

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
SO YOU WANT TO WRITE A DISSERTATION?

Some practical advice for students approaching the dissertation process.

General. You should make sure you know what the requirements (both departmental and Graduate School) for the Ph.D. are, and that you have satisfied or will satisfy them. They are spelled out in the Department's online Guide to Graduate Student Policies, Procedures, and Resources [<https://classics.unc.edu/policies-and-forms/graduate-students-policies-procedures-and-resources/>]. The Student Services Manager and the Director of Graduate Studies will try to help you keep abreast of all these, but the basic responsibility is yours. Remember to keep the Student Services Manager up-to-date about your progress toward the degree at every stage.

Choosing a topic and director. You may already have a topic or area you want to work on, perhaps something developed from a term paper or seminar paper (or two), or from your special field exam or fieldwork. Ideally you have been thinking about this during your years of coursework and exams. In this case, consult with the faculty member(s) who seem likely to be willing to work with you on it. Or you may not have a topic but know which faculty member you want to work with, or what general area you want to work in. At times faculty have topics they are eager to have students work on, and in this case you can just ask whether the faculty member has any suggestions. If you have neither a topic nor a director in mind, ask various members of the faculty with whom you have done work what they might suggest, then do some preliminary reading in those which appear to you to be most fruitful and significant. Whatever procedure you follow, take the decision seriously: your choices here will directly determine the course of your work for the next couple of years, and will continue to affect your work for a number of years after you finish the Ph.D., and perhaps for your entire career. By the way, faculty are not offended if you do not choose a topic they suggest: we are well aware that tastes and interests vary widely.

The Prospectus and the Oral Prospectus Defense. Once you have a topic and a director, consult with your director and with the Director of Graduate Studies concerning second through fifth readers; then yourself ask those proposed readers if they are willing to serve on your committee and work with you on the dissertation. A majority of your committee must be regular faculty members in the Department of Classics at UNC-CH. In recent years some students have used one or more committee members from other institutions when they would add a special areas of expertise; discuss this with your director if the idea appeals to you. Note that faculty at other institutions will need to be approved as special appointees to the Graduate Faculty, and that having more than one reader outside the Triangle area may create some logistical complications. You should inform the Student Services Manager as soon as you have a dissertation director, a topic, and a committee; she needs to include that information in your file and to process the paperwork for any committee members who are at other institutions.

You should spend some time reading and thinking about your topic, and discussing it with your director, then prepare a prospectus (about 5 to 15 pages) and brief preliminary bibliography (1 to 3 pages). In the prospectus you should:

1. Define the topic clearly.
2. Briefly discuss earlier scholarship in your general area to show why your dissertation is worth doing and how it relates to previous work.
3. Describe how you will proceed (types of evidence; methodology; etc.).
4. Propose likely chapter divisions or organization of the dissertation.
5. Where appropriate, include a short example of the kind of material you will work with and what you will be able to do with it.
6. Include any other materials or discussion needed to clarify for the committee what you propose to do. You are by no means obligated to have all the answers at this point (you haven't written the dissertation yet); what you do need is an informed curiosity and some ability to tell what is meaningful from what is not. So don't feel that you need to predict in detail what conclusions your research will lead to; if the topic deserves working on, your conclusions will necessarily be worthwhile.

Once your dissertation director has approved your prospectus, you will need to meet with your full committee in order to defend it orally. The Student Services Manager can help you schedule the prospectus defense. You will need to give your committee members time to read the prospectus, and work with their schedules; readers outside the Triangle area may need to take part by telephone or Skype. Remember that the goal of the prospectus and the defense is not just to show your committee that you have a topic, but also to elicit from them any help or suggestions or bibliography they can give you at the start.

Remember that by Graduate School policy you need to be registered in dissertation credit (CLAR/GREK/LATN 994) during the term in which your defense takes place. Since you will need to register under your dissertation director's section number, you should make sure that the office staff has the information they need in order to set this up; please respond to their requests for information in a timely fashion, or you may risk not being registered for the semester.

Once you have fulfilled all your other requirements and your prospectus has been defended and approved, you should apply to the Graduate School for admission to candidacy. The form may be found online here: <http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/wdcanfrm.pdf>. Admission to candidacy formally gives you the status of ABD, 'All But Dissertation'.

