

The Ph.D. Program in Philosophy

Doctoral Comprehensive Exam

- The Doctoral Comprehensive Exam is comprised of two parts: (1) a qualifying paper (QP) and (2) a dissertation proposal.
- The QP is to be a paper of publishable quality on a systematic question or on an author(s). It must meet the usual standards for academic publications with respect to both the form and the content. See the supplemental document “Ph.D. Qualifying Paper.”
- The dissertation proposal is to state the topic of the dissertation, how the student intends to study the topic of the dissertation, and why the topic needs study. It should include a thorough outline of the dissertation and plan for completion, as well as bibliography. See the supplemental document “Dissertation Proposal Guidelines.”
- For each part of the exam, a student will be given the mark of Passed with distinction, Passed, or Failed. In the synthesis for the registrar, a student shall receive Passed with distinction on the Doctoral Comprehensive Exam if and only if the student receives Passed with Distinction on both parts. A student shall Fail the exam if the student fails any part of the exam. Otherwise, the student shall Pass the exam.
- Students must complete all other requirements for the degree, except defense of the dissertation itself, before defending the dissertation proposal. A student attains the status of a doctoral candidate by passing the Doctoral Comprehensive Exam.
- Students must contact the Graduate Program Assistant for the relevant paperwork one month prior to the defense of each portion of the exam.
- This requirement should be completed by the end of the fourth year. Students often defend the QP in the Fall semester and the Dissertation Proposal in the Spring semester.

Ph.D. Qualifying Paper

Nature, Committee Composition, Length, and Format

- The Qualifying Paper (QP) is a research paper in addition to any paper written for coursework, although it may be derived from a class paper.
- The defense is oral, with a board of three members composed of the paper supervisor, the future supervisor of the dissertation, and another faculty member (or two members, if the same person is the paper supervisor and the future dissertation supervisor). All board members must belong to the department faculty.
- The defense is based on the paper and on a reading list of 6 to 10 authors and/or texts (primary sources) from the history of philosophy (as broadly as possible) that raise significant questions or challenges for the thesis of the paper.
- The reading list is to be established ahead of the defense with the paper supervisor, and sent in due time (at least two weeks before the defense), with the paper, to the other board members. The paper, the list, the date of the exam, and the composition of the board, must also be given to the graduate program director.
- The length and format of the paper is to be determined in consultation with the QP supervisor. The QP supervisor is to be chosen in consultation with one's Academic Advisor, and the QP supervisor must agree to serve in this role.

Defense Timeline

- The QP should be written at the end of year three and over the summer, under the supervision of a faculty member of the department (who need not be the future dissertation supervisor), and normally defended in the Fall semester of the fourth year.

Grades

- The grades, in descending order, are Pass with Distinction, Pass, and Fail.
- Students must receive at least a Pass or Pass with Distinction to satisfy the requirement.
- Students must pass the QP before they can advance to the examination of the dissertation proposal. The first part of the result form must be given to the Graduate Program Assistant.
- In case the examination of the paper is failed, the paper may be resubmitted after improvement and defended again, only once, and (by Graduate School policy) not sooner than the following semester. The board decides when exactly the paper can be resubmitted and defended again.

Evaluation Criteria

- The standard is a publishable research paper that demonstrates clarity of writing, solid argumentation, and knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary sources.
- The department recognizes that papers may reflect a plurality of philosophical styles and methodologies (historical, hermeneutical, phenomenological, analytical,

textual criticism, and so on). Nevertheless, a Qualifying Paper should have the following qualities, and will be evaluated accordingly:

