



Graduate Program in Religion

**STUDENT
HANDBOOK**

2023-2024

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Welcome to the Graduate Program in Religion

Welcome to the Graduate Program in Religion (GPR), a division of Boston University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences housed in the Department of Religion.

We are so pleased that you have chosen to become a part of our dynamic academic community! This handbook is designed as a complement to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Bulletin (<https://www.bu.edu/academics/grs/>) and the Religion Program Description posted there (<https://www.bu.edu/academics/grs/programs/religion/>).

This handbook serves to guide you as you complete the steps toward your graduate degree. Outlined below are the basic requirements for your PhD degree. It is your responsibility to meet the requirements of your degree program and to accurately report on your progress to your advisor and to the GPR staff. As you progress in your degree program, the faculty and staff of the GPR will be here to support you and to answer any questions you may have.

All students are encouraged to work actively with your primary advisor in the shaping of your program and to identify the best resources for meeting your goals and helping to ensure that your work is done in a timely and efficient manner. Questions concerning financial assistance, student progress and general questions concerning program requirements can be directed to Prof. Klawans.

Along with the Director of Graduate Studies (Prof. Klawans), Prof. Kecia Ali, our department's Director of Undergraduate Studies, will assist in training and overseeing the work of Teaching Fellows. Should you have other questions or concerns, including ones outside of or beyond the specifics of GPR policies and requirements, you are also welcome to contact the Chair of the Department of Religion, Prof. Deena Klepper.

When it comes time to submitting paperwork including registration forms, records of examinations, etc., your point of contact in the office will be our office administrator, Wendy Czik. Please to attend to all paperwork requests from our office in a timely manner.

Our GPR Community

The Graduate Program in Religion strives to provide a thriving intellectual home for its students, staff, and faculty. We seek to foster a space that supports inquiry, discussion, unfettered thought, the asking of sometimes uncomfortable questions, and, crucially, mutual respect as we work together on our scholarly and pedagogical pursuits.

First and foremost, however, fostering such engagement requires doing our best to support the diverse needs of our community, which includes actively countering discrimination, harassment, unwanted attentions, or cruel or demeaning words or actions, whether these are based on race, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, cultural or class background, political commitments, or linguistic competencies. Boston University's Title IX page (<https://www.bu.edu/eoo/sexual-misconduct-title-ix/>) addresses some of these issues, but students and others should feel free to approach the advisor, department Chair, or DGS on any matters that arise pertaining to any form of discrimination or harassment that they may encounter.

True learning and inquiry can only progress in an open environment, and the precondition of such openness is, quite simply, safety, respect, and kindness for all.

GPR Administrative Directory

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Islamic Studies	Prof. Teena Purohit
Jewish Studies	Prof. Michael Zank
Religions in American Culture	Prof. Margarita Guillory
Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean	Prof. David Frankfurter
Religion in Politics, Philosophy and Society	Prof. Anthony Petro

Glossary of Acronyms

At Boston University, school, program, and building names are often abbreviated in both written communication and conversation. For the sake of brevity, this handbook employs many of these acronyms. This glossary is provided as a reference.

BTI	Boston Theological Institute
BSR	Bay State Road
DGS	Director of Graduate Studies
CAP	Committee on Academic Programs
CAS	College of Arts & Sciences
GPR	Graduate Program in Religion
GFR	Graduate Faculty in Religion
GRS	Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MLCL	Modern Languages & Comparative Literature
RS	Romance Studies
STH	School of Theology
TF	Teaching Fellow

GPR Learning Outcomes

As you work through this handbook and plan your course of study, we hope you will keep in mind the following outcomes that we wish to help you reach:

Students graduating with a PhD in Religion are expected to:

1. Produce an original and substantial contribution to knowledge in the field of religious studies, utilizing appropriate skills of research.
2. Demonstrate a rich generalized mastery of the field's subject matter and the variety of methods employed by its practitioners.
3. Obtain the necessary knowledge for future research and to teach broad introductory undergraduate courses in religious studies.
4. Comport themselves according to the highest ethical standards of the Academia, exhibiting collegiality and fairness in their treatments of teachers, peers, students, and subjects of study.

Note: The policies outlined in this Handbook are subject to revision, as our faculty deem appropriate and when the GRS makes changes to which our program must comply.

