

Frequently Asked Questions about Dissertation Writing

What's the dissertation clock?

The dissertation clock is the first registration period, equivalent to nine academic quarters, which begins when students start writing the dissertation. It is approximately 2 calendar years. All PhD students register for dissertation writing to convene a committee and formally begin the dissertation process. Usually, this occurs after they have finished their coursework though there is some variation among programs. Students wanting to register for dissertation writing early can contact their program's Research Coordinator.

If, at the end of the initial registration period, the work isn't complete, students can continue by registering for additional years of dissertation writing, one year at a time, as long as their Program Time Limit has not expired.

What's a Program Time Limit?

The Program Time Limit, or PTL, begins the moment students begin the first year of coursework and expires 8 years later. For instance, if a student began coursework in the fall quarter of 2009 the PTL will expire in the summer quarter of 2017. The PTL is a fixed date that does not change, even if a student takes a leave of absence: it continues to count down.

Why does the Program Time Limit matter to me?

Pacifica students are expected to complete all degree requirements before the end of the Program Time Limit, including dissertation degree requirements. These include finishing the dissertation manuscript, getting it approved by the committee, preparing the final manuscript for publication, and passing the oral defense.

When can I start writing my dissertation?

The requirements vary by program. In some programs, students can register once they have successfully completed all MA requirements and have an approved concept paper. In others, students register for dissertation writing after completing all three years of coursework, which includes writing an approved concept paper. In addition, students must have a 3.0 minimum GPA with no failing grades on their transcript and they must be in good financial standing with the Business Office.

Students can register for dissertation writing four times per year: in the fall, winter, spring, and summer quarters, with the actual registration date tailored to the program and track. To ensure that registration goes smoothly, ask the research faculty if he or she has submitted the concept paper and the approval form to the Dissertation Office. Then, send the registration form to the Dissertation Office at least three or four weeks before the start date. For students receiving financial aid, plan on submitting the registration form six weeks before the start date of the quarter.

How do I start my dissertation clock?

Students start the dissertation clock by downloading the dissertation registration form from the dissertation handbook, filling it out, and sending it to the Dissertation Office. Forms can be submitted three ways: via USPS, via the Dissertation Office fax (805) 565-9896, or via email, as an attachment, sent to Robyn Cass at rcass@pacifica.edu.

When do I register for dissertation writing?

Students can register four times a year, as always, but the specific deadlines are tailored to the program and track. Generally speaking, registration occurs once per quarter, for instance on or around the beginning of January, April, July, and October. Students need to know the specific dates for their program and track, which are shown in the current dissertation handbook.

Is there a time limit for finishing my dissertation?

Yes. Students who complete their coursework in three years, which is customary, have up to five years to complete the dissertation along with all other degree requirements of their program. Students first register for two years or nine academic quarters of dissertation writing but, if they need more time, they may register for an additional year of dissertation writing up to three times, so long as they are within the Program Time Limit.

For example, suppose you begin coursework in fall 2009 and complete the courses in the summer of 2012. You start your clock in the fall of 2012 and the two dissertation registration period expires in the summer of 2014. You can then register for an additional year as many as three times because the PTL will not expire until the summer of 2017:

- The first additional year, fall 2014 through summer 2015
- The second additional year, fall 2015 through summer 2016
- The third additional year, fall 2016 through summer 2017

Can I delay starting my dissertation clock?

Yes, after completing the coursework students can take up to one year leave of absence before starting the two-year clock. Some students must do this because they need extra time to prepare the concept paper and get it approved. Some students who do have an approved concept paper delay for personal reasons. Students planning to take a leave must submit a leave of absence form to the Registrar to maintain their student status.

There are a few caveats. Taking a leave of absence does not extend a student's Program Time Limit: all degree requirements must be completed within 8 years of starting PhD coursework. Also, history has shown that a delay in starting the clock can affect students' momentum for doing scholarly work and their feeling of connection to the Pacifica community, especially their cohort, which can make the dissertation journey more arduous.

What kinds of milestones should I set for the two-year clock?

Most students find it very useful to set some achievable goals for the two years of dissertation writing. It's a good idea to convene the dissertation chair within the first few months, and start actively seeking the other committee members within that same time frame. Then plan on finishing at least a first draft of the complete proposal around six to nine months after starting the clock. By the end of the first year, aim to have a complete, approved dissertation proposal and ethics application.

When students make these milestones, most find it fairly easy to complete the dissertation within the two-year clock.

When do I assemble my dissertation committee?

It's a good idea to have informal conversations with prospective committee members, especially the chair, in the third year of coursework. Get to know them, tell them about the topic, and find out whether they might be interested and, possibly, available in the future.

