

Guidance for SOCY Students Writing Dissertations
January 2018

Note that these recommendations are not intended to replace your advisor's guidance, but rather to provide general guidelines that may be useful. Check with your advisor to see if they have other suggestions or different ways of proceeding.

Your dissertation project is meant to demonstrate your ability to design, conduct, and write original sociological research. The final dissertation is a publicly available research product that follows strict formatting guidelines from the university and disciplinary norm about the structure of the document. See your Graduate Handbook: <https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/students/graduate-students/resources>.

General guidance:

1. Your dissertation proposal will typically be defended in your 4th or 5th year in the program. The dissertation proposal forms the basis of your introduction, background, and methods chapters. You will find that much of the proposal text can be reused and expanded as you write the dissertation.
2. If your dissertation project will involve fieldwork, plan ahead for when this fieldwork will happen. Many fieldwork grants such as Fulbright and SSRC have application deadlines in the fall, and funds are not released until the following spring.
3. Sociology dissertations can be based on either a “book model” or a “paper model.” Talk with your advisor to decide which is best for you—often depending on how you want to publish the work. A “book model” will usually have the following chapters: introduction, theory/background, methods, 3-4 findings chapters organized around topics or themes, and discussion/conclusion. The book model can also lend itself to publishable articles, but the material for these articles may be scattered through several chapters. A “paper model” will have 3-4 discrete journal article-length manuscripts as the findings chapters, sharing a common topic or theme. These manuscripts may each have their own background, methods, and discussion chapters (sharing only an introduction and a conclusion chapter), or parts of these chapters may be shared.
4. The topic, framing, and approach need to be your own ideas, and the dissertation should be your own work. The faculty define this as independently generating research questions, theorizing and/or bringing literature to bear on the questions, analyzing data, and writing the dissertation; it is permissible to collaborate in data preparation and to eventually coauthor the dissertation when submitting it for publication. The advisor should help the student clarify her/his thoughts but make sure the dissertation represents the student's own thinking and skills. Advisors and others can help the student understand how to conduct and interpret analyses more generally but should not analyze their specific data or write the dissertation.
5. Talk to your advisor and committee early on about how they would like to receive written work and provide feedback. Your advisor, and possibly other primary members, will read chapters one by one as you write them. You should talk to them about what kind of time frame you can expect for receiving feedback on chapters. They may or may not be willing to look at multiple drafts of a chapter. Other committee members may wait to read the final defense copy. You may want to ask specific committee members to provide feedback on specific chapters that relate to their areas of expertise.
6. You may want to start looking for jobs while your dissertation is still in progress. Check with your advisor and the members of your committee who will be writing letters for you to determine whether they feel you are ready to start seeking jobs while finishing your dissertation. If you are going on the academic market, you will need to have completed enough of the dissertation to have a strong analysis ready for your job talk by early- to mid-fall.

7. Depending on your method and scope, your dissertation will probably be anywhere from 100 to 250 double-spaced pages in length. Make sure that the defense copy and the final formatted version are clearly written and carefully proofread. It may be worth asking a friend who is a good writer to proofread, or engaging the services of an editor, to help improve the quality of the writing in your dissertation.
8. Midway through your writing process and preferably a couple of months in advance, talk to your advisor about setting a defense date. If your advisor approves, you should schedule a defense slot with your committee for sometime during the academic year. Finding a two-hour slot when the whole committee is available can be difficult, so set up a scheduling poll (you can use a site such as whenisgood.net or doodle.com) that provides quite a few potential options. Some committee members can join the defense via Skype or phone if needed—check with the graduate program coordinator for details. Once you have decided on a slot, notify the committee and reserve a room. You should aim to provide your committee members with the full dissertation at least 3 weeks before the defense date.
9. Your Doctoral Exam Report paperwork must be submitted at least 2 weeks prior to your defense date. Give your committee names and your defense date to the graduate program coordinator, who will complete the paperwork for you. This is the same paperwork that you used for your Comp Exam, only this time the “final” box will be checked. To view the paperwork that will be filed, go to Sociology Grad School Forms page: <https://www.colorado.edu/graduateschool/academic-forms>. Also note that your defense must be publicized, but there are different options for doing this; consult with the graduate program coordinator.
10. Check with the graduate program coordinator or the Graduate School to find out the deadline for applying for graduation in the semester you want. You can easily cancel your application, so do not hesitate to apply multiple times for graduation if needed. If you have not applied for graduation in time, you will not be able to graduate in a given semester.
11. Similarly, the Graduate School has deadlines for the completion of dissertation defenses and the submission of the formatted dissertation. Defense deadlines are usually in early November for fall graduation and early April for spring graduation. Students can also defend in May and graduate in summer without needing to pay summer tuition (for a later summer defense deadline, you must pay tuition). Otherwise, you need to be enrolled during the term you want to graduate.
12. The dissertation defense consists of your short (~15-minute) presentation of your project, followed by 90 minutes or so of discussion of the project and its written product. It is not usually an oral exam in the sense of the committee members testing your knowledge. Instead, everyone engages deeply with the project. The committee will try to help you improve the project as you prepare for publication. Make sure to approach this feedback with an open mind.
13. Bring a copy of the dissertation signature page with you to the defense, and obtain the necessary signatures. This will become the first page in the copy of your dissertation that is submitted to the Graduate School. This form differs from the Graduate School’s Examination Form, which will be handled by your advisor and the graduate program coordinator.
14. You will be asked to step out of the room at the beginning of the defense as your advisor and committee members discuss procedural matters. You will also leave the room at the end, as the committee decides the outcome of the defense. You will learn that outcome immediately.
15. You will probably be asked to make specific written revisions to your dissertation. Make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. There are usually 2-3 weeks after the defense and before you have to submit the final document, during which you can make these changes.
16. Congratulations on completing your Ph.D.!