Writing the Dissertation. You want to write a good dissertation, but it is crucial to finish it in a timely way, and these days a completed dissertation helps immeasurably on the job market. If the topic turns out to be too broad, discuss with your director ways to limit it. The prospectus is not a contract: if you plan five chapters but the first three turn out to be more complicated than you expected, you can change your plans, with your director's approval. A chapter may naturally split in two. You should also keep in mind that, although the dissertation in its final form will be made available online through UNC Libraries, you will very likely be revising it further for publication as a monograph or a series of articles; it is in that form that most people will encounter your work. For all practical purposes, then, the dissertation is likely to be simply one stage of a larger process. It accordingly does not need to be the last word on your topic, nor to solve every conceivable problem. It does need to be honest, thoughtful, and accurate: a young scholar's serious, considered treatment that will advance our knowledge in an interesting and significant area of scholarship. You will read a lot of good scholarship while working on the

dissertation, but try to avoid measuring your work on this, your first major project, against what senior scholars are doing in their third or fourth books.

You should meet with your director at least monthly throughout the academic year, although your director may require more frequent meetings. By Graduate School policy, you are also required to submit a progress report to each member of the committee at least once a year. You and your director should together decide on a regular date for these annual reports. It's a good idea to update your second and third readers on a more frequent basis, so that they are aware of your progress and any significant shifts in the shape of the dissertation. One situation to be avoided is for you and your director to move ahead on your own and then find, after a year or even longer, that the other members of the committee have serious concerns about the direction you have taken, or your use of evidence, or your conclusions. So make sure your second and third readers know where you are headed. Fourth and fifth readers, on the other hand, typically do not need to be involved until you have a draft of the entire dissertation. But you should always feel free to consult any member of your committee on particular topics in which they have expertise, and you should make sure to ask all your committee members whether they would like to see drafts of chapters as you complete them.

It is an excellent idea to begin writing before you think you are ready to write. The process of writing is encouraging, and it compels you to define problems and face decisions that you might otherwise leave unresolved. A strategy that works well for some people is to set up a schedule for submitting written work to your director on a regular basis; you may want to discuss this possibility with your director. You should give your director a good clean copy of what you have written, but you don't need to have polished everything to a high sheen before you submit it: your director is there to give you advice and help, but cannot do so if you do not give him or her something to react to. It is crucially important that you think of your director and readers as sources of advice and criticism during your writing, not as harsh judges from whose eyes your work must be sheltered until it is perfect. It will probably never be perfect, but it will get better with your advisors' help faster, and much more easily, than without it. Each of your committee members is someone who once wrote a first draft of a first chapter.

Many graduate students and faculty in recent years have benefitted from formal or informal writing groups, which meet regularly to discuss or even present work, and to discuss the writing process and provide mutual support and encouragement. Ask faculty or older graduate students about this—or organize one yourself.

Always be sure to allow your readers plenty of time to look at your work. Faculty members have many obligations, and it will often take them a matter of weeks to get through a lengthy section, especially since you want them to do it carefully. Keep this in mind when planning your schedule. Always ask whether they prefer digital or hard copies of your chapters. And while saving paper is a good goal, do not give people as old as we are drafts with anything, even footnotes, in less than 12-point type, and allow ample margins.

You should keep in mind that in order to submit your dissertation it will need to be formatted according to the standards set out in the Graduate School's 'Thesis and Dissertation Guide' (see below under 'Final Submission'). You don't need to meet all these formatting requirements

while you are writing the dissertation or even when you submit it to your committee for the defense, but it can help save you time and trouble to be aware of them from the start.

The Last Months. As you move closer to completing the dissertation, you should discuss your progress and plans with your director, the Director of Graduate Studies, and the Student Services Manager. There are a number of things to keep in mind.

