Dissertation

Graduate College Five-Year Rule

By regulation of the Graduate College, a student has five years following successful completion of the Comprehensive Examination in which to finish all substantive requirements for the Ph.D.

Registration after the Comprehensive Exam: After a student has passed the Comprehensive Exam and is engaged in the preparation of the prospectus or doctoral thesis, he or she must enroll every fall and spring in the independent study course ENGL-7999 under the guidance of his or her dissertation director. Continuous enrollment in this course will bring the student to 72 s. h., which the Graduate College requires of all PhD students at the time of graduation. If the dissertation defense examination is completed during the summer semester, the student must register for summer s. h.

For financial aid, the student must submit a “short hours” form must be submitted to the Registrar’s Office (30 Calvin hall) to be considered fulltime. This form is available in the GPC’s office.

A. The Dissertation Committee: This five-member committee consists of a dissertation director and three other full or jointly-appointed English Department faculty members. The fifth member may be either from the English Department or from another department within the University of Iowa. The Graduate College must approve any requests for a member from another institution or for an additional committee member. These committee members share with the director an active role in the formation of the dissertation. The nature of responsibilities for reading and responding to chapters will be decided at the meeting to approve the prospectus.

B. The Topic: In most cases, the article prepared for the Comprehensive Examination Portfolio provides a point of departure for the dissertation, but the questioning that produces a successful dissertation begins early in your course work. A dissertation topic may emerge from the materials of a specific course or from a conjunction of texts, themes, and theories encountered in several courses; often it receives its first formulation in a seminar paper. Because topics are constituted through the critical discourse that surrounds them, all topics are tied to a scholarly community. The aim of the dissertation is to enter this community in a way that is fresh, individual, and productive.

C. The Prospectus: After passing the comprehensive examination, you must present a dissertation prospectus to a committee composed of the dissertation director and at least three secondary readers from the dissertation committee. No later than the semester following the Comprehensive Examination, this committee must meet with you and determine whether the prospectus is acceptable. Please note that you must turn in a copy of the prospectus to each member of the dissertation committee at least one week prior to the prospectus meeting. If the prospectus is not approved at the prospectus meeting, a second meeting must be held by the end of the following semester. Although the prospectus should be precise enough to give your committee a clear sense of your proposed topic, argument, and aims, it is a working proposal, not a legal contract. Your prospectus should follow these two general guidelines:

a. A prospectus is a typed, double-spaced document 6-8 pages in length. In addition to stating the main thesis, it should provide the most pertinent critical context for the argument and some idea of how the thesis will be developed chapter by chapter. In the end, the prospectus should be useful not only for launching research and writing the dissertation but also as an abstract to
submit for possible internal or external fellowship support. In this regard, it is helpful to consult guidelines for the Ballard/Seashore Fellowship described in the Fellowships and Awards section below. In addition, forming a prospectus-writing workshop with other students may prove valuable.

b. A working bibliography of primary and secondary sources should accompany the prospectus.

A copy of the prospectus, signed by the dissertation director, must be submitted for approval to the DGS.

The Dissertation

Writing a book-length dissertation is the most sustained and demanding intellectual labor confronting a graduate student. Although research and writing are part of doctoral training from the start, the dissertation is the evidence on which academic employers will judge a candidate's potential as a publishing scholar. A student who has completed a dissertation has a claim to be not just an author but an "authority": someone who has addressed a significant topic with learning and thoroughness, someone whose arguments have weight and consequence, someone who has made a contribution to ongoing scholarly discourse. A successful dissertation combines a project worth doing, the preparation necessary to do it well, and the hard work and insight that can lead to a fresh and urgent argument.

Many students find writing a dissertation to be the hardest and most rewarding experience of their time in the program. Students are well advised to take advantage of the formal and informal resources available at the University of Iowa for doctoral candidates working on their dissertations. These include the Doctoral Workshop in English offered every summer and the Writing Center’s Write-In and Write ON programs and its summer writing camps. Many students also find it helpful to form writing groups to share chapters-in-progress with their colleagues. Students are strongly encouraged to set a schedule for completing their dissertations with their directors. It is especially helpful to set and keep deadlines for completing and revising chapters. Above all, students should stay in regular contact with their directors to discuss their progress. This is especially important for students who choose to leave Iowa City while writing their dissertations.