Note 2: This Fall 2023 Edition of the GPR Handbook (dated 8-31-23) constitutes the fullest revision in many years. If anything seems incorrect or insufficiently clear please send questions, comments, concerns or suggestions to Prof. Klawans at jklawans@bu.edu; if any links are non-working please alert Meredith Rippert mmripp@bu.edu.

Financial Aid and Fellowships

All PhD students who are admitted to the GPR will be fully funded (have their tuition covered and receive a stipend) for five years, of which three years (6 semester) will include service to the department, usually through a teaching or research fellowship. Students who need more than five years to complete and defend their dissertation are guaranteed to have their tuition covered (but will not receive a stipend) for an additional two years.

Teaching Fellowships

The majority PhD students who are admitted to the GPR will be required to serve as a Teaching Fellow as part of the terms of their Fellowship. Most students should expect to serve as TFs for three years (six semesters) starting the Fall Semester of their second year in the program. TFs assist a faculty member with teaching a semester-long course and work 15 hours a week.

External and Multiple Fellowships

PhD students receiving additional fellowships from funding organizations outside the University must inform GPR and GRS of this support. In some cases, multiple fellowships may be held concurrently; in other cases, the BU funding can be deferred while holding an external fellowship, all in accordance with GRS procedures.

Additional Work

All funded students, domestic and international, face limitations on the amount of additional work they may do during the times covered by their fellowships. International students must take particular care because of legal and tax issues relating to their visas. International students should be in direct contact with GRS and BU ISSO about questions regarding salary beyond their stipends.

In general, students may do limited amounts of additional work (e.g., serving as a grader or doing some research for a faculty member) provided:

1. the tasks provide the student with an opportunity for professional growth in research, teaching, or associated administration (such as running a conference or department administration);
2. the work involved does not exceed 5 hours/week averaged over the semester; and
3. the payment is set up as a weekly salary. Hourly payment is not permitted. All additional payments must be submitted to GRS Financial Aid by submitting the standard student employment authorization forms.

For additional information please see the GRS fellowship page: <https://www.bu.edu/cas/admissions/phd-mfa/fellowship-aid/aid-for-phd-students/> as well as the FAQ page: <https://www.bu.edu/cas/admissions/phd-mfa/fellowship-aid/frequently-asked-questions/stipends/> (“Can I work an additional job on top of my regular stipend?”).

The limits above apply primarily during Fall and Spring semesters. Students who are not receiving salary from BU during the summer months are normally permitted to work beyond the limits above. Please note that what is printed here is for advisory purposes only. The GPR does not permit anything that GRS does not allow.

Timeframes for PhD Programs

GRS timeframe for completion of all PhD programs: 10 semesters (ideal); 14 semesters (maximum)

The maximum timeframes may only be extended with the approval of the DGS and the GRS Dean. Students who do not make reasonable progress toward completion of the degree may be terminated from the degree program. Students who find themselves in situations that prevent their making progress on the degree should consider taking a Leave of Absence.

Requirement	Ideal Timeframes	Maximum Timeframes
Approaches to Religion (x2) Professional Development Seminar	4 semesters	5 semesters
Language Exams (x2)	4 semesters	5 semesters
Qualifying Examinations	6 semesters	8 semesters
Prospectus Approval	6-7 semesters	8 semesters
Dissertation Defense and Completion of Program	10-12 semesters	14 semesters

Degree Requirements

This section of the Handbook provides a summary of the main rules and requirements that must be followed and fulfilled by students pursuing a PhD in the GPR.

The GPR follows the guidelines set forth in the Admissions and Policies sections of the GRS Bulletin (<https://www.bu.edu/academics/grs/>). **Students should familiarize themselves with these guidelines.** The GRS Bulletin is only available online.

The administrators and the DGS monitor student records to ensure that all requirements and timeframes outlined in this Handbook and in the GRS Bulletin are met. However, the student is ultimately responsible for meeting all degree requirements and deadlines. **Students who are not able to meet one or more of the timeframes outlined below must contact the DGS for assistance.**

Please note: All timeframes are recorded in semesters rather than years. For purposes of meeting GPR requirements, these semesters are understood to include the fall and spring, but not the summer.

