Political Science “Major Area Paper” Guidelines

All doctoral students must write one “major area” paper; this requirement must be completed no later than 90 days after the successful completion of the written comprehensive exam requirement. Major area paper topics must be related to the student’s proposed dissertation interests, and must be approved by the Director of Graduate Studies as well as the student’s dissertation chair. Similar to passing comprehensive exams, successfully completing the “MAP” is a step which each student must take prior to advancing to candidacy and writing a dissertation.

The primary purpose of the MAP is for the student to demonstrate competency within the specified “major area.” Major areas are distinct from, and thematically narrower than, exam fields. A major area might be a substantial topic within an exam field (such as American presidential politics or comparative government formation), or a substantial topic which crosses subfield lines (e.g., game theoretical treatments of legislative politics).

There are two different ways a student may demonstrate competency in their major area: writing (1) a critical review of the literature within the student’s major area or (2) an original research paper which contributes to (or at least tests a hypothesis related to) the major area. For the first option, students should be sure to discuss the reach and limitations of the existing literature in terms of questions asked, concepts raised and answers offered, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the existing concepts and answers. For the second option, students may choose to test alternative hypotheses stemming from the existing literature or probe different methods or measurements that stem from the literature as well as offering alternatives that will hopefully contribute to the existing literature. Students must consult with and obtain approval from their MAP committee when determining the paper format. A completed MAP should be approximately the length of a publishable scholarly article.

Students should meet with their MAP committee members as soon as possible after successfully passing comprehensive exams to discuss the committee’s expectations for the paper. The student and the committee should discuss and obtain agreement upon the following points: the MAP topic, the scope of the major area, the format of the paper (including whether it will be a critical review or an original research paper), length guidelines, and any additional expectations or requirements the committee wishes to specify. In general, a student’s MAP committee will be available for verbal consultation, but not to read drafts of the paper.

Note that although the official requirement is that the MAP be completed no later than 90 days after completing comps, it is not necessary to wait until comps are completed for students to start working on (or even completing) their MAPs. Indeed, in nearly every case the work a student does for the MAP will help him or her prepare for exams. Students may not turn in as a MAP a previously submitted and graded seminar paper. However, students and their committee may decide that it would be appropriate for the student to base the MAP on a paper that he or she wrote in a graduate seminar, pending substantial revision or expansion of the original paper;
similarly, committees may approve the student basing their MAP on a previous conference paper, published article, or MA thesis. These issues should also be discussed at the initial MAP committee meeting, and students must obtain formal approval from the committee before utilizing any previous work.

The MAP will be evaluated by three members of the faculty – two who are specialists in the area and one who is not. The student’s dissertation chair will be one member of the committee; the other specialist will also be chosen by the student in consultation with the graduate director. The third, “outside” member of the committee will be chosen by the graduate director.

MAPs will be due to MAP committees no later than 90 days after the successful completion of comprehensive exams; the specific due date will be announced at the start of every semester by the graduate director. MAPs will be graded as either “Passing” or “Inadequate.” If a MAP is determined to be “inadequate,” students will be allowed one chance to revise the paper based on the committee’s feedback. This revised paper is due no later than 30 days from when the grade was communicated to the student. Failure to submit a passing MAP after the revision period will result in dismissal from the doctoral program.

As with all work a student completes in the doctoral program – including for courses and comprehensive exams – the MAP should reflect the student’s original work. Any hint of plagiarism, or other potential violation of the University’s Academic Honesty Policy, will result in severe consequences including the potential of dismissal from the program.

Successful completion of the MAP requirement means that the student has completed the necessary steps to advance to candidacy and enter the dissertation stage of the program. The student should formally create their dissertation committee within 30 days of completion of the MAP requirement, and submit to the graduate director a completed “Declaration of Intent” form. We also encourage all students to meet with their dissertation committee within this time period. Students must then defend their dissertation proposals within 90 days of successfully completing the MAP requirement.