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General Examination Procedures and Guidelines

Religion, Ethics, and Politics (REP) and Philosophy and Religion (PR)

This document supplements the Department of Religion's *Graduate Student Handbook* and University guidelines for doctoral education.

There are four principal stages to graduate work in the 'Religion, Ethics, and Politics' and the 'Philosophy and Religion' subfields:

- First, coursework in the first two years – including REL 501 and REL 502, along with seminars offered by subfield faculty and beyond. In accordance with their research needs, students typically continue to take courses – either as auditors or for credit – after these first two years, but they do not typically take a full load of courses. All students are expected to participate in the subfield Workshop during their time at Princeton.
- Second, the 'General Examinations', consisting of four research papers.
- Third, a Prospectus for the proposed thesis, capped off by an oral defense.
- And finally, the thesis itself, defended in a Final Public Oral Examination administered by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS).

Each of these stages must be passed satisfactorily in order to move onto the next. And each is designed both to help prepare students to undertake the following stage, and to ensure that they are adequately equipped to do so fruitfully.

'Generals'

The 'General Examinations in REP/PR' consist of four papers which you will write under the guidance of relevant faculty members. Working on these papers is intended to help you to hone some of the core skills – and to acquire and organize some of the core knowledge – necessary for undertaking a sustained piece of independent research (namely, your thesis).

A given Generals paper will be passed if it demonstrates sufficient proficiency in the relevant area to indicate that – with regard to that area – you are now ready to fruitfully start to work on your thesis (or that you are ready more generally to pursue independent work in the relevant area at a later time in your career). The precise standard for passing will therefore vary from paper to paper and from student to student, in accordance with each student's particular needs and intentions. As such, the Generals papers are both thresholds and stepping-stones: thresholds because you need to demonstrate a certain necessary degree



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of competence in the given area and genre of each paper, and stepping-stones because they mark just one step in the ongoing process of growth and improvement that will actively continue through the course of your thesis work and scholarly career.

Your Generals papers may evolve from papers you have written for seminars. But this will rarely be the case for all four, so some will likely be started from scratch specifically for a particular General. If a given Generals paper stems from a prior seminar paper, it will likely need to be significantly developed and improved.

Each Generals paper will be written under the guidance of a member of the subfield faculty (apart from the Outside Paper – see below), and each paper will go through numerous drafts, each one improved with the help of the feedback you receive. The faculty member who is guiding the given paper will decide when it has reached a satisfactory stage (in consultation with your advisor), at which point that paper will be deemed to have passed. When all Generals papers have passed, your advisor will inform the DGS and the Graduate Administrator.

The following brief descriptions of each of the Generals papers are intended to give you a sense of their subjects, genres, and aims. You should discuss your plans for each of the papers with relevant members of the subfield faculty. The particular projects that would be best for you to undertake for each paper will depend on the skills and knowledge it will be most helpful for you to develop in the context of your preparation to embark on your thesis work and future career and will therefore be different for each student. This applies not only to the particular subjects you choose to write on, but also to the styles and traditions of thought you choose to engage – from analytic to continental to non-Western, or indeed any tradition of philosophical, theological, religious, ethical, or political thought. The aim of these papers is to help you develop the skills and proficiencies you need to progress along your own individual intellectual path, whatever that may be.

Given that the Generals process is designed to be tailored to each student's particular needs as they approach the prospect of writing a thesis, it will often be more misleading than illuminating to compare notes with your fellow students regarding the specific demands of a given Generals paper category. Instead, we recommend that you speak about this to a relevant member of the subfield faculty. This is certainly not to discourage you from sharing and discussing the ideas from, or drafts of, your Generals papers with your fellow students. On the contrary, doing so – whether informally or in Workshop – is an integral aspect of the communal life of the subfield. But seeking substantive feedback on the ideas and arguments of your paper will be more useful than seeking technical or logistical feedback on whether and how the paper fits the conditions for a given General. Questions about the latter should be directed to a relevant member of the subfield faculty, as answers may differ from case to case.



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TEXT IN CONTEXT PAPER

Philosophical, religious, ethical, and political thinking is never divorced from its history and context. This paper is intended to help you develop a sensitivity to this in your reading and writing, and to develop your skills in the history of ideas.

