

Graduate Program Handbook

(for Students and Supervisors)

MA Communication and Media Studies
PhD in Communication
School of Journalism and Communication
Carleton University
2026 - 2027

This handbook is revised regularly as Grad Studies policies and procedures evolve and change.

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This handbook cannot and does not address every question or concern; it is more of a snapshot of policies and procedures. The authoritative guide to the rules and regulations, timeline, registration, and so on for graduate students and degree programs is the [Graduate Calendar](#) with degree requirements for [Communication Studies](#) and then [Grad Studies](#) policies that govern all aspects of graduate degree programs at Carleton.

Introduction

Welcome to The School of Journalism and Communication and the Communication and Media Studies graduate programs! [COMS at Carleton](#) is one of Canada's longest standing Communication and Media Studies programs. You are now part of a long and continuing tradition of rigorous and impactful scholarship, teaching, and public engagement.

Whether you are a new MA or PhD student, a continuing graduate student, or a faculty colleague looking for guidance about aspects of the degree program, this handbook is for you.

Advice & Support

The **Graduate Program Administrator** is Laura Gareau, and she is your main contact person for administrative issues (registration, funding, TA assignments, thesis submission, etc.).
Laura.Gareau@carleton.ca Room 4302 C, Richcraft Hall

The **Graduate Program Supervisor** is Prof. Sandra Robinson, an associate professor in communication and media studies, and she is your main contact person in academic matters such as questions or concerns about electives outside the program, finding a supervisor, funding questions, and issues that arise throughout your degree that are of an academic nature. Sandra.Robinson@carleton.ca Room 4317, Richcraft Hall.

Other department contacts

Prof. Liam Young, Program Head, Communication and Media Studies
Co-Director, School of Journalism & Communication
Room 4302 A, Richcraft Hall
Liam.Young@carleton.ca

Prof. Vincent Andrisani, Undergraduate Supervisor, Room 4317, Richcraft Hall
Vincent.Andrisani@Carleton.ca

Frequently Used Acronyms

SJC – School of Journalism & Communication
FPGA – Faculty of Public & Global Affairs
GS – Grad Studies
GSA – Graduate Student Association
CGC – Communication Graduate Caucus
SSHRC – Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
OGS – Ontario Graduate Scholarship

CGS – Canada Graduate Scholarships – master's program
CIHR – Canadian Institutes of Health Research
ABD – all but dissertation
GPA – Grade Point Average
ETD – electronic thesis deposit
WBC – COMS Writing Boot Camp

Department information and other resources and supports

Graduate Office & Desk Space

Secure, shared graduate desk space is available and is normally assigned in the Fall. Please contact Laura, the Graduate Administrator, for room information. You will need to **enable your Campus Card with a PIN** by accessing the [Web Card Centre](#) for access to offices and the seminar room once you are on campus: see [here](#) to set this up.

Carleton Accounts

As a new student, the first thing you need to do is [activate your MyCarletonOne account](#) through Carleton Central. Activating your account grants you access to your official Carleton email account and to other [IT services](#). As a CU grad student, you also have access to the [Microsoft 365](#) suite.

The Resource Centre

The Resource Centre, at 4400 Richcraft Hall, provides students, faculty, staff and researchers a collegial environment in which to meet, study, collaborate, research, or just relax. There are small meeting rooms that can be reserved through this [link](#).

Communication Graduate Caucus

All Communication graduate students are automatically members of the [CGC](#). The CGC organizes an annual communication graduate conference and represents student interests to the Department and the [Graduate Students Association](#) (GSA).

Professional Development Sessions

There will be opportunities to engage in Grad Studies sponsored [professional development](#) activities and [getting started as a teaching assistant](#). Teaching and Learning Services also provide [pedagogical training](#) for TAs. All TAs have access to five hours of pedagogical training, so do explore those links!

Writing Retreat

The COMS writing retreat is an intensive two-day workshop for COMS graduate students and faculty designed to focus on the practice of academic writing. It is usually offered twice a year (late Fall and late Winter terms) and open to all faculty and graduate students in the program with no limits on annual attendance. Notifications are sent by email.

Department of Equity and Inclusive Communities (EIC)

Academic accommodations, equity services, and support links: equity@carleton.ca
This is the university's [central hub](#) for expertise in human rights, sexual violence prevention and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities

The designated department at Carleton University coordinating disability services on campus. Current students can submit your academic accommodation requests using the Ventus Student Portal.

Campus Safety

Please be familiar with the services offered by [Campus Safety](#) and, again, the [Safe Walk Program](#) and [Working After Hours Program](#).
Emergency on campus? Call **Campus Safety Services 613-520-4444 or 4444** from any campus phone.

Graduate Student Funding

Only full-time students are eligible for funding as a university TA and/or RA and may apply for external or internal awards, and/or donor awards. For all grad students, continuation of your funding from year to year is dependent upon satisfactory academic performance (B- is the minimum permitted for a course credit) and full-time registration. At the MA level (in the two-year MA program) teaching assistantships are renewable for four terms.

At the PhD level, teaching assistantships are renewable for up to ten terms over five consecutive calendar years. You can apply to be considered for an out of priority TA extension using this [form](#) after you've exceeded your funding, but these extensions are rarely available and reviewed by the Dean's Office; they are not allocated by the graduate administrator.

