

The Doctoral Dissertation Guidelines

The Dissertation Timeline

So now you have finished all your courses and defended your comprehensive exam. It is time to start your dissertation. In the usual timeline, **you** are beginning your dissertation in your third year of the program. There are 6 key phases of this work. The timing of this is context dependent and highly variable, but the following is a rough timeline for full time work:

Year 3

Draft and defend your proposal (approximately 3-6 months)

Secure ethics clearance if working with human subjects (2-3 months)

Collect data (approximately 4-8 months – sometimes continuing into year 4)

Year 4

Remaining data collection

Writing the first draft (approximately a year)

Year 5

Revisions (approximately 6 months to a year to get a final draft)

Defence

Committee Composition

Your supervisor(s) and qualifying exam committee members will normally remain on your thesis committee. These core committee members are at the Proposal defence along with a chair of the defence, usually the Social Work Graduate Programs Supervisor.

For your thesis defence, the committee requires:

- Thesis supervisor or co-supervisors
- At least two thesis advisory committee members. This includes cross-appointed and adjunct professors.
- One member (full-time faculty or adjunct) from outside the student's home unit/program and who has been at arm's length from the thesis research (Internal Examiner)
- One member from outside Carleton University who is a recognized authority in the subject of the thesis (External Examiner)
- Chair of the examination board (Graduate Administrator will assist)
- Chair of the unit (ex officio)
- Dean of the faculty (ex officio)

Please consult [Carleton's Thesis Requirements](#) for further details.

Starting your Dissertation – the Proposal

The dissertation process is an exciting and rewarding part of the PhD experience and is likely very different from anything that you have done before in academia. This is the time when you engage in a substantial research-based project of which you are sole author and which will make an original academic contribution to your field of study. While exciting, this can also be a very challenging and isolating experience so it is important to remember that no one is entirely alone, even though it sometimes feels that way. There are many resources and people available to support you and you will need to familiarize yourself with them and be sure that you have them in place. Your main resources, of course, are your thesis advisor, thesis committee, and peers, but there are on-line guides and university resources available also.

After the qualifying examination process is completed you will begin work on your dissertation proposal. The first step in this process is the preparation, presentation and defence of a thesis proposal. The importance of the proposal is that it indicates that the groundwork for the thesis has been done. It demonstrates that you have identified and thought through the essential components of your project, clearly demonstrating how your project has the potential to make an original contribution to your area of study; and it shows that you have a well-developed plan for carrying out the project.

Your dissertation proposal should be between 20 and 30 pages long (or between 7500 and a maximum of 10,000 words). It specifies the subject for investigation and the path to follow in order for you to be able to answer the question(s) that you have posed as the subject of investigation. You should give your proposal a working title.

The format and order of the content of the proposal may vary (depending on advice from your thesis advisor/committee) but should include the following elements:

1. The Research Question

Begin with a statement of what you want to research. What do you want to know and how did you become interested in this subject? Provide some background on the issues and end this section with a broad statement or set of questions that you would like to answer in the research.

2. The Literature

Situate your research question in the relevant bodies of literature. This involves a discussion of how the answer that you come up with will contribute to or build on existing literature or respond to the puzzles left as yet unexplained or unexplored. There is no need to identify and read everything that has already been written on the topic, but you should have a strong familiarity with the literature directly relevant to your research question. This section requires you to be conscious of “your place” within the field. This includes discussion of:

- 2-5 major theoretical, conceptual and empirical scholarly conversations from which your project emerges and to which your work contributes.
- major substantive, scholarly research (findings or claims) in the field including what is known about the issue, the assumptions and arguments made by others and the extent to which you concur or differ from them. Remember that you are making a claim in which you have something original to contribute or some perspective to advance; and
- a concluding piece that is comprised of a statement of the proposition(s) that you intend to investigate. A proposition differs from a question. In a question, you may be indicating that you are interested in social issues but in a proposition you are stating the cause, effects or relationships of the issue.

3. Research Design/ Methodology

The proposal must identify the overall design for your research and your research methodology. It should discuss strengths and weaknesses of the design/methodology and why these are the best choices for your research. Indicate how you propose to analyze your data. Address questions of epistemological position, assumptions and practicalities of the form(s) of data analysis you intend to pursue.

The method you employ is as important as the research question. Indeed, the method follows directly from your formulation of the research question and describes the path you intend to follow in the collection of data or examination of primary or secondary sources. Research methods fall into three broadly defined camps: qualitative, quantitative, and historical although it should be recognized that even these distinctions are disputed. In social work all three approaches to research can be combined to answer research questions.

4. Data Sources

Identify your sources of information/data, including their availability and any perceived limitations of the data or access to the data.

5. Ethics

Discuss any relevant ethical considerations in the collection, analysis and dissemination of your research findings.

6. Claims to Originality

Demonstrate how using the sources and methodology that you have identified will produce an original synthesis or proposition.

7. Implications

Discuss the implications of your project in light of the existing literature and knowledge (point 3) and the claims you have to originality (point 9).