This paper should therefore focus on a historical text and examine it in the context of its time. This could involve, for example: analyzing the text in relation to the social and/or political context in which it was produced; the historical development of one or more of its key concepts, ideas, or arguments; its relation to some of its intellectual predecessors, or to its then-contemporary interlocutors, or to its early reception and interpretations; or any number of other related possibilities.

The text in question should date from the early 20th century or before.

CONSTRUCTIVE PAPER

A large part of the history of philosophical, religious, ethical, and political thought is the history of the construction of arguments for (and against) particular claims or positions in those fields. This paper is intended to help you develop your skills in constructive argumentation (as distinct from your skills in interpreting the arguments of others).

In this paper you should therefore focus on building and defending your own argument for (or against) a particular position. This could be a position in ethical or political theory, applied ethics, the philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, or any other relevant area of humanistic enquiry.

REVIEW PAPER

'Review' in this context is ambiguous between a 'broad overview' and an 'evaluative response'. You could take this paper in either direction, depending on the skills and/or proficiencies you most need to develop. (You should make this decision in consultation with a relevant member of the subfield faculty). In any case, this paper will involve gaining some breadth of knowledge and the ability to synthesize and organize that breadth, both of which will be essential to your thesis research.

Option one: A paper that presents a broad overview of a particular philosophical, religious, ethical, or political subject, problem, or area, etc. This paper should be written roughly in the style of an entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. This will give you the opportunity to gain broad familiarity with a particular domain of thought, and to organize and synthesize your understanding of it.

Option two: A paper that gives a long-form critical review of a recent or forthcoming book in the field (or of a small cluster of related books, or of a recent trend in the field), of the kind that is sometimes published in academic journals. If you choose to review a single book, you should pick one that you take to be indicative



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in some way of a significant trend in the field, or one which is otherwise significant for the field more broadly. This will give you the opportunity to practice a potentially unfamiliar genre of writing and of intellectual engagement, as well as obtaining the breadth of familiarity – and synthesis of understanding – involved in making judgements about the place of certain discussions in the field.

Option three: A paper that gives a long-form popular introduction to and critical review of a pair (or small cluster) of related books, recently published or forthcoming. This paper should be written roughly in the style of the ‘double-’ or ‘cluster-review articles’ that appear in the *New York Review of Books* or the *London Review of Books*. This will give you the opportunity to practice a potentially unfamiliar genre of writing and of intellectual engagement, as well as obtaining the breadth of familiarity – and synthesis of understanding – involved in being able to introduce and contextualize a particular scholarly area or conversation to a non-specialist audience.

OUTSIDE PAPER

In any academic community (our subfields, for example) there is always a danger of a certain intellectual narrowness, myopia, or group-think – unless a positive effort is made to avoid it. This paper is intended to formalize that effort by getting you to write an essay under the supervision of a faculty member from outside your subfield (usually from another Princeton department, or even from another institution). Further motivations include gaining competence in an area that may not be central to your thesis work, but which is nonetheless likely to be importantly relevant, or broadening your potential areas of teaching competence, and the like.

The paper can be on anything that you and the chosen faculty member deem appropriate. The choice of faculty member – and the broad choice of the project – should be made in consultation with a relevant member of the subfield faculty.

Potential department and institutions in which you might look for relevant faculty members could include: Philosophy, Politics, African American Studies, Near Eastern Studies, German, Classics, History, the Princeton Theological Seminary, and many others. You may choose to work with someone you have got to know from a course that you have taken.

DOUBLING-UP

If your Outside Paper sufficiently fulfills the conditions of one of the other three papers, then it can count under both categories at once. This will leave you with a slot for a fourth Generals paper, which can be on whatever subject, and in whatever form, will most help your development towards undertaking your thesis project, or help you gain sufficient competence in an area related to our subfields (i.e., areas in which you might plausibly be asked to teach). What this will be should be decided in consultation with a relevant member of the subfield faculty.



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THE GENERALS DEBRIEF

Once all four Generals papers have been passed – and the Graduate Administrator has been informed – then you have officially passed the General Examinations. At that point a ‘debriefing session’ will be scheduled with the members of the subfield faculty, as well as – potentially – any outside faculty who were involved.