Students are not eligible to receive payments if they withdraw completely from their graduate program, change to part-time status, or are granted a leave of absence from their program. In the case of backdated withdrawals, students may have to refund scholarship payments already received.

External Awards

For [external awards](#) from the Tri-Council (OGS, SSHRC, CIHR), workshops hosted by Communication Studies are offered in the late summer (for PhD students) and/or fall (for MA students) for external awards. We will be in touch by email before the workshops. The award deadlines are posted by Grad Studies, [Funding and Awards](#).

Donor-Funded Awards

Donor-funded awards are financial awards and provided by an individual or organization to Carleton. They are administered by Carleton with deadlines in either the fall or winter and are awarded based on academic merit, financial need and/or specific research areas. More information on these awards can be found at Grad Studies, [Funding and Awards](#).

Grad Studies Graduate Student Travel / Research Bursary

Grad Studies provides modest funds to graduate students who require assistance to conduct or present their research. See the terms and application requirements of the bursary [here](#). This fund is administered by Grad Studies and not by the COMS department.

COMS Departmental Graduate Student Support

There are two funds to support PhD students. The terms of reference (TOR) including eligibility, application details, and amounts for these funds are emailed to all grad students in September each year. If you don't have a copy of these TOR, please email [Laura Gareau](#) to request them.

Student Research Support Bursary

This fund supports COMS graduate students presenting research at academic conferences and conducting field, archival, participant- or community-based research. It provides partial reimbursement of eligible costs to reduce financial barriers to scholarly activity during the period of active study. Please see the TOR for more details.

Ph.D. Candidacy Bursary

This bursary provides a fixed award to COMS PhD students upon their transition to doctoral candidacy. It is intended to seed the early stages of dissertation research by providing a modest, predictable financial contribution at a critical milestone in the doctoral program. No application from the student is required; it is processed on a rolling basis when PhD students achieve candidacy. Please see the TOR for more details.

Graduate Program Information: MA Communication

→ For PhD Communication program information jump [here](#).

In 2026-2027 there are three routes to the MA Communication degree: coursework, research essay (MRE), or thesis. If you elect to take a collaborative specialization, your pathway and requirements will be slightly different.

Coursework option

Coursework is our most popular option with students and maximizes your contact with a wide range of faculty members and topics.

MA Research Essay & Thesis options

The **research essay** option enables you to combine more breadth in your course work with a smaller scale research project (approximately 50-60 pages). The **thesis** option affords a more expansive and guided research on a project (approximately 90-110 pages). A research essay should reflect a substantive interpretation of the field(s) studied whereas the thesis should represent a more distinct contribution to the field, based on some primary research.

MA Program Requirements

The specific requirements for the MA are as follows (for the collaborative specializations see [here](#)):

- COMS 5101 Foundations of Communication Studies (1.0 credit, Fall and Winter terms). All MA students must take 5101 in their first year.
- COMS 5605 Approaches to Communication Research (0.5 credit). All full-time students must take 5605 in their first year.

Then, one of these pathways:

- Coursework option: 3.5 credits chosen from the list of elective courses noted below.
- Research Essay option: (1.0 credit) and 2.5 credits chosen from the list of elective courses.
- MA thesis option (2.0 credits): and 1.5 credits from the list of elective courses below.

Electives (*not all electives are available every term*). **Course descriptions can be found [here](#).**

COMS 5102, 5200, 5202, 5203, 5205, 5206, 5207, 5208, 5209, 5212, 5214, 5218, 5219, 5220, 5221, 5222, 5223, 5224, 5225, 5509, 5808

- Students may take one optional (elective) course (0.5 credit) outside the program, with permission of the graduate supervisor.
- In very exceptional circumstances, students in the M.A. program may request one directed studies course with permission of the graduate supervisor, COMS 5808 (0.5 credit).

Academic Standing: B- or better must be obtained in each credit counted towards the master's degree.

MA Specializations

The MA Communication offers four [collaborative specializations](#). Please see the Graduate Administrator to add a specialization to your program and review the requirements.

1. MA Communication with Specialization in African Studies
2. MA Communication with Collaborative Specialization in Latin American and Caribbean Studies
3. MA Communication with Collaborative Specialization in Climate Change
4. MA Communication with Specialization in Data Science

Master's Research Essay (MRE) and MA Thesis Requirements

→ Please fill in the **supervisory committee form** once you have a supervisor and second reader/committee member: email the [Graduate Administrator](#) for this form.

MRE Requirements

You complete the MRE in your second year along with your remaining coursework. The MA research essay (MRE) should be 50-60 pages max plus references. Some supervisors will require a brief outline or short proposal of the research. The MRE is assessed by your supervisor and a second reader. Once students have a MRE supervisor, they should complete the supervisory agreement available from the Graduate Administrator.

Once the MRE is graded and returned in the later part of the Winter term of your second year, any outstanding corrections outlined by the supervisor and second reader must be made. It is the student's responsibility to have a digital copy of the MRE (including title page) emailed to the department's graduate administrator by April 30 for archiving once the MRE is graded and complete.

MA Thesis Requirements

Students should have completed all coursework prior to starting the thesis work and have a supervisor and together you can consider who would be a good second committee member, based on research alignment, from our unit. Once students have a thesis supervisor, they should complete the supervisory agreement available from the Graduate Administrator.

