

# The Definitive ‘what do I ask/look for’ in a PhD Advisor Guide (minus lifestyle questions)

You’ve been accepted to a PhD program, and have time to ask questions while visiting – what do you look for and ask? Below are some high level ideas to keep in mind as you start this journey and an exhaustive reference of questions to ask, color coded by who you should probably talk to first.

You’ll have 30 min – full day with each lab, so focus on the questions relevant to your situation. Some have complex, nuanced implications that you should ask a trusted neutral party about or @ me on twitter (@andrewkuznet).

Good luck, I believe in you. :)

**Before:** Understand potential advisors’ work: read a few, recent, paper abstracts (e.g. prev. 2 yrs for HCI) and check out their academic/lab website. Do this even for profs you might not be directly interested in, come in with an open mind and try to learn as much as possible. Never know if you’ll want to add or switch an advisor.

## Who do you want to work with?

Your advisor relationship determines quite a bit of your graduate student experience. Pick wisely :)

## What do you want to research?

Figure out what topic you’ll be working on, projects, types of approaches, etc.

## How does funding work?

Money is (unfortunately) important. Figure out how much it will drive your experience and what to expect.

## How likely is what you had in mind?

Although you may have time to sort out the details later, now is the time to check if a specific arrangement is viable.

## Do you want to be co-advised?

Co-advising can be useful for a number of reasons. It’s almost always easier to add a co-advisor later than to remove.

## What’s the culture like?

Much of lab culture will be gleaned from methods other than direct questioning but will strongly affect your experience.

## Who best to ask this question to...

Advisor’s website / publications

Direct Observation

Department

Advisor Directly

Advisor’s current PhD students

Current PhD students in program

Advisor’s current PhD student (candid)

Yourself

## 1 Advisor Style & Expectations

- Does the professor have tenure yet? [engagement level, PhD might get interrupted]
- What is the professor’s formal training / background / PhD? [helps contextualize problems/approaches]
- What have previous lab members done after getting their PhD? [Gone to industry?/Post-doc?/Professor?]
- What is the lab structure? [how collaborative/disjointed are lab members’ projects?]
- Does the advisor consider themselves a ‘hands-on’ or ‘hands-off’ advisor?
- How does the advisor give feedback on papers/what is their feedback style?
- How often does the advisor meet with their students? [1:1 or all together? Daily guidance by PI or post-doc?]
- Are there lab meetings? What are other meetings you will see your advisor in a group with other people?
- What does a group/lab meeting look like? [Or other relevant meetings]
- How many students are in the group? [Number of undergrad/masters/phd/post doc]
- What progress does the advisor generally expect from a student in the course of a semester? [Submission/Publication pace]
- What other expectations does the advisor have for their students: time/vacation/paper/project/experiment wise etc.
- “When have you given a letter of concern? Why?”
- “What do you do when students are struggling?”

## 2 Research Fit & Projects

- How directly applicable will your future technical skills be to the roles you want after graduating. [If set on industry]
- What ‘research methods’ does the lab use? [What ‘types’ of papers / contributions / conferences targeted]
- “What are some of the projects that you and your students are currently working on?”
- “In general, do you tend to give your students projects or have them select their own?”
- “Do you have particular projects that you see me working on?”
- “How much freedom do you think I’d have in selecting my own projects?”
- “Are there other students you are interested in working with? If so, what would they be working on project-wise?”
- “Would they have their own line of work or contribute to a bigger project/someone else’s project?”

## 3 Funding / Obligations

- Where does their funding primarily come from? [If military / industry-focused funding bothers you, figure this out]
- What are their constraints from their funding source? [Some restrict research topic and change final deliverables. Some add work — writing progress reports, traveling, preparing presentations for the funding source or engineering overhead for integration]
- If your advisor made you work on a project in their area that you are least interested in (e.g. for a grant) would you still be excited doing that work? [Useful for choosing between advisors]
- “If you run out of your primary funding for a student how do you expect the student to handle that” [advisor’s responsibility / you’ll have to write a grant with me / dept will cover the student / you have to find their own funding]
- “What does the quals process look like?”
- “Is there a TA requirement?” / “How often would I be expected to TA”?

## 4 Student-Advisor Fit / Placement

- [If you are interested] Would the advisor be interested in co-advising?
- “Are you taking a student” / “Do you have funding to take students in this year (or, for which projects)”
- “What factors will affect whether or not you take a student?”
- “How do you anticipate your funding to change during my time as a student?”
- “Do you think our research interests are a good match?”
- “Are there other students in my cohort that you’re interested in working with?” (If so, are you taking more than one student?)
- “I’m interested in working with you. Do you think I’d have a good chance of working with you if I come to [your university]?”
- “Are there other faculty you think I’d be a good match for?”

## 5 Co-advising

- How much overlap would they have in research?
- Have these advisors co-advised in the past? Or worked together in the past?

## 6 Lab Culture

- How often do grad students get to attend conferences? [Pace + What constraints]
- Do students mostly work with senior students or directly with professor?
- How many conferences are students expected to target a year? [remember pubs ≠ submissions]
- How often do students take time off? Are there lab / department outings/events?
- Are there snacks in the lab?
- Is the professor in an 80/20 with a company? Are student’s research projects tied to industry funding?
- Will it be acceptable/encouraged to intern at a company during the summer? [Does this change with seniority?]
- Do students work together in common space? Is their common space? Do students often get meals together?
- Do students often work late? [Often / only before conference deadlines.]
- How often are students expected to be contactable by their advisor. [Email, slack, hangouts. Online around the clock?]

Created with input from (No order)

Francesca Khakaj, Tweet from @doublehelixpod, Jason Gross, Adeel Lakhani, Jiajun Li, Samantha Reig, Cori Faklaris, Toby Li, Abhiram Kothapalli, Jonathan Dinu, Naren Dasan, HCI’s “So You Need an Advisor”. Colors from B. Wong, Points of view: Color blindness, *Nature Methods*, vol. 8, pp. 441, May 2011.