The provision of structure by dissertation advisors is crucial at all stages of a graduate student's work, but is particularly important during the initial phase of dissertation work. It is essential that advisors and students have a shared set of expectations. Each needs to understand the constraints that operate on the other and the effects that these may have on the mentoring relationship. Good advisors make their expectations clear to students on issues such as the need for regular meetings, mastery of methodological skills, conference publications and conference presentations, timelines for degree completion, etc. Once these expectations are clearly outlined, it is much easier to develop a positive, productive relationship.

The following are suggested topics to cover in initial discussions between student and advisor:

- Frequency of contact.
- Preferred communication method (e.g., e-mail, phone calls, Skype, in person).
- Timelines for each stage of the research, including publications and conference presentations.
- Type and frequency of feedback expected.
- Whether students work in the graduate group or at home/library. Hours of work.
- Nature of any directed reading program.
- Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of progress.
- Additional training, fieldwork requirements.
- Any authorship/collaboration or intellectual property issues.
- The establishment and membership of the dissertation committee.