

**Guidelines for the Dissertation Process**  
**Department of Gerontology**  
**McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies**  
**University of Massachusetts Boston**

Students pursuing a PhD must produce a dissertation as part of the requirements to graduate. The dissertation process begins after the student has passed the qualifying paper exam and has been admitted to PhD candidacy.

1. The student identifies a Gerontology Department faculty member who may be a potential dissertation committee Chair. The student meets with the faculty member to discuss whether the faculty member is willing and able to serve in this role. The dissertation committee Chair must be a full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty member in the Gerontology Department who contributes to the Gerontology PhD program. The dissertation committee Chair must have a record of scholarly publications and/or professional achievement within a period of five years prior to the formation of the dissertation committee. A list of the eligible full-time faculty may be obtained from the Gerontology PhD program Graduate Program Director (GPD). The acting Chair does not become the official Chair of the dissertation committee until after the concept paper is successfully completed and the dissertation committee is formally constituted by approval from the Dean of the Office of Graduate Studies and Admissions.

2. The student prepares a concept paper. The goal of the concept paper is to provide concrete details regarding the anticipated research, such that potential committee members will be able to determine if they are willing and able to work with the student. The concept paper includes the following:

- a. An introduction which includes the underlying policy and/or theoretical questions and the aims of the research;
- b. An indication of gaps in existing knowledge and previous research (with reference to the literature);
- c. A conceptual model;
- d. An overview of the proposed study methodology that includes information on the data and analytic strategies to be used; and
- e. A work plan that identifies needed resources, indicates how they will be obtained, and presents a realistic time frame for completing the project.

The concept paper is reviewed with the acting dissertation committee Chair and is revised to address concerns of the acting Chair, as necessary.

3. The dissertation committee consists of at least three members, including the Chair of the committee. The size of the committee may be larger than three when additional expertise is required. At least half (a minimum of two, including the dissertation committee Chair) of the members must be full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty from the Gerontology Department who contribute to the Gerontology PhD Program (internal members). The committee must include at least one person who is not a faculty member of the Gerontology Department (external

member(s)). This will ensure that, in both appearance and in reality, the outside person maintains an “arms-length” relationship with the Gerontology Department. The outside member, who is a full voting member of the committee, need not have an appointment at the University but must have achieved the highest degree in his or her field of expertise. Dissertation committee members must have a record of scholarly publications and/or professional achievement within a period of five years prior to the formation of the dissertation committee. PhD students, with the assent of the acting Chair, will suggest one or more outside members.

4. In consultation with the dissertation committee Chair, the student identifies potential committee members. Students invite the potential committee members to review the concept paper before they commit themselves to participating on the dissertation committee. By university rule, committee members from outside the university must submit a CV to the GPD upon agreeing to participate as a committee member. If there is a question about the eligibility of a given external dissertation committee member, the committee Chair will consult with the GPD. The dissertation committee must be approved by the Dean of the Office of Graduate Studies and Admissions prior to the formal defense of the dissertation proposal.

5. The student prepares the formal dissertation proposal by expanding upon the concept paper. The dissertation proposal acts as a clear “roadmap” guiding the work of the student. In addition, the proposal should document an agreement between the committee and the student regarding the work expected from the student. After the proposal and any amendments from the committee are agreed upon, significant deviations from the work plan should not be made by either the student or the committee. Major deviations may be made with agreement from both the student and the committee.

The dissertation proposal includes the following elements:

- a. An introduction that includes the underlying policy and/or theoretical questions and the aims of the research. It should identify gaps in existing knowledge and research and how the proposed dissertation will address those gaps. It should specify the major research questions to be answered and/or hypotheses to be addressed;
- b. A literature review that identifies the key studies upon which the research will be based. This section should identify the topics that will be covered within the literature review section of the dissertation as well as the strengths and weaknesses of that literature;
- c. An indication of the theories and/or conceptual frameworks that will inform the dissertation and a statement of the research questions to be addressed and/or the hypotheses to be tested;
- d. A well-developed presentation of the research methods to be used that includes research design, measurement, data sources, and analytic strategy;
- e. A work plan that identifies needed resources, if any, indicates how they will be obtained, and presents a realistic time frame for completing the project; and
- f. A plan for addressing any potential issues regarding rights of research subjects, if warranted.

Following a successful dissertation proposal defense, the student seeks Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for their project, if warranted. This requires submitting the appropriate forms to the IRB office and completing the University of Massachusetts Boston required IRB training course (CITI).

Under some circumstances, a proposal may serve as the foundation for the initial chapters of the dissertation. However, it is not necessary for students to take this approach at the proposal stage.

