

PhD Student Handbook (2025-2026)

A student must complete a minimum of 18 courses (the actual number of courses may be higher depending on the language proficiency of the student). These include the required language courses, the three required departmental seminars, and other courses relevant to the student's chosen specialty. The latter may include courses offered in other departments as well as in SALC. Students may not receive a grade of 'R' in any of the courses counted among the required 18 courses, and none of these may be an informal reading course. These requirements must be fulfilled before admission to candidacy.

Before being admitted to candidacy, PhD students must also fulfill the following requirements which are given in further detail below:

- meet general language requirements;
- complete the three required departmental seminars;
- receive a passing grade on the two qualifying papers;
- formulate two reading lists and pass an oral examination based on them; and
- write and defend a dissertation proposal.

Students with prior graduate work in South Asian languages and civilizations or those holding a relevant Master's degree may petition at the end of their first year to satisfy a portion of the 18-course requirement. Only courses taken at accredited institutions will be accepted, and the petition will have to be approved by the departmental Director of Graduate Studies.

The PhD is awarded following approval and successful defense of the completed dissertation.

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Time to Candidacy and Time to Degree

Students are expected to reach candidacy in year 3 or 4 of registration. According to Divisional policies, students who do not reach candidacy by the start of their sixth year will not be allowed to continue in their program.

Beginning with students who matriculate in Autumn 2025 (or Summer 2025 if students matriculate in one quarter early), the mandated time to degree is seven years. If a student requires an additional year to complete the degree, they should apply in writing to the Chair and Director of Graduate Studies by Friday of week 6 of their first quarter of their seventh year. The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), in collaboration with the dissertation chair of the student, and in consultation with other dissertation committee members, will make a decision regarding the extension by Friday of Week 9 of that quarter.

Students who do not defend their dissertation **by the end of the summer of their seventh year** (if they have not applied for or been granted an extension) or by the end of their eighth year (if granted an extension) will be withdrawn from the program.

Students who are administratively withdrawn for reaching maximum time limits and who go on to complete their dissertations later may petition the Department to be allowed to defend the dissertation and receive the degree per this policy: <https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/registration-for-students-in-phd-programs/time-limit-administrative-withdrawal/>.

Language Requirements

The Department encourages varied research devoted to the ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary cultures of South Asia. All research in the department has as its main prerequisite suitable advancement in the languages appropriate to a student's chosen field of specialization.

The languages in which the department presently offers concentrations are Bangla, Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Tibetan, and Urdu. Instruction in Persian and Arabic is also available through the Department of Middle Eastern Studies. Courses may occasionally be offered in other languages; special arrangements must be made in advance with the instructors of these languages, and students must petition the Department in order to count these languages for their requirements.

Three languages are required: (i) the South Asian language of concentration (the major language); (ii) a second South Asian language relevant to the student's program of study (the minor language); and (iii) a third language of scholarship (e.g. French, German, Hindi, Japanese, or Arabic).

Students are required to achieve advanced proficiency in their major language. Students who already possess both linguistic competence and analytical skills in their major language should contact the language instructor for placement at the appropriate level. However, at least one year of advanced language courses in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (with an average grade of at least B+) has to be successfully completed regardless of the student's level of language competence.

In their minor language, students are required to achieve a proficiency equivalent to at least 2 years of formal study at the University of Chicago (with an average grade of at least B+). Again, students who already possess a knowledge of their minor language should contact the language instructor to determine the level of proficiency. Students who already possess a proficiency level equivalent to 2 years of formal study at the University of Chicago may fulfill the requirement by taking an exam without prior coursework. The standards for passing the exam and fulfilling the requirement will be communicated to the student in advance.

The student's selection of the major and minor language will have to be approved by the Director of Graduate Studies. While the choice of the major language will obviously depend on the

student's research projects, students are strongly encouraged to consider for their minor language one that opens up new perspectives and that will help to gain a broader knowledge of South Asia. Students are expected to demonstrate satisfactory progress each quarter in the required language courses.

For the third language, the language of scholarship, students should choose a language on the basis of how useful it will be for their chosen field of study. Students should make a case in writing, for the approval of the Director of Graduate Studies, that a significant body of secondary literature relevant to their primary area of research has been or is being produced in that language. Once the choice of language has been approved, proficiency in reading the language of scholarship is typically assessed by an examination administered by the Office of Language Assessment or by the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, as appropriate to the language in question. For Persian and Arabic, students should contact the Department of Middle Eastern Studies.