Advising

PhD students entering the GPR will be assigned an advisor. This advisor will assist the student in selecting courses and satisfying degree requirements according to the “Timeframes for Completion” (see p13, below) established by the GPR. Upon admission, students are welcome to request certain faculty advisors. Students can also consult the DGS to request changes in assigned advisors. It is often the case that as a student develops the focus that will constitute their dissertation, a faculty member other than the initial advisor becomes the new primary advisor (and First Reader). All advising changes must be registered with the Department Administrator and DGS.

Course and Credit Requirements and Transferring Credit

PhD candidates must complete 64 credit hours (usually, 16 courses), which includes three required courses:

1. RN791: *The Study of Religion I: Classic Approaches and Theories*
2. RN792: *The Study of Religion II: Religion and Contemporary Theory*
3. RN793: *Professional Development Seminar*

PhD Candidates must also satisfy a **World Religions requirement**. The goal of this requirement is for students to attain breadth in the diversity of global religious traditions, such that they could design and teach a course on world or global religions. Such traditions might include Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—religions often thought of as “world religions”—but also might include Africana, Latin American, and indigenous religions, as well as new religious movements. The goal is intellectual exposure to some of these many traditions, not all of them. As such, the requirement may be satisfied in several ways, depending on students’ areas of research and what additional work best expands upon their breadth. These may include serving as a TF for: *RN105 World Religions*, *RN103 Religions of Asia*, or *RN104 Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*; completing an exam in this area; or counting previous graduate coursework. These are suggestions; alternative or additional courses or exams may be required at the discretion of a student’s advisor and/or DGS.

Transferring Credits: Students who enter with previous graduate training in the study of Religion may petition for advanced credit for up to a maximum of 16 credit hours (usually five 3-credit courses for 16 credits or four 4-credit courses for 15 credits). *You should consult first with your advisor and then with the DGS about the possibility of transferring courses.* Please also see the [GRS website](#) for complete information on receiving advanced credit. When filling out the form linked there, please submit for consideration only those courses that your advisor has approved, with a goal of reaching approximately 16 credits. The GRS registrar will determine the precise credit value based on their formulae. Should you need additional credits, a second request can be submitted. Please do not submit requests for more courses than should be necessary, as this creates additional work for GRS and confusion when we review the request.

Course Options

GPR students may take graduate level courses (500 level or above) in almost any School or College of Boston University. Students can view the upcoming semester’s University Course Schedule online on their [Student Link](#) page to explore course options by topic.

Students may also take courses at all member institutions of the Boston Theological Institute (BTI). In most cases, students will be approved to take one course per semester through the BTI, but under special circumstances, when approved by their advisor and the DGS, a student may be able to enroll in two. A full

listing of member institutions is available on the [BTI Web site](#). In many cases, these resources can helpfully supplement the wide range of learning available within Boston University. **When registering for courses through the BTI be diligent in following BTI instructions and be certain your courses are listed correctly on your current schedule in the student link.**

Timeframes for Completion of Coursework Requirements

4 semesters (ideal); 5 semesters (maximum). Students with previous graduate study in Religion should petition for advanced credit during their first semester in the program. Ideal and maximum timeframes will then be set accordingly.

Taking an Incomplete

Students who are unable to finish the work required for a course before the designated deadline may, upon the instructor's approval, take a temporary incomplete for the course. The student and the instructor must agree on a deadline for the work to be completed, normally within one to two months. By GRS policy, an Incomplete becomes a permanent "I" (unsatisfactory grade) unless the coursework is completed within a period of one year from the end of the semester in which the original grade is recorded. A GRS incomplete form (<https://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2022/11/Incomplete-Grade-Form-Fillable1.pdf>) must be completed by the student and faculty member and submitted to the DGS. Both the student and the instructor must sign the form and both parties should keep a copy as a reminder of the revised deadlines.

Withdrawal or Leave of Absence Guidelines

Students who find themselves temporarily unable to make progress toward their degree should consider taking a Leave of Absence (LOA). Reasons to take a LOA include, but are not restricted to, family emergencies, illness, [maternity/paternity leave](#), or reserve duty. Please note that students are automatically allowed up to two semesters of leave of absence. Students who find themselves unable to make progress toward the degree for an extended period of time (longer than one year) may petition for an extended LOA or may consider withdrawing from the program. For more specific information please consult the [GRS Bulletin](#) and the official [University Policy pages](#) regarding withdrawals and LOAs.