Because the forms that a successful dissertation can assume are various and because a new topic may call for an unprecedented form, no canonical description of a dissertation is possible. Specific questions of form and content must be decided in consultation with the dissertation director and committee. However, regardless of the form of your argument, it is strongly recommended that your dissertation not exceed four chapters or 250 pages, and that you choose a topic that is attuned to the opportunities and constraints of the current academic marketplace.

Successful completion of a dissertation requires careful planning and active consultation with the director and committee members. Because very few manuscripts reach publication without alteration from the criticism of colleagues and peers, suggestions from readers connected with a press, and the intervention of one or more editors, you might consider your dissertation committee to be your first—and most streamlined—band of editorial advisers.

While the form and content of acceptable dissertations cannot be effectively defined here, the duties and responsibilities of all persons concerned can be made clear. The director has major responsibility for
the supervision of the planning and writing and for detailed commentary on the chapters in progress. The obligation to provide commentary also extends to the other readers, whose role as critics and advisers should be active. They and the director are responsible for returning drafts of individual chapters no later than one month after receiving them. You, in turn, are responsible for observing all required procedures and deadlines that relate to the dissertation and its defense. In particular, you must be certain that all members of the committee possess a full draft of the dissertation no later than three weeks prior to the defense. Any committee member may refuse to read the dissertation if this deadline is not met, and the defense will have to be rescheduled.

**Defense of the Dissertation**

A. Doctoral candidates, having completed the dissertation, must pass a final oral examination called the “Thesis Defense,” “Defense of the Dissertation,” or “Final Examination.” This examination will be conducted by the dissertation director and the dissertation committee, with questions from the public as they are recognized by the dissertation director, who chairs the examination. There are two aspects of the defense of the dissertation that require clarification: the procedures that govern the defense and the nature of the examination itself.

B. The procedures covering the defense are complex, partly because of official deadlines and partly because the Graduate College must approve the dissertation before its final defense can occur. It is your responsibility to assure that all deadlines and requirements are satisfied. The following timetable should be observed:

1. The defense must occur no later than five years following successful completion of the Comprehensive Examination. In unusual circumstances, an extension may be granted by the Graduate College.


3. You must file an application for receiving the degree before the deadline specified each semester by the Graduate College. Failure to meet this deadline means that awarding of the PhD will be postponed for a semester.

4. Following consultation with all five members of your committee, the next step is to make a formal request through the GPC for a specific examination date. If a member of the examination committee is on leave, a substitute examiner must be requested at this time through the DGS. The request of an examination date must be made with the GPC no later than six weeks prior to the defense.

5. **No later than three weeks prior to the defense**, every faculty member on the committee must be given a paper or electronic copy (check with committee members for preference) of the full dissertation. The completed draft of the dissertation distributed to the committee at this time need not be final, but it should be very close. Major rewriting in the three weeks before the defense is unacceptable.
6. The “first deposit” should be submitted electronically according to the Graduate College Guidelines (http://www.grad.uiowa.edu/deadlines). Please follow the “Theses and Dissertation” electronic format guide (http://www.grad.uiowa.edu/theses-and-dissertations). The only textual changes permitted after the “first deposit” are those required by the Graduate College or by the examining committee.

7. On the date assigned, the defense of the dissertation takes place. A report of the examination is signed by all committee members and returned to the GPC along with a signed copy of the dissertation title page and optional embargo letter (An embargo letter prevents your dissertation from being electronically circulated on the internet through the University Main Library). Each committee member evaluates the student as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Two unsatisfactory votes will make the committee report unsatisfactory. In case of a report of unsatisfactory in the Final Examination, the candidate may not be reexamined until the next semester. At the time of the defense, the paper copy of the title page must be signed by the committee members. The dissertation abstract page and embargo letter must be signed by the committee director. The examination may be repeated only once, at the option of the department.

8. Following a successful defense of the dissertation, the student must make any corrections specified by the Graduate College and/or the examining committee and submit the corrected final paper copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College by the deadline for the “final deposit,” submit the abstract page, title page and embargo letter.

C. The nature of the defense will vary with the composition of the examining committee and the nature of the dissertation. To some degree, the members of the dissertation committee serve a different function as examiners than they did as advisers. They confront in the finished dissertation not individual pieces of work-in-progress, which is usually what they see as advisers, but a complete work implicitly asking recognition from a larger world of scholars, publishers and readers. In approving the dissertation, the committee certifies that the student's completed act of literary interpretation, criticism, and/or scholarship is worthy to be made public not only inside but also outside the University of Iowa.