

Graduate Program Handbook for Faculty and Students

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The Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African
Studies (MESAAS)

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This handbook outlines departmental specifics of the graduate program and should be read in tandem with the GSAS [handbook](#), which offers more general information about many procedures and requirements.

All department requirements and deadlines supersede those of GSAS, which are the most basic and minimum requirements of the university.

Note: All students and faculty should keep Thursdays 4-6pm (faculty should also keep 12-2pm) free for department related events. This means that no courses (beyond department colloquia or meetings) should be scheduled or taken during these times.

THE STANDALONE M.A. PROGRAM

Students in the free-standing M.A. program choose an area of focus for their seminars and language courses in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies. Full time study cannot extend beyond 4 semesters.

Requirements

Courses: Thirty (30) points of courses at or above the 4000 level, taken for a letter grade (of B or higher), including either MDES GR5000 (Theory and Methods 1: Politics, Economy and Society) **or** MDES GR5001 (Theory and Methods 2: Literature and Textuality), and MDES GR6008 (Research Colloquium). At least two thirds of the total courses must be in MESAAS. Exceptions to this rule must be approved by both the advisor and DGS. Students who chose not to take Theory and Methods in their first year should enroll in MDES GR5000 (Theory and Methods 1: Politics, Economy, and Society) in fall of their second year.

All second-year students also enroll in MDES GR6008 (the MESAAS Research Colloquium) in their third or fourth semester. The colloquium provides a forum for peer discussion of the M.A. papers or thesis, although the principal academic guidance comes from the thesis advisor.

Language: Proficiency in one MESAAS language, demonstrated by successfully completing a two-semester course at the intermediate (second-year) level or higher with a grade of at least a B, or by passing an equivalency exam.

Note: Elementary and intermediate-level language classes, even when taken as part of satisfying the language requirement, are not graduate-level (4000 or above) classes and therefore do not meet the requirement to take thirty (30) points of graduate courses.

Residence Units: Completion of two full residence units is required for granting the MA degree.

The M.A. Papers or MA Thesis: By the end of the first year MA students are expected to have selected an MA advisor, who guides them in revising two papers or a thesis for an MA exam. If they hope to finish the MA in three semesters they should make significant progress on these revisions during the summer after their first year.

Students have two options for completing the M.A. degree requirements. They may submit two revised seminar papers for review and discussion before a committee at the end of the third or fourth semester (determined in consultation with the DGS). These are papers typically written in seminars in their first year (at least one must be MESAAS), revised, typically during the following summer, in the light of written comments from the instructor. Each paper should be about 8,000 words in length and at least one paper should demonstrate a capacity for original research. The M.A. papers review committee consists of professors in whose courses the papers were written (if one was written for a course outside the department, the other committee member is the advisor). Students must submit an [application](#) to the department for the oral review of their Master's papers no later than three weeks before the review.

The other option is to write an M.A. thesis, which is submitted in the 3rd or 4th semester (determined in consultation with the DGS). The thesis is defended before two faculty readers (the MESAAS thesis advisor and a second reader). The thesis is about 30-40 pages and usually builds on a seminar paper written during the first year.

There are no grades for the M.A. thesis. Students are awarded either a "pass" or a "fail" on the strength of the written work and oral defense. A digital copy of the thesis or papers is to be deposited in the department.

Students must fill out an [application for the MA degree](#) with the Registrar at the beginning of the term in which the MA will be completed. Please click through to SSOL to apply for the degree.

The Part-Time Free-Standing M.A.: Students registering part-time may take up to four academic years (eight semesters) to complete the degree requirements for the free-standing M.A. degree. Part-time students can meet the two residence unit requirement by accumulating half and quarter residence units. For more information, see [here](#).

One-Year M.A.: On rare occasions, as when students enter the program with advanced language or research skills, it may be possible to complete the course work for the M.A. degree within just two semesters, and complete the Master's thesis/papers over the following summer. In such a case the student should signal their intention to the DGS from the outset, to make sure that all requirements can be met on schedule. For instance, it may be necessary to take both MDES GR5000 and MDES GR6008 in the first semester. A minimum of two residence units (semesters of full-time study) are required for the degree.

