

Every PhD student has to choose a supervisor. But few know how to.

Joan Bolker, EdD, counseled PhD students for 30+ years at Harvard, MIT, and Brandeis.

Here is her advice on how to choose a supervisor:

(Reposting for folks who started following me recently)

Bolker says that ideally a PhD supervisor should be:

- a coach
- a mentor
- an editor
- a career counselor
- an expert in your field

Since we don't live in an ideal world, it's hard to find a supervisor with all these qualities.

So, you'd need to be strategic.

Reputation:

Bolker says you should start by checking out the reputation of your potential supervisor.

You can find relevant information about them through their former/current students.

Most importantly, find out what percentage of their students **finish** their degrees.

Famous supervisors:

Bolker cautions against choosing famous supervisors who get treated like celebrities.

Working with such a supervisor may seem attractive but often these people are busy and you are not their biggest priority.

She stops short of saying they can be jerks.

Expert/Non-expert:

Should you choose a supervisor who is an expert in your subfield or someone who may not be an expert?

Bolker's advice is to see who is more helpful to their students.

A kind and decent non-expert is better than an abusive expert.

Supervisor's Calendar:

Bolker says you should pay close attention to your potential supervisor's calendar.

You don't want a supervisor who is planning to go on a sabbatical the year you will be up for your defense.

After you have selected a supervisor:

Your relationship with your supervisor will be like any other relationship.

It won't be perfect and will require both of you to work on it.

There should be enough goodwill on each side to put in the required work.

To do so, establish clear guidelines and expectations.

How often is your supervisor willing to meet with you: every other week, every month, etc.?

How much time do you need to prepare a first draft, revise a draft, etc.?

Know that your supervisor will not do the thinking for you. For that you are on your own.

Don't throw tantrums when your supervisor critiques your work.

Be professional, but also don't let your supervisor abuse you.

Red flags you should pay attention to:

1. Your supervisor insists you do what they want you to do and not what you are interested in.
2. If your supervisor starts competing with you.
3. Your supervisor disparages you and makes you feel bad about yourself and your work.
4. You can't get hold of your supervisor. They are always busy and inaccessible.
5. Your supervisor comes on to you. This is a very serious matter and grounds for a lawsuit.

If you want to read more, you can check out Chapter 2 of Bolker's book, "Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day."

It contains some excellent pieces of advice on the dissertation writing process.