The purpose of this debriefing session is to use the four Generals papers to think constructively about your scholarly strengths and weaknesses, about potentially profitable research directions, and potential pitfalls, as you head towards starting work on your thesis research. To get at these issues the faculty members will ask you questions, pushing both on aspects of the particular papers, as well as patterns and tendencies that might have emerged across a number of the papers. This will tend to merge into a discussion of what some productive ways forward may be for your research, including strengths that you should play to, and areas which would repay more work and attention. The discussion usually ends with some practical advice regarding your next steps towards producing a thesis prospectus.

The Thesis Prospectus and its Defense

THE THESIS PROSPECTUS

A ‘prospectus’ is a document that sets out an overview of a forthcoming publication. Your Thesis Prospectus will be a short document presenting an overview of the project you propose to undertake for your thesis.

Of course, when you write this prospectus you will not yet have undertaken the years of research needed to produce the finished work, so there will necessarily be significant aspects of your proposed project about which you are tentative, or regarding which you still have more questions than answers, or more hunches than arguments. This is to be expected, and there’s no need to pretend otherwise. Rather, the role of the prospectus is to convince the subfield faculty (i) that you have a research project in mind which seems fruitful, and (ii) that you have the requisite background knowledge and skills to bring this research project to fruition (taking for granted, of course, that you will continue to acquire further knowledge and skills as you progress).

In other words, with the prospectus you are seeking permission to *begin* formal work on your thesis, rather than claiming that you already have it all worked out in your mind.

Not all prospectuses look exactly alike, nor need they all have exactly the same section divisions. There are, however, some basic things that most adequate prospectuses will need to address, in some form or other. For example, descriptions of:

- The topic which the thesis will be addressing, i.e. the general subject-matter of the thesis. (One way to think about this could be in terms of: What question(s) will you be asking?)



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- The state of the relevant existing literature on this topic. (Note: *relevant* is more helpful and important than *exhaustive*).
- The particular contribution(s) that your thesis will make to the existing literature on this topic. (One way to think about this could be in terms of: What do you think your answer(s) will be to the question(s) you will be asking?)
- The significance of your contribution(s), i.e. why your contributions matter, and to whom you think they will and/or should matter and why.
- The considerations (evidence, arguments, methods, etc) you will use in order to convince your readers of the rightness (veracity, value, etc) of your contribution(s).
- The basic structure you envisage your thesis having, in order to make your contribution(s) most clearly and persuasively. This will likely involve a tentative list of proposed chapter titles, along with brief descriptions of what you hope to accomplish in each chapter. (Note: *tentative*. At this point you may not be able to fill in the details of the argument of each chapter. But be clear about where you are confident, where you have just a hunch, and where you are still entirely unsure of the path to take; and avoid the temptation to blur over the latter so that it might be mistaken for the former.)
- The texts and thinkers you intend to principally engage as you set about undertaking the various parts of your thesis research. This could be a short and selective reading list of the writings you suspect will be most fruitful to you as you start working on each proposed chapter of the thesis. (Note: a *selective* list of texts you think will be most fruitful to you, will be more helpful and informative than attempting an exhaustive list).

The relative lengths at which you address each of these matters – along with any others that seem relevant – will vary from case to case. If you are proposing to work in a field which already has a voluminous literature, then you may need to spend relatively more space describing what has already been said and how your contribution will take the existing literature forward in an original way. If you are proposing to make use of a fairly controversial or idiosyncratic kind of evidence or mode of argument, then you may need to spend relatively more space describing exactly what this will be, and why we ought to trust it. If people might be liable to take your prospective contribution(s) to be either obviously true or obviously false, then you may need to spend relatively more space allaying those potential worries in the reader. And so on. Each prospectus should be structured and proportioned appropriately to its own proposed project.

Everyone recognizes that your project is almost certain to change its shape and proportions – and sometimes even its direction – once you get underway with your research and writing. If it stayed exactly as you predicted when you were just setting out, this would be reason to suspect that something was going wrong with your progress. As your research proceeds, both you and your understanding are bound to change and develop. At the very least it is common for the final project to end up being somewhat narrower than the project proposed in the prospectus. (Prospectuses are often more ambitious than a full and responsible thesis could possibly be: actually arguing for your claims demands a lot more than it at first seems to).

