

General Advising Guide for Biology

The following advising guide provides information about how to get an adviser in biology and the department's general philosophy on the nature of the advising relationship. It is not intended to replace actually meeting with your adviser. Rather it offers suggestions of conversations you might have with your adviser and things you can do on your own to get the most out of this important relationship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

- [For Prospective Majors](#)
- [For New Majors](#)
- [During the Second Year](#)
- [During the Third Year](#)
- [During the Fourth Year](#)

FOR PROSPECTIVE MAJORS

If you are reading this, you might be considering majoring in biology. That is exciting! Well, we are excited, and we are happy to talk to you about it. First and foremost, know that you can talk to any biology professor about the major. You can figure out who we all are on the [department's web page](#) on the grinnell.edu site or via the [Biology SharePoint page](#). While you are welcome to approach any professor with questions, the department chair is especially open to visit with you about the major.

If you are thinking about a biology major, you'll want to consider two main things early on in your time at Grinnell – a **course plan** and a **potential adviser**. You should work with your Tutorial professor/adviser to consider what courses you need to take to stay on track with the major. While you don't need to decide on a specific major immediately, it is useful to understand the curriculum of majors you are considering so you can make smart course selections in your first year. Most majors have some flexibility, but it is also true that for each major there are certain courses it is best to take in your first year to make it easiest to complete the major. For biology, it is ideal to take BIO150, CHM129, and MAT131 in your first year; semester order doesn't matter. See more about [navigating the biology curriculum](#) on our webpage. Again, regardless of your current situation, if you have any questions, please reach out to the department chair or any biology professor you know.

If you find yourself seriously considering a biology major, it would be good to start seeking out a major adviser. The latest you can declare a major is about halfway through your fourth semester. In the interest of continuity and keeping things flexible, it is probably best to keep your Tutorial adviser during your first year. But any time in the second year prior to the major declaration deadline is a great time to start formally looking for a biology adviser. A general plan is as follows: 1) identify professors you might like to be your adviser, 2) meet with these people to talk about their ability to take on new advisees and advising style, 3) select an adviser and work with them to complete the major declaration form.

If you have no idea where to start in terms of identifying potential advisers, consider the following suggestions. Ask a biology professor you know. This may be someone you had a class with or someone you know through some other means. Ask the department chair for a list of professors who are taking advisees. Make a poster adorned with pictures of professor faces, then put on a blind fold and play pin the tail on the adviser. Please do NOT worry about approaching a professor you've never met before. That is very common, and we are used to it. Every professor is happy to work with you.

One last piece of general advice about selecting an adviser. Some students wonder whether it is best to find a professor whose research interests match their own interests. This can certainly make for a good advising relationship, but it is not essential. Remember, you can have one professor who advises you about the major AND you can still talk to any professor you want at any time about other things like career advice. In fact, it is probably good to have separate academic and research advisers. Get more input from more people!

FOR NEW MAJORS

Dear Biology Major,

You have recently declared a major with a biology faculty member and we want to ensure that the advising experience you have is rich and fulfilling. To that end, we have two common goals that broadly define our expectations regarding this working relationship. As advisers of declared biology majors, we help students 1) navigate the biology curriculum and college-wide requirements for graduation and 2) develop post-graduation plans and pursue them. We expect that you and your biology adviser will use this document as a foundation upon which to build a highly individualized working relationship that is tailored around your academic pursuits at Grinnell and your plans for the future.

Developing a productive working relationship with your adviser:

In order to act on these advising goals, we strive to develop close working relationships with our advisees. This is most effectively achieved when you, our advisees, are actively reflecting upon, and willing to discuss, topics that you might prefer to keep to yourself, such as: successes and challenges of your Grinnell education to date, your working relationship with your former adviser, your goals for obtaining a biology degree, and your career aspirations. As former students ourselves, we recognize that goal-orientated thinking of this nature does not come easily to everyone. However, we are also mindful that you will need to seek employment or further your education when you leave Grinnell, and we will therefore do our best to encourage you to reflect on your previous education and develop workable plans for the future.

To foster a relationship of this sort, you should plan to meet with your adviser at least twice a semester. Your formal pre-registration meeting is essential for completing your curricular program, but an additional meeting or two to discuss developments in your long-term planning, goals for your education, or learning challenges and successes are extremely important for developing a working relationship with your faculty adviser.

The following sections describe additional actions you can take to foster a productive advising relationship. They are listed based on when you should begin to take these actions, but the suggestions are not exclusive to that year.

Help us to help you:

We'd like to reiterate that your adviser is just one person and you have multidimensional needs. So be sure to seek advice from all biology faculty (and others on campus) with whom you enjoy interacting. We are all invested in your success! Further, advising students is the single-most important part of our jobs at the College. We constantly strive to be better at this core aspect of our work and therefore appreciate any feedback that you have. Case-in-point, this letter is our response to critique and invaluable feedback from alumni and current students regarding perceived differences in advising relationships among students. We are immensely grateful to our thoughtful alumni and students for their insights and their commitment to make our department a better academic home for all students.

Sincerely,

Your Biology Faculty

DURING YOUR SECOND YEAR:

- 1) Talk with your adviser about your current interests and career goals. Think with them about how a biology degree will enable you to accomplish these goals. Which courses are best for your development and most relevant to your developing interests. Your adviser is well-informed about the content of

department courses and can help you make the best 4-year for you. While your adviser cannot get you into specific classes, if they understand your circumstances and rationale for your curricular choices, they can give you better advice and be a better advocate for you.

