

The Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal

Ph.D. Dissertation

In the Department of English, Ph.D. dissertations are typically 200-400 pages in length. A dissertation of more than 400 pages suggests an overly ambitious research project or a repetitive argument; a dissertation of anything less than 200 pages suggests too narrow a topic, insufficiently diverse evidence in support of the dissertation or insufficiently contextualized argument or material, and/or an insufficiently vigorous conclusion reached in the research process.

Students should consult the most up-to-date version of the *MLA Handbook* or *The Chicago Manual of Style* and consistently follow its directives. Technical requirements for the dissertation specific to this university are outlined in the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies instructions for [Electronic Theses and Dissertations](#).

Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal

The Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal is to be developed by the student in conjunction with the Supervisor and, where possible, members of the Ph.D. Advisory Committee. While a rough draft of the proposal will be an outcome of the student's work in ENG 890.3: Research Methods, the approach, scope, and stakes of the dissertation may be modified following the Ph.D. Field Examination process. A draft of the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal must be provisionally approved by the Supervisor and submitted to the Graduate Chair by 1 May of the second year of the doctorate. Following a Dissertation Proposal Presentation to the Advisory Committee and potentially further revision, the final, approved version will be submitted to the Graduate Chair by **31 May of the second year of the doctorate**.

Writing the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal

Function

The function of the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal is to provide a roadmap for the dissertation writing process. It will be based on initial research and the identification of an issue in the scholarly field to which the student can make a useful contribution.

To these ends, students are expected to attend to the following:

1. establish the texts, topic, and the gap in the scholarship or the scholarly debate to which your project will contribute;
2. identify the specific research questions through which you will focus your contribution;

3. indicate the means through which the questions will be addressed: the methods, the critical or theoretical framework, and/or the analytical approach informing your work;
4. provide a sense of the structure of the dissertation and the objectives and/or provisional arguments that will focus your chapters; and
5. suggest the anticipated outcomes, possible contribution, and/or stakes of the project.

Form of the Dissertation Proposal

Typically, the proposal involves a 6-8 page overview of the research project and a 4-6 page bibliography.

Proposals may differ in form depending on the nature of the project. That said, the following components are important to include in order to clarify for the Advisory Committee the rationale behind the project, as well as its aims and objectives, the methods that will be used, and the anticipated outcomes.

a. **Working title**

The title should be as specific as possible about the topic and the factors that will be most central to your analysis: i.e. text(s), author(s), time period, genre, place, theory, method....

No one title needs to indicate all the specifics listed above, but a working title such as "Deconstructing the Depression: Representations of the Dirty Thirties in Euro-Canadian and Indigenous Canadian Poetry" makes clear the material to be studied and the method to be employed.

b. **Statement of topic, text(s), and hypothesis**

This section should include a clear, concise description of the topic and the issue you wish to investigate in relation to that topic. Identifying the gap in scholarship or the scholarly conversation to which the dissertation responds can help to indicate the nature of the contribution that your project will be making. The 2-3 main research questions to be investigated should be presented in this section, as well as a hypothesis or sense of the outcomes as they represent a contribution to the field.

No dissertation writer knows in advance exactly what will be found out through the process of thinking about, researching towards, and writing the dissertation. A statement of the anticipated outcomes of the dissertation proposal should, however, indicate what you want to find out (and suspect you will prove) by doing the research, and should suggest the stakes or intervention represented by the project.

c. **Description of the project and of its form**

In this section of the proposal, the writer is expected to answer four questions: "Why are you choosing to study these texts?" "What features of these texts will you investigate?" "What approach are you taking in this investigation?" and "Why have you

chosen this approach?" As well, this section of the proposal should include a plan for the structure of the dissertation. An outline of chapters is helpful here, both for guiding the research and drafting process, and for enabling assessment by the Advisory Committee. The plan should answer questions about presentation and organization, such as "What will the introduction cover?" "How will the chapters divide up the material?" and "What is the function or main claim that will orient each chapter?"

Questions that may be of use in supporting a chapter outline include: Will you devote a chapter to each author or to each text in question? Will you devote a chapter to the theoretical approach and then use chapters to demonstrate its application to different texts or groups of texts? Will you devote individual chapters to how narrative voice, delineation of character, and plot contribute to political critique in two or three novels per chapter? The possibilities are excitingly endless....

d. **Working bibliography of primary and secondary sources**

The bibliography should draw attention to those sources that are deemed essential to the project. That is, it should be selective, and not exhaustive. While the writer should have read far enough into the key texts to be able to make an informed plan, the bibliography of a dissertation proposal is not a checklist of everything read so far about the topic. The bibliography demonstrates the student's capacity to research the topic in a focused, informed, constructive way. In particular, it should demonstrate the writer's familiarity with current publications on the research question.

While the bibliography should list both primary texts and secondary sources (works of criticism specific to the primary materials and works pertaining to the theoretical or analytical framework), there is no need to divide the bibliography into two corresponding parts. The bibliography should follow the format appropriate to the dissertation itself: i.e. the most current version of, for example, MLA style or Chicago style.

The Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal and Presentation

When the draft of your proposal is complete, it should be submitted to your Supervisor for review and potential revision. Once the Supervisor has indicated that the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal is ready to move forward, you will both fill out the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal Form which will be signed following the Advisory Committee's approval of the Proposal and Proposal Presentation.

By **1 May** of the second year of the doctorate, the Proposal and the completed (but unsigned) Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal form will be submitted to the Graduate Chair. The Graduate Chair will then circulate the Proposal and Proposal Form to the Advisory Committee as a whole. A Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal Presentation will then be scheduled.

The Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal Presentation will take place no later than **15 May** of the second year of the doctorate. This meeting, which will last no longer than one hour, will involve the Ph.D. Advisory Committee and will be chaired by the Graduate Chair or designate. The student will present a 5-10 minute talk regarding the proposed dissertation. After questions have been posed and discussion has taken place, the Advisory Committee will provide the Graduate Chair with their determination of the outcome of the proposal and presentation. Following that determination, required revisions, or a retake, will ensue.

The final draft of the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal will be forwarded by the student to the Supervisor for final approval, and then both the Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal and signed Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal Form will be forwarded to the Graduate Chair no later than **31 May**.