

**Course of Study  
for the Robotics Ph.D. Program**

**by the Faculty of the Ph.D. Program in Robotics**

**Carnegie Mellon University  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213**

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This document defines the degree requirements for students in the Ph.D. Program in Robotics at Carnegie Mellon. It is maintained by the Robotics Program Committee.

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## 1.0 Overview

This document defines the degree requirements for candidates in the Ph.D. Program in Robotics in the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University. The program is designed so that a well-prepared student can complete the doctoral degree in four to five years. The Ph.D. program requires completion of:

- Course Qualifiers (Core and Specialized)
- Research Qualifier
- Thesis

The Course and Research Qualifiers are performed concurrently and are designed to take approximately equal amounts of time during the student's first two years. The doctoral dissertation and its associated research will normally require two to three further years for completion.

The exact degree requirements for a student in the program are as defined in the Course of Study as of the date that student first enrolls in the Robotics Ph.D. Program. Any subsequent changes to the Course of Study may optionally be selected by the student, or the student may choose to retain the previous requirements.

Occasionally, it is appropriate for a student to deviate slightly from the requirements as defined in the Course of Study. A student may request approval for a specific proposed alternative from the Chair of the Robotics Ph.D. Program. Generally, the Robotics Program Committee will review the request and make a recommendation to the Chairperson.

### 1.1 Preparation

The Robotics Doctoral Program accepts strongly motivated and exceptionally talented students from a wide range of educational backgrounds. It is each student's personal responsibility to arrive with, or to acquire rapidly thereafter, basic understanding (at the level of an introductory undergraduate course) in the following areas:

- Mathematics: calculus, linear algebra, numerical analysis, probability and statistics
- Computer Science: programming, data structures, algorithms
- Physics and Engineering: mechanics, dynamics, electricity and magnetism, optics

On request, the faculty will advise incoming students about individually appropriate alternative ways to satisfy these requirements, such as taking an undergraduate course, serving as a teaching assistant in an undergraduate course, or self-study by guided reading and discussion.

## 2.0 Course Qualifiers

Each student must complete the two course qualifiers in:

- Core Courses, consisting of one course from each of four core areas
- Specialized Courses, comprising 48 units of coursework (typically four graduate courses) in a specialized area defined by the student

Courses must be passed with a grade of B-, or better, to fulfill, or contribute to, completion of a course qualifier.

All of the necessary study and evaluation within the Robotics Ph.D. Program are contained in the Course Qualifiers. There are no other examination requirements for the Doctoral degree in Robotics. Students are encouraged to attend additional courses if they and their advisor agree it would be valuable, but such courses are not required for the Robotics degree and may be substituted for required courses only if approved by the Chair of the Robotics Program. Seminars are valuable educational experiences, but do not count for credit toward a course qualifier.

Students in the Robotics Ph.D. Program must register with the university and enroll for credit for all courses taken as part of fulfilling the Course Qualifiers.

### 2.1 Core Course Qualifier

Students must pass four Core Courses, one course from each of the following four Core Areas:

- **Perception:** vision, image sensors, range data interpretation, tactile and force sensors, inertial guidance, and other sensors. Core courses in Perception are 16-720 Computer Vision (section A or B) and 16-722 Sensing and Sensors.
- **Cognition:** artificial intelligence for robotics, knowledge, representation, planning, task scheduling, and learning. Core courses in Cognition are 15-780 Artificial Intelligence, 10-701 Machine Learning and 10-715 Advanced Machine Learning
- **Action:** kinematics, dynamics, control, manipulation, and locomotion. Core courses in Action are 16-741 Mechanics of Manipulation and 16-711 Kinematics, Dynamic Systems, and Control.
- **Math Foundations:** optimal estimation, differential geometry, computational geometry, and operations research. The one core course in this area is 16-811 Math Fundamentals for Robotics.

## 2.2 Specialized Course Qualifier

The Specialized Course qualifier is a sequence of courses chosen by the student to enhance the Core Course subject matter by adding greater depth a particular area. These specialization courses must total at least 48 units of graduate coursework. In this way, the foundational science component of the program is complemented by studies that keep pace with new developments and current topics. The courses should have coherence in subject matter. They may be directly related to the student's thesis research but are not restricted to that topic.