This is why you should not see the prospectus as a document that is valuable in its own right, to be labored over in an endless number of revised drafts. Rather, it is a means to an end, and should be worked on up to



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the point when further work will no longer be useful. Working on the prospectus is a spur to get you to read and think widely in your field of interest, and to prompt you to try to home-in on the questions that particularly intrigue and excite you and that strike you as most significant, the texts which seem particularly fruitful and thought-provoking to you, and the methods which seem particularly promising – and to begin to organize and direct some of the thoughts emerging from all this. It is also an opportunity to discern your intuitions and hunches regarding potential answers to the questions which are concerning you, and to make the first steps towards filling out and testing those hunches, or at least considering how you might do so, and what their significance would be if you could. This process itself – and that of writing up one potential way your thesis research could go – is extremely valuable. At the very least it will get you thinking about what is involved in writing a responsible and original thesis. It won't fix where your thesis will end up, but it will give you a solid foundation from which to set out.

As a part of this process of investigation and clarification it is likely that your prospectus will go through a number of drafts. This process will be undertaken under the guidance of your main thesis advisor from the subfield faculty. They – along with your secondary advisor, if appropriate – will decide at what point the prospectus is ready to be defended.

THE PROSPECTUS DEFENSE

The Prospectus Defense is a formal occasion on which you, the members of the subfield faculty, and anyone else who is interested (often including fellow students in the subfield), gather to discuss your Thesis Prospectus. If your thesis committee includes any faculty members from outside the subfield, then they will likely be present too.

The aim of this defense is, firstly, to gather the whole subfield together – faculty and students – to engage with your proposed thesis project as a community. The multiple perspectives on your project that will emerge from this gathering will allow for many avenues of questioning, which grounds the second aim of the defense. Namely, to probe your proposed thesis project from multiple angles – many of them quite different from your own background set of concerns and presuppositions. This might involve people seeking to clarify some of things you say in your prospectus, or to raise potential objections to some of the things you say, or to prompt you to think about various wider connections that you may not have seen, or to highlight various potential challenges and pitfalls that they think you might encounter in undertaking your proposed project. All this is intended to be of practical help as you set out on your research path – whether by highlighting particular aspects of your project which you will need to think about more carefully, or by helping you to prepare to meet particular difficulties that may arise.

The Prospectus Defense usually opens with a 5-minute introductory presentation from you. This should not simply be a summary or recapitulation of your prospectus, but rather, something that might help those present get some further orientation to your project in addition to what they have learnt from your prospectus. For example, you may: say a few words about how and why you arrived at your research project; or share some thoughts about the project as a whole and its significance (for you, or in general); or raise any questions, doubts, or concerns that you have about the project; or anything else that might be illuminating.



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If you would prefer not to open the proceedings in this way, that is okay – but let your advisor know in advance.

After this opening, the members of the subfield faculty – as well as any outside committee members – will take about 15-20 minutes each, to pursue a particular line of questioning into your proposed project, engaging in a back-and-forth with you on the issue that they want to examine. This way, at least four different aspects of your project will be probed – in conversation with you – in enough detail to be of practical help.

If there is time remaining after each of the relevant faculty members has pursued their lines of questioning, then the floor will be opened to questions from anyone else who is present, until the end of the allotted time.

Your main and secondary thesis advisors will only recommend that you proceed to defend your prospectus if they are confident that it is satisfactory and that you will be able to defend it adequately. However, whether your Thesis Prospectus has passed will be officially decided by the members of the subfield faculty – as well as any other members of your committee – in a private meeting, immediately after the end of the questions. Everyone apart from the relevant faculty members will be asked to leave the room, while the faculty remain to discuss.

For the reason mentioned above, it is very rare that a Thesis Prospectus does not pass at this point, so this decision rarely takes much time. Rather, what the faculty members principally discuss in their post-defense meeting are the main points they think you should take away – practically – from the preceding discussion, as you embark on your thesis research. Often the faculty will also discuss where they think it would be best for you to begin work. (For various reasons this will rarely be the Introduction and will not necessarily be Chapter 1).

When they have finished discussing, the faculty will invite you – and anyone who remains – back into the room and will announce whether or not your Thesis Prospectus has been passed and you have been approved to proceed onto your thesis work. They will then discuss the particular upshots of their meeting with you, privately.

At this point you will be ready to get going with your thesis research.