1. Form
 - 1.1. The prose is clear and precise. The flow, pacing, and wording are very good.
 - 1.2. The essay's structure is easily discernible: the paper stays focused on the objective stated in the introduction; the way in which the middle sections develop and support the paper's thesis is manifest; the progression of ideas is plain (i.e., the thinking moves logically from one paragraph to another and throughout the paper); a clear outcome is reached in the conclusion (even if a negative one—for example: "It is impossible to establish that...").
 - 1.3. The bibliographical information and mode of citation of the sources are consistent and conform to a standard system (e.g., Harvard, Chicago, APA).
 - 1.4. The paper is preceded by a 200-word abstract and keywords.
 - 1.5. The length of the paper is appropriate (to be determined with the Qualifying Paper Mentor, as it depends on the topic, the approach, etc.). Writing samples in PhD applications are typically between 15 and 20 double spaced pages long. The maximum length is set at 7,000 words, all inclusive.
2. Content
 - 2.1. The intent of the paper is clearly formulated at the outset.
 - 2.2. The methodology is appropriate to the topic (e.g., historical research, hermeneutical approach, phenomenological analysis, literature review and critique).
 - 2.3. Presuppositions are made explicit.
 - 2.4. The key aspects of the topic are addressed.
 - 2.5. The pertinent philosophical concepts are clearly defined and explained, and they are correctly employed.
 - 2.6. The primary and secondary sources are pertinent and satisfactory.
 - 2.7. The summaries or interpretations of the sources are accurate. The quotations and paraphrases supporting the interpretation or the point being made are suitable.
 - 2.8. The paper makes a good case for its central claim(s): it offers appropriate evidence in support and addresses possible objections with fairness.

Formatting

- Every paper should use a 12-point serif font (Cambria, Times New Roman, or other typical font), with standard 1-inch margins, and double-spaced.
- The paper page should begin with (a) the Title, (b) a 200-word Abstract, and (c) Keywords.
- Every paper must have a bibliography formatted according to a standard style.

Dissertation Proposal Guidelines

Nature and Committee Composition

- A dissertation is a piece of research, and so a dissertation proposal is the statement of a plan for a piece of research.
- The defense is oral, with a board of three members composed of the future supervisor of the dissertation, another faculty member from the department, and a third reader who may be external to the department. All must be tenured or tenure-track faculty members. The composition of the committee should be determined in consultation with the dissertation supervisor.

Defense Timeline

- The dissertation proposal should be defended by the Spring semester of the fourth year.

Grades

- The grades, in descending order, are Pass with Distinction, Pass, and Fail.
- Students must receive at least a Pass or Pass with Distinction to satisfy the requirement.
- Students must pass the dissertation proposal before they proceed with dissertation. The second and third part of the result form must be given to the Graduate Program Assistant.
- In case the examination is failed, it may be resubmitted after improvement and defended again, only once, and (by Graduate School policy) not sooner than the following semester. The board decides when exactly the paper can be resubmitted and defended again.

What should go into a dissertation proposal? (Advice from Arthur Madigan, S.J.)

The proposal should contain the following elements:

- The question or problem (or set of questions or problems) to be resolved in the dissertation. This part of the proposal answers questions like "What do you intend to find out in the course of researching and writing the dissertation?" "What do you hope to learn by doing this dissertation?" Some questions are mainly historical; others are mainly systematic; and many questions have both an historical and a systematic dimension. Questions may be of different types: Yes/ No questions ("Is Aristotle's conception of substance in the Categories compatible with his conception of substance in the Metaphysics?"), but also more open questions ("What did philosopher A think about issue X, and why?", "What is the best solution to problem Z?").
- An indication of why this question or problem is of interest or significance, why someone should go to the trouble of researching and writing a dissertation about it. This answers the questions "Why bother?" and "What makes this topic so important?"

- An indication of why the question or problem needs the concentrated attention that goes into a dissertation. This answers the questions "What's so difficult about that?" and "Isn't the answer obvious?"
- An account of the state of discussion and literature on the question or problem to date, telling how much or how little has been said or written on the question or problem, sketching the main positions that have been taken, outlining the grounds on which these positions are based, and indicating why and how it is appropriate to contribute something further (the dissertation) to the discussion and the literature. This answers the question "Hasn't that been done already?" and addresses the possible reaction "Oh, No, not another dissertation on..."
- An indication of the principal data or sources of data relevant to solving the question or problem. This answers the question "Where do you intend to look for an answer to your question or problem?"
- An indication of the method you propose to follow in using the data to solve the question or problem. This answers questions like "How do you intend to handle your data?" and "Once you have located your data, what do you intend to do with them?" Examples: studying a text from a "mainstream" point of view or from a Marxist point of view or from a Straussian point of view; studying a problem from a Thomistic point of view or from a phenomenological point of view or from an analytic point of view. It is often appropriate to offer a brief explanation or defense of your method.
- A frank statement of your assumptions. These are matters that you will invite your reader to grant or concede at the outset, so that you don't spend the dissertation (or the defense) arguing for them. There are various types of assumptions. Some have a bearing on the set of data, e.g., the assumption that a given text is the authentic work of a certain author. Some have a bearing on method, e.g., the (highly debatable!) assumption that what Socrates says in a Platonic dialogue is identical with what Plato thinks. This section answers questions like "What are you asking us to buy at the outset?" "What do you want us to grant you so that you can get on with your work?" and "Are you sure you're not just begging the question?" As with the method you propose to follow, it is often appropriate to offer a brief explanation or defense of your assumptions, to show that they are at least plausible. One aim of this part is to head off people saying things like "It's clear that a lot of work went into this dissertation; it's a shame that it rests on untenable assumptions." It is important that your initial assumptions do not by themselves dictate your conclusions; if your assumptions dictate your conclusions, that throws into question the value and significance of your research.
- A statement of your working hypothesis or hypotheses. This answers the questions "As of now, what kind of solution do you think you will come up with?" and "How much of an idea do you have about where you are going to end up?" Leave plenty of room for the possibility that the data will lead you to modify your working hypotheses or even to discard them in favor of others. One test of a good question is whether you are still interested in the question after the facts have forced you to give up what you thought was the right answer.