The Specialized Course Qualifier must be defined by the student in conjunction with their Ph.D. Advisor and then approved by the Chair of the Ph.D. Program. Typically the student will identify 4 graduate courses that relate to their interests and will complete and submit a Specialized Qualifier approval form. Students are strongly encouraged to seek approval before completing courses; any course completed prior to approval is at risk and may not be deemed eligible for their qualifier.

**The Specialized Qualifier courses must total at least 48 units**, usually four full-semester graduate courses. The following guidelines cover the usually applicable constraints and will help in composing a Specialized Qualifier sequence.

- Graduate level (600 - 800-level) courses only
- No more than 12 units of non-doctoral (600-level) graduate courses
- No more than 12 units of courses completed by waiver
- No more than 12 units of project-only courses
- No more than 12 units of independent study

(Independent study courses must include syllabus, schedule, assignments, and evaluation criteria. Syllabus submitted with the SQ form.)

- Core courses can be used in the Specialized Qualifier sequence, but only in addition to 48-units of Core Qualifier courses
- Teaching Assistantships cannot be included as Specialized Qualifier courses

Students who have completed graduate courses prior to entering the Ph.D. program and have acquired relevant knowledge and experience that is directly related to their area of specialization may request that some portion of their Specialized Qualifier be waived. For graduate courses completed at Carnegie Mellon, the Chair of Ph.D. Program will review the waiver, this includes

students matriculating from the Robotics Masters programs who may have completed courses eligible for waiver as Core or Specialized courses. For graduate courses completed at any other institution, a subject area expert from the faculty will be assigned for the waiver review.

## **2.3 Waivers**

At Carnegie Mellon courses can only be credited to a single degree; additionally transfer credit for graduate courses completed at other institutions is not granted in robotics. However if students possess all of the knowledge conferred and evaluated in a particular course, they may apply for a waiver to be released from the requirement of enrolling and completing the course.

On the basis of previous experience and knowledge students may apply, by completing a waiver request form, to waive any course. The Chair of the Ph.D. Program will then assign a suitable faculty member to evaluate the request, typically the relevant course instructor or an expert on the topic. The faculty member will then conduct an evaluation which may include oral examination, proctoring of course quizzes or exams including final exams, assigning course exercises, assignments or projects, or any combination of these. They will assess the extent and quality of knowledge and its sufficiency relative to the course objectives and requirements.

In some cases, the faculty may determine that a student has demonstrated significant knowledge of the research area, but not sufficient to waive the course requirement entirely. In such cases, the faculty may grant a conditional waiver, contingent upon additional work, such as successfully acting as teaching assistant in the course or completing some designated project. If a student disagrees with the outcome of the waiver application, he or she may petition the Robotics Program Committee to review the case.

### 3.0 Research Qualifier

The Research Qualifier examines the skills that are important for every researcher to possess including scholarly research, speaking, writing, and teaching. The Research Qualifier typically requires half of the student's time and effort for two years and is to be completed concurrently with the Course Qualifiers. The primary component of the Research Qualifier is supervised research under the guidance of a faculty member who serves as the student's advisor. In addition, the research qualification process includes serving as a teaching assistant, writing a research paper, and presenting a technical talk.

To oversee this process, the student forms a Research Qualifier Committee consisting of three faculty members and one Robotics Ph.D. student who has completed his or her second year of study. One faculty committee member must hold a primary appointment in Robotics. The faculty members should include the student's advisor(s) and one faculty member who is not participating in the student's research. Forms to verify completion of the parts of the Research Qualifier must be filled out by each member of the Research Qualifier Committee (with the exception of the Teaching requirement, which must be filled out by the instructor of the course for which the student serves as teaching assistant).

It is the student's responsibility to ensure that reviews are completed and submitted by the relevant deadline.

The Research Qualifier comprises four components:

- **Research Skills:** The ability to create, explore, refine, and test new ideas in robotics. Students are expected to demonstrate awareness of previous work in their area of research, depth of insight into the problem, creativity in approaching the problem, and substance of results obtained.
- **Speaking:** The ability to communicate in oral presentation. Students are expected to demonstrate the ability to present technical material to a technical audience clearly and succinctly. The presentation must be made at a venue open to the public. Ideally, the Research Qualifying Committee will be in attendance, but committee members may designate proxies, subject to approval by the Program Chair, to evaluate the presentation.