If a student should need to take a leave of absence or withdraw from their program, the student must complete a [Withdrawal/Leave of Absence form](#) and submit it directly to the GRS office. The student's withdrawal or LOA goes into effect the day the signed request is received in the GRS office.

Language Requirements

All students are required to demonstrate a reading knowledge of two languages in addition to English, to be tested in reading exams or language courses as outlined below. Additional languages may be required, possibly at higher levels of proficiency, depending on one's Specialization. Appropriate languages for each student will be determined by their advisor in consultation with the DGS and Specialization Coordinator.

Language Courses

Students are strongly encouraged to take the language reading courses offered by the Departments of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature (MLCL) and Romance Studies (RS). These courses are GRS LG 621 (German), GRS LF 621 (French), GRS LI 621 (Italian), and GRS LS 621 (Spanish). They are set up as Pass/Fail courses and are designed for students with little or no prior knowledge of the language. Successful completion of these course will be indicated on the transcript; no additional report of exam form is needed.

Language Exams

Students who are already proficient in two languages besides English may make special arrangements to take the exam without taking the class. Those who wish to do so should contact the DGS.

The exam consists of a passage of either 250 or 500 words selected by a student's advisor (or appointed examiner) to reflect the student's program of study. The student has one hour for every 250 words to translate the passage(s) and is permitted the use of a dictionary, although not a grammar text, online dictionary, or any kind of digital translation program. The completed exam will be graded by a GPR faculty member (or appointed examiner) who is fluent in the language. The grader's evaluation will be based on the evidence of reading comprehension and accuracy of the translation(s). Please note that the nature of the test is finally determined by the faculty member who designs it.

Students who elect to take a language exam rather than a language class may take each language test more than once, if necessary. Once a language exam is passed a prior failure will not be included in the student's record. Repeated failure to pass language exams, however, constitutes failure to make good progress toward the degree and is therefore grounds for dismissal.

Required Forms

Once a student has passed a language exam a [Report of Exam Form](#) must be completed in order for the satisfaction of language requirements to appear on academic transcripts. Completed forms should be turned in to the Department Administrator, Wendy Czik, who will then obtain the signature of the DGS and file the form with the GRS.

Timeframes for Completion of Language Exams

4 semesters (ideal); 5 semesters (maximum)

Students with at least 16 hours of advanced standing credit: 3 semesters (ideal); 4 semesters (maximum)

Continuing Student Status

Once they have completed their coursework and language requirements, students must continue to register each semester until all other degree requirements, including the dissertation defense, have been met. In order to graduate, a student must be registered with the University in the semester that they defend the dissertation, as well as the preceding semester.

All continuing students will register using the GRS Full and Part Time Continuing Student form:

<https://www.bu.edu/cas/academics/phd-and-mfa-academics/student-forms/>

Annual Reports

Each spring all PhD candidates are required to submit an annual report to their advisor and the DGS. Students who are beyond the maximum time frame for the degree must also file a [Petition for Extension](#) with the Graduate School. Both of these forms require students to detail their progress during the previous year and outline progress to be made the following year. Reports and petitions must be signed by the student and their advisor and will be reviewed by the DGS. **Students will not be permitted to register for the fall semester until these forms have been submitted and approved.**

Qualifying Exams

General Guidelines for Exams

Students in the GPR will take 3-4 qualifying exams, depending on the requirements of their Specialization. Each exam should have at least two readers. If a student needs an external reader (someone from outside of BU), they should still have two BU faculty readers as well. Your exam readers should include, but do not need to be limited to, faculty who will be readers on your dissertation. Ideally, there will be some variety in readers selected for your exams. Indeed, one great way to ensure that you are well-positioned to build a dissertation committee (of at least four faculty) that will serve you well is to involve potential committee members in the development of and supervision of your comprehensive examinations. Examinations will have both oral and written components, to be decided on by the readers and/or Specialization committee and in consultation with the student's primary advisor/s.

Examinations reflect the corpus of knowledge the GPR expects the student to control before they can move to writing a dissertation prospectus. Qualifying exams fall into three general types:

I. **One to two exams:** Specializations draw on diverse bodies of knowledge, address different historical periods and geographical areas, and demand discrete methodological skills. Consequently, each specialization will administer 1-2 examinations covering the historical periods, data, and historiography relevant to the specialization.

