

RELIGIOUS ETHICS ON THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

What is a doctoral dissertation? A doctoral dissertation is an original research document that identifies a problem, question, or difficulty, and seeks to resolve that problem or advance scholarship around it by critically engaging the relevant literature in the author's field or subfield, and at times in cognate areas. It aims to make an original contribution to knowledge.

What are the core essentials of a humanities doctoral dissertation? These eleven clusters of questions provide parameters as you propose, research, write, discuss (at mid-point) and defend your dissertation:

1. **What is the title of your dissertation?** The title should identify the subject and the parameters of the study; it sets readers' expectations as to what the study is and is not about.
2. **What is the dissertation's thesis?** What question, problem, or difficulty does your dissertation plan to address? Why is the problem important—can you answer the “So what” question? Beyond your own personal interests in the topic, what justifies the project? Can you make a short statement of your anticipated argument?
3. **What is the principle of selection** according to which you've chosen the materials on which you're working? What justifies your decision to include the materials on which you're writing? If seemingly obvious material to include is not included in your study, why?
4. **What methodology or methodologies shape(s) your project?** Literary? Philological? Social scientific? Historical? Philosophical? Theological? Ethnographic? Ethical? Hermeneutical? What tradition or traditions of scholarship guide how you are advancing your ideas? If you're drawing on different kinds of sources, e.g., philosophical and narrative materials, how are they working together in the service of advancing your argument?
5. **How will your project inform a particular body of scholarship?** What are the distinctive aims of the dissertation? What foils help to sharpen the signature claims or ideas you're developing? Who are you arguing with and against? How well does your project offer a landscape of the relevant scholarship in which it situates itself? What is your dissertation's original contribution to your field or subfield?
6. **What (or who) are the key authors, sources, texts, and/or data** that you will be examining in your dissertation? What materials give your dissertation its substantive content?
7. **What is your prior preparation, in terms of languages, research tools, and familiarity with your sources?** How well do you know them in advance of taking them up, or using them, in this project?
8. **What do you envision as the Conclusion of your dissertation?** To be sure, your answer to that question will likely change as you move through the process. Still, you need to ask: What are readers to learn from your work?
9. **What is the structure of your dissertation?** How is it organized so as to (a) identify your problem and thesis, (b) engage the relevant literature, (c) advance your argument, (d) contribute to scholarship regarding your topic, and (e) conclude? How is the dissertation arranged, chapter by chapter, and within each chapter? Does it have a through-line that advances your line of thought? Do the chapters work together as an ensemble of ideas or lines of thought that are mutually informative in ways that advance your argument?
10. **How will you document your sources?** What format of documentation are you using? Are you doing so consistently? You should document each and every direct quotation as well as reworded statements from the materials on which you rely. You should also cite each source on which you rely to substantiate claims that you're making, even if you're not directly quoting or rewording another source's materials. Beyond that: What justifies your selection of the sources you cite?
11. **What is the timeline for completion?** When do you expect to finish your dissertation? What benchmarks are you and your dissertation committee working with for moving toward that goal?

Students are advised to consult the requirements and procedures for proposing, writing, and defending the doctoral dissertation at <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/announcements>.