

MCB PhD Degree Completion Checklist and Guidelines

Updated September 2024

The box on your last DAC Meeting Report must be checked in order for you to proceed with writing and scheduling your dissertation defense! Ordinarily, no more than 12 months should have passed between your last DAC meeting and your defense.

1. Complete the Application for Degree Online

An application for the PhD degree must be submitted by the deadline indicated for the given degree conferral date. The application becomes available shortly before each submission deadline, and is available on my.harvard.edu. There are 3 degree conferral dates at Harvard: November, March, and May. The current year's dates and deadlines are available at: <https://gsas.harvard.edu/policy/degree-calendar>

Please ensure that your subject area is correct before filling out the application. Your committee will indicate on your final DAC report in which subject area your degree should be conferred, either: **Biology or Biochemistry**. Students should check their official subject area in the Student Progress to the Degree Database: <http://my.harvard.edu> **If you need to change your degree subject before applying for the Ph.D., please submit this to the Registrar's Office (enrollment@fas.harvard.edu) prior to submitting the degree application.** The Change of Subject Form may be found [here](#). Please note that the Chair's signature refers to your committee chair, not the department chair.

Important - International Students: Please contact the Harvard International Office (HIO) **at least 4 months in advance of your thesis submission date** to ensure a smooth transition from your student visa, whether you are staying at Harvard or moving to a position outside of the University. Guidelines and information regarding your status can be found at the HIO's website at: <http://hio.harvard.edu/student-guide>.

2. Schedule a Date & Time for your Defense with Your Advisor and Committee Members

Typically, your advisor and all committee members should be in attendance at your dissertation defense. Please note: The Thesis Defense Committee in MCO consists of the same faculty members as your Dissertation Advisory Committee. There are no outside thesis readers (unlike some other Harvard PhD programs). Please be aware of the due dates for each degree conferral when scheduling your defense!

Please refer to the Registrar's website for the current year's deadlines. **Dissertation Defenses should be scheduled a MINIMUM of 10-14 days prior to the deadline for electronic dissertation submission.** You must allow for the time it will take if your advisor and/or thesis committee require additional edits to the draft of your dissertation.

You should schedule a 2-hour block of time. One hour for your public seminar and at least one more hour with your committee members and advisor. The public seminar precedes the private meeting. The second hour can be scheduled in the same room (physical or virtual) as your seminar, or in a separate room

Important Notes: When scheduling your defense, please be aware of standing meetings and regular seminars to avoid events such as Thursday Seminars, Friday Faculty Meetings and other dissertations which have been previously scheduled. The calendar available on the MCB website is kept up-to-date with previously scheduled seminars and dissertation defenses:

<https://www.mcb.harvard.edu/department/events/>

Please also be aware that many lecture halls and rooms are occupied with classes between 9:00am-3:00pm. If you schedule your defense during this time, your preferred rooms may not be available.

3. Contact the MCO Graduate Program Office

Once you have identified a date and time for your defense with your advisor and committee members, please inform Graduate Program Administrator, Lindsay Guest (lindsayguest@fas.harvard.edu), of the date and time of the defense, and at least a tentative or working title. A final title and abstract is required **2 weeks prior** to your defense date.

Important Note: You must have a discussion with your advisor concerning your ongoing status in the lab well in advance of your defense. Following your discussion, please convey this information both to Lindsay and Katie Scrocca (scrocca@fas.harvard.edu) in the MCO Graduate Programs Office. International Students please also see section 1.

A confirmation email will be sent to you, your advisor, committee members, and relevant faculty assistants and lab managers. A reminder of your defense will be sent to your committee approximately 2 weeks before your defense date, and an official announcement will be sent to the department and posters displayed approximately 1 week in advance.

Virtual Defenses: Lindsay will set up and assist in moderating each defense over Zoom.

In-Person Defenses: Lindsay will help reserve a room. Many dissertation defenses are scheduled in the Biological Laboratories Lecture Hall, but other rooms or lecture halls may be utilized if this is booked. A reminder that all dissertation defenses for MCB PhD Candidates must take place on the Cambridge campus, regardless of home lab.

Hybrid Defenses: This option allows for the defense to take place in person, as well as Zoom. Lindsay will help book a room, and will also host and run the Zoom portion of the defense.

4. Write your Dissertation

Follow the guidelines and procedures for your dissertation outlined by the GSAS here: <https://gsas.harvard.edu/policy/dissertations> . This site includes a submission checklist, information on formatting, submission, publishing and more.

Note: Ordinarily, a dissertation must contain an introductory and concluding chapter, each no less than 5 double-spaced pages. The introductory chapter should set out the overall theme of the dissertation, describe the state of knowledge in the field before the student's work began, and any important advances made by others during your dissertation research, and describe the progression of the following chapters. The concluding chapter should attempt to draw overall conclusions from the dissertation research work and describe directions in which it could be usefully extended and new questions that it has produced. Any exception to this structure must be approved, in advance, by the student's Dissertation Advisory Committee.

5. No Less Than 2 Weeks Before Your Defense

No less than 2 weeks prior to your defense, please provide a copy of your dissertation to your advisor, each member of your committee, and the MCO Graduate Program Office. This should be done electronically.