II. **One Exam:** Students across the GPR are required to master the theoretical models, interpretive schemes, and modes of analysis unique to their specialization. Hence, all students will be required to take one examination that will demonstrate the theoretical and methodological acumen necessary for interpretation of the materials particular to their specialization.

III. **One Exam:** In their dissertations, students will be making use of the requisite historical, theoretical, and methodological knowledge of their specialization to develop an original work of scholarly analysis. The final exam will consequently be aimed at demonstrating the student's skill at analyzing their own area of expertise and interest in terms of those accepted interpretive schemes and bodies of knowledge.

Required Forms

Before starting exams, please submit the [GPR Comprehensive Examination Form](#). Using this form will help you, your advisors, and the DGS have a good understanding of the plans for your comprehensive examinations. Upon completion of all required qualifying exams, a Report of Exam Form

(<https://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2015/11/Report-of-Examination.pdf>) form must be submitted. The form should list the title of each exam taken and the date each exam was administered.

Requesting the MA “In Course”

PhD students who have successfully completed all required coursework and at least two written qualifying exams may receive the MA degree “in course.” The student must complete a [Report of Exam](#) form and file a [Diploma Application](#) with the GRS office.

MA Terminal Degree

A student who chooses not to continue in the PhD program, who has otherwise fulfilled the course and language requirements for the Master of Arts (and listed above), may apply for that degree. Please be sure you have complete all [GRS requirements](#) for this degree.

Timeframes for Completion of Qualifying Examinations

6 semesters/3rd year (ideal); 8 semesters/4th year (maximum).

*Students with advanced standing credit hours should adjust this timeframe accordingly.

Dissertation Prospectus and Presentation

The academic policies and procedures of the GRS require that students who have completed their language requirements, coursework, and qualifying examinations prepare a dissertation prospectus before the more extensive phase of dissertation research is undertaken. The GPR Prospectus Guidelines can be found on the Graduate Program Resources page: <https://www.bu.edu/religion/academics/graduate-program/graduate-student-resources/gpr-prospectus-guidelines/>.

The student will draft their prospectus in consultation with at least two readers, usually drawn from their own specialization (see, below, guidance on preparing the prospectus). Once the prospectus is provisionally approved by the first reader (advisor) and second reader, the student should contact our department administrator, Wendy Czik, and the DGS to schedule a formal presentation, usually to be held within 2-3 weeks of completion, and during the academic year. The draft of the prospectus will be circulated in advance, and the student will present their project to an audience of GPR faculty and graduate students. The student will offer formal remarks on their project (about 15-20 minutes), which will be followed by questions from those in attendance. Following the presentation, the first and second readers will decide whether officially to approve the prospectus, or to approve following modest revisions. In rare cases, the readers might require substantial revisions or reconceptualization of the project. If minor revisions are required, they will be submitted to the two readers for their final approval; major revisions will be submitted to the two readers and the DGS.

The information below outlines the formal requirements and academic standards of the GPR regarding PhD prospectus and can also be [found online](#). For more detailed advice on writing the body of the prospectus, please see the appendix of this handbook and the information posted on the [GPR Resources Page](#).

Steps for Creating a Successful Prospectus

1. Find Readers

The student is required to have a minimum of two readers but may have as many as three. Readers are selected at the prospectus stage; additional committee members (also called “examiners”) are normally added later, as the student prepares to defend a completed dissertation.

Once graduate students reach the prospectus-writing stage, they may, in consultation with their advisor, choose a different faculty member from the GPR to serve as the First Reader on their Dissertation Committee. Students who exercise this option must inform the DGS and the Department Administrator of this decision. The First Reader is responsible for ensuring that the prospectus and the dissertation conform to the standards of the GPR.

GPR faculty will serve as readers for dissertations. Students may draw on full-time graduate faculty outside of the GPR (but within BU) by permission of the DGS to serve in the position of second or third reader. In consultation with their advisor, students may also request to have a professor from outside of BU serve as a second reader or third reader by submitting a [Special Service Appointment form](#). Students should plan for the future and familiarize themselves with GRS rules governing the make-up of dissertation committees. These are posted at <https://www.bu.edu/cas/academics/phd-and-mfa-academics/graduation-information/> under the header “Final Oral Exam and Dissertation Draft.”