MA Thesis Proposal

In discussion with your thesis supervisor, you must prepare a thesis proposal and receive feedback from your supervisor and second committee member before starting work on your thesis. Your thesis proposal should have a working title and should be approximately 3500- 4000 words long. Its main purpose is to tell the committee what you are going to do in your thesis and how you are going to do it. You will work on the proposal under the guidance of your supervisor with input from your second committee member as needed. Please see [Appendix I](#) for more information on the MA proposal.

MA Thesis

The MA thesis should be 90-110 pages plus references. Guidelines for the preparation of graduate theses are available here: [thesis cover page template](#) and [formatting guidelines](#). Your document format should follow recommendations in the APA style manual or an agreed upon style using formatting conventions in MS Word. Please discuss thesis structure and citation style with your supervisor and format accordingly.

Timeline for MA Students: Coursework, MRE, or Thesis

Normal progress and deadlines over the course of a full-time MA are noted in the table below. If you have added a specialization, your requirements may differ.

MA	Coursework	Research Essay	Thesis
Year 1			
Fall term	COMS 5101 (Fall & Winter), and two optional COMS 5xxx course electives.	COMS 5101 (Fall & Winter), and two optional COMS 5xxx course electives.	COMS 5101 (Fall & Winter), and two optional COMS 5xxx course electives.

MA	Coursework	Research Essay	Thesis
Winter term	Continue coursework. COMS 5101, and two other courses, one of which is COMS 5605. Advise Grad Supervisor & Grad Administrator of your program choice.	Continue coursework. COMS 5101, and two other courses, one of which is COMS 5605. Arrange formal meeting with a potential supervisor about proposed research essay. Fill in the supervisory form and send to Grad Administrator.	Continue coursework. COMS 5101, and two other courses, one of which is COMS 5605. Arrange formal meeting with a potential supervisor about proposed thesis research. Complete the MA Supervisor Authorization form and submit to the Grad Administrator.
Summer term	Coursework students may take a 0.5 credit elective course over the summer.	Begin work on MRE outline in discussion with your supervisor. You may decide to take a 0.5 credit elective over the summer.	Register for COMS 5909 (thesis). Begin work on your thesis proposal in discussion with your supervisor.
Year 2			
Fall term	Continue coursework.	Complete coursework and register for COMS 5908 (MRE). Submit research essay outline to supervisor.	Register for COMS 5909 (thesis). Finalize proposal; meet with supervisor and begin thesis work as soon as possible (October).
January-February	Continue coursework.	Third formal meeting with supervisor. Full draft of research essay for review recommended.	Full draft of thesis for review recommended to be done by end of February at latest.
March	Continue coursework.	Meetings with supervisor for revisions. Deadline to submit is last day of classes.	Meetings with supervisor/committee for revisions and set thesis examination date.
April	Apply to graduate by April 1st. Contact the Grad Administrator for details.	Apply to graduate by April 1st. Contact the Grad Administrator for details.	Apply to graduate by April 1st. Upload thesis exam copy and prepare for defence. Contact the Grad Administrator for more details.
April- early May			Thesis Defence NOTE: Last date to submit electronic thesis copy for deposit and June convocation is often as early as the end of the first week of May.
June	Convocation	Convocation	Convocation
August/Summer	*End of time for program completion. Apply for an extension if necessary.	*End of time for program completion. Apply for an extension if necessary.	*End of time for program completion. Apply for an extension if necessary.
September (for MA students who have extended work into the Summer term)	Apply to graduate by August 31.	Apply to graduate by August 31.	Apply to graduate by August 31.

MA Thesis Examination Process

If you are in the MA thesis option, the defence process is detailed in the Grad Studies [thesis examination policy](#). Students and supervisor must be familiar with the policy. Supervisors and students are encouraged to review the [academic calendar](#) for key dates to meet the deadlines for thesis submission in time to graduate. Thesis supervisors should discuss upcoming thesis defences first with the Graduate Administrator and you may also seek advice from the Graduate Supervisor. The Graduate Supervisor chairs MA defences or finds an alternate.

The examination board (committee) will include your thesis supervisor, second reader, and an examiner from outside the unit, but from Carleton, plus a chair of the defence. The thesis supervisor schedules the examination with the help of the Graduate Administrator.

- Grad Studies has stipulated that all MA thesis defences should be in-person at Carleton University whenever possible.
- MA thesis defences are a maximum of two hours.
- This process is outlined in more detail in the Grad Studies thesis examination policy for MA defences [here](#).
- There is also a COMS-specific Chair process document for MA thesis defence chairs and delegates. If you have been designated to chair a COMS MA defence, please contact the Graduate Supervisor.

Graduate Program Information: PhD Communication

NOTE: For PhD students who joined the program prior to 2025, please consult [Appendix IV](#) for program details and second comprehensive guidelines.

For PhD students joining the program as of September 2025 or later, the specific requirements are listed in the [Graduate Calendar](#). Doctoral candidates must successfully complete the equivalent of 5.0 credits. There is one collaborative specialization available in Political Economy (see below).