Advising: The Director of Graduate Studies is the advisor for all graduate students upon entering the program. Students in the free-standing M.A. program go on to choose another faculty member as their advisor(s), in consultation with the DGS by the end of their second semester. The advisor(s) supervises the writing of the M.A. thesis or revision of the papers (one of which will have been written in the advisor's course), which should be underway during the summer after the first year.

Doctoral Program:

Students in the Ph.D. program earn the M.A. and M.Phil. degree before writing the Ph.D. dissertation. They complete M.A. degree requirements by the end of the third semester and the M.Phil. requirements by the end of the sixth semester. Students are expected to fulfill the program requirements within six to seven years. Students admitted to the Ph.D. program are normally awarded six years of financial support, including full-tuition fellowships and stipends. They may extend their funding to a seventh year with an external grant.

Formal requirements for:

M.A. degree

Courses: Thirty (30) points of courses at or above the 4000 level, taken for a letter grade (of B or higher) by the end of the third semester.

All students are required to take MDES GR5000 (Theory and Methods 1: Politics, Economy, and Society), offered in fall semester, and MDES GR5001 (Theory and Methods 2: Literature and Textuality), offered in spring semester. In consultation with the DGS, they design a program of additional seminars and language courses. Students must also enroll in MDES GR6008 (MESAAS Research Colloquium), a forum for peer discussion of M.A. papers or theses, in the third semester. At least two thirds of the total courses must be in MESAAS (or taught by MESAAS faculty). Though a B grade indicates basic requirements have been met, generally only A level grades signal strong academic performance.

Language: Proficiency in one MESAAS language, demonstrated by successfully completing a two-semester course at the intermediate level or higher with a grade of at least a B, or by passing an equivalent exam.

Note: Elementary and intermediate-level language classes, even when taken as part of the preparation for satisfying the language requirement, are not graduate-level (4000 or above) classes and therefore do not meet the requirement of thirty (30) points of graduate courses.

Residence Units: Completion of two full Residence Units is required for granting the MA degree. A Residence Unit is one semester of full-time study.

Students must fill out an [application for the MA degree](#) with the Registrar at the beginning of the term in which the MA will be completed. Please click through to SSOL to apply for the degree.

Advisor and Ph.D. faculty sponsor: The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) is the advisor for all graduate students upon entering the program. In consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies, each student asks an approved Ph.D. faculty sponsor in MESAAS to become the student's sponsor, usually by the end of the first year, but no later than the start of the third semester.

The M.A. Papers: Students in the Ph.D. program complete the requirements for the M.A. degree by submitting two seminar papers for review and discussion before a committee of two MESAAS faculty members no later than the end of the third semester. The work consists of two seminar papers written during the student's first year or during the summer, (at least one must be in a MESAAS seminar), revised, typically during the following summer, in the light of written comments from the seminar instructor. Each paper should be about 8,000 words in length and at least one paper should demonstrate a capacity for original research. The M.A. papers review committee is formed of the professors in whose course the papers were written (if one was written for a course outside the department, the other committee member is the advisor). Students must submit an [application](#) to the department for the oral review of their Master's papers no later than three weeks before the review.

The committee awards either a "pass" or a "fail" on the strength of the written work and the oral review. A pass may be awarded either with or without permission to continue to the M.Phil. In the case of exceptional MA papers, considered to be of publishable quality, the committee may recommend departmental "distinction."

M.Phil. degree

Courses: A second semester of MDES GR6008 and at least four MESAAS (or advisor-approved) courses at or above the 4000 level beyond the 30 points (obtained through course work or Advanced Standing) required for the M.A. degree.

Students generally complete the coursework for the M.Phil. no later than fall of the third year. In their second semester of the MESAAS research colloquium students workshop and discuss oral exams, grant proposals, and the dissertation prospectus. As with the MA, at least two thirds of the total courses for the M.Phil. must be in MESAAS. Exceptions to this rule, rarely given, must be approved by both the advisor and DGS. Those awarded advanced standing must be sure to include MDES GR5000 and MDES GR5001 (Theory and Methods 1 and 2) and one semester of MDES GR6008 in their course work for the M.Phil.