2. Prepare the Prospectus

Students must successfully submit their prospectus and receive approval within one year of finishing their qualifying exams. It is recommended that students start drafting it while preparing for the exams, in close consultation with their First and Second Readers. Readers commonly review the prospectus several times before declaring it ready for submission.

Students should review the GPR [Content Requirements of a Prospectus](#) (which are outlined in Appendix 1 of this handbook) as well as examples of other students’ successful prospectuses (available as hard copies outside 145 Bay State Road Room 302 or by request in electronic form from the Program Coordinator) before beginning the writing process.

3. Submit the Prospectus

Students must submit a completed copy of the prospectus to the Department Administrator (Wendy) and DGS, before moving on to schedule a prospectus defense.

Final Prospectus Approval

Once the prospectus has been approved, defended orally, and (if applicable) required revisions have been made and approved, the student is required to submit two hard copies of the final prospectus and a completed [GRS Dissertation Prospectus Approval Page](#) to the Department Administrator. The Department Administrator will obtain the Chair or DGS’s signature and submit the materials to the GRS office.

Timeframes for Completion of Approved Prospectus

6-7 semesters (ideal); 8 semesters (maximum)

*Students with advanced standing credit hours should adjust this timeframe accordingly.

*As students proceed to the prospectus, they should also be aware of requirements for grants and fellowships, many of which require a prospectus to be defended before applying.

Writing and Defending the Dissertation

There are multiple important deadlines during the academic year that the student must meet in order to schedule the defense (the “Final Oral Examination”) and, following a successful defense, to file the final dissertation and receive their degree. A student who is planning on graduating must meet all these administrative deadlines in order to qualify to receive the degree on time.

To ensure timely and thorough review of the dissertation, students should submit a complete draft of the dissertation to their first and second readers, if not the full committee, on or before the [deadlines listed on the GRS website](#).

To ensure that all requirements and paperwork filing dates are met, the student must check in with the Department Administrator early in the semester in which they intend to graduate.

After the readers have approved the dissertation for defense, the student must schedule an oral defense in consultation with the First Reader, Department Administrator, and DGS. Students are responsible for any technology and communication needed for the defense.

The student must defend the dissertation before a committee of at least 4 professors. The committee includes the student’s 3-4 Readers as well as the Defense Chair (who is not a Reader). The combination of Readers and Chair must add up to at least 4 (with a maximum of 5 members on the committee), a majority of whom must be members of the GPR faculty. Three weeks prior to the defense, a copy of the dissertation should be provided to each member of the student’s committee. Students should determine the preferred document format (hard copy, Word Document, PDF, etc.) of each committee member before circulating the dissertation. For further guidelines on the defense, please see the GRS website, and note especially the recently updated rules (effective starting Spring 2023). GRS will no longer review dissertation abstracts; but a complete and properly formatted dissertation must be filed with GRS **THREE WEEKS PRIOR TO THE DEFENSE**. See <https://www.bu.edu/cas/academics/phd-and-mfa-academics/graduation-information/#schedule>

Appendix 1: Prospectus Guidelines

General Advice Regarding the Prospectus

The prospectus is a major step toward composing the dissertation and is a key step in the preparation of students for entry into the field of Religious Studies. A successful prospectus describes the dissertation project succinctly, persuasively, and in a manner that an educated non-specialist can understand. As such, the prospectus offers practice at writing for a broad audience of interested readers, a valuable skill when applying for grants, submitting manuscripts to publishers, applying for positions at academic institutions, and so on. The prospectus also offers an opportunity to receive detailed feedback from senior scholars across the discipline.

This is also an opportunity to work collegially with your peers. Students are encouraged to seek advice and feedback from student colleagues and to set up a working group with other students drafting their prospectuses.

Students should expect to revise drafts, in consultation with their First and Second Readers, prior to submission. Please be attentive to proofreading prose, citations, and bibliographies. Students are also encouraged to consider making an appointment with the graduate writing tutors at the [Educational Resource Center \(ERC\)](#) for a final check.

Content Requirements of a Prospectus

A prospectus is a description and justification of research to be undertaken. A good dissertation prospectus is clear and concise, and accessible to all scholars engaged in the academic study of religion. Technical language not widely used in the larger field should be explained (or avoided). The prospectus should demonstrate the student's control of the issues to be investigated, make clear the boundaries of the inquiry, indicate the method(s) to be employed, and describe the significance of the research. A full bibliography must be included in order to display the thoroughness of the preliminary investigation of the problem, the location of the problem in a field of inquiry, and the present state of the research in the field. The prospectus is limited to 12 double-spaced typewritten pages, plus bibliography and appropriate appendices.