Dissertation committee: A dissertation committee for the comprehensive and proposal phases includes the supervisor and two committee members from the program (and can include cross appointed faculty, adjunct professor, adjunct research professor). Committee members from outside the unit can be on the committee if necessary. At the time of the dissertation defence, an examination board is set with additional external and internal examiners. See the policy [here](#). Please fill in the **supervisory committee form** once you have a supervisor and two committee members: email the [Graduate Administrator](#) for this form.

Progress Reports: Ph.D. student progress is reviewed annually by Grad Studies: see [PhD progress reports](#). This process is undertaken by the student with the support of their thesis supervisor and submitted at the end of the Winter Term (end of April).

Doctoral candidacy: A PhD student who has completed all of their program milestones except for the PhD thesis will be given the status of PhD Candidate. Candidacy must be achieved by the end of the third year (ninth term) of full-time study, or fifth year (15th term) of part-time study. Doctoral candidacy will be enforced beginning in the Fall 2029 term. Failure to achieve candidacy within the timeline will result in loss of status and removal from the program.

PhD Communication program requirements (for new students as of Fall 2025)

All students (part-time and full-time) must take COMS 6000 in their first year.

Requirements

1. 1.0 credit in:	1.0
COMS 6000 [1.0] Doctoral Seminar in Communication Studies	
2. 2.0 credits from the list of electives below; up to 0.5 credit may be taken in a relevant discipline outside of the School; students in the Ph.D. program are restricted to one (0.5 credit) directed studies course:	2.0
COMS 6010 [0.5] Directed Studies	
3. 2.0 credits in:	2.0
COMS 6101 [0.5] Comprehensive Exam: Field I	
COMS 6102 [0.5] Comprehensive Exam: Field II	
COMS 6908 [1.0] Ph.D. Thesis Proposal	
4. 0.0 credits in:	0.0
COMS 6909 [0.0] Ph.D. Thesis (must be successfully defended at an oral examination)	
Total Credits	5.0

Elective course list is [here](#). Not all electives are available each year.

PhD Communication with Specialization in Political Economy

*Please consult with the Graduate Supervisor and see the Graduate Administrator to add this to your program. This specialization is also 5.0 credits. See the PhD Communication with Specialization in Political Economy requirements [here](#).

Please note that PECO 6000 – Political Economy: Core Concepts, a required course for the students in the specialization in Political Economy, will only be offered every second year rather than annually. Please consult the course schedule or check with the [Institute of Political Economy](#) to confirm the course offering.

All students (part-time and full-time) must take COMS 6000 in their first year.

Elective Courses

All doctoral candidates must complete 2.0 additional credits from the list of electives (1.0 for PECO specialization); 0.5 credit may be taken in a relevant discipline outside of the School, particularly those that address central theoretical and/or methodological issues within the student's chosen field of concentration. Students in the Ph.D. program are restricted to one (0.5 credit) directed studies course (COMS 6010 Directed Studies), but these are approved only in exceptional circumstances.

Course descriptions for COMS graduate courses can be found [here](#).

Academic Standing

A standing of B- or better must be obtained in each course counted towards the Ph.D.degree.

PhD Timeline

The PhD program is formally five years in length for full-time students. Students should set firm dates with their dissertation supervisor and committee based on this guideline. For part-time timeline, please see [Appendix III](#).

PhD timeline for full-time students (this does not reflect exact dates)

PhD Year 1	
Fall term (S1)	COMS 6000 and two additional COMS courses
Winter term (S2)	COMS 6000 and two additional COMS courses. Discussion about the comprehensive process will be part of COMS 6000 in the Winter term.
April-May	Assemble committee. Complete the PhD Supervisor authorization form.
Summer term (S3)	Register in Comprehensive Exam: COMS 6101-Field 1 and COMS 6102-Field 2 Select fields in consultation with supervisor/committee. Compile reading lists. See below for Comprehensive Exam details. See Appendix III for part-time roadmap.
PhD Year 2	Note: this timeline assumes a 5-year degree program. Individual student pathways may vary.
Fall term (S4)	COMS 6101-Field 1 and COMS 6102-Field 2 Meet with committee to develop and approve reading lists (Sept.–Oct.).

Winter term (S5)	COMS 6101-Field 1 and COMS 6102-Field 2 Committee meeting to discuss readiness to sit exam (late Feb.–Mar.). If committee agrees student is ready, begin setting questions. (If not, student applies to Grad Supervisor for extension to summer.) Write exam (April).
April-May	COMS 6101-Field 1 and COMS 6102-Field 2 Oral defence of comprehensive exam (May).
Summer term (S6)	If in extension for comprehensive exam, remain registered in COMS 6101-Field 1 and COMS 6102-Field 2 If you have successfully defended your comprehensive, then register in COMS 6908: PhD Thesis Proposal Begin work on dissertation proposal. Schedule regular meetings with supervisor.
PhD Year 3	Note: this timeline assumes a 5-year degree program. Individual student pathways may vary.
Fall term (S7)	COMS 6908: PhD Thesis Proposal Continue work on dissertation proposal. Schedule regular meetings with supervisor.
Winter term (S8)	COMS 6908: PhD Thesis Proposal Continue work on proposal; circulate draft to committee and work on revisions.
May	COMS 6908: PhD Thesis Proposal Defend dissertation proposal or extend into Summer term with proposal revisions.
Summer term (S9)	If/when thesis proposal defence completed successfully, register in COMS 6909: PhD Thesis. Begin work on dissertation.
PhD Year 4	Note: this timeline assumes a 5-year degree program. Individual student pathways may vary.
Fall term (S10)	COMS 6909: PhD Thesis Work on dissertation. Continue to meet with supervisor and committee members.
Winter term (S11)	COMS 6909: PhD Thesis Work on dissertation. Continue to meet with supervisor and committee members.
Summer term (S12)	COMS 6909: PhD Thesis Work on dissertation. Continue to meet with supervisor and committee members.
PhD Year 5	Note: this timeline assumes a 5-year degree program. Individual student pathways may vary.
Fall term (S13)	COMS 6909: PhD Thesis Work on dissertation. Finalize dissertation revisions.
Winter term (S14)	COMS 6909: PhD Thesis Six weeks' notice required between receiving thesis copies and the actual defence. Plan accordingly with your supervisor and committee members.
April – Early May	Apply to graduate by April 1st. PhD Thesis Examination
Summer term (S15)	June Convocation for PhD students who have successfully defended by early May. *End of time for program completion. See Graduate Administrator if you require an extension to complete the dissertation. If you defended in Summer, apply to graduate by September 1st.