Note that all language requirements must be satisfied for a student to enter into candidacy.

Required Departmental Seminars

Competence in South Asian languages and civilizations is demonstrated as much by close familiarity with South Asian texts as by a broad knowledge of the plurality of South Asian practices and traditions. To this end the PhD program includes three required departmental seminars, consisting of the two "Research Themes" courses and the course "South Asia as a Unit of Study." These seminars are taught in a two-year cycle. The three required seminars must be completed in the first two years.

These required departmental seminars are to be taken by students in the first and second years of the doctoral program. Students must enroll in each of these courses as they become available,

until the requirement is met. Students cannot opt out of a course when it is offered with the expectation of taking an equivalent course later.

1. & 2. Research Themes in South Asian Studies

These two seminars will each approach a broad theme in South Asian studies from a perspective transcending any narrow focus on a specific language or region. The objective is to introduce students to current research themes and methods pertinent but not exclusive to the study of South Asia. Seminar topics include South Asian court cultures, genres, material aspects of textual culture, poetic theories, political thought, translation practices, etc. The topics will be indicated in the subtitles of the courses.

3. South Asia as a Unit of Study

This course aims to acquaint students with major historical and methodological questions pertaining to the field of South Asian languages and civilizations. Topics include the history of Orientalism, colonial forms of knowledge, South Asia in a global context, etc. This course will be offered in alternate years.

Exams

Qualifying Papers

In their first year of study, students are required to submit a qualifying paper on a subject agreed upon with a faculty member. This paper should demonstrate the student's ability to write scholarly prose, to formulate a clear research argument, and to situate it within the context of secondary literature relevant to the topic. It must be submitted during the second week of the Spring quarter of the first year. The length of this paper must be 5,000 to 6,000 words (see below for details). There are two grade options for this first qualifying paper:

- No Pass: The student will be placed on Academic Probation and be given one more opportunity to rewrite the qualifying paper and have it be evaluated as passing quality. If the paper is not rewritten by the deadline and/or the paper is deemed to not be a Pass, the student will be administratively withdrawn from the program.
- Pass: The student continues in the program.

In their second year of study, students are required to submit a second qualifying paper on a subject agreed upon with a faculty member. This paper should demonstrate the student's ability to formulate a research topic involving primary materials, to argue its importance and to situate it within a history of scholarship, to articulate the principal questions of theory and method relevant to this topic, and to present conclusions in a clear and precise manner. It must be submitted in the second week of the Spring quarter of the second year. The length of this second paper must be 8,000 to 10,000 words (see below for details).

There are three grade options for the second qualifying paper:

- No Pass: The student will not move on in the program, but may decide to rewrite the paper to have it evaluated for a “Pass with terminal MA” in an agreed-upon timeframe.
- Pass with terminal MA: The student will not move on in the program, but will receive the terminal MA degree, if all the other requirements of the MA have been met.
- Pass: The student continues in the program.

The word limits for both qualifying papers are strictly enforced, and submissions above the limit will not be accepted. The word limit includes the text and references (footnotes or endnotes), but does not include the list of references (the bibliography), which is required. Students should consult with the first reader of the paper about the appropriate citation style; the Chicago Manual of Style should be followed as a default. The papers should be double-spaced with one-inch

margins and set in a twelve-point font. Students should also consult with the first reader of the paper about appropriate standards of transliteration for texts in South Asian languages.

The evaluation of the second qualifying paper is part of a holistic annual review with faculty. A student will either move on from this review to continue work on the PhD, or exit the program with a terminal MA. This decision will be based on the student's progress over the course of the first two years, including the qualifying papers.

There are two readers for each of the qualifying papers. The student should approach a potential first reader by the end of the Autumn Quarter of the year in which they will submit the paper.

The first reader's responsibilities include reading and commenting upon at least one draft of the qualifying paper before its submission. The second reader will be selected and appointed by the Chair of the Department in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies. The exact submission date of the qualifying paper will be communicated to first and second year students in the Autumn quarter.

MA Degree

Upon successful completion of the two qualifying papers, students may apply for the MA degree. For the degree to be awarded, students must have completed, in addition to the qualifying papers, (1) the three required departmental seminars, and (2) the major language requirement. There can be no outstanding Incomplete grades. It is very strongly recommended that students avoid Incomplete grades at all times.