Outline of a Successful Prospectus

- **Statement of the Problem**

The prospectus begins with a concise statement of the problem addressed by the proposed dissertation. This section delimits the topic and provides a preliminary dissertation thesis or the central research question to be addressed.

- **Context and Significance of the Study**

This next section explains how the dissertation contributes to the advancement of scholarship and normally includes a literature review that surveys existing research on the topic, identifies an intellectual context, and demonstrates the significance of the proposed study within the established context. The research should be placed not only in a particular field but also within a wider understanding of religion in human history and experience. In short, the question, "So what?" should be cogently addressed.

- **Method(s) of Investigation**

Third, the methodology or theoretical framework of the proposed study is presented. This section explains the method(s) used; describes the legacy, in the specialization, of the method(s); and makes a case for the appropriateness of using the method(s) to carry out the proposed research. While it is not possible to know everything about a research project at the outset, the prospectus should demonstrate awareness of some of the difficulties facing the proposed project and describe the ways the project will overcome known challenges.

- **Structure of the Dissertation**

The final section describes the structure of the proposed dissertation and should include an anticipated chapter outline.

- **Working Bibliography**

The bibliography is a crucial part of a successful prospectus. It indicates how thoroughly the student has investigated the research on the topic, its location within a field of inquiry, and its relation to cognate fields in and beyond the academic study of religion. The bibliography should also include sources and literature published in all the research languages required by the student's Program of Study. Students should also list and comment, where appropriate, on original sources and secondary literature. The bibliography should be organized by category, and a rationale for the organization should be provided in an introductory paragraph. A good working bibliography at this stage of research is typically at least 15 pages long.

- **Appendices**

Any tests, questionnaires, or other such instruments to be used in the proposed investigation should be included as appendices.

Please also include a brief statement of the estimated timeline for completing the various stages of the research and writing, including planned graduation date.

- **Formatting**

The prospectus must include a title page with the title of the project, the name of the student, his or her specialization, the names of the first and other Readers, and the date of submission.

The body should not exceed 12 double-spaced typewritten pages and should use a clear, formal font, such as Times New Roman. Citations should be appropriate to the standards of the field of the student, either parenthetical in-text citations or endnotes. Margins should be 1" on all sides. Pages should be numbered.

Bibliography and citation formats should match the standards in the field of the student, most commonly the Chicago Manual of Style, 15th edition. A handy, shorter reference is Kate Turabian et al., *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Note: If the body uses an in-text parenthetical citation system, the student must include a separate bibliography listing only those sources cited in the body; a prospectus that uses endnotes will include all this information in the notes.

It is not necessary to follow the above list to the letter. That is, a particular prospectus need not begin with a section entitled "Statement of the Problem" followed by one on "Context and Significance of the

Study,” and so on. Instead, individual prospectuses should follow the contours of the proposed project and field. However, students should keep in mind that all of the issues discussed above must be addressed and within a clear, discernible structure.

Appendix 2: Dissertation Defense Guidelines

GPR Final Oral Examination Guidelines (AKA: the “Dissertation Defense”)

At Boston University, “Students undergo final oral examinations in which they defend their dissertations as valuable contributions to knowledge in their fields and demonstrate a mastery of their fields of specialization in relation to their dissertations” (<https://www.bu.edu/cas/academics/phd-and-mfa-academics/graduation-information/>).

This means that a proper defense in the GPR will include robust conversation about the dissertation in question, carried out by an examining committee of at least four faculty who have read the dissertation carefully. The ultimate goal is to determine whether the student has achieved the learning goals of our program, especially the first two:

1. Produce an original and substantial contribution to knowledge in the field of religious studies, utilizing appropriate skills of research.
2. Demonstrate a rich generalized mastery of the field’s subject matter and the variety of methods employed by its practitioners.