PhD Comprehensive Examination (for students starting as of Fall 2025)

NOTE: If you started your PhD degree *prior to Fall 2025*, please see [Appendix IV](#), for the guidelines for your Comprehensive Exam II, which differ from the new requirements beginning in 2025.

Comprehensive Exam Requirements (as of Fall 2025)

In addition to their course requirements, PhD students are required to write a two-field comprehensive examination worth 1.0 credit.

COMS 6101 [0.5]: Comprehensive Exam: Field I

COMS 6102 [0.5]: Comprehensive Exam: Field II

Before taking the comprehensive examination, students must have completed all course work and earned a GPA of 9.0 or higher.

Doctoral students must complete a comprehensive examination covering **two literature fields**, with reading lists curated *in consultation with their supervisory committee*. Each list includes 15–20 books, with five articles or chapters counting as one book. One of the fields (COMS 6101) is selected from a list developed by program faculty and the other field (COMS 6102) may address a subfield closely linked to the student's dissertation research (see [Appendix I](#) for the fields list). The exam timeline varies for full-time ([see timeline above](#)) and part-time students (see [Appendix III](#)), but the process and goals remain the same. Part-time students don't register in Comprehensive Exam: Field I (COMS 6101) and Field II (COMS 6102) until semester 9.

Full-Time Students: By the end of their first year (semester 2), full-time students must assemble a committee and discuss their comprehensive with their supervisor and committee. In semester 3 (Summer term), students will register in Comprehensive Exam, Field I (COMS 6101) and Comprehensive Exam, Field II (COMS 6102). The reading list requires formal approval by the committee by the end of October in semester 4.

From October to February-March (semester 5), students study both fields while receiving feedback from their supervisor. In February or March, students meet with their committee to assess their readiness to defend the comprehensive. If the student is ready and the committee agrees, the exam is scheduled for March or April (semester 5). If not, students may extend by one term.

When the exam begins, students receive three questions per field set by their supervisor and committee and must choose two per field to answer. Each response is about 10 pages (2500 words), totalling approximately 40 pages (10,000 words) for the whole comprehensive exam (Fields 1 and 2). Students have two weeks to complete the exam, followed by an oral defence within 2–4 weeks.

Each field is evaluated as Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory based on written answers and the oral defence and the student's committee provides written feedback with the assessment of Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. If any field is Unsatisfactory, students have six weeks to draft a written response, which may require further engagement with the reading list. A second defence is held promptly.

Results of the comprehensive exam are sent to the Graduate Supervisor.

The Dissertation Proposal

→ Students who started the program in or after Fall 2025 should register in COMS 6908: PhD Thesis Proposal after the comprehensive exam has been satisfactorily defended at an oral defence. (*Students who started the program prior to Fall 2025, register directly in COMS 6909 PhD Thesis course code after your comprehensive exam II is successfully defended as this course code includes the proposal and dissertation phases and process.*)

All candidates for the Ph.D. degree must prepare and present a formal dissertation proposal before beginning the substantive work on their dissertation. The proposal is typically 10,000 to 12,000 words in length (40-50 pages). Please review [Appendix II](#) for further proposal guidelines.

Proposal preparation meeting: The student should prepare an outline of their proposal with a bibliography and discuss with their full committee (in an in-person meeting constituted for this purpose) prior to submitting the proposal for defence. Don't skip this step!

PhD Dissertation Requirements

Students who have successfully defend their dissertation proposal, should register for COMS 6909 PhD Thesis. The Ph.D. dissertation is typically between 200-300 pages. Guidelines for the preparation of graduate dissertation and information on the procedures for examination are available at [here](#). (For students who began their studies prior to Fall 2025, you register in COMS 6909 after your second comprehensive exam is successfully defended as this course code includes the proposal and thesis phase).

Guidelines for the preparation of graduate theses/dissertations such as formatting and title page are available here: [thesis cover page template](#) and [formatting guidelines](#).