- **Writing:** The ability to communicate in technical writing. A student is expected to produce a conference-length, or longer, paper, in which he/she is the sole, or the primary, author plus a one page executive summary in which he/she is the sole author. The paper should demonstrate a style, organization and clarity that enables researchers in the field to comprehend the problem, method, and results of the research. Students who have written papers prior to entering the Robotics Program may submit them for evaluation, provided they meet the above criteria.
- **Teaching:** The experience of teaching in a classroom environment. This includes demonstration of as many as possible of the following: lecturing, recitation instruction, homework and exam design, grading, office hours, curriculum design. Each student must serve as a teaching assistant in two (2) courses relevant to the Robotics Program. Allowable courses will be defined by the Chair of the Ph.D. Program. Students may arrange to serve as teaching assistant (TA) by contacting the Program Coordinator at the beginning of the semester before the semester in which the student will act as a TA. The student is expected to spend on average 10-15 hours per week or about one quarter of their time on teaching. The instructor should provide feedback to the student concerning the quality of the student's teaching. The instructor should report to the Program Coordinator his or her evaluation of whether the student has carried out the TA activities successfully.

Note that the State of Pennsylvania requires proficiency in English to act as a teaching assistant. Non-native speakers must be evaluated at the CMU Intercultural Communications Centers (ICC) and either Pass or Restricted I on their ITA examination. It is the student's responsibility to achieve this proficiency in time (in their second year) to complete their required TA assignments (in their third year).

### 3.1 Master's Writing and Speaking

Students completing the Master of Science in Robotics (research masters) at Carnegie Mellon University who intend to matriculate into the Ph.D. program may optionally compose their M.S. thesis committee to meet the requirements of the Ph.D. research committee, as described in section 3.0. Upon successfully completing their Writing and Speaking requirements for their M.S. they may waive the Writing and Speaking requirements for their Ph.D. This cannot be done retroactively (a full research qualifier committee must conduct their M.S. thesis examination) and the students must still complete the Ph.D. Research Skills and Teaching components.

## 4.0 Thesis

The doctoral thesis represents a novel and significant contribution to the state of art in robotics. Researching, writing and presenting a thesis is intended to occupy approximately two to three years of activity, with these specific parts:

1. Thesis Proposal
2. Dissertation
3. Oral Defense of the Thesis

The evaluation of all three of these components must be performed by the Robotics faculty, as represented by the student's Thesis Committee. The committee will consist of at least four members: a minimum of three from Carnegie Mellon, at least two of whom must be faculty members affiliated with the Robotics Institute (at least one faculty member with a primary appointment in Robotics) and at least one qualified researcher who is external to Carnegie Mellon. The student's advisor(s) chair the Thesis Committee. The entire composition of the committee must be approved by the Chair of the Ph.D. Program before the Thesis Proposal is scheduled.

Prior to presenting the Thesis Proposal, the four Core Courses of the Course Qualifier and the research, speaking and writing skills portions of the Research Qualifier must be complete.

In the Thesis Proposal, the student is formally asking the faculty for permission to pursue a line of research leading to the Dissertation. To do this, the student must do the following:

- Describe a problem and its importance;
- Summarize and evaluate what previous work has been done by others to solve this problem;
- State what has been accomplished so far by the student and how and why it will lead to the solution, or partial solution, of the problem;
- Describe and state what the student intends to do to complete the dissertation and how long it is expected to take; and
- Identify what novel and significant contributions it will make to the field of Robotics that merit awarding the degree of Ph.D.

The oral presentation of the proposal is made publicly to the entire research community, including particularly the Thesis Committee. The Thesis Committee must then express approval to the Chair of the Program if the proposal is to be accepted.

The **Dissertation** itself is normally preceded by a year or more of research and writing after the proposal. The Dissertation is a scholarly document describing the problem, related work, the student's approach, the results and insights achieved, and the significance of the work. The written dissertation must be presented to the Thesis Committee for approval.

All Course and Research Qualifiers must be completed before scheduling a Thesis Defense.