Any agreement by a faculty member at this point is *not* a formal commitment, promise, or contract. No prospective committee member can officially join a dissertation committee until after the student starts the clock. At that point, a student may download the appropriate form from the dissertation handbook and follow the instructions printed on the form for submitting it.

What does my committee do?

Members of the dissertation committee mentor students in the development of the work, formally giving students feedback and approval at two different stages, first, on the dissertation proposal and second, on the dissertation final draft. (In the Mythological Studies program, committee members also approve the completed Concept Paper, which has already been approved by the research faculty.) Each committee member has up to six weeks to review the work and return comments. Often they request changes, anything from minor copyediting to major content editing, which may mean another review cycle to read and approve the revisions.

The committee is also quite active when students are scheduling and preparing for the oral defense of the dissertation. Typically one or two committee members attend the defense in person, but occasionally all three members can be there.

When should I expect to hear feedback from my committee members?

Each member of the committee can take up to six weeks to review the work and offer feedback. Students should plan on at least 18 weeks for a full review of both the dissertation proposal and the final manuscript. If committee members require substantial changes and want to review the work again before approving it, they have another six weeks to respond to the new draft. For this reason, it's a good idea to be prepared for a lengthy review cycle.

What is the dissertation proposal?

The dissertation proposal is typically the first one, two, or three chapters of a dissertation. It becomes part of the final manuscript. Typically, it is organized in a very similar manner to the Concept Paper, though it expands each of the key sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Research Question, and Methodology.

How long is a dissertation proposal?

The length of the proposal can vary greatly depending on research methodology and topic. At Pacifica, most dissertation proposals range from 40 to 60 pages, though some are longer. Often, the most surprising thing about writing the proposal is how much time it takes. Sometimes dissertation students think, "A 50-page proposal, no big deal" only to discover that producing an acceptable proposal is quite demanding. Be prepared for the proposal to take at least six months if not a full year to complete.

What's the process for approving my dissertation proposal?

All three members of the committee read the proposal and provide feedback; they may ask for revisions to the work. Once it is acceptable to them, each one completes an "Approval of Dissertation Proposal" form and follows the submission procedures. In addition, the chair or dissertation coordinator must read and approve the ethics application and submit it to their program's Research Coordinator for his or her approval. Once approved, it is submitted to the Dissertation Office. Students also must fill out and submit the Intellectual Property and Copyright Infringement form indicating their awareness of their legal responsibility for securing permission to use protected works.

Plan on at least 18 weeks for the committee to read and approve the proposal. If any of them asks for revisions, it can take much longer.

What's the process for approving my dissertation final draft?

Like the proposal approval process, all three members of the committee read the final manuscript and provide feedback. Once it is acceptable, each one completes an "Approval of Dissertation Final Draft" form and follows the submission procedures.

Plan on at least 18 weeks for the committee to read and approve the final draft. If any of them asks for revisions, it can take much longer.

When my final draft is approved, is the dissertation done?

No. The dissertation committee approves the content of the work and, in some cases, will alert the students to problems in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and APA or MLA formatting. However, before the manuscript is considered complete it must be proofread by the Pacifica proofreader and the student must make the necessary corrections. Having a professional proofread the dissertation helps ensure that Pacifica maintains the highest possible standard of publication quality. Pacifica now uses electronic proofreading, rather than print-copy proofreading, which saves time, effort, and the cost of mailing manuscripts between students and the Dissertation Office.

For students who enroll in dissertation writing beginning in Fall 2013, they must have their complete final dissertation draft proofread and corrected before scheduling the oral defense.

How do I contact prospective committee members?

If the prospect is Pacifica faculty, holding informal conversations while on campus is a good way to begin. Perhaps schedule an appointment during office hours or by phone. If the prospect is outside of the Pacifica community, it's a good idea to send a brief email introducing yourself within a succinct description of the research topic. If the person expresses interest, follow up by sending them the concept paper.

What's the function of the dissertation chair?

The chair is part of the Pacifica community. Most programs require that person to be core faculty, though some accept adjunct faculty. Typically, the chair is a student's principle mentor, the person students turn to for developing ideas about the topic or method and for answering those pesky research questions. That's not always the case. Sometimes a student develops a closer rapport with a different committee member. There's no one template that works for all situations because, bottom line, these are human relationships.

What's the purpose of an external reader?

The external reader, as the name implies, is the one person on the dissertation committee who is not affiliated with Pacifica. Because that person often works with students from different graduate programs, he or she provides an important institutional check on Pacifica's standards of scholarship. Seeking an external reader is an opportunity for students to find a subject area expert allied with another school, another perspective, and even perhaps another discipline. Think of this person as a "worthy opponent" who can, in an ideal world, broaden the view of the topic.

