Field Statements and Dissertation Research Proposal

In order to advance to candidacy and begin work on the dissertation, students are expected to complete and defend two field statements (a publishable paper can substitute for a field statement with approval of the student’s primary advisor and committee) and a fundable-quality dissertation research proposal.

Field statements

The field statements replace the comprehensive exams that have traditionally been used. The purpose of each field statement and subsequent oral defense is to equip the student with the theoretical and conceptual expertise needed to teach courses in the field, to write a fundable research proposal (whether or not funding is actually secured), and to enter into the dissertation phase of their graduate studies with a strong grounding in a substantive area. At least one of the field statements must be taken in one of the department’s established areas of concentration. With the approval of his/her committee, a student may petition to take the second field statement in an area outside of the established areas of concentration if desired.

Completing each field statement and passing the subsequent oral defense will ordinarily entail critically reviewing and synthesizing central arguments in the field; explicating the relationship between contrasting pieces of research or lines of analysis; characterizing the main trends and debates; and identifying fruitful research questions which the field might do well to address. The written statement is not only a comprehensive overview of a subfield; it is also a discussion of current controversies, issues, and opposing points of view. The field statement is limited to 25-30 double-spaced pages (Times New Roman, 12 pt. font), not including references.

There is no set reading list for a field statement, but students are encouraged to consult existing reading lists in a departmental cluster or other area where students commonly do exams/field statements. Students may also consult field statements completed by other students. However, compiling and organizing a reading list is part of the exercise and should be done in a way that facilitates a unique argument and approach to the literature in a subfield. A typical reading list will consist of at least 50 to 60 academic books, chapters, and/or peer-reviewed journal articles (though some lists may require more).

Before undertaking a field statement the student will put together a field statement committee consisting of a chair and at least two additional members. At least three committee members should be chosen from the department of Sociology and Anthropology unless a compelling case can be made otherwise. The Chair of the committee must be from the department. Students interested in including a faculty member from outside the department as one of the three main committee members must petition COGS for approval, stating a clear rationale for the request. The student should notify the Graduate Director in writing of the composition of the committee and area of the field statement at the start of the semester during which the field statement is expected to be defended.

The student notifies the Graduate Director by submitting the Intention to Complete Field Statement form found on the Department website under Current Student Resources/ Field Statement Exam Information.

Once a committee approves an initial draft of the reading list (which can evolve over the course of the writing), the student can start to work on the statement. Students are encouraged to finish the field statement in a timely manner according to their program of study as agreed to with their primary advisor and field statement committee (see Figure 1). In general, it should take no
more than one semester to prepare a field statement, and most students will complete a field statement over a particular semester or during a summer break. Students are strongly encouraged to complete both field statements before the start of the fourth year in the graduate program, and must complete both field statements within 12 months of the completion of coursework or by the end of the fourth year, whichever comes first. To facilitate the field statement writing process students will be allowed to take one directed study (individual or group) for credit (the final product of which would be a draft field statement). Students may complete the other field statement (as well as a draft of their dissertation research proposal, see below) during a summer break and/or during their regular coursework.

Chairs of field statement committees are responsible to communicate with students and coordinate with other committee members in a timely manner, to expedite students’ successful completion of the written statements and advancement to candidacy. Chairs should be attentive to and communicate scheduling expectations and constraints, including availability during periods off campus and during breaks, with students and other committee members. Generally chairs will be expected to respond to students’ work within a 2-week turnaround, if somewhat longer for detailed feedback.

Once a field statement committee receives a completed version of the field statement, they will either deem it defensible, and thus proceed to schedule an oral defense, or they may require revisions before agreeing to schedule the defense. The defense itself typically lasts an hour and a half to two hours. The field statement committee chair is responsible for coordinating communication between the student and the committee and for scheduling and presiding over the defense. At the end of the defense, the Committee will indicate its grade (Pass or Fail) by completing and signing a field statement defense report, which the student will return to the Sociology Graduate Program Coordinator, along with an electronic and hard copy of the final bibliography and field statement if the student opts to post the field statement to the Department’s Blackboard site.

To receive a passing grade a student will need to a) demonstrate knowledge of the foundational and other key texts within a particular subfield; b) explain the history and development of thought within that subfield (including epistemologies and methodologies, as well as critiques and debates); c) analytically engage with the current state of research and recent work in the field; and d) outline key outstanding questions for future research in the subfield.

Successful completion of a field statement includes both the production of a written document that is approved by the committee and its successful oral defense.

The goals of the oral defense of the field statement are threefold: (a) to provide a space for the student to present and clearly articulate key concepts and debates addressed in the written statement; (b) to allow the student to clearly express and defend their central argument(s); and (c) to facilitate a discussion of how the field statement helps the student move toward dissertation work and, in particular, the development of a dissertation research proposal.

There are two ways that a field statement can be deemed unsuccessful:

a. The student times-out by not completing an acceptable field statement and oral defense within the four-year time limit (or one year after the end of coursework)

b. The committee decides through discussion and an iterative process of rewriting (the specifics of which are to be decided by the committee in consultation with the student) that the student will be unable to successfully complete the field statement within the allotted
time.

If a field statement is deemed unsuccessful, the student may appeal to COGS. Note that students are expected to complete both field statements by the start of year 4 and no later than the end of year 4 (or one year after the end of coursework).

**Dissertation research proposal**

A dissertation proposal must be submitted and defended within six months of completing the candidacy examination. Students may apply to the Committee on Graduate Studies for a six-month extension if circumstances warrant.

Before producing the proposal the student should put together a dissertation committee consisting of a chair and at least three other members (one of whom must be an external reader from outside the department, college, or university). All three main committee members should be chosen from the department of Sociology and Anthropology unless a compelling case can be made otherwise. *The Chair of the committee must be from the department.* Students interested in including a faculty member from outside the department as one of the three main committee members must petition COGS for approval, stating a clear rationale for the request.

The process for completing and defending the dissertation research proposal will be the same as for a field statement. To facilitate the pursuit of external funding and to ensure a clear research design for the dissertation, the dissertation research proposal should be written according to the guidelines of an existing dissertation research funding program of an organization such as the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, the Spencer Foundation, or other relevant funding sources to be agreed upon by the student and committee. While not mandated, students are strongly encouraged to submit their proposals to the relevant funding program(s). Thus, most students will want to plan to complete the dissertation research proposal in a timeframe that is in accordance with the deadlines for these programs.

The development of the dissertation research 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 defense may be scheduled. The defense itself typically lasts an hour and a half to two hours. The Chair is responsible for coordinating communication between the student and the committee and for scheduling and presiding over the defense. At the end of a successful defense, the committee must sign the Dissertation Proposal Defense Results form, which the student will return to the Sociology Graduate Program Coordinator, along with an electronic and hard copy of the dissertation research proposal if the student opts to post Dissertation Proposal to Dept.’s BlackBoard site.