

Research Assistant Expectations

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1 Introduction

This document explains the standards I expect from all research assistants, whether undergraduate, Master, or PhD. I have worked with enough research assistants on joint projects to have observed what makes for a successful working relationship. I do not claim that these are the secret to life or even superior to a different professor's expectations, but they are what have worked for my research assistants and me.

Overall, they reflect what I believe it means to be a professional. Everyone is capable of professional behavior, but what that constitutes is often part of a hidden curriculum. By putting my expectations of professional behavior in writing, I aim to reveal some of those lessons.

Once I received tenure I started to think about composing this document, but not until meeting [Miriam Golden](#) at a summer lunch had I seen someone else's. Her [standard operating procedures for research assistants](#) inspired me to finally start writing. Time during the summer helped as well. Those standards are more extensive than mine will be, but I agree with everything she says.

2 Collaboration

Any project we work on will use Dropbox, Google Drive, or Github. I create a parent folder with a README file and folders for data, scripts, output, and writing. I will share the project folder with you and expect **all work to be conducted within that folder**. This requirement is so that we can collaborate on data analysis and writing together. For example, many students will download data from a Dropbox folder to a different folder on their computer and write scripts for their local folder. It is then common to forget to upload the scripts back to Dropbox. Even when remembered, the paths in the script will not work on my computer, but they would if the script kept itself oriented to the project folder.

Dropbox is my preferred service. It has a desktop app that keeps folders in sync so that one does not have to remember to upload scripts, data, and output as they are made. **I expect you to download and use Dropbox's desktop app.**

Dropbox's free tier is too small for many projects, however, and I understand when students do not want to pay out of pocket for extra storage. Your university may provide enhanced Dropbox storage, but UCLA does not because it has a contract with Box. Box does not have good desktop integration, so I do not use it. **If Dropbox is not feasible, we will use Github** (easy enough with the desktop program); as a last resort, Google Drive.

3 Meetings

Everyone's most important resource is time, and I remain shocked at how much time is lost to meetings. The following expectations are what I have found make meetings most useful.

We **meet no less than biweekly** (every two weeks) at a time determined at the start of every quarter. Often, especially during the academic year, these meetings will be group meetings. It is helpful to everyone involved to talk about problems — coding, finding data, debugging, etc. — in front of each other. I apportion meetings in 15' increments, though 30' is the modal meeting duration for one-on-one meetings.

Punctuality is expected of everyone. All meetings start on time and 1 minute late is late. There is no punishment for lateness and I understand that extenuating circumstances arise, but I expect everyone, myself included, present at a meeting start time. Though the expectation is that all meetings are in person, if Zoom is necessary then on time means in the waiting room by the meeting start.

Everyone will take written or typed notes at all meetings. Extremely few people's memory is as foolproof as the written record; mine is not and I have not had a research assistant's who is. I take written notes at all meetings. I prefer paper because it provides fewer distractions than a screen and encourage you to try paper notes as well. These notes are especially important between meetings, as it lets you remember what research to conduct between them.

Each meeting will end with **clear work objectives for the next meeting**. These objectives will be part of the notes you have taken.

If something is unclear, whether as a concept or simply hard to hear, do not hesitate to ask a question. Make sure to write down the question and answer as well, as questions are often signposts of difficult concepts. Much better to have the problem and solution written down than have to memorize it if you did not take notes!

Finally, **the objectives from the previous week's meeting should be completed at least 24 hours before our meeting**. I need time to review your work before our meetings, but my schedule is quite full and so completing work too close to the meeting often does not give me time to review it. In addition, completing work just before a deadline is not a great way to work because research work benefits from sustained focused thinking, which rushing before a deadline impedes. If you cannot complete all of the work objectives from the previous week between meetings, that is understandable; the point of this expectation is to emphasize not to complete work at the last minute.

4 Communication, Independence, and Asking for Help

I expect research assistants to have an attitude of independence when confronted with new tasks, skills to learn, programming bugs, and so on. At the same time, it is important to maintain open communication with me and learn when it is optimal to ask for help. This section clarifies the balance between independence, asking for help, and communication.

All **electronic communication occurs via email**. Slack is entertainment software masquerading as productivity.

Research assistants are often afraid to email with questions. Don't be! Especially as we first start working together, I would rather you email me too frequently than not enough. I will let you know if it is too frequent. Research goes faster and is higher quality when there is open communication, so do not be afraid to email me with questions when you get stuck.

The key is that you are stuck. How to troubleshoot a task, whether academic or personal, is an important skill. More than 50% of the time, a question you have about how to perform a task has an answer online. None of my research is so crazy that someone else has not had the same or a very similar problem. For example, if I ask you to insert a hyperlink or footnote in a LaTeX document, it is okay if you do not know how to do that. (It is very old software that I did not know about until my PhD program, and before Overleaf made it easy to use, it was even more annoying. Seriously, the [Overleaf LaTeX](#) is actually pretty great.) People have done that for decades, however, so I expect you to **first spend a minimum of 20 minutes troubleshooting** on the internet.

This expectation is not about minimizing my interaction with research assistants but improving the research experience for everyone. Emailing me, waiting for a response, trying my suggestion, and back and forth gets very slow very quickly, much slower than independently researching the problem. It also gives you practice conducting independent research and thinking, which is a skill like any other but one that is difficult to teach and practice.

Once you have independently tried to solve the problem and become stuck, *then* email me. Learning this balance between being too quick to ask questions but not too slow is the balance between communication and independence that can take time to figure out.

Another component of this balance is response frequency. Except for weekends, if I email you a question I expect a **response within 24 hours**. If you are traveling, on vacation, sick, have an emergency, or something else happens that prevents a prompt response, I understand. The default expectation, however, is prompt response.

If I do not respond to your email within 48, please nudge me. I do my best to stay on top of email from Monday to Friday, but emails slip, especially when traveling.

5 Writing

Treat emails like letters; they are not casual. All e-mails start with a salutation (“Hello < *person* >”, “Dear < *person* >”, etc.) and end with a sign-off (“Thank you, < *your name* >”, “Sincerely, < *your name* >”, etc.). In between use proper capitalization and punctuation.

If we write an academic paper together, **do not use first-person pronouns**. See [here](#) and [here](#) for explanations of this standard.

6 Quitting

If during the course of our work together you decide you no longer want to continue, that is fine. I understand situations change and different working styles do not always go together, and I will not have hard feelings if you quit. When you reach that decision, however, please let me know. **Do not ghost**, it is unprofessional. I can write a good recommendation letter if you choose not to continue working. If you ghost, however, I cannot in good conscience write a recommendation letter or serve as a reference.