

The Dissertation Committee

Constitution and Responsibilities

The Dissertation Committee is to be constituted within three weeks following successful completion of the Qualifying Examination. Notification of the Committee membership is made to both the Director of Graduate Studies and the Department Coordinator. Typically, the Dissertation Committee consists of a Director and two Readers; the roles of Director and Reader are distinct. The Director is the primary advisor in consultation with whom the candidate develops the overall direction of the dissertation as well as the details of its execution. In short, the Director has the primary advisory role and closely monitors the production of the dissertation to ensure its timely completion and its qualification as a genuine contribution to scholarship. Readers, by contrast, have a primarily “inspirational” role; they are “resources” for the doctoral student and their primary task is to suggest concepts, connections, and archives that might further the project as well as to call attention to potential problems. A consequence of this distinction of roles is a division of labor in the evaluation of chapter drafts. Chapter drafts are always read first and thoroughly commented on by the Director. All revisions called for by the Director are to be completed before the chapter drafts are submitted – now in nearly final form – to the Readers. Readers, then, receive substantially complete chapter drafts. Their task is limited to the identification of errors or lacunae that may have been overlooked as well as the suggestion of minor additions (e.g., useful references, comparisons, clarifications).

The Dissertation Proposal

The dissertation proposal, consisting of 15 pages (and a bibliography), should be problem-driven and question-oriented, and should contextualize the project within relevant scholarly debates. It ought not attempt to predict the final conclusions of the project before the research is fully under way. Instead, it should seek to divide the project into subordinate questions and to rank the parts of the project in terms of priority. It should include a preliminary bibliography and a potential chapter structure, and also indicate a rough timetable for the research and writing of the dissertation. The student will discuss the project in a proposal defense with the dissertation committee, to be scheduled in consultation with the primary advisor and the departmental administrator. This will usually be done one quarter (not including summer) after the Ph.D. examination. Students must file copies of their exam lists and proposal with the department administrator. Typically, proposals will accomplish the following:

1. Characterize the topic or problem,
2. Indicate knowledge of previous work on the topic or problem,
3. Sketch the proposed methodology,
4. Suggest what the dissertation will contribute to the field,
5. Outline the proposed chapters, and

6. Provide a working bibliography.

These are meant as general guidelines. A dissertation proposal that significantly deviates from these guidelines should be carefully considered and justified.

Meetings of the Dissertation Committee

A first meeting of the Dissertation Committee with the candidate occurs for the discussion and evaluation of the Dissertation Proposal. If the Proposal, a description of the dissertation project including an outline of the chapters and a working bibliography, is deemed acceptable by the Committee, the student is “advanced to candidacy.” Advancement to Candidacy should occur no later than Winter Quarter of the fourth year (Spring Quarter of the third year for students who have entered with an M.A. degree). Furthermore, the Committee should collectively meet with the candidate at least twice per academic year. These meetings provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas bearing on the development of the dissertation as it has taken shape in the course of research and writing. It is the responsibility of the Director (perhaps with the aid of the Department Coordinator) to arrange these meetings, typically in Fall and Spring quarters.

Joint Direction

Doctoral students may find it useful to have two directors. This is often the case when students are pursuing a joint Ph.D. degree, in which case there will typically be a Co-Director from each Department or Division. But joint directors can also be useful when a dissertation topic bridges two areas of specialization each represented by different members of the faculty. In cases of joint Directorship, there should be an explicit understanding among the Directors and student involved as to the expectations for advisement. It is also highly recommended that just one of the two Directors assume the responsibility for calling meetings throughout.

Submission of Chapter Drafts

As indicated above, chapter drafts are first submitted to the Director. Only when all alterations (expansions, clarifications, editorial changes, etc.) have been made, are chapter drafts submitted to the Readers. In all cases, chapter drafts are to be returned with comments to candidates within thirty days. In order to guarantee timely response to submitted chapter drafts, candidates should notify the Department Coordinator upon submission. The Coordinator will then send out a three-week alert reminding Director and Reader that the thirty-day deadline is approaching. If the one-month period has passed without response, the Department Coordinator will notify the Department Chair and DGS.

General Remark

The production of a dissertation is a complicated process involving at least four parties (Candidate, Director, Readers) and it is in everyone’s interest that this process runs smoothly. It is therefore crucially important for candidates to remain in regular touch with all members of the Dissertation Committee, especially with the Director. Everyone should be apprised of the candidate’s progress. Moreover, it is important, especially for the Director, to make clear what

her expectations are regarding the frequency of progress reports, the level of “polish” required for drafts to be read, and any other factors that play into the cooperation. Readers should also be aware of both the responsibilities and the limitations of their role. Finally, everyone should cooperate in addressing tasks in a timely fashion and keeping the process moving swiftly toward completion.