PhD Thesis Examination Process

The PhD examination process (including preparation) is outlined carefully and in detail in the Grad Studies' [thesis examination policy](#), which all students and supervisors should be familiar with. Please review the process. PhD examinations are chaired by the Program Head or delegate. Supervisors should contact the Graduate Administrator to advise when there is an upcoming doctoral defence at least 5 to 6 weeks prior to a proposed date. The Program Head organizes the external examiner.

Graduate Supervision for MA and PhD students

Finding a topic, finding a supervisor

Whether you decide on the MA research essay or the MA thesis option, or you are a PhD student, you will need a good topic and a suitable supervisor ([check out faculty profiles!](#)). These are a few things to keep in mind on your search:

The Topic

1. Choose something interesting to you that addresses a real problem in the world and the literature.
2. Make sure it's feasible with methods you can learn within your time and resources.
3. Start early, and pick courses that help develop it.
4. Don't write term papers meant to become thesis chapters.

The Supervisor

1. Approach potential supervisors with topic ideas, ideally by late Winter term of year one.
2. Supervisors will help shape your topic, proposal, and research plan, and should know the relevant literature/methodology.
3. It's official once they sign the departmental agreement form (Appendix I/II).
4. Only switch supervisors over a communication breakdown or topic change; please consult the graduate supervisor first.
5. No supervisor by end of Winter term, year one? See the graduate supervisor or your faculty mentor.
6. Supervisors and committee members are generally from COMS: one second reader for MA thesis/MRE, two committee members for PhD.

Supervisor - Student relationship

Fundamental to a satisfactory relationship between a supervisor and a student are mutual respect and a high level of professional integrity. Graduate supervisor and grad student responsibilities are outlined in detail in the [responsibilities and expectations policy](#). Students and faculty should consult this resource.

All full-time tenure track and tenured faculty with a PhD, can supervise students in COMS graduate programs (assistant, associate, and full professors; and adjuncts can co-supervise and/or be committee members). See [here](#).

Graduate Student Regulations

All grad students are responsible for understanding and abiding by the regulations. Following are abbreviated explanations for some regulations, so please visit [Graduate Calendar regulations](#) for forms and up-to-date text and details on regulations, policies, and procedures.

Continuous Registration in Thesis, Dissertation, or Research Essay

Any student (full-time or part-time), after initial registration in a thesis or research essay, must maintain this registration in all successive terms (including the term in which the student is examined) until their thesis or research essay is completed. Completion means submission of a final grade to Grad Studies after modifications/revisions. See [section 8](#) of graduate regulations.

Summer Registration

During the summer term, MA students in a course-based pathway do not have to register. However, if a student does not register any funding allotted to the summer term will be cancelled; and it is not carried forward. Once the student registers (full-time) again in the Fall, any subsequent funding such as a priority TA appointment, will restart. Please note, non-registration is not a pause button; the timeline to completion carries on regardless of registration status, so the summer term will still count towards a student's overall time limit. Students in the MA or PhD thesis or MRE must register in the summer term.

Loss of Status

Any student who remains unregistered in their degree program for three terms (twelve months) will lose their graduate status.

Full- and Part-time Student Status

Full- or part-time status is established at the time of admission to a program. Grad student status is outlined here in [section 7.9](#) in the Graduate Calendar regulations.

A part-time graduate student will not register in more than 0.5 credits per term, including audit courses. TA and RA positions are not available to part-time students.

Change of Status from Full-Time to Part-Time

Students who have valid reasons and/or extenuating circumstances for changing status from full- to part-time prior to registration for a term should first consult with their supervisor and graduate supervisor and then may apply to Grad Studies for permission by:

- Review [section 7.10](#) of the Graduate Calendar, and complete the [Academic Change Form](#) in support of their request.
- A status change will be granted only in **exceptional cases** (e.g., for medical reasons, full-time employment when supported by a letter from the student's employer, or other extenuating circumstances).

Leave of Absence (exemption from registration)

Students must review [Grad Studies policy and procedures on LOAs](#) and discuss this option with their supervisor first and/or then the graduate supervisor or graduate administrator. Ultimately, it is Grad Studies who will determine whether an exemption from registration as a leave of absence will be granted. The 'Reason for this request' section the student fills in on the [Registration Change](#) form may include options such as:

- Navigating medical-related issues
- Navigating mental health issues
- Death of a loved one
- Personal/family matters
- increase in work-related responsibilities
- Pregnancy/parental leave
- Increased caregiving responsibilities

When a leave of absence (LOA) for a term or terms has been approved by Grad Studies, this period will be exempt from the overall time limit allowed for completion of the program. **Students should also apply for a Leave from Duties so that any TA-ship they hold will be deferred until they are back.**

Parental Leave: Students applying for parental leave will not be registered, nor will they be required to pay fees for this period.

See also [section 8.5](#) of the graduate regulations.

Extension

Students who have exceeded the regular program length for their degree, may apply for an extension from Grad Studies so that they can complete their degree. MA and PhD students should discuss extensions with their supervisor and/or the graduate supervisor. Please pay careful attention to the requirements stipulated by Grad Studies [Extension Policy and Procedures](#). A detailed timeline to completion for the extension will be required by Grad Studies with milestones in each term of the extension carefully outlined.

Grad Studies requires students to complete this online extension [form](#).

Appendix I: Comprehensive Exam Fields list

NOTE: This process is for students entering the PhD program in Fall 2025 or after.