1. The final oral defense committee will ordinarily be the same as the committee with which you discussed your prospectus. If there are any changes to your committee you need to inform the Student Services Manager as soon as possible.
2. In starting to think about a defense date, you should keep in mind the submission deadlines for each term, which normally fall about a month before the date of graduation (for further details, see below under 'Official Submission'). You should plan to schedule your defense no less than two weeks prior to the submission deadline at the latest, in order to give yourself time to make any last changes and to do any final formatting before you submit.
3. In order to schedule a defense, your committee will need to agree that you are ready to proceed. The first step in this process is to consult your dissertation director; you can then, with his or her approval, follow up with the other members of your committee. Think about the following questions:
 - a) Have the second and third readers read and approved what you have written so far? How long will their suggested revisions take?
 - b) Do the fourth and fifth members of the committee want to see the dissertation now before agreeing that you are ready to have a defense, or would they prefer to wait and read your final version in the last week or so before the oral?
4. Finding a date and time for the defense that will work for all of your committee members is often a complicated business. It is Graduate School policy that all committee members must be present at the defense, although when necessary some may participate by telephone or Skype. It's a good idea to check with them as soon as you have a general time frame in mind in order to find out about their availability; this is particularly important if you are thinking of defending during the summer. The Student Services Manager will help you with the actual scheduling.
5. Keep in mind these important requirements:
 - a) You must be registered for dissertation credit (CLAR/GREK/LATN 994) during the term in which your defense takes place. Again, make sure to give the office staff the information they need in a timely fashion, so that you can register before the deadline.
 - b) You must apply online to graduate prior to the deadline. Be aware that the deadline falls early in the semester: normally late September for the December graduation and mid-February for the May graduation. For August graduation the deadline is normally early July. The precise deadline is set every year, and can be found on the Graduate School's 'Graduation Deadlines' page here (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/academics/resources/graddeadlines.html>). You can find information about the application process on the same page.

The Final Oral Dissertation Defense. By departmental practice, attendance at the oral dissertation defense is limited to you and your committee. Graduate School policy, however, allows all or part of it to be open to the public. If you'd like to have others present at your defense, you should discuss this possibility with your dissertation director.

At the defense, your committee will probably start by asking you to leave the room while they briefly discuss your work, and also the order in which they will ask questions. Then they will ask you to begin by talking about the dissertation, usually about whether or how your research has turned out differently from what you expected. Then they will take turns asking questions, although on a particular topic any member of the committee can ask a follow-up question out of turn. Often your director will go last: he or she will have asked most of his or her questions months earlier. Questions can probe weaknesses, ask you to explain things that are not clear, point out minor flaws or errors, and explore areas for improvement and development in any future publications developed from the dissertation. Ideally you will find yourself discussing issues with them as you would with peers, not with teachers. When all have finished asking their questions, they will ask you again to leave the room while they discuss your work, and their final verdict on it. A majority of the committee members must judge the dissertation to be acceptable in order for it to be approved. When they bring you back into the room, ideally they will shake your hand and congratulate you. Some will give you a list of typos or stylistic problems, or even give you their copy of the dissertation with marginalia and corrections.

Official submission. Your committee will very likely ask for changes in the dissertation after the final oral defense. These are seldom more extensive than corrections of minor errors, stylistic infelicities (several faculty members have lists of "pet peeves"), and typos, although they can be. The director of your dissertation is responsible for verifying that you have made the requested changes. You will also need to make sure that the dissertation is formatted according to the guidelines set out in the Graduate School's 'Thesis and Dissertation Guide' (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/academics/thesis-diss/guide/index.html>); see also the useful 'Submission Checklist' (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/academics/thesis-diss/guide/checklist.html>).

Once you have made all the final changes and made certain that the dissertation is correctly formatted, you will need to submit it electronically for online publication with ProQuest/UMI Dissertation Publishing. For the procedures, see here (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/academics/thesis-diss/guide/submission.html#steps>); see also the additional information and FAQs here (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/academics/thesis-diss/>) and here (<http://www.etsadmin.com/cgi-bin/main/resources?siteId=84>). The deadline for submission is normally about a month before graduation: mid-April for the May graduation, mid-July for the August graduation, mid-November for the December graduation. The precise deadline is set every year, and can be found on the Graduate School's 'Graduation Deadlines' page here (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/academics/resources/graddeadlines.html>). It's a very good idea not to wait until the actual deadline to submit. It's not uncommon for the Graduate School to reject a dissertation because of problems with formatting, and if that happens you will need to make corrections and resubmit before you can be approved for graduation.

The Department's Davis Family Fund can be used to help cover the cost of submitting the dissertation; the Student Services Manager regularly sends out a memo reminding students of this support.

Once the dissertation has been submitted online and you have received notification that it's been accepted, you should celebrate. You've earned it!

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