Much of the above can be summarized in the advice to distinguish carefully between

questions and answers, between data and interpretations of data, between data and assumptions. The above suggestions are, of course, no substitute for the most important activity in the formulation of a dissertation proposal: discussion with one's supervisor.

Doctoral Comprehensive Examination Result Forms

Student's Name: _____

Eagle ID Number: _____

The present form is composed of **one ballot for each part** of the exam, **and a synthesis** for the Registrar Office (“Examination Report”).

When the **qualifying paper** has been examined, **only the ballot for the first part should be completed**. You may have the form signed electronically if your defense takes place online.

Electronically signed forms should be sent to the program assistant.

A candidate cannot proceed to the defense of the dissertation proposal if the examination of the paper is failed. The board decides when the paper can be resubmitted and defended again (only once).

When the **dissertation proposal** has been defended, **the synthesis for the registrar should be completed together with the ballot for the second part**. The synthesis should be signed by the members of the second board, but not necessarily by the members of the first board (except the board chair person—the future dissertation supervisor—, who is present in both parts.) The signed form(s) must be sent to the Graduate Program Assistant upon completion.

In each of the two parts, the decisions “Passed with distinction”, “Passed” and “Failed” must result from a majority decision.

In the synthesis for the Registrar Office,

The decision “Passed with distinction” shall result from “Passed with distinction” in each of the two parts of the examination;

“Passed” shall result from “Passed” in one of the parts and “Passed with distinction” in the other, or from “Passed” in both;

“Failed” shall result from “Failed” in one of the parts.

If the board decides to attach any conditions or stipulations to its decision, they should be added in writing to this report.

Doctoral Comprehensive
Part I — Qualifying Paper Result Form

Student's Name and Title of the Paper:

Date of the Examination: _____ / _____ / _____

In the view of the examination committee, the student has:

- Passed the examination with distinction.**
- Passed the examination.**
- Failed the examination.**

(Chair of the Examination Committee)

(Examination Committee Member)

(Examination Committee Member)

Doctoral Comprehensive
Part II — Dissertation Proposal Result Form

Student's Name and Title of the Dissertation Proposal:

Date of the Examination: _____ / _____ / _____

The examination committee judges that the student has:

- Passed the examination with distinction.**
- Passed the examination.**
- Failed the examination.**

(Chair of the Examination Committee)

(Examination Committee Member)

(Examination Committee Member)



BOSTON COLLEGE
OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR
CHESTNUT HILL, MA 02467

DOCTORAL COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION REPORT

Date of Exam: _____

Examinee: _____ BCID#: _____

Department: _____

The above examinee has completed the comprehensive examination. The board, having considered and evaluated the totality of the examination, judges that the examinee has:

- Passed this examination with distinction
- Passed this examination
- Failed this examination

Therefore the examinee should/should not be promoted to the status of doctoral candidate.

Signatures:

(Chairperson)

N.B. To qualify, the examinee must be "passed" by a majority of the board.

The expressions "passed" and "passed with distinction" indicate achievement in an ascending order of worth. The board's selection among these expressions should result from a majority decision.

If the board decides to attach any condition or stipulation to its decision, they should be sent in writing along with this report.