Languages: Language requirements for the M.Phil. degree are completed by the end of the third year. The dissertation sponsor is free to set higher standards,

depending on the student's field and project, but the minimum language requirements are: High proficiency in a first MESAAS language (usually the one used to fulfill the M.A. language requirement), proficiency in a second MESAAS language, and reading competence in a third language (a research language, meaning a modern language other than English in which there is a substantial body of scholarship in the student's field of study). High proficiency is normally achieved by completing a fourth-year language course or the equivalent, and proficiency by completing coursework at the intermediate (second-year) level or the equivalent. Reading competence is demonstrated by taking a proficiency exam, or the rapid readings and translation course (or equivalent) offered by other Columbia language departments.

Grants: Those who plan to conduct research abroad in the fourth year must submit applications for external fellowships by the first half of the third year, and sometimes earlier. This may require preliminary work on the prospectus during the fall, and possibly the preceding summer, at the same time as preparation for the M.Phil. examinations.

Oral Examination: By the end of the second year, they should also have finalized their M.Phil. reading lists. They should reach out to potential examiners to begin planning their lists at the beginning of the spring term their second year. At least two of the three examiners should be members of MESAAS (one will be the advisor).

After completing the required coursework and language training, students take the oral exam, usually at the start of the sixth semester (exam period is the 3 weeks before spring break). The exam is held in three areas, which are determined by the student in consultation with a three-member M.Phil. committee. Reading lists are prepared by the student and each normally covers about twenty-five books or a commensurate number of articles (one book = 4 or 5 articles). In contrast to the dissertation prospectus (see below), which concentrates on a specific scholarly question, a reading list for an M.Phil. area covers a broader range of scholarship, encompassing the main literature and debates in a field of teaching and research.

An [application](#) must be filled out one month prior to the exam and all language requirements must be fulfilled prior to the exam. The MPhil exam is taken on a pass/fail basis. Students may not retake the exam and failure of the MPhil exam will result in the termination of candidacy in the PhD program.

Dissertation Prospectus: Prior to beginning the writing of the dissertation the student submits a dissertation prospectus, by the end of their third year. In its broadest outline the prospectus is a proposal that explains in detail the thesis project, the critical and theoretical instruments used to approach it, and the original contribution that the proposed project entails in terms of the existing relevant scholarship on the subject. Approximately 20-30 pages in length, it should provide a clear statement of the scholarly problem to be addressed (in the form of a central question), a review of existing scholarship that elaborates the significance of the project's central question, and a discussion of the student's theoretical and methodological orientation to the project. The prospectus should also contain a provisional outline of the dissertation as a whole, a plan of research (including discussion of the texts and/or archives to be consulted, research sites chosen), and a bibliography of several pages. The plan of research should also include a tentative plan for the project's development in the form of a research schedule and a tentative chapter outline and description. The aim of the prospectus is to persuade the committee of the significance and plausibility of the proposed research and its guiding question, rather than to anticipate its potential conclusions.

The prospectus is prepared in consultation with the advisor(s) who determine when the document is ready. It is defended orally before at least three members of the candidate's Ph.D. committee (at least two should be MESAAS faculty). A [Prospectus defense application](#) and an electronic copy of the Prospectus must be submitted to the department a minimum of at least three weeks prior to the exam. The Prospectus is circulated to department faculty and graduate students as well, who are invited to attend the defense.

To remain in good academic standing, the department requires students to fulfill M.Phil. requirements by the end of the third year of study (the second year if in cases of advanced standing). In exceptional cases and only with the approval of the DGS and adviser, students may meet these requirements later. But GSAS requires all students to complete M.Phil. requirements no later than May of the fourth year. Students who do not meet this deadline will not have their stipend disbursed for the ensuing fall semester, and will be terminated from the PhD program.

Residence Units: Completion of six residence units (semesters of full-time study).

Post-M.Phil. Ph.D. requirements

After defending the dissertation prospectus, students pursue their research, often in the archives located in MESAAS regions (ideally, with the support of external fellowships). They also establish a timeline for the completion of their dissertation chapters. It is important to develop a regular schedule for writing, and to stay in close contact with the dissertation sponsor and committee throughout the writing process.