This list reflects current and enduring areas of focus in the field, faculty expertise, and specialized research themes. It also helps structure the comprehensive exam process, guiding students and supervisory committees in connecting the two required field papers. One of the field exams, **COMS 6101: Field 1, must be selected from this list.** Students and committees may also draw on this list for the Field 2 exam if it is a helpful structure, but it is not mandatory.

The program is strongly committed to intersectional studies that engage thematic areas including critical race theory, feminist and gender theory, critical disability studies, Indigenous studies, and decoloniality each of which may cut across other subfields. Terms such as political communication, cultural studies, sociology of culture, communication policy, critical data, critical computation and algorithms/AI, and technology studies, and others are implicitly included within the categories below. The goal was to create a focused yet flexible framework rather than adhere to specific labels and provide a good sense of the field's boundaries as reflected in our program.

The following key phrases capture core concerns and evolving themes within the field and specialized interests of our faculty:

1. Communication and media and social critique
2. Communication and media theory and method
3. Communication, Technology and Society
4. Communication and media history
5. Audience and reception studies
6. Political economy of communication
7. Platform and infrastructure studies
8. Global and regional communication and media studies
9. Identity, power, and resistance
10. Environment, health, and risk communication

See the description of the comprehensive exam process outlined in a [previous section](#) of this document. Again, it applies to students entering the doctoral program from Fall 2025 onward.

Appendix II: MA and PhD Thesis guidelines

For your MA or PhD thesis (or dissertation as it is often called for a PhD), you will need to work closely with your supervisor and committee. How your documents are set up, structured, and formatted should be on the advice of your supervisor and require the application of a consistent style, such as APA, and you will need good working knowledge of MS Word to build your proposal and thesis using a style sheet for consistency.¹ See this helpful APA style guide resource: [OWL Purdue](#)

MA proposal and thesis guidelines

Proposal guidelines

All MA students must write a 2,500-word thesis proposal with a working title, explaining what you will do in your thesis and how. The committee should come away understanding your project's boundaries, its theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, and why it matters.

Structure:

1. Thesis statement or question: State your core argument or question.
2. Literature review: Key scholarship relevant to your topic, showing where your research fits and what gap it fills.
3. Theoretical framework: The key concepts you'll use to analyze your topic.
4. Methodology: How you will conduct the research.
5. Timetable: Dates for drafts and chapter submissions, with up to three weeks for committee feedback in each review cycle.
6. Bibliography: Sources cited in the proposal.
7. Provide an ethics statement if you are working with human subjects. See [CUREB-A](#).

MA Thesis guidelines

For MA students, thesis guidelines should be discussed with your supervisor and committee. MA thesis should be 90 to 110 pages.

- See thesis [formatting guidelines](#) and [title page guidelines](#).
- Thesis non-exclusive license <https://gradstudents.carleton.ca/wp-content/uploads/LAC-license-2025.pdf> (this is for when your thesis is ready for defence and uploaded to the thesis portal)

¹ Google Docs does not have the required styles and features for creating structured thesis document. Please use Word.

PhD proposal and dissertation guidelines

Proposal guidelines

These guidelines apply to all PhD students, regardless of entry year.

The dissertation proposal is a road map outlining the steps for executing dissertation research. It lets candidates articulate their research plan and receive feedback before fieldwork, data collection, or other project work begins. The proposal situates the project within relevant theoretical traditions and scholarship, avoiding duplication of prior work. It consists of (1) a written proposal and (2) an oral defence.

Eligibility: Begins after successful completion of the comprehensive exam.

Timeline: Normally 6 to 9 months to complete. Full-time students should present before the end of year three; part-time students during year five. Students achieve candidacy after successful proposal defence.

Committee: Typically, three members. A supervisor and two additional COMS faculty, chosen by the candidate in consultation with the supervisor. Typically continues from the comprehensive exam committee and, except in rare cases, becomes the candidate's thesis committee.

Written Proposal: Developed in consultation with the committee. Early on, the candidate should meet with the committee to discuss an outline and bibliography or early draft. The proposal is typically 10,000 words (about 40 pages, excluding references; length under review) and should include:

1. Introduction: introduce the research problem or question through a clear statement of what you're investigating and why it matters to situate the topic's significance. This can include the context and motivation as background to establish why this topic and how it will address a gap in existing knowledge.
2. Clear explanation of the main question or problem(s) to be addressed and how it relates to research in the field.
3. Concise literature review.
4. Discussion of theoretical approach(es) from which question(s) or problem(s) will be explored.
5. Description of the methodology and main source materials to be used in the research.
6. Timeframe for completion. Your timeframe must include approximate dates for drafts and chapter submissions, with up to three weeks for committee feedback in each review cycle.

If a [research ethics](#) clearance is required, this should be addressed as well.

Oral Defence: Scheduled by the candidate and supervisor once the committee approves the written proposal. Typically includes: an oral presentation by the student (10 min); two rounds of questioning (90–100 min); and an optional brief closing statement. Both components must meet committee standards; the assessment is sent to the graduate supervisor.

Next Step: Students who began Fall 2025 or later should register in COMS 6909 Ph.D. Thesis after successfully completing the proposal.

Dissertation guidelines

For PhD students, dissertation guidelines should be discussed with your supervisor and committee. The university does have existing [formatting requirements](#) and recommendations and [cover page](#) template. Thesis [non-exclusive license](#).