The faculty of the Robotics program and the local community must receive notice of all thesis presentations at least one week in advance. Therefore, students are required to provide the Program Coordinator with complete information, no less than ten days before the scheduled presentation, including: title, abstract, committee members, on-line location of thesis document and/or hard copy. The Program Coordinator will advertise these presentations on appropriate on-line and physical venues.

When the committee gives preliminary approval, the **Oral Defense** of the thesis can take place. At the Oral Defense, the committee and the entire community will have the opportunity to publicly question the work critically. Finally, the Thesis Committee on behalf of the faculty must decide whether to approve the oral defense and whether, or under what conditions, to accept the dissertation and recommend awarding of the doctoral degree.

A student will be certified for graduation and allowed to attend commencement ceremonies when the thesis is unanimously approved by his or her Thesis Committee and it has been delivered to the Program Coordinator in final form. The student will be awarded the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in the field of Robotics.

## 5.0 Robotics Orientation

The student's research education begins in the Robotics Orientation, which all Robotics students must attend at the beginning of their first semester in the program. The Robotics Orientation is a series of lectures, discussions, and demonstrations that familiarize the students with Carnegie Mellon and the Robotics Program, introduce the research projects and faculty within the Program and affiliated departments, and describe the computational and other resources available to students in the Program. The Robotics Orientation gives students an opportunity to learn what it means to conduct research and to get to know the faculty in the Robotics Program.

## 6.0 Advising and Matching Process

The candidate's advisor will be the faculty member who works most closely with that student. This is usually the most important factor in the student's research education, so choice of an advisor should be based on careful consideration. New candidates and faculty will have extensive opportunity to meet to discuss research, assess compatibility, and evaluate interests. The Matching Committee will match students and faculty advisors based on the preferences of the students and the faculty, subject also to the research agenda (and funding) of the faculty.

In order to make this an informed process, the assignments are made approximately 6 weeks after the Robotics Orientation, giving an ample period of time for the new students to meet the faculty individually. Each new student should use this opportunity to talk to all the faculty whose research interests might overlap those of the student. In this way, the students can learn about all the available research areas of the faculty, and the faculty can meet and talk with the students, before commitments are made. Students and faculty present their preferences for advisor/advisee pairings, and these preferences are used in matching students and advisors. After the Matching process, each student begins guided research under supervision of the advisor.

The duties of the advisor include approving the student's selection of courses, mentoring the student in research, advising the student on methods and skills, providing research opportunities and facilities for the student, and reporting on the student's progress to the faculty.

Advising relationships are mutually agreed and are mutable. It is possible for a student to change advisors with approval of the Chair of the Ph.D. Program. A student may request to switch to a new advisor, to add an additional co-advisor, or to remove a co-advisor. In this way, the student's changing perspectives and research focus can be accommodated by the program. Generally, the student should discuss such matters first with their current advisor(s), then make a tentative agreement with the new advisor(s), then finally request that the new plan be approved by the Chair of the Ph.D. Program. The Chair of the Ph.D. Program is available to help guide the student through this process if needed.

## 7.0 Timeline of Study

It is expected that students will complete both the Course and Research Qualifiers concurrently in two years of dedicated study.

Students who have completed at least half of the required courses in graduate study prior to entering the Program, such as in the Robotics Masters program, will be advanced one year in the timeline for completing the Course Qualifier. This means they are expected to complete remaining courses in only one year of dedicated study.

It is expected that the Thesis Proposal will require about half a year of productive research beyond the Research Qualifier for its preparation and that it will be presented during the student's third year in the Program.

Students who are more than one year beyond the expected completion time for a qualifier or proposal are not making satisfactory progress in the Program. Specifically if not complete with: the Course Qualifier after three years (or two years if advanced due to prior coursework) or the Research Qualifier after three years or the Thesis Proposal after four years, then students are not in good standing and, subject to the judgment of the faculty in the Review of Progress, may be removed from the Program.

## 8.0 Review of Progress

At the end of each semester, the entire faculty of the Robotics Program meets to discuss the record and progress of all students in the Program (for historical reasons called "Black Friday"). The evaluation for each student is based on several factors:

- The student's status at the start of the semester, as expressed by the previous Black Friday evaluation;
- The student's accomplishments during the semester, as described by the student in a form submitted prior to the meeting, and summarized at the meeting by the student's advisor;
- The advisor's evaluation, expressed in the form of a draft of a Black Friday letter that the advisor proposes to be sent to the student;
- Input from other faculty who have had dealings with the student;
- Discussion by the faculty of all of the above factors at the Black Friday meeting, which may include modifications to the letter drafted by the advisor; and

- Final decision by the Chair of the Program based on the above discussion.