All post M.Phil. students must circulate work in progress (chapters/essays/grant proposals) for feedback in the MESAAS Dissertation Colloquium. Thus, post M.Phil. students are required to enroll in the MESAAS Dissertation Colloquium, MDES GR8008, a non-credit course that supports the writing of the dissertation every semester they are in residence. Students not in residence must enroll at least one semester a year. The colloquium provides a forum in which the entire community of MESAAS dissertation writers meets, bridging the department's different fields and regions of research and serving as a valuable forum for feedback. The colloquium convenes regularly, on a schedule that is drawn up at the start of every term, with the oversight of the department chair. Each meeting is devoted to the discussion of one or two pre-circulated pieces of work or some aspect of professional development. All enrolled students share in the process of peer review by reading and providing feedback on others' submissions. As with all graduate seminars, registration alone is not acceptable, lack of attendance and nonparticipation will result in the loss of good academic standing. Students who are abroad on field work/research are exempt, once verified by the DGS. All other cases must be discussed with the DGS and approved in advance on a case by case basis.

Additionally, per GSAS requirements, students must hold Dissertation Progress Meetings. Beginning in the semester following the defense of their prospectus, students should meet once each semester with their advisor and at least one other faculty member on their dissertation defense committee to receive timely feedback on their dissertation work and regular support throughout the dissertation-writing process. The DGS (sometimes in collaboration with GSAS) works to support students in the accomplishment of this expectation.

The advisor(s), in consultation with the student, chooses the four other members of the student's dissertation defense committee. Three must be in place directly after the prospectus defense and the fourth should be selected within a year of the

defense. The fifth should be added no later than the start of the last year of writing. The sponsor (not the student) asks them to serve on the committee and asks one of them to chair the defense when the time comes. The advisor and at least two other members of the committee must be MESAAS; at least one committee member must hold an appointment outside MESAAS. The remaining member can be MESAAS or external faculty.

Rules governing the constitution of the committee and the deadline for distributing the dissertation to its members are specified by the GSAS [Dissertation Office](#). Students should familiarize themselves thoroughly with the dissertation regulations and deadlines well in advance of their defense date.

Abbreviated Doctoral Program Structure

Y1

- Take classes as widely as possible to fulfill degree requirements and work with possible mentors.
- Identify seminar papers to revise for M.A. by end of May. Make revisions over the summer.
- Choose advisor at the end of year.

Y2

- First term – workshop papers in the Research Colloquium, revise and submit, and pass MA exam by mid Dec.
- Second term – establish oral fields with examiners, begin reading, draw up lists. Finalize lists with examiners by end of May.
- Teaching Fellowship

Y3

- First term – apply for research grants for Y4. Prepare for orals.
- Second Term -- Oral exams (end Feb-early March) and Prospectus submission and defense (by end of May)
- Teaching Fellowship

Y4

- Research (on Dissertation Fellowship or outside research grant).

Y5

- Writing.
- First term - apply for external completion grants for Y6.
- Teaching (TF, Core Preceptorship or Teaching Scholars Program), DF (if not already used), or outside grant.

Y6 (and 7 if received outside grant)

- Writing and/or teaching and/or applying for external completion grants.
- First term - Job and Postdoc applications.

Other Information for Doctoral Study

Transfer Credit: In some instances, Transfer Credit may be granted to doctoral students who have completed relevant graduate-level coursework elsewhere. This requires approval of the DGS and advisor. Students are advised to go to the GSAS Transfer Credit [page](#) for further information. Up to eight credits can be transferred, beyond which students obtain one semester of advanced standing (and less time to finish their degree).

Financial Aid: GSAS offers a comprehensive program of financial aid, including fellowships and appointments in teaching, to Ph.D. students. All Ph.D. students admitted to the program receive the prevailing annual stipend, summer research support, and appropriate tuition and health fees through the sixth year, provided that they remain in good academic standing. They receive five years of summer support and can apply to the department for a sixth year under certain circumstances. Ph.D. students are expected to apply for both internal and external grants (grant writing is one of the topics covered in MDES GR6008, the Research Colloquium taken by all pre-M.Phil students). They must apply to external grants (usually for research) at least once in their first four years and often also again to complete writing. Please consult the [Fellowship Listings](#) on the website for a full list.