Appendix III: Part-time PhD comprehensive exam schedule

This applies to PhD students entering the program in 2025 or after and who entered the program registered as part-time students.

Proposed Comprehensive Exam Timeline, Part-Time Students

Semester	Milestones
8	Year 3/semester 8 Assemble committee. Comps workshop (Apr.–May).
9	Register in Comprehensive Exam: Field I (COMS 6101) and Field II (COMS 6102) Select fields in consultation with supervisor/committee. Compile reading lists.
10	Comprehensive Exam: Field I (COMS 6101) and Field II (COMS 6102) Meet with committee to approve reading lists (Sept.–Oct.).
11	Year 4/semester 11 Comprehensive Exam: Field I (COMS 6101) and Field II (COMS 6102) Committee meeting to discuss readiness to sit exam (Feb.–Mar.). If committee agrees student is ready, begin setting questions. If not, student applies to Grad Supervisor for extension to summer. Sit exam (Mar.–Apr.). Defend answers (Apr.–May). Register in Thesis proposal, COMS 6908.

Please note:

Part-time students should normally present their proposal during their fifth year in the program and must do so by the end of the fall term of their sixth year at the latest. Once they successfully defend the comprehensive 2, students can register in COMS 6908 PhD Proposal.

Students who were accepted into the PhD program on a part-time basis must complete their degree by the end of their 9th year.

Appendix IV: Information for PhD students in program prior to Fall 2025

PhD course requirements pre-2025 admissions

1. COMS 6000 Doctoral Seminar in Communication Studies (1.0 credit)
2. Two [2.0] additional credits from the list of optional courses below:
COMS 5102, 5200, 5202, 5203, 5205, 5206, 5207, 5208, 5209, 5212, 5214, 5218, 5219, 5220, 5221, 5222, 5223, 5224, 5225, 5509, 5605, 6001, 6005, 6006, 6007, 6010, JOUR 5401
Note: Up to 0.5 credit may be taken in a relevant discipline outside of the School, with permission of the Graduate Supervisor; students in the Ph.D. program are restricted to one (0.5 credit) directed studies course (COMS 6010).
3. 2.0 credits in:
COMS 6900 [1.0] Comprehensive Examination I
COMS 6901 [1.0] Comprehensive Examination II
4. COMS 6909 [0.0] PhD Thesis

Once COMS 6901 is completed, students who entered the program prior to 2025, will register directly in COMS 6909 PhD Thesis (covers proposal and thesis stages) and begin work on your proposal and then dissertation. This pathway is slightly modified for newer students, but the credits, deliverables and requirements remain the same for all.

Second comprehensive (for PhD students admitted before 2025)

COMS 6901: The Second Comprehensive Examination

The “Second Comprehensive Examination” (“second comp”) requires students to conduct a “literature review” on an identifiable tradition, sub-field, problem or thematic in the field of communication. It is intended to demonstrate an ability to organize, synthesize and critique a body of scholarship relevant to one’s expertise, and to prepare students to carry out independent research. In most circumstances, the second comp would contribute to the theoretical framework and/or literature review of the dissertation and help define the student’s area of expertise. The second comp examination includes: (1) submission of a written comprehensive paper; and (2) an oral examination.

Eligibility: For students who joined the program prior to 2025, to be eligible for COMS 6901 the second comprehensive examination candidates must have completed COMS 6000 (Doctoral Seminar in Communication Studies) and COMS 6900 (First Comprehensive Exam).

Timeline: Normally it takes one full year to complete the second comp. Students typically start working on the proposal in the Summer term of Year 1, for their committee’s approval in the beginning of the Fall term of Year 2. This will allow students to submit the written paper and defend it at the oral examination in the Winter term of Year 2.

Committee: The committee for the second comp is comprised of three members: a supervisor and, typically, two additional faculty in the department. The committee members are determined by the student in consultation with the supervisor. The second comp committee can continue to be, but may be different from, the committee established for the dissertation work.

Written paper: The second comp paper is developed by the student in consultation with the supervisor and committee. It requires a proposal (approximately 500-1000 words) that outlines the goals, rationale, and timeline for completion of the comp, and a complete list of the books, articles and materials consulted for the exam (including 25 books or a combination of books and articles where five (5) articles constitute one book). It is highly encouraged that students include a detailed timeline that allows adequate time for supervisor and committee feedback on drafts, if necessary, and the final submission. Upon the approval of the proposal, the student develops the paper, primarily in consultation with the supervisor. The length should be 10,000 (40 pages), not including references.

Oral examination: Upon submission of the written paper and the approval by all members of the committee, the student and supervisor are responsible for scheduling the exam. The exam may be held during any time of the year (Fall / Winter /Summer). An oral examination typically includes: (1) an oral presentation (10 minutes) synthesizing the main points of the paper; (2) two rounds of questioning (approx. 90 minutes); and (3) a brief closing statement by the student (optional).

Exam Grading: The exam is graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory on both written and oral components by the student's committee.

Rationale: The second comp ensures that PhD students have: (1) an appropriate foundation and the depth and breadth of knowledge in their area of expertise; (2) the capacity to engage in scholarly communication both oral and written; and (3) appropriate knowledge to design course materials for teaching in their area of expertise.