After the meeting, the Chair of the Program will send a letter of progress to each student, based on the recommendation of the faculty at the meeting. Through this mechanism, the faculty can report “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” progress, offer recommendations to the student and advisor, set specific progress goals that must be achieved, or, if necessary, terminate a student’s participation in the program. The continuation or conditions of a student’s funding may also be determined in the meeting, as described in the “Robotics Graduate Student Handbook”.

In general, termination will be preceded by at least one unsatisfactory evaluation. An explicit warning (called an “N-1 letter”) will normally be given one semester before any decision to terminate a student’s participation in the program.

In addition to the progress review, the Black Friday meeting and resultant letters provide an opportunity for the faculty to learn about and acknowledge the students’ contributions in service to the Program and achievements such as research publications and awards. Matters of academic policy are frequently discussed at the Black Friday meeting as they arise in the discussion of individual students.

The Black Friday process ensures that each student’s progress is reviewed by the entire faculty, and not only by the advisor. The Black Friday process involves a careful consideration by the faculty of each student’s case. If the student wishes to appeal the decisions reflected in their Black Friday letter, the student should state their perspective in a request to the Chair of the Program to review the case again. The Chair will undertake such a review, in consultation with the faculty as appropriate, and issue a written response to the student. If the student is not satisfied with the Chair’s response, it may be appealed as described in the Student Handbook for Carnegie Mellon University.

## **9.0 Master’s Degree in Robotics**

The Robotics Doctoral Program at Carnegie Mellon is principally a Ph.D. program. However a student who is working towards a Ph.D. may receive the degree of M.S. in Robotics by completing the requirements as defined by the current Masters Program course of study. This M.S. degree may be completed as a terminal degree or may be granted while still continuing to the Ph.D. degree.

## A. Core Courses

### A.1. Perception Core Courses

- **16-720: Computer Vision.** Topics covered include image formation and representation, camera geometry and calibration, multi-scale analysis, segmentation, contour and region analysis, energy-based techniques, reconstruction of based on stereo, shading and motion, 3-D surface representation and projection, and analysis and recognition of objects and scenes using statistical and model-based techniques.
- **16-722: Sensing and Sensor.** The principles and practices of quantitative perception (sensing) illustrated by the devices and algorithms (sensors) that implement them. Learn to critically examine the sensing requirements of proposed applications of robotics to real problems, to specify the required sensor characteristics, to analyze whether these specifications can be realized even in principle, to compare what can be realized in principle to what can actually be purchased, to understand the engineering factors that account for the discrepancies, and to design transducing, digitizing, and computing systems that come tolerably close to realizing the actual capabilities of available sensors.

### A.2. Cognition Core Courses

- **15-780: Artificial Intelligence.** Introduction to Artificial Intelligence tailored toward the algorithms and applications of robotics, manufacturing, and engineering disciplines. Strong focus on modern numerical approaches to AI and robotics, including Bayes nets, classical decision-theoretical problems such as scheduling, and optimal and learning control of Markov systems. Motion planning and spatial reasoning, neural nets, qualitative reasoning, and fuzzy logic are covered in detail.
- **10-701: Machine Learning.** Machine Learning is concerned with computer programs that automatically improve their performance through experience. This course covers the theory and practice of machine learning from a variety of perspectives. Topics covered include learning decision trees, neural network learning, statistical learning methods, genetic algorithms, Bayesian learning methods, explanation-based learning, and reinforcement learning. The course covers theoretical concepts such as inductive bias, the PAC and Mistake-bound learning frameworks, minimum description length principle, and Occam's Razor. Programming assignments include hands-on experiments with various learning algorithms. Typical assignments include neural network learning for face recognition, and decision tree learning from databases of credit records.