The Department also offers some support for travel to academic conferences, for summer research and language study, and for nomination for teaching fellowships across the university. When approaching the department they should also apply to GSAS for matching funds [here](#). Students should also apply to the Graduate Council's travel grant [here](#). Students who regularly participate in the department colloquia and contribute generously to peer review are typically given preferential consideration for departmental funding.

Fellowships are sometimes available to support students in specific areas of research. The department currently offers a graduate fellowship in Armenian studies (contact the DGS and DAAF for further details).

Incompletes: To maintain good academic standing, no student may hold more than one incomplete at a time. The mark of IN is given to a student who has satisfactorily met all the requirements of a course except for the completion of the final academic exercise—an assigned paper, report, or the final examination—which a student has been compelled to postpone for reasons that are 1) beyond their control and 2) satisfactory to the instructor. For a course in the

Arts and Sciences, if the student does not submit the outstanding work by the deadline, the mark of IN will be changed to an F, which will not be subject to change at a later date. Official leaves of absence “stop the clock” on Incomplete deadlines. The deadline for students to submit their outstanding work is December 30 for Incompletes earned in the previous spring semester or summer session, and June 30 for Incompletes earned in the previous fall semester.

Teaching requirement: Beginning in the second year, students receive training and experience in teaching by serving as Teaching Fellows to assist faculty in undergraduate classes. The six-year Ph.D. fellowship includes four years in the position of Teaching Fellow. The timeline may vary depending on field research and external fellowships, but most students serve as Teaching Fellows for 3-4 years. GSAS requires doctoral students to serve as a Teaching Fellow for a minimum of one year.

Departmental colloquia: Students and faculty should keep Thursdays from 4-6 pm free, since most Thursdays throughout the academic year the department holds some form of colloquia. MESAAS faculty (and sometimes scholars doing related work from other departments or universities) present their current research in the form of pre-circulated papers at the Faculty Colloquium. Other colloquia (including the Research Colloquium and the Dissertation Colloquium, but also less formal meetings and workshops, as well as job talks) dedicated to the intellectual and professional development of the MESAAS community are scheduled in this time slot. Graduate students are expected to attend colloquia and other talks regularly and to contribute to the intellectual life of the department.

Summer research and language study: The department encourages students to use the summers following the first and second years for intensive language training and for travel abroad to make preliminary investigations of libraries, archives, and other potential research sites. Preliminary research trips are especially intended to aid students in preparing for their grant applications (deadlines are typically the fall of the third year but some are earlier), and drafting their dissertation prospectus.

MESAAS Teaching Fellow Guidelines

Overview

Teaching Fellowships are an important component of the Columbia PhD student experience and afford valuable professional training. MESAAS PhD students begin teaching during their 2nd year in the program and typically teach for a total of three to four years during the course of the PhD.

This document has been prepared at the request of graduate students, to clarify expectations for students and professors. The availability of such a document in every department is also an expectation of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Responsibilities of the Department and Course Faculty

TF assignments. Recognizing that it is in the best interest of students, the department endeavors to assign students to a range of classes over the course of their PhD training. Student input is sought in the process—students are asked for their preferred assignments—but, inevitably, it is not always possible for student preference and curricular needs to be in perfect alignment. The DGS determines the final assignments, which require GSAS approval. For courses to qualify for discussion sections, they must have a minimum of 30 students, per GSAS requirements.

Timely notification. In most cases the department can notify students of their TF assignment at least 6 weeks prior to the start of the semester but a small number of TF assignments can only be provisional until enrollment numbers are clear.

Communication. Faculty members should be in touch with their TF soon after the notification goes out and should indicate their expectations of the TF as early as possible. Faculty should communicate duties and expectations in as much clear detail as possible. (See sample list of possible duties below.) TFs should respond in a timely manner and initiate requests for any needed clarification. The course professor is responsible for monitoring the fulfillment of TF duties and communicating any concerns or issues to the DGS.