A reminder that 2 weeks prior to your defense, the MCO Graduate Program Office will send a reminder notice to you, your advisor, committee members, and relevant faculty assistants and lab managers as mentioned above.

It is at this time that a final title of your dissertation must be submitted in order for your Thesis Acceptance Certificate (and poster) to be made. The title of your dissertation and the spelling of your name (including middle initials or names) which appear on your dissertation must match **exactly** with what appears on your Dissertation Acceptance Certificate. The Certificate is prepared by the MCO Graduate Program Office Staff and submitted to your committee chair. **Please confirm that both your name and dissertation title are identical to what appears on your bound dissertation or it will not be accepted by the Registrar.**

6. One Week Before Your Defense

The MCO Graduate Program Office will send an announcement of your defense to the MCB and MCO communities, as well as hang posters in the Biological Laboratories and Northwest Laboratories once buildings are re-opened. You may let the staff know if you would like additional posters.

7. Defense

As mentioned above, the dissertation defense consists of one-hour public lecture followed by a private meeting with our Dissertation Advisory Committee and advisor. The length of this meeting can vary, sometimes it is very short, other times it can be longer than an hour.

If your dissertation and defense is accepted by your committee, each committee member will certify this by signing your **Thesis Acceptance Certificate**. The MCO Graduate Program Office will assist in collecting the signatures and will provide you with the fully signed document.

8. Dissertation Submission

Please navigate to the below website for exact instructions on Harvard GSAS and Registrar's Office dissertation submission instructions: <https://gsas.harvard.edu/policy/submitting-your-dissertation>

- **The original complete and signed Dissertation Acceptance Certificate must be added as the first page of your dissertation, as well as uploaded to the administrative documents section of ETD. The DAC must additionally be uploaded as a separate "Administrative Document" when submitting the electronic dissertation to [ProQuest ETD](#). All DACs are forwarded to the Harvard University Archives.**

Online submission of the dissertation via [ProQuest ETD](#) is required by the Graduate School. Dissertations must be received by 11:59 pm on the [deadline date](#) for the given degree period. NO EXTENSIONS TO THIS DEADLINE ARE PROVIDED.

Dissertations should be submitted in their final format, in accordance with the GSAS guidelines. The Registrar's Office will review the document for formatting compliance. *Formatting errors may prevent the conferral of the degree and the student may need to apply for the next available degree period.* A [sample dissertation](#) as well as the [Top Ten Common Errors](#) are provided for your convenience.

9. MCO Graduate Student Exit Survey

Please complete the MCO Graduate Student Exit Survey before you leave at <http://goo.gl/pKaFf>

Questions or Concerns

Questions about these policies?

[GSAS Office of Student Affairs](#)

email: studaff@fas.harvard.edu

phone: 617 495-1814

[FAS Registrar's Office](#)

Questions about the electronic submission process?

Email: <http://www.registrar.fas.harvard.edu/about-us/contact-us>

Phone: 617 495-1543

Office of Scholarly Communication

Questions about publishing options?

Email: osc@harvard.edu

Phone: 617 495-4089

Helpful Tips from Previous Graduates & Notes from Student Affairs and FAS Registrar:

1. One of my chapters will be the paper I publish(ed). Can I put it in as-is or should I reformat it? If I don't have to reformat my paper, do I have to add all the references in the paper to one reference list at the end? *Articles should be reformatted to meet the GSAS requirements. This includes font, figure/table labeling, pagination, margins, etc. The references may be placed at the end of the dissertation or at the end of each chapter. Students are asked to use the style customary in their field, as long as the style is consistent throughout the dissertation.*
2. ***BACK UP YOUR DATA AND WRITING A MILLION TIMES!***
3. Plan ahead. Figure out how much time you need. The following steps alone will likely take at least a month, if not MORE.
 - Turn in dissertation to committee on time (OR EARLIER!). They need AT LEAST 2 WEEKS to read it.
 - Get it back from committee & revise
 - Defend
 - Re-do/edit if necessary
 - Submit to GSAS w/acceptance certificate
 - Do GSAS and MCO surveys by submission deadline!
4. Previously-submitted dissertations may be useful examples, but past performance is no guarantee of future acceptability. Do not assume that you can just copy the format of previously-submitted dissertations! If you need clarification on a format issue, consult the Form of the PhD Dissertation guidelines or ask someone.
5. Be sure that the word "Abstract" appears on the abstract page! It should be under the title and above the abstract text.
6. Make sure you include an introduction and conclusion! (See section 4).
7. Can I submit a previously published paper as part of my dissertation? *From GSAS Student Affairs: Whether students may submit the paper as part of the dissertation is up to the publisher. The dissertation is considered a form of publication so the student needs to check with the specific initial publisher. In the past, MCB/MCO students have been allowed to submit dissertations in which an article made up a chapter. In the past, students were required to reformat the whole article to be in line with the Guidelines for the PhD Dissertation/Form of the PhD Dissertation, however, the Student Affairs Office can allow for some flexibility if the article is formatted extremely tidily and looks reasonable in line with the rest of the document. Please be advised, however, that this is done on a case-by-case basis by the Student Affairs Office, once they are in receipt of the Dissertation.*