Some students want someone they have known in another capacity as their external reader, for instance a therapist, clinical training supervisor, or spiritual director. If the relationship is current, asking this person to be on the committee would constitute a dual relationship and is disallowed. Even if the relationship is not current, it's probably not a good idea because the candidate may not be capable of objectivity in evaluating the work.

How do I find an external reader?

There are a couple of approaches that seem to work well. As students begin the literature review for the concept paper, and extend it for the proposal, they typically find that certain scholars keep cropping up—someone who is publishing articles and books on the topic (a subject area expert) or who is expert in the chosen methodology (a research expert). Take note of such names and pursue them. Students often are surprised how often a shared scholarly interest can turn into a collegial relationship. Another option is to consult with the chair and see who they might know or if they have other ideas for contacting likely candidates.

What are the qualifications of an external reader?

A qualified external reader must have a doctorate in their field. Occasionally, Pacifica will accept an external reader who has the highest degree granted in that person's field (a Juris Doctor or Medical Doctor, for instance) so long as their curriculum vitae suggests that they are qualified to guide dissertation research. Speak to the chair about any external reader candidates and, if necessary, also take the matter up with the program's Research Coordinator. Pacifica disallows dual relationships with an external reader (see above, "The Purpose of the external reader"), so students should avoid seeking to use a therapist, mentor, or teacher they already know personally.

If I have problems working with committee members, what should I do?

The first thing to do is talk to the chair, alerting him or her what's going on and working to resolve it. If the issue is with the chair, or if the chair has tried but cannot entirely resolve the problem, the next step is to contact the program's Research Coordinator. If the Research Coordinator needs assistance, he or she can contact Elizabeth Nelson, the Dissertation Policy Director.

How does financial aid affect dissertation writing?

Students receiving financial aid must show proof of progress within the first year of dissertation writing. This means 1) staying in regular contact with the dissertation committee and 2) submitting written work beyond the concept paper. Near the end of the first year of dissertation writing, the Financial Aid office contacts the student's chair to see if both

conditions of “Satisfactory Academic Progress” have been met. If financial aid recipients don’t do both, they risk losing benefits. To qualify for financial aid beyond the initial dissertation writing period (approximately two calendar years), students must have a proposal approved by all committee members. **There is no financial aid available after the third year of dissertation writing.** Once the final draft is approved by all committee members, any pending financial aid disbursement will be cancelled.

For questions about this, contact Pacifica’s financial aid office—not the chair or research coordinator—at financial_aid@pacific.edu.

How is the oral defense scheduled?

The student, working with the chair, chooses a few different days and times for the oral defense that are at least three weeks after the final draft approval forms have been submitted to the Dissertation Office. Then the chair or dissertation coordinator contacts the Dissertation Office to check the master schedule. The Dissertation Office determines whether any of the preferred days and times are available and coordinate the selection of the final date for the defense.

What happens at the oral defense?

Students are expected to present their research in a prepared speech lasting about 25 to 30 minutes. Then the committee members ask students questions about any aspect of the research for 15 or 20 minutes, sometimes less. After the questions, the committee members retire to another room and privately determine whether or not the student has successfully defended the work. Though “defense” makes it sound adversarial, oral defenses are generally amicable and provocative explorations of the topic. Pacifica allows students to invite family members, friends, and colleagues to their oral defense, which can make it an exceptionally meaningful moment in a student’s academic life.

When and how does the Dissertation Office contact me?

The Dissertation Office sends emails to students using their Pacifica email accounts at certain key moments in the dissertation writing process. For instance, the Dissertation Office alerts students when the proposal and final draft have been accepted by all three committee members and the forms have been filed. Dissertation administrators do not send email to students’ personal or business email addresses, so it is a good idea to regularly check Pacifica email. Many students have found it very helpful to set up their Pacifica email so that it is automatically forwarded to the email account they check daily.

How do I contact the Dissertation Office?

While students are researching and writing their dissertations, the detailed paperwork and processes can feel overwhelming or confusing. The Dissertation Office knows this. Students are welcome to send email to Pacifica’s dissertation administrators, who are happy to answer questions and, hopefully, make your life a little easier! Here’s how to reach them:

Robyn Cass, Senior Dissertation Administrator, rcass@pacific.edu

Rachel Reeve, Dissertation Administrator, rreeve@pacific.edu

Students also can contact the Dissertation Office via USPS, or send faxes to the Dissertation Office fax line, which is (805) 565-9896.