student articulate the project in terms that will be intelligible to readers who may not have expertise in the student's specific area (e.g., the outside reader and possibly the other committee members).

4) ensures that the dissertation bears enough relation to the work of the English Program that it can be meaningfully evaluated by members of the faculty and it makes sense to confer a degree in English on the dissertation.

Advising a dissertation:

The results of the prospectus review are shared with the whole Dissertation Committee; this provides an occasion for the adviser (and possibly the committee members) to consult with the student about possible revisions to the dissertation project before writing begins. The student should discuss expectations and establish timelines with all three faculty on the Dissertation Committee.

Students have the best chance of completing successful, timely dissertations when the dissertation adviser:

1) creates a realistic timetable with the student and tries to keep the student on that schedule (barring, of course, accidents and illnesses).

2) returns chapter drafts with substantive comments within a reasonable time, say within 4-6 weeks, or according to a timeline discussed with the student.

3) responds to miscellaneous student requests, like vetting abstracts, conference papers, article drafts, and job materials, as promptly as possible.

4) proposes necessary revisions but also remains willing to accept a version of the chapter that may not do everything the faculty member would like. A "good enough" list, prospectus, or chapter may be the best way to facilitate a student's progress.

5) remembers that this text should express the student's perspective even if it is one with which the advisor may disagree - although those perspectives are outmoded, problematic, or unsubstantiated ones that will not represent the student well, then the faculty member ought to work to redirect the student.

6) participates in annual meetings (set up by the student) so that the entire committee can review the student's progress.

7) checks in with the student regularly, ideally at least once a month but at least on a timetable agreed upon by both sides.

8) is willing to give the student a grade of NPR (No Progress Reported) if the student is not submitting adequate work on time.

9) lets the student know as soon as possible if there are serious problems that might make this dissertation hard to complete or defend.

10) offers meaningful support for the student's entrance into the professional field, beyond commenting on drafts: sends along relevant references, introduces students to like-minded scholars, forwards calls for papers and fellowship opportunities, etc.

ACADEMIC JOB MARKET SUPPORT

While we all know how difficult the academic job market is, good faculty support can make a difference. Best practices include:

1) Two years before the student goes on the job market, faculty should encourage the student to get publications and conference presentations underway.

2) Faculty should discuss other ways students can prepare themselves, from teaching a variety of topics to doing service work. See the job search website: <https://engljobsearch.commonsgc.cuny.edu/>.

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3) Faculty should be willing to write recommendation letters for their students, of a length and tone suitable for the modern academic job market. There is detailed advice for letter-writers on the job search website listed above, but, briefly:

- Recommendation letters are usually 2-4 single-spaced pages
- They begin with a brief laudatory first paragraph, followed by two or three paragraphs summarizing and showcasing the merits of the dissertation by placing it in the field and comparing it to other dissertations.
- Subsequent paragraphs assess teaching and service, with perhaps a brief mention of personality/collegiality at the end.
- The recommendation can also work to explain any potentially worrisome elements in the student's record.

4) If the faculty member is unsure whether the letter is serving the student properly, please send the letter to the Job Search Officer for review.

5) Faculty should solicit the student's job materials by July to review them before the student takes them to the Job Search Officer.

7) The dissertation adviser should pay particular attention to the dissertation abstract since s/he will have the best knowledge of the project, while other faculty (including the Job Search Officer) can review it from a non-specialist perspective.

NON-ACADEMIC JOB MARKET ADVICE

As students pursue employment in alt-ac, academic-adjacent, and non-academic fields, the advisor may feel unsure about how to help with careers with which they have little or no experience. Here's some ways to be helpful:

1. Advise the student to take advantage of the resources at the [Office of Career Planning and Professional Development](#),
2. Make sure the student sees the resources on the job search website: <https://engljobsearch.commons.gc.cuny.edu/non-academic-career-information-2/>
3. Lay out options for the student. Alt-ac and academic-adjacent careers include advising, academic administration, non-tt work in foundations and programs. Non-academic careers include journalism, secondary-school teaching, public relations, writing.
4. Advise the student to speak to GC alumni who work in similar fields (contact the EO for possibilities)
5. Think about how the student's academic experience can be represented to non-academic employers in a recommendation or phone call, ie stressing the discipline, ingenuity, work ethic, communications skills that scholars develop.
6. Treat this career path with the same joy and excitement with which you would feel about a more familiar academic track; make it clear that you will continue to be proud of them as (and because!) they have the initiative to find a path that suits them better. Faculty approval means a great deal.

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

1. It is okay to email faculty more than once if you don't hear back from them in a week or two. They get a lot of emails, and often have multiple emails for the different campuses

they teach at, so it may have just got lost in the inbox. They may, in fact, be grateful for the nudge.

2. You should feel comfortable asking for meetings, letters of recommendation, reading your work, help constructing your orals lists, help with the job search, and general advice related to your work. This is help to which you are entitled. All students need and deserve this kind of help.
3. If you are working with a faculty member who does not share your sense of appropriate timelines and responsiveness, you might explicitly raise it with the faculty member if that feels comfortable, but if not you should feel free to switch to another faculty member. Talk to the EO if you need help figuring out how to do this.
4. Some faculty love to work with students on collaborative projects, reading groups, or conference panels. Ask faculty if they would be open to doing something together if you have an idea you want to pursue with your mentors. Similarly, if you really admire someone in your field, ask faculty if they can put you in touch; faculty have extensive networks!
5. Mentor-mentee relationships are a two-way street. While the mentor is mostly helping the mentee in their work/endeavors, be on the lookout for ways you could help them too, such as recommending them for advising awards or talks, or even just express your gratitude if a mentor goes out of their way for you. Show that you appreciate their labor, and that you care about their well-being too.