Reading Lists and Oral Examinations

While the program asks students to pursue specialized research in their area of concentration, it is essential that they do this in relation to a broad understanding of the cultural and historical context in which their objects of specialized study are situated. The Department therefore

requires oral examinations on the basis of two reading lists in (1) a major area of study, and (2) a minor area of study.

Each of the student's two reading lists is to be designed in consultation with one or more members of the SALC faculty in a given area. No one faculty member should serve as sole adviser for both lists, and the two lists must be on clearly different areas. The first must deal with an important aspect of the literary, cultural or other history of the student's principal area of research. The second must pertain to an area of South Asian studies other than his or her field of concentration. The reading lists should not exceed twenty books and should constitute a serious, deep, and broad set of readings in important issues in the area of study. The relative weight of primary as opposed to secondary texts should be a matter of consultation between the student and the faculty member(s) concerned.

Each of the two reading lists in their final form must be approved and signed by the faculty member(s) who supervised their preparation. The two signed lists must be shared with the Chair and the Director of Graduate Studies of the Department for verification that the lists meet all the formal requirements. An approved and signed copy of each will be deposited in the student's permanent file. These signed copies must be submitted to the departmental office no later than thirty days before the proposed date of the oral examination. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the reading lists are filed in time.

The faculty members who approve the reading lists serve as examiners for the oral examinations, which are normally taken in the Winter or Spring Quarter of the student's third year. The two exams are administered in one session; each is approximately 45 minutes long. There are two grade options for each of the two oral examinations:

- No Pass: The student will be placed on Academic probation and will retake the exam on a date agreed upon in consultation with the examiners.

- Pass: The student continues in the program.

A student must receive a “Pass” in both exams to continue in the program. The oral exams can only be retaken once. A “No Pass” on the second try will result in the student being administratively withdrawn from the program.

Joint Degrees

Students in SALC can pursue a joint degree with another doctoral program in the University, typically in the Humanities or Social Sciences Division. Undertaking a joint degree is a lengthy and complex process that requires approval at every stage. Permission to pursue a joint degree is a privilege extended only to those students who have demonstrated in their work a record of excellence and who can convincingly demonstrate that they will be able to complete the requirements for each of the two degrees within the maximum time period a student is accorded. Students may only start the process of applying for a joint degree after the satisfactory completion of the requirements of the first year of the SALC graduate program.

To embark on a joint degree, students must abide by the set of procedures outlined below:

A strong intellectual case has to be made to the SALC Department as to why a joint degree program is best suited to the fulfillment of the student’s proposed research project. Students should first consult with their advisor(s), followed by conversations with the Chair and Director of Graduate Studies. The student must submit a brief petition (maximum 3 pages) detailing the nature of the research to be undertaken and why training in two doctoral programs is needed. The student’s petition has to be accompanied by a letter of support from the student’s SALC advisor. The departmental decision on a student’s joint degree petition will be made by the entire SALC faculty.

Departmental rules vary widely. Students must consult with the second department to make themselves aware of its rules and requirements.

Students must consult with their advisor(s), the Department Chair, and the Director of Graduate Studies in SALC before consulting members of the second department on the viability of a joint degree program. Students should not assume that taking classes in another department automatically qualifies them for a joint degree.

In the event that approval has been obtained from SALC, the student must be cognizant that they abide by the timeline set out by the department in fulfilling the degree requirements. A joint degree should not delay the student's proposal defense beyond the end of the fifth year.

Joint degrees may take longer to complete and so may affect the student's eligibility for a dissertation completion fellowship and other post-doctoral fellowships. Note that our departmental time to degree policy (7 years for those students entering in SU/AU25 and after) will not be extended for joint degree students without petition.

Students pursuing a joint degree should constitute a committee that has an equal representation from both SALC and the second department. By SALC rules a joint degree committee (in cases where SALC is the home department) should consist of no more than 4 members. Typically, a SALC faculty member and a faculty member from the second department will act as co-chairs of the dissertation committee.

Students must familiarize themselves with the regulations for the Joint Degree Petition Process in the Division of the Humanities.

