Dissertation Proposal and Dissertation Requirements[[1]](#footnote-1)

The culminating requirement of the Sociology Ph.D. program is the completion and successful defense of a doctoral dissertation, which is intended to demonstrate students’ ability to produce original research or creative scholarship. The dissertation is overseen by a committee comprising a chair and three additional committee members. It must be defended in an oral hearing in which students will discuss the contributions of their research and respond to questions from their dissertation committees.

Dissertation Committee

Students must assemble a dissertation committee consisting of a chair and at least three other members. The Chair of the committee must be a full-time or jointly-appointed faculty member of the Sociology & Anthropology Department; one committee member must be an external reader from outside of the department. The purpose of the external member is to help expand the students’ professional network and to enable the inclusion of perspectives that extend beyond those of the department’s faculty. Students are encouraged to choose their external committee member in conuslation with their dissertation chair. Of the two remaining committee members, at least one must be a member of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology (in addition to the chair). Any deviations to the committee must be approved by the Graduate Committee.

Dissertation Proposal and Proposal Hearing

Upon composition of a dissertation committee, students must draft a dissertation proposal that contains the following elements

* Outline of the key research questions;
* Contributions to the literature;
* Theoretical framework;
* Proposed methods for data collection and analysis;
* A discussion of the project’s intellectual merits;
* Timeline for completion; and
* Preliminary chapter titles.

Students are encouraged to model their dissertations on research grant proposals, utilizing the format required by the Social Science Research Council’s International Dissertation Research Fellowship (IDRF), the NSF Sociology Program Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant (DDRIG) as well as NIH grants. The development of the dissertation proposal should be an iterative process, involving ongoing discussions with and feedback from the student’s Chair and committee members.

Once the committee deems the proposal acceptable, the student should schedule the oral hearing of the dissertation proposal and submit the [Petition to Schedule Dissertation Proposal](https://cssh.northeastern.edu/socant/petition-to-schedule-dissertation-proposal-defense/) form online. The student and all dissertation committee members must be present (in person or virtually) at the proposal hearing, including the external member of the committee. The hearing typically lasts between approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours. The student is responsible for coordinating communication among the committee members and scheduling the defense. The dissertation Chair is expected to preside over the proposal hearing. (If communication challenges arise, then the Chair can help the student facilitate communication and assist with scheduling.) While students are welcome to invite audience members to the proposal hearing (with the permission of the dissertation committee), proposal hearings are not required to be public events.

At the end of a successful hearing, all committee members must sign the [Dissertation Proposal Defense Results](https://cssh.northeastern.edu/socant/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/07/Dissertation-Proposal-Defense-Results.pdf) form, which the student will return to the Sociology Graduate Program Administrator, along with an electronic copy of the dissertation research proposal. Electronic copies of proposals will be made available on the department Blackboard site if the student opts to post their Dissertation to the Graduate Student Resource Hub on Blackboard.

Doctoral Dissertation

The content and structure of the dissertation should be developed in consultation with the Chair and members of the dissertation committee. Dissertations may take the form of either a monograph, book-style dissertation or a three-paper, article-style dissertation.

Traditionally, sociology dissertations have been written in a monograph style, with a single argument carried throughout the entire document. However, three-article dissertations are becoming more common in sociology. The particular format should be agreed upon by the dissertation committee, based on the format most suitable for the proposed dissertation research and the student’s professional objectives. There may be certain research topics, research questions, and types of data for which a particular model is more or less appropriate. The dissertation format should be specified at the time of the proposal hearing.

If students choose to change format after the dissertation proposal defense, they must submit an amended [Petition to Schedule Dissertation Proposal Defense](https://cssh.northeastern.edu/socant/petition-to-schedule-dissertation-proposal-defense/) form indicating the format switch. (Email verification of agreement is acceptable for non-local faculty and external readers — these should be sent to the graduate department administrator.) The form will be sent to the full committee to approve the format change. A new hearing is not necessary.

While it is understood that elements or even full sections from field statements or publishable papers may be included in dissertations, it is expected that these elements will have undergone significant revisions throughout the dissertation research and writing process. The dissertation committee will review and approve the use of duplicated material to ensure the integrity and originality of the dissertation.

Monograph-Style Dissertation

A monograph or book-style dissertation has long been the norm for sociology dissertations. The monograph dissertation contains a series of related chapters organized around a coherent argument or central thesis. Early chapters typically include an extensive literature review which provides the basis and rationale for the research problem that is analyzed in subsequent chapters. A minimum of three empirical chapters is the norm for a monograph dissertation, although dissertations often include four or five chapters that draw from the students’ empirical research. A concluding chapter summarizes the work and explores its broader implications and interpretations.

Three-Article Model

The three-article dissertation is becoming more common in certain subfields of sociology. For dissertations conforming to this model, there must be coherence between the articles that make up the dissertation, and the rationale for grouping the three articles together must be clear. The three-article dissertation format is required to be approved by the student’s dissertation committee at the proposal hearing.

The articles submitted for the defense must each be of publishable quality. It can also include articles that have already been submitted or even published prior to the completion of the whole dissertation. The dissertation committee will decide whether the articles meet the publishable standard. The question of authorship of the papers (whether the articles must be sole-authored or co-authored with the student listed as first author) should be determined by the dissertation committee. In addition to the three articles, dissertations using this format must have short opening and closing sections. The opening will provide a framing of the larger topic, the questions addressed in the three papers, and the broad themes that tie together the dissertation. Optionally, it can contain methodological details that are not otherwise addressed in the papers.  It may also contain material on how the student developed their interest in the topic, and the routes they took to get there. The closing section will discuss the broader implications of the full dissertation project.

Oral Defense of the Dissertation

Upon completion and approval of the dissertation by the committee, students must participate in an oral defense of the dissertation, attended by all members of the committee (either in person or virtually). As specified by the Graduate Office, the student and at least two committee members, including the advisor, must be physically present at the defense. At least three weeks prior to the oral defense, students must complete and submit [Petition to Schedule Dissertation Defense](https://cssh.northeastern.edu/socant/petition-to-schedule-dissertation-defense/) form online.

As per university policy, the oral defense must be held at least four weeks prior to the commencement at which the degree is to be awarded. Oral defenses of dissertations are public events, and they must be advertised publicly at least two weeks prior to the scheduled defense. Oral defenses typically last between 1 ½ and two hours. The purpose of the oral defense is for the student to articulate the contributions of the dissertation and answer questions from the committee. At the end of the oral defense, the student and audience will be asked to leave the room while the committee members confer about whether the dissertation is passable and what revisions, if any, are expected to be made before the final submission of the dissertation.

Students should bring to the dissertation defense a printed copy of the Dissertation Proposal Defense Results, as well as the [Graduate Approval Record](https://cssh.northeastern.edu/socant/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/07/Dissertation-Approval-Record-Template.docx) form. Upon successful completion of oral defense, committee members will sign the Graduate Approval Record form and the student will return it to the Graduate Program Administrator.

Dissertations must be formatted and submitted to the College according to the guidelines specified here: [https://cssh.northeastern.edu/graduate/commencement/formatting-guidelines.](https://cssh.northeastern.edu/resources/theses-and-dissertations/#yourdefense)

1. Voted and approved by the GC 9/11/19 and by full faculty vote (15-4-2) on 10/30/19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)