Syllabus and coordination of desk copies. The supervising faculty member should provide a draft syllabus and a clear indication of the textbooks 6 weeks before the start of the semester so that TFs can order desk copies; if the full list cannot be provided (syllabi often evolve as the term draws near), then the textbooks used in the early weeks of the course should be identified. In case a course has multiple TFs the course professor should coordinate the ordering of desk copies among them. Many publishers will not send desk copies until they see an order for the book, or will ask for confirmation that the order has been placed. In cases where TFs are unable to procure complimentary desk copies in a timely fashion due to no fault of their own (say, due to a late book order), it seems only right that the faculty member reimburse them for the expenses incurred. There is no problem in charging such expenses to a faculty member's research account.

Pedagogical training. The department, in conjunction with its Lead Teaching Fellows, provides additional resources for graduate student teachers beyond the training offered by GSAS.

Faculty guidance. Supervising faculty are expected to observe a discussion section of new teaching fellows and provide feedback. They should also consider how to make the TF experience pedagogically enriching for the PhD student by providing guidance on grading, the design of course materials, and other matters. Regular meetings between faculty and TFs are valuable for keeping the communication channels open and allowing students to express any concerns they may have about teaching and to seek advice. TFs might also be invited to give a guest lecture and receive feedback on performance.

Evaluation. TFs are provided with an evaluation of their performance and recommendations for improvement at the end of the course.

Reasonable workloads. By GSAS regulations TFs are not permitted to work more than 20 hours/week, and it is better to aim for a workload of 15 hours/week.

Office space. The department provides keys to TF offices at the start of term. TFs must return the keys at the end of their appointment.

Responsibilities of the Teaching Fellow

Timely arrival on campus. At the time of their TFship notification PhD students are given a deadline by which they must return to campus to take up their fellowship. Timely arrival is expected.

Being flexible. Occasionally, unforeseen enrollment spikes and dips require the department to make some last minute changes. So no TF assignment can be fully guaranteed until the 2nd week of classes of a given semester.

Attendance at GSAS and department teacher training sessions. Both GSAS and MESAAS orientations for new Teaching Fellows are mandatory. TFs are also expected to attend workshops on pedagogy that are organized within MESAAS, including those conducted by the DGS or Lead Teaching Fellows.

Use of Columbia CTL resources. The Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning (<https://ctl.columbia.edu/>) is a valuable resource. Students are strongly encouraged to seek out consultations about teaching and to take advantage of various training opportunities and fellowships that the Teaching Center offers.

Desk copies. Most publishers provide free desk copies of their books to instructors who have adopted the material as required reading for a given course. Each press has its own protocols and requirements, which you can easily find out through an internet search. For instance, the search term "Columbia University Press order desk copies" takes you straight to [this page](#), where you can place an order for desk copies after you fill out basic information about the course and expected enrollments, etc.

Some publishers will not send desk copies until they see an order for the book, or will ask for confirmation that the order has been placed, so TFs may need to coordinate with the supervising faculty member.

Faculty instructions and communication. Teaching Fellows are expected to heed the directives of their supervising faculty and stay in regular communication.

Attendance. Unless otherwise instructed, Teaching Fellows are expected to attend all of the classes of the course to which they are assigned.

Hours. The recommended workload of teaching fellows is an average of 15-20 hours/week.

Other duties. Other duties will usually include directing discussion sections, grading assignments, taking attendance at lectures and sections, holding office hours, and meeting with other TFs and the course professor. Every course is structured and run differently, so TFs must consult their course professor on specifics.

Sample Teaching Fellow Responsibilities:

- Organize course roster and grading spreadsheet.
- Assemble readings and organize the Courseworks site.
- Attend all classes and take attendance.
- Teach weekly discussion sections and take attendance.
- Review/assess weekly assignments and grade major assignments per standards jointly set with the professor.
- Hold a minimum of 1 hour of office hours per week.
- Meet with the professor as needed for coordination (typically a brief weekly check-in, or more frequent/longer as needed).