Related: Joint Degree Programs

The Dissertation Proposal

In order to be admitted to PhD candidacy, a student must write and orally defend a detailed dissertation proposal prepared under the supervision of the dissertation chairperson. Students must have completed all requirements: at least 18 courses, including the three required

departmental seminars, as well as the language requirements, and the qualifying papers. All incompletes and blanks on the student's transcript for required courses must have been removed (note incompletes and blank grades cannot be carried over from one year to another – any missing grade will switch to an unofficial withdrawal – “UW” – at the start of the next academic year and bears no credit), and the new grade recorded in the Registrar's Office prior to the date of the proposal defense. Admission to candidacy must take place no later than the start of the sixth year of the student's program, although students are strongly encouraged to plan to defend their proposals in years 3 or 4.

Note that, in accordance with Departmental requirements, students must pass the examination in the language of scholarship before being admitted to candidacy. Furthermore, most of the external grants which are available to support dissertation research (Fulbright, AIIS, etc.) require that a student be admitted to candidacy before taking up the grant.

The proposal should demonstrate a student's awareness of broad theoretical issues and a detailed knowledge of the chosen area of specialization. The dissertation proposal should be 20–25 pages (double spaced) in length. It should provide a clear statement of the scholarly problem to be addressed by the dissertation; the student's theoretical orientation to this problem; a review of previous scholarly work; a provisional outline of the dissertation as a whole; a plan of research, including archives to be consulted, research sites chosen, a timetable, and a bibliography of no more than two pages.

Prior to the proposal defense, the student and the dissertation chairperson (who must be a member of the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations) will settle on the composition of the dissertation committee. This will ordinarily consist of two additional members. At least one of the two additional members of the committee must be a member of SALC; the third may be from any academic department of the University or may be, with the approval of the departmental Chair, from outside the University.

At the discretion of the dissertation chairperson, a fourth member may be added to the dissertation committee. This option should be made available only when genuinely warranted by the intellectual, disciplinary, or practical circumstances of the student's dissertation project, and is subject to the discretion of the departmental Chair and Director of Graduate Studies. In such a case, at least three of the committee members should be members of SALC; the fourth may be from any academic department of the University or may be, with the approval of the departmental Chair, from outside the University.

The proposal must be deposited in the form of a printed paper copy in the departmental office at least two weeks prior to the date of the defense, and an abstract of it must be circulated to all SALC faculty. It is the responsibility of the student to ensure that the proposal and the abstract are deposited by this deadline. The proposal is defended orally before the committee and the Department, with the Chair of the Department presiding; these proceedings are open to students and faculty of the University. One purpose of the proposal defense is to familiarize all the members of the Department with a student's research agenda, and provide an opportunity for them to offer guidance. With successful completion of the dissertation proposal defense, the student is admitted to PhD candidacy.

The Dissertation

After reaching candidacy, the student is expected to make satisfactory progress toward the completion of the dissertation for the remainder of their program. The student should meet with the full committee at least once a year (committee chairs are expected to report to the Director of Graduate Studies on student progress every Autumn Quarter) and will meet with the Chair and Director of Graduate Studies during the annual review every Spring Quarter. Satisfactory progress within the first year of candidacy means having at least one dissertation chapter approved by the committee. Failure to do so will result in the student being put on academic probation (see below).

It is expected that the dissertation will represent a substantial and original contribution to the study of South Asian languages and civilizations. Upon completion of the dissertation, the student defends it orally before the members of the dissertation committee, and the Department, with the Chair of the Department presiding. Students will follow the guidelines of the University's Dissertation Office in planning the date of their defense, and in formatting the dissertation. The student and each member of the committee must agree to hold the defense and agree upon a date for the defense.

Three weeks before the scheduled defense, the student must submit a hard copy of the dissertation to each member of his or her committee and the departmental administrator. This task is solely the responsibility of and at the expense of the student. This copy will be a complete, formatted dissertation, with the preliminary pages (other than acknowledgements), main body of work, conclusion, and end matter included in their entirety, and properly formatted. This copy of the dissertation should be printed on standard white paper and should conform to the requirements outlined by the University's Dissertation Office. The defense will be cancelled if these standards are not met.