**10-715: Advanced Machine Learning.** The rapid improvement of sensory techniques and processor speed, and the availability in inexpensive massive digital storage, have led to a growing demand for systems that can automatically comprehend and mine massive and complex data from diverse sources. Machine Learning is becoming the primary mechanism by which information is extracted from Big Data, and a primary pillar that Artificial Intelligence is built upon. This course is designed for Ph.D. students whose primary field of study is machine learning. The topics of this course will in part parallel those covered in the general graduate machine learning course (10-701), but with a greater emphasis on depth in theory and algorithms. The course will also include additional advanced topics such as fairness in machine learning. Students entering the class are expected to have a pre-existing strong working knowledge of algorithms, linear algebra, probability, and statistics.

### A.3. Action Core Courses

- **16-711: Kinematics, Dynamic Systems, and Control.** Basic concepts and tools for the analysis, design, and control of robotic mechanisms. Topics covered include foundations of kinematics, kinematics of robotic mechanisms, review of basic systems theory, control of dynamical systems. Advanced topics will vary from year, including motion planning and collision avoidance, adaptive control, and hybrid control.
- **16-741: Mechanics of Manipulation.** Kinematics, statics, and dynamics of robotic manipulator's interaction with a task, focusing on intelligent use of kinematic constraint, gravity, and frictional forces. Automatic planning based on mechanics. Application examples drawn from manufacturing and other domains.

### A.4. Math Foundations Core Course

- **16-811: Mathematical Fundamentals for Robotics.** This course covers selected topics in applied mathematics. Topics covered in the past have included: polynomial interpolation and approximation; solution of nonlinear equations; roots of polynomials; approximation by orthogonal functions such as Fourier series; optimization; calculus of variations; probability; numerical solution of differential equations.

## **B. Research Qualifier**

Some students may feel unprepared for the Research Qualifier. To help in that regard, there are courses and materials available that can prepare the student for speaking, writing, and teaching. For international students, the Intercultural Communication Center can recommend remedial course work and ICC workshops and seminars on an individual basis to help ensure that students have the language skills to pass these three portions of the Research Qualifier.

### **B.1. Research Skills**

This is the most important skill learned as a Ph.D. student, and it is the primary responsibility of the advisor to mentor the student in research skills. Students and advisors should meet regularly to discuss research and plan approach.

### **B.2. Speaking**

A suitable course for a student to take to improve speaking ability is:

**90-718: Strategic Presentation Skills** (6 units)

In addition, the School of Computer Science has many videotapes of distinguished lecturers that are available for students to review.

### **B.3. Writing**

A suitable course for a student to take to improve writing skill is:

**76-870: Professional and Technical Writing** (12 units)

In addition, it is recommended that students read extensively in the field, especially award-winning papers, to get an idea of what good writing entails. Many papers and presentations exist on techniques for writing well, including Marc Raibert's "Good Writing". A student's advisor can also provide opportunities to review papers for conferences and journals, another helpful tool in improving a student's writing skills.

#### **B.4. Teaching (Non-Native Speakers of English)**

There are many courses and seminars offered weekly and each semester through the Eberly Center that can be taken to improve teaching ability.

For non-native speakers of English, Carnegie Mellon policy, in accordance with the Pennsylvania English Fluency in Higher Education Act, requires that all students be tested by the Intercultural Communication Center (ICC) before they can be certified to serve as International Teaching Assistants (ITAs). The ITA test is offered several times during the year. A rating of "Pass" or "Restricted I" must be attained in order to qualify for certification. Students with Restricted I status are permitted to teach, but they must take the “Foundations of Fluency” seminar or must have already completed at least 15 hours of ICC work in previous semesters before beginning their teaching assignment.

While Carnegie Mellon and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania policies require the above standard of students teaching assistants in undergraduate courses, the Robotics Institute requires these standards of all teaching assistants in any Robotics course, and all Robotics students assisting in a course in Robotics or any other department. This holds for both graduate and undergraduate courses. The Program Coordinator will monitor the status of all international students to ensure that a Pass or Restricted I has been attained before any student will be permitted as a teaching assistant. Restricted I students will be monitored throughout the teaching semester to ensure that they are continuing with required training. Students found to be out of status, either by assisting before they have attained a Pass or Restricted I, or by not continuing the required tutoring during the teaching semester, will risk not having the teaching assistant assignment count toward his or her Research Qualifier and having to act as teaching assistant again once the required standards are met.