The Dissertation Proposal

1.45 Defining the Dissertation Topic: Over the course of your third year, you should define the area of your dissertation and the intellectual problems with which you'll be engaged. You should, of course, stay in close touch with your principal advisors during this year about your thoughts concerning the dissertation. By winter quarter students ideally will be ready to engage in sustained research directed towards establishing their dissertation topic. Such research would then be continued over the course of the spring quarter, and, if needed, over the course of the summer of the third year. Track II students may be on the same schedule or one that is roughly one quarter later.

1.46 Dissertation Proposal Workshop (ARTH 50200): The Dissertation Proposal Workshop (ARTH 50200) is conducted by a faculty member every spring to introduce third-year students to the tasks of preparing grant proposals and applications. Grant proposals are typically much shorter than the departmental proposal. Here you will read and critique each other's proposals. The aim of the workshop is to help you produce a finished proposal by early autumn of your fourth year and to prepare you to apply for grants at that time. Second year students who have room in their schedule and have a dissertation topic defined may enroll in their second year, with permission of their advisor and Director of Graduate Studies. You should register for the workshop for course credit. Grading is Pass/Fail. The time demands of the workshop will depend on how far along you are in developing your departmental proposal. If you are early in that process, working on a short grant proposal will help you define what you need to develop in both versions over the summer. Failure to satisfactorily complete the teaching colloquium and/or proposal workshop on schedule will result in an "I" and the requirement of retaking the class the next time it is offered. This "I" will not prevent the disbursement of regular GAI stipend funds, but will delay any department fellowship funding (for research travel, etc.) until the course is completed.

1.47 Pre-Dissertation Grants: It is generally in the spring of your third year that you will plan a pre-dissertation trip and submit a trip proposal to the department for approval. These trips, typically a month or so long, are designed to conduct preliminary research on the dissertation. On this trip, you might canvass archives and works of art, and consult with local scholars. If your dissertation research will be based abroad, you might approach one of them about the possibility of directing your research when you return to work on the dissertation. The primary purpose of a pre-dissertation trip is to help you prepare more specific, and thus stronger, grant applications for dissertation research.

Endowments within the department may be used to support graduate student travel, including pre-dissertation trips. They can also be used to supplement summer stipends if the travel expense exceeds the summer stipend amount. Refer to section 1.53 for further information. Students should also look for other sources for pre-dissertation funding.

After consulting with your advisors, you should submit your pre-dissertation trip proposal in time for the Department’s deliberations about student travel awards in the spring. A form is available in the Department office that must be submitted with the proposal.

1.48 Dissertation Committee: The dissertation committee normally consists of three faculty members but may include up to five. It is chaired by your faculty advisor, who must be a member of the Department. Your other two readers may be based in other University departments. The majority of the committee members must be University of Chicago faculty; any exception has to be approved by the Director of Graduate Studies or Department Chair, or in some cases, the Division.

Before considering non-departmental and extra-University committee members, study the requirements regarding readers’ attendance of dissertation defenses, 1.59. Consult with your advisor on the constitution of the committee and be sure to make explicit invitations to potential members to serve on your committee, including the role you would like them to fill (e.g., second reader, third, etc.) and your mutual expectations for the level of their involvement. At a minimum, second and third readers provide feedback on work approved by the advisor. The committee is officially appointed by the Department Chair.

The committee is usually constituted during the third year, but at the latest, it should be formalized just after you pass the preliminary exams and before you begin serious work on the departmental proposal. If, at a later date, the second or third reader should leave the University or for any reason withdraws from the committee, the Chair may appoint a new member in consultation with you and the remaining members.

1.49 Dissertation Proposal: You are expected to complete your departmental dissertation proposal within four months of completing your preliminary exams. To remain in good academic standing, you must complete your proposal within ten months of completing your exams. Prepare your proposal in close consultation with all of your committee members, especially your advisor. The entire committee will review and approve it. Ask in advance whether any members will be on leave or away for the summer during the time you will draft your proposal and consult them about their availability to give advice or read drafts during that time.

The proposal should be presented in a concise, clearly written form that begins with a definition of the topic. Length varies considerably according to project but a good guideline is around twenty pages. Although proposals vary according to topic, most proposals contain sections on the current state of the question, the contribution to scholarship that the dissertation will make, the specific questions and problems to be considered and the expected results, both immediate and far-reaching. Writing the proposal should also help you plan the materials you will need to consult and in what order, so the discussion of the topic may be followed by a schedule of future travel, research, and writing. If appropriate, any restrictions in the scope of the topic should be noted and explained. If the research is sufficiently advanced, you may sketch or describe the organization of the dissertation. You should include an extensive bibliography.

Circulate the proposal among your committee members and convene a meeting of your committee members to discuss its merits and any need for revisions. This meeting should take place during the academic year. The Department Assistant is available to assist you with the logistics of scheduling. You must submit the final revised version of your proposal no more than three weeks following this meeting. When the committee members agree that revisions are sufficient, fill out the PhD Dissertation Proposal Form (downloadable from the department website) and ask your committee members to email their approval to the Department Assistant, who will give the form, emailed signatures, and proposal to the Chair for final approval.

The faculty strongly encourages you to present your proposal at one of the University’s graduate student workshops. Here you can often get very useful interdisciplinary feedback and can begin to establish a local community of students and faculty that will be interested in and supportive of your work over the coming years.
1.50 Admission to Candidacy: When you have completed coursework, paper requirements, language requirements, and prelims, and your dissertation proposal has been approved, you are admitted to candidacy and become what is called ABD, "all but the dissertation." ABD status is frequently required for fellowship awards. Under no circumstances should you draft or complete a chapter of your dissertation before advancing to ABD status. Per departmental requirements, you must be admitted to candidacy by June of your fourth year in residence. Per Divisional policy, failure to meet this deadline jeopardizes receipt of your final summer stipend. Departmental exceptions are made only with the approval of the faculty and have no bearing on Divisional rules about summer stipend receipt. (It is a requirement of the University that the student be admitted to PhD candidacy at least 8 months prior to the awarding of the degree; it is a requirement of the Humanities Division that the student be admitted to PhD candidacy by the end of their fifth year in residence, at the latest.) When you are ready to be admitted to candidacy, contact the Department Coordinator to check that all requirements have been fulfilled and that all necessary forms have been signed and filed. If everything is in order, the Department Coordinator will circulate the official paperwork admitting you to candidacy. Once the form has been signed by all necessary people, you will receive a letter from the Dean approving your new status. Official copies of your transcript will also include the date of your admission to candidacy.