The defense proceedings are open only to the University community. They normally last 90 minutes for a committee of three faculty members or 120 minutes for a larger committee, and begin with the candidate's presentation of the thesis, which should take no more than being allowed to speak for no more than 15 or 20 minutes. **Grades are awarded by vote of the dissertation committee.** Three grades are available:

- Pass without revisions;
- Pass with minor revisions: the student may revise and submit the dissertation without further approval of the committee;

- Pass with major revisions: the student must obtain the committee's final approval of suggested revisions before final approval of the dissertation will be recorded;
- No Pass: the student will exit the program without having received the PhD.

Related: Dissertation Office

Degree Completion Plan

For students who have reached candidacy, the Degree Completion Plan form provides a space for them and their departments to document the progress they plan on making in order to complete their program inclusive of their dissertation. Departments will review previously submitted completion plans, and advise students appropriately as needed.

The plan must clearly, realistically, and in detail outline work that has been completed and work that remains to be done before defending the dissertation. It is to take into consideration pedagogical teaching requirements, coursework and outstanding grades, departmental milestones or qualifying exams, research, time needed for write-up, securing copyright permissions, and any other circumstances that may affect progress.

The plan must be discussed and agreed upon by both the student and the chair of the dissertation committee in consultation with the department chair and/or director of graduate students if needed.

The progress of each student at every level in the SALC graduate program is reviewed annually in a special meeting of the department faculty, following individual sessions in which the Department Chair and Director of Graduate Studies meet with each student to discuss any matters relevant to the student's progress and plans.

Satisfactory Academic Progress and Academic Probation

Students are expected to make satisfactory academic progress throughout the course of their degree. During the first two years of the program, academic progress is evaluated by the Director of Graduate Studies, in consultation, if necessary, with the instructors of the courses which the student has taken and the readers of the student's qualifying papers. Students who have fulfilled their course requirements and are no longer taking a full course load are automatically enrolled for "Advanced Studies," and the Director of Graduate Studies submits a grade (S = Satisfactory, U = Unsatisfactory) in consultation with the faculty with whom the student is working.

Unsatisfactory academic progress at any stage of the program can lead to the student being placed on Academic Probation. This is a status that is intended to get the student "back on track" in terms of completing requirements in a satisfactory way. Students on academic probation will be provided in writing a statement regarding the timeline in which requirements need to be met to return to good academic standing and the consequences if those requirements are not met satisfactorily, including administrative withdrawal. We hope and expect that students placed on Academic Probation will go on to successfully complete their degrees.

Room Reservations

Affiliated students may reserve rooms controlled by the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations on a first-come, first-served basis. Priority will be given to departmental academic and/or social programming. Room reservations must fall within building operating hours.

All room requests for the purposes of administering the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the University and GSU-UE should be directed through the [UChicagoGRAD Room Reservation Form](#).

To reserve space, students must email Isaac Rainey, Department Administrator, with the following information:

- Name and email of the person leading the event
- Title of the event
- Description of event
- Date of event
- Start and end time(s) of the event
- Estimated number of attendees
- Preferred room
- If there will be any food served

Student Manual

The [Student Manual](#) is the official statement of University policies, regulations, and expected standards of student conduct that are applicable to all students. While students should be familiar with the manual as a whole, the following are commonly referenced by graduate students: [Student Life & Conduct](#), [Leaves of Absence](#), [University Grievance Policy for Graduate Students](#), [Policy on Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Misconduct](#), [Policy on Title IX Sexual Harassment](#), [Policy on Religious Accommodation for Missed Classes, Assignments, and Exams](#), [Academic Honesty & Plagiarism](#), [Graduate Student Parent Policy](#), [Registration for Students in PhD Programs](#)

Divisional Manual/policies

The Division of Arts and Humanities student policies can be found [here](#).

Collective Bargaining Agreement

The terms and conditions of employment for certain graduate students at the University of Chicago who are employed to perform instructional or research services will be determined by a

Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) between the University and Graduate Students United (“GSU-UE”) for the duration of the assignment to perform such services. Students can access the CBA and review frequently asked questions about graduate student unionization on the [Provost’s office website](#).

Departmental and Dean of Students Office

Contact information for departmental staff and faculty can be found [here](#). The [Dean of Students Office](#) is available to assist students with support/resources, answer questions/concerns, and provide review of policies and processes.

Concerns and Clarifications

Students with questions related to grievances or disputes, can review the information found [here](#). Students with questions may contact their Department Administrator, Director of Graduate Studies, the [Dean of Students](#), or the Director of Graduate Student Affairs [in UChicagoGRAD](#).