- 2) Do you have an interest that links biology to other areas of study at the College? Do you want to pursue an interest that has nothing to do with biology? Great! Talk to your biology adviser about these interests. Your 4-year plan is best viewed as a living document that you are continually revising with guidance from your adviser(s).
- 3) Continue to strive for success in all your biology courses. If you are struggling to thrive, take some time to consider why and then talk to both your instructor and your adviser in a timely fashion. They may have personal advice and can help you find relevant resources in Academic Advising and with the Science Learning Center.
- 4) Dispel the myth that career advice is only relevant for students who know exactly what they want to do. Most second-year biology majors do NOT know what their career-goals are, and that's perfectly fine. Pay attention to what you enjoy learning about in our second-year curriculum and talk to your biology and CLS adviser about options. While these conversations may be outside your comfort-zone, they may be some of the most meaningful conversations you will have with faculty and staff at Grinnell.
- 5) Choosing your path after Grinnell requires narrowing your interests, and to do that effectively you will likely use both positive and negative experiences to help define your focus. Choose your classes and summer experiences with foresight, but don't despair if you find yourself unengaged in what you thought would be your life's work. Challenge yourself to figure out why it's not working for you and talk to your adviser about how your vision of your future has changed. Self-reflection and re-direction in college is extremely beneficial for your long-term success and happiness.
- 6) Have a discussion with your adviser about how to go about pursuing summer opportunities that will further your interests in biology-related work on- or off-campus. Have this conversation with CLS staff, too. CLS staff are skilled at helping students develop ideas about future careers and have specific information about externships with alumni and other opportunities.
- 7) Time-permitting, seriously consider applying to do research or an internship during the summer between your 2nd and 3rd year. Planning for this likely starts late in the fall semester, but it depends on what you are applying for. You will need letters of recommendation from at least two faculty members. Your adviser can help you think about who might be good letter writers and how (and when!) to ask for a recommendation letter.
- 8) If you plan to study off-campus during your 3rd or 4th year, discuss your plans with your biology adviser. It is not necessary for your plans to include biology courses, and we encourage you to think about your entire Grinnell education as you determine timing, location, and area of study. If you are specifically seeking an off-campus study program that does involve biology, note the resources on the OCS page and talk to program advisers. Talk to your adviser about how to determine whether OCS courses can count toward major requirements.
- 9) Are you eligible for fellowship, grants, or awards? Your biology adviser may have some ideas about your eligibility, but this is likely best addressed with your CLS adviser. Take note of the planning needed to apply for these in subsequent years and discuss with you adviser how this affects your 4-year plan.

DURING YOUR THIRD YEAR:

- 1) You will be taking upper-level biology elective courses. You have some options here. How should you choose? What topics interest you? What skills would you like to develop? Do you have requirements for post-graduation plans? Remember that biology is a broad discipline, and the most complete education will include a variety of topics. Talk with your adviser about different elective options.
- 2) Visit with your adviser about your academic progress at least once, in addition to your pre-registration appointment. In addition to specific questions you want to discuss, it is good to reflect and share your thoughts on what classes you enjoy the most/least, what ideas you think thinking about, what activities

you enjoy doing, what you have learned about your academic interests, insights from your previous summer experiences, how your post-Grinnell plans have changed or been reinforced. Embrace these conversations as opportunities to talk with someone who has your best interests at heart and is invested in your success.

- 3) Reflect on how you are spending your time outside of academics. Are you involved in volunteering, clubs/organizations, athletics, art, music, etc.? Are there things you wish you'd be doing more or less? Get involved in something but be careful not to overcommit. Depth of experience is often better than breadth. Remember it is great to do things that bring you joy. Not everything has to be a resumé builder.
- 4) Early in your third year is a good time to have a discussion with your adviser about your post-Grinnell plans, especially if you haven't already. If you are not yet certain about your interests, that's just fine. This conversation is not intended to shame you into having a plan, but rather to help you begin to think seriously about what you will be doing two years from now. The third year is not "too late" to start thinking about this in earnest but recognize that the sooner you have an idea of what you'd like to pursue, the sooner you can start to get relevant experience, complete program requirements, etc. Your Biology and CLS advisers can help you with this.

DURING YOUR FOURTH YEAR:

- 1) As you commence your final year at Grinnell, it is a good idea to review the elements of a liberal arts education (go to the [Academic Catalog](#) and use the "Education in the Liberal Arts" link). Reflect on your growth and consider what else you'd like to achieve in your final year. What knowledge have you gained? Skills developed? Many of the skills garnered through a liberal education will be useful regardless of what you do next in life. Discuss these reflections with your adviser and think together about how you might prepare for and/or apply to your first post-baccalaureate position, whether that be further education, a fellowship, or a job. You certainly will need to find the opportunities, prepare a CV or resumé, and request letters of recommendation or references. Your biology and CLS advisers can help you accomplish these tasks.
- 2) All the Biology faculty can discuss graduate school as a possible path to a career because that's what we did! There is MUCH to be learned about how to successfully navigate applying to graduate school and your adviser can help. Your adviser can help you identify and select programs, understand what to expect from interviews, develop questions to ask of the programs, and more. Typically, applications are due in the second half of the fall semester, so don't delay in getting this conversation started.
- 3) If your plans do not include graduate school, still meet with your adviser early in the fall semester to discuss the future. Our advisees have done remarkable things over the years, and we are wiser because of their pursuits. Your adviser may have suggestions for opportunities or people to connect with as you explore possibilities.
- 4) As you begin to hear back from positions for which you've applied, talk to your adviser about both your successes and failures. We'd love to celebrate with you and/or help you consider your options.
- 5) If your adviser doesn't reach out to you, ask them for an "exit conversation". This is a great way to recap your time in the major and at Grinnell, and we have things to learn from your experience.