8. Chapter headings

Provide a preliminary breakdown of chapter headings.

9. Research Timeline

Outline your research process (how you intend to proceed) and provide a preliminary timeline for completion of the project.

10. Bibliography

The proposal must include a preliminary bibliography in an agreed -upon style, i.e., APA, MNL, Chicago, etc. Consult with your thesis advisor/committee on this. You will expand the bibliography as you prepare the final version of the thesis (see: *Thesis Preparation Guidelines* document cited above in the Introduction). Some suggested style guides are proposed under the Resources section of this handbook.

In your finished proposal make sure that you have demonstrated that:

- this a viable and original dissertation topic,
- your central research question is relevant to your field of study,
- the data are accessible,
- evidence and method selected will allow you to answer your central question(s) or proposition.

As you prepare for your proposal defence, remember that your committee's job is to be rigorous in their reading of your work. This is to ensure that any problems that you may encounter will be caught early.

Proposal Defence

Once you and your committee have determined that your proposal is ready for the oral defense, a date will be scheduled in consultation with the School's Graduate Supervisor (or designate). The oral defense is open to all faculty members; if any students want to attend the defense they must have your approval. The Graduate Supervisor (or designate) will chair the defense as well as the closed committee deliberations (i.e. closed to the defending student and anyone who is not a member of your PhD Committee with the exception of the chair) that immediately follows the defence. These deliberations will determine the acceptability of the proposal.

At the defense you can expect that:

- you will be asked to open discussion by presenting an overview of your proposal for no more than 20 minutes,
- members of the committee will have the opportunity to ask you questions in a first round of one-on- one exchanges. A second round gives committee members an opportunity for follow-up questions and a more informal exchange. By convention, your external committee member is the first one to ask questions, then your second committee and then your supervisor. The Chair may also decide to raise some questions as well,
- the oral examination normally takes around 90 – 120 minutes,
- at the conclusion of questioning, you will be asked to leave the room while members of the committee deliberate,
- the committee members will make one of the following decisions:
 - accept the proposal as is,
 - accept the proposal with minor revisions (in this case revisions must be approved by your advisor),
 - accept the proposal with major revisions (in this case you will be expected to significantly rework the proposal and bring it back to your committee for approval

- but you will not have to do another proposal defence),
 - find the proposal unsatisfactory (in this case you will have to redo both the proposal and the proposal defence; you will be given this one chance to pass the proposal).
- a final version of your thesis proposal must be filed with the Social Work Graduate Administrator after the successful completion of the defense and any required revisions.

Ethics Approval

If you are planning to work with human subjects you must get ethics approval from Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (CUREB) through the Office of Research Ethics <https://carleton.ca/researchethics/>.

This process can take some time depending on the sensitivity and vulnerability of the population you plan to work with and/or the research methodology you have chosen, so make sure that you build this into your timeframe by giving yourself enough time to complete this process. The ethics process must be done in consultation with your thesis advisor. The ethics committee meets once a month and deadlines for submission are fixed.

The School of Social Work is a member of the Faculty of Public Affairs, refer to CUREB-A meetings & deadlines. Application, FAQs, Policies & Resources are all found within <https://carleton.ca/researchethics/>

Dissertation Preparation Details

The essential characteristic of the doctoral dissertation is that it offers an original contribution to the field. Detailed guidelines concerning the technical preparation of the thesis (margins, fonts etc.) can be found at: <https://gradstudents.carleton.ca/resources-page/thesis-requirements/formatting-guidelines/>

PhD Dissertation Oral Defence

The dissertation must be defended successfully at an oral examination which is approximately two to three hours in duration.

In addition to your supervisor and other committee members, you will be examined by an Internal Examiner (a member of faculty from within the University but outside the department) and an External Examiner (expert in the field outside the University).

Any faculty member from within the University may attend the defence as an observer. Other observers may also attend the examination, but observers cannot participate in the proceedings in any way. Observers should inform the candidate of their intention to attend before the defence takes place. Family, friends and your colleagues may attend to support you as you pass through this final process in your doctoral studies.

Thesis Outcome Guidelines:

The outcome is based solely on the academic quality of the thesis and graded as Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. If outstanding, a thesis may be nominated for a medal.

The four categories of acceptability are as follows:

1. **Accepted:** Used where only a few typographical or stylistic changes are required.
2. **Acceptable after minor revisions:** Used where a large number of typographical errors

exist, or where other changes are required which do not affect the basic tenets of the research or its findings and do not call for alteration to the basic structure of the thesis. These changes should be clearly specified in writing and are subject only to the approval of the thesis supervisor before the thesis is finally accepted for deposit.

3. **Acceptable after major revision:** Used where, in the judgment of the examiners, changes of a substantive nature which call for re-writing of parts of the thesis are required. These changes should be clearly specified in writing and are subject to the approval of the thesis board, or a designated committee, before the thesis is finally accepted for deposit.

4. **Rejected:** Used where, in the judgment of the examiners, the thesis is unacceptable on substantive grounds.