

GUIDELINES FOR THE DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS/PROPOSAL for Department of Philosophy, Columbia University

The guidelines are supplemental to the Philosophy Department's requirements for the PhD and M.Phil. in philosophy and to the GSAS guidelines for the M.Phil. (<https://www.gsas.columbia.edu/content/requirements-mphil-degree>) and Dissertation Prospectus for PhD students (<https://www.gsas.columbia.edu/content/dissertation-prospectus>).

The dissertation prospectus is defended before a committee usually by the end of the third, or beginning of the fourth, year. A successful defense is the final departmental requirement for the M.Phil. degree and is required for advancement to PhD candidacy.

In the summer recess before the third year, students should begin to prepare a dissertation prospectus and three substantial research papers. The dissertation prospectus is a formal proposal for the PhD dissertation. It should identify and motivate the central questions/problems; the main claims/lines of the argument; situate the project in existing scholarship; and sketch a timeline for completing the dissertation. One of the three papers usually counts as a **sample chapter** at the prospectus defense.

Students have two kinds of advisor: an **advisor** who advises on coursework and general progress from the start of the program and a **dissertation advisor** who supervises the dissertation and chairs the dissertation committee. These may be the same person. The dissertation committee typically comprises three members: the dissertation advisor from the home department and two Columbia faculty members. Any committee member external to the Department or the University should be approved by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) and/or the main advisor. Students should further confirm the proposed committee with the Academic Programs Coordinator before scheduling the defense.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

Because expectations differ across subfields, the Department does not impose a rigid format. The following structure reflects typical practice and is strongly recommended:

The length (main text) should be 8–15 double-spaced pages (about 2,500–5,000 words), excluding bibliography and timeline.

1. A working title and one or more introductory paragraphs motivating the main question(s)/problem(s) leading to concise statement of central idea or thesis.
2. Why central questions, terms, problems; guiding claims or hypotheses matter and relate to existing debates. An outline of general method or approach (e.g. formal, historical, analytic, interdisciplinary) if the field or area calls for this.
3. Provisional chapter-by-chapter outline stating motivation and aims, and how each fits with other chapters and overall argument.

If a 3-essay dissertation is proposed, essay outlines substitute for chapter outlines. Alternate formats for dissertation writing must be worked out with the committee.

The sample chapter is normally one of the three third-year research papers. A substantial piece of philosophical and rigorous writing, typically 20–30 double-spaced pages. A draft or sketch is not enough.

Tentative schedule for completing the remaining work (e.g. chapter drafting and revision by semester), consistent with GSAS expectations for time to degree.

Preliminary Bibliography: primary texts and central secondary literature. It should indicate serious engagement with the relevant scholarship without needing yet to be exhaustive. Field-specific norms (for example, degree of formality, balance of historical and systematic material, style of bibliography) should be discussed with the dissertation committee.

Students are encouraged to consult prospectuses recently approved in their field, by permission.

PROSPECTUS DEFENSE

A meeting (typically 60–90 minutes) between the student and the full committee comprising a brief presentation by the candidate of the project and sample chapter. Discussion and committee deliberation, after which the outcome and feedback follows. Outcomes may include:

Pass – The prospectus and sample chapter are approved. Minor revisions may be recommended but do not require a second defense.

Conditional Pass – Approval is conditional on specified written revisions to the prospectus and/or the sample chapter. Normally no second defense is required; the advisor confirms that conditions have been met.

Revised Prospectus and Re-Defense – Substantial changes are required, and the committee requests a revised prospectus and/or chapter and a second formal defense.

Fail – In accordance with departmental regulations, a student may leave the program with the M.Phil. after an unsuccessful defense. A successful defense is required to advance to PhD candidacy.

The GSAS Dissertation Prospectus Committee Report form must be completed, signed, and submitted to the Academic Programs Coordinator after the defense in line with GSAS procedures.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND FURTHER GUIDANCE

Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with GSAS and departmental regulations; identifying a dissertation advisor and committee in a timely manner; meeting GSAS and departmental deadlines; circulating the prospectus and sample chapter with adequate lead time.

Advisors and committee members are responsible for: providing field-specific guidance on the content and structure of the prospectus; giving timely feedback on drafts of the prospectus and sample chapter; participating in the defense and offering constructive advice about feasibility and direction. Questions about these guidelines, including unusual cases and possible exceptions, should be directed to the Director of Graduate Studies.