The concept paper, dissertation proposal, and final dissertation project are formatted using APA guidelines. The length of the concept paper typically will be between 10 and 15 pages of text (does not include references and other supporting material). The length of the dissertation proposal will typically be 25-75 pages of text (does not include references and other supporting materials). There is no required length of the dissertation in terms of number of pages of text; however, most fall in the range of 150-400 pages, inclusive of all relevant material. The length of the dissertation is determined by the objectives of the project and the type of research design. Dissertations should be written with enough detail to address the aims, research questions, and hypotheses. Two types of dissertations are possible: 1) the traditional dissertation that is akin to a monograph, or 2) a three-paper version that is akin to three journal manuscripts on a related subject.

Traditional dissertations typically include introduction, literature review, conceptual framework, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion chapters. In practice, however, structure may vary depending on the necessities of the specific project. The three-paper version typically includes brief introductory and concluding chapters that tie the three separate papers together. The structure of each individual paper may follow the traditional dissertation format, though, again, this may vary depending on the specific content. Students are strongly encouraged to review examples of past department dissertations for formatting, length options, and so forth.

6. When the dissertation committee Chair is satisfied that the proposal is ready for committee review, the student circulates the proposal to other committee members. The final version of the proposal is circulated at least two weeks before the committee holds a meeting to review the proposal. If the committee's approval of the proposal is conditional, the student with the assistance of the Chair prepares a memorandum for the committee regarding the steps that will be taken to address the changes. If the committee requests major revisions to the proposal, a second meeting may be held to discuss a revised proposal. A form is signed by the committee members to indicate formal approval of the proposal. The form is attached to the proposal. The Chair informs the GPD that the proposal has been approved. The GPD assures that the record of approval and the proposal are in the student's file.

7. The student has the right to request a change in committee membership. The student should consult with the dissertation committee Chair about changes. If the student wishes to replace the dissertation committee Chair, she/he should consult with the GPD (or Department Chair, if the GPD is the dissertation committee Chair). If the student seeks to replace or add committee members following submission and approval of the stage 2 form required by the Office of

Graduate Studies and Admissions, approval by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Admissions is necessary.

8. The student asks the dissertation committee Chair to review the completed dissertation in draft form. It is expected that the student will seek informal review from other committee members prior to the defense.

9. Before the defense is scheduled, all committee members need to agree that the dissertation is ready to be defended. The defense is scheduled at the discretion of the student and the committee. The student has the responsibility to ensure that they are in compliance with all procedures, deadlines, and requirements established by the Office of Graduate Studies and Admissions. The student must provide committee members with a copy of the completed dissertation draft at least two weeks prior to the defense. The defense is open to the public. Notice of the defense must be posted within the Gerontology Department and publicized in accordance with University policies at least four weeks prior to the defense. Dissertation defenses typically follow a standard format: first, the student presents an overview of their work; second, committee members engage the student with questions and comments about the study; third, public attendees are given an opportunity to ask questions of the student, and fourth, the dissertation committee meets in executive session to discuss the dissertation project. The committee has the following options regarding approval or disapproval of the dissertation:

- a. Approval of the dissertation presented;
- b. Approval of the dissertation with minor modifications whose adequacy is to be judged by the committee Chair;
- c. Approval of the dissertation with more substantial modifications requiring approval of one or more committee members in addition to the committee Chair;
- d. Deferral of a decision, reconsideration upon submission and defense of a substantially revised dissertation; or
- e. Disapproval

Generally, the dissertation committee Chair will seek a consensus among committee members. If modifications are required, the Chair will provide the student with a statement in writing regarding the specific tasks needed to be completed for the revised dissertation project. If there is one negative vote, the degree will be held up pending satisfactory resolution by the student of the objections of the dissenting member of the committee; final program approval is represented by the signature of the graduate program director. If two or more members cast negative votes, the student will be informed that he/she has failed the examination

10. The dissertation committee Chair informs the GPD regarding the outcome of the defense. The GPD informs the program administrator and the Office of Graduate Studies and Admissions. Appropriate forms must be filed with the Office of Graduate Studies and Admissions to facilitate recording of the outcome.

11. The dissertation must comply with the editorial and formatting standards established by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Admissions ([click here](#)) and the Department of Gerontology.

12. The student provides a bound copy of the dissertation to the Office of Graduate Studies and that copy is provided to the Gerontology Department for archival purposes.

13. Completed dissertation are submitted through Proquest to be archived. For instructions, go to this website

[https://www.umb.edu/editor\\_uploads/images/graduate\\_studies/Step\\_by\\_Step\\_throug5BD377\\_2016.docx](https://www.umb.edu/editor_uploads/images/graduate_studies/Step_by_Step_throug5BD377_2016.docx).

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