As of Spring 2023, GRS has streamlined and simplified the processes for scheduling the Final Oral Defense. These rules can be found at the link provided above, and the GPR’s practices are now fully in accordance with these simplified policies. We reiterate here one point that is commonly misunderstood. The committee consists of “readers” and “examiners.” The term “readers” refers to those members of the committee who have been deeply involved in the project (usually from the prospectus stage), reading drafts all along, and who will sign the dissertation “readers” page. The term “examiners” refers to committee members who are brought in at a later stage, as the dissertation is nearing completion, to ensure that the committee has at least four members. One of these examiners—someone other than the first or second reader—will serve as the “Chair” of the defense, officially running the proceedings. **All committee members must receive the dissertation in advance and are expected to have read the dissertation carefully before the defense.** (The schedule of defense form—due three weeks in advance of the defense—will not be signed or forwarded without confirmation that the completed work has been distributed a month in advance of the defense.)

The GPR provides guidance on two aspects of the Final Oral Defense. First, we have some basic practices we typically follow; second, we have some guidance regarding guests at the Final Oral Defense.

A. The Order of a Typical Final Oral Defense

The final oral examination begins and ends with the examining committee meeting in “executive session”—committee alone, without the student or any guests (if welcomed, see below) in the room.

The formal portion of the Final Oral Examination in the GPR typically begins with an introduction to the project by the student; the student and first reader should agree in advance on a timeframe for this (e.g., 5 - 10 minutes). Each member of the examining committee will then be given a pre-set amount of time to pursue lines of questioning arising from the dissertation. There is no set order for who asks questions first, nor must the time be divided equally. Ideally, the First Reader and the committee chair will work together to determine a schedule in advance, so that the student will come to the exam with a good sense of the order of operations and the relative timing devoted to each examiner. When each examiner has asked their questions, additional time (if any) can be devoted to additional discussion at the discretion of the chair. When the conversation has concluded, the student and all guests will be dismissed from the room while the committee members privately deliberate, to determine whether the project meets the standard (“an original and substantial contribution of knowledge”) and whether the student has successfully defended their work. Constructive feedback generated will be categorized in three levels of importance regarding the status of the dissertation and the degree: (1) revisions that the committee requires to be completed before the final submission of the dissertation; (2) revisions that the committee recommends (but does not require) be completed before the final submission, and (3) revisions that the committee suggests the author consider when moving beyond the dissertation and towards a publishable monograph. The committee should also consider carefully whether the abstract clearly and adequately summarizes the work. When this feedback is compiled, the student is admitted back into the room to receive word of the committee’s deliberations. Feedback can at that point be summarized orally and shared in its entirety, whether orally or by electronic communication.

Reasonable variations on the above are welcome, but it is the firm hope of the GPR that students coming to the defense will have a very good sense of what will happen (even though they won’t know the specific questions they will be asked).

B. Policies and Practices regarding Guests at the Final Oral Defense:

The first reader and the student will also determine, well in advance, whether guests will be welcome at the defense. In the GPR, there is no presumption that defenses are either open or closed, but we recommend the following:

- 1) Family guests are discouraged. The ideal times for family to celebrate with the candidate is at graduation. Some students have felt strongly that they want family (especially a partner present). This is certainly understandable. But it is also important that such guest(s) be prepared in advance for what they will witness: challenging questions posed to the candidate, in the spirit of improving the manuscript and probing the candidate’s control of the material.
- 2) Including a small number of peer/student guests (two to five) is encouraged but is not required. Students advancing toward their own degrees have benefited from seeing the process in action; students undergoing the defense have valued having peers with them for moral support during and for debriefing after. We hope that those students wanting this experience will have the chance; we also respect the choices of those students who may wish their defense to be closed.
- 3) Additional guests—typically students or faculty in the GPR—may also be welcomed, at the mutual discretion of the student and first reader. All guests to be welcomed (again, at the mutual discretion of

student and first reader) will need to register/RSVP in advance and will be limited to the comfortable seating capacity of the room in question. Guests must understand the necessity of arriving well before the commencement of the defense process.

- 4) Guests at a dissertation defense--whether students or partners or graduate colleagues--will not be participants in the process. Questions of the candidate will come only from the examiners, who will all have read the dissertation carefully in advance. If the readers and candidate wish to allow time for questions from guests at the end, this should be decided in advance. Most GPR faculty discourage this practice, but it is not disallowed.
- 5) At the beginning and end of the defense—when the committee meets privately—any and all guests will be asked to leave the room.