HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Every student undertaking research with a faculty mentor wants to be a successful research assistant, but not everyone is aware, when they begin, how to accomplish this. Here are some tips to assist you that are based on former students’ research experiences.

A successful research assistant has the following attributes:

(1) **Be reliable.** Always be on time & prepared for your meeting with your mentor. Be sure to have completed any reading you’ve been assigned.

   Learn the skills you need to know, including lab techniques, library databases (beyond just JSTOR!), citation formatting, and and any computer programs or apps that you might need.

   Be organized. Make a plan and learn to prioritize your research tasks. Keep notes of your research, including any questions you have.

(2) **Be engaged.** Do reading on your own. Explore your topic, looking for other sources such as blogs or events related to your field.

   Don’t passively wait to be told what to do. If you need direction, ask.

   Keep an open mind.

   Go to lab meetings, lectures, and other events.

(3) Learn to **communicate.** Ask for feedback of your work.

   Be open & honest about your skills, challenges, & strengths. If you don’t understand how to do something, speak up!

   Be clear about your **expectations** and about your mentor’s/lab’s expectations. This includes expectations of when your work will be due and in what form, what tasks you will be expected to perform, when & how you will be given feedback, what skills you will need to learn on your own, etc.

   Learn the culture of your research group/lab/department. What are the unstated expectations of the group? For example, do you address faculty by their first or last name? Do you ask the PI a question or one of the post-docs? Is attendance at lab meetings assumed to be mandatory?

   Become part of the community. Get to know others in your lab. Ask professors, post docs, and graduate students how they got to where they are. Seek out advice from those you admire.