

Guidelines for Readers of Ph.D. Preliminary Exams

Revised 02/07/2020

The format of the department's graduate examinations is discussed at some length in the graduate program's *Handbook for Graduate Students*. Graduate faculty should acquaint themselves with the handbook's discussion of the exams. The following guidelines are designed to give further assistance to faculty members charged with writing and assessing the exams beyond what can be found in the handbook.

Purpose

The purpose of the exams is to ensure that our students are sufficiently grounded in their knowledge and understanding of the field of English studies to warrant progression towards a Ph.D. degree. Reading for the exams requires students to go well beyond the readings assigned in their courses, thereby not only furthering their knowledge of their chosen fields of study but also teaching them to take responsibility for their development as experts in their field.

Expectations for all Ph.D. Preliminary Examinations (Standard and Custom)

Doctoral students take these exams after or near the completion of their coursework and prior to registering for dissertation credit, so they are expected to demonstrate a high degree of knowledge of the works in their chosen examination areas as well as a sophisticated understanding of literary-critical contexts beyond what might be expected at the Master's level. It should be kept in mind, however, that students are examined not only in the area in which they plan to write their dissertations, an area in which they should be expert, but in another area as well. It seems reasonable, then, to think of the level of expertise demonstrated in the exams to be that of a scholar qualified to teach upper-division undergraduate courses.

The preliminary exams may consist of an oral component in addition to the written exam if the examiners request it. The oral should be seen as an opportunity to go beyond the limitations of a four-hour examination period. Thus, while the oral may address areas of the written exam in which the student would be advised to read further, it can and should also address topics not covered in the written exam. For fuller discussion, see the "Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Graduate Exams" at the end of this document.

Procedures

Standard Area Exams: Ph.D. prelims in a standard area will be read by two faculty members expert in the field; normally these will be graduate faculty members, but on rare occasions it may sometimes be necessary to appoint a faculty member who is expert in a given area but does not hold graduate faculty status to read prelims.

Custom Exams: Custom preliminary exams cover a reading list constructed by the student in consultation with two appropriate area faculty who hold graduate faculty status. These two faculty will write and evaluate the examination of the custom readings.

Faculty examiners should not be present while the exam is taking place. Normally the graduate program director will oversee the exam unless s/he is an examiner. Faculty examiners can obtain the completed written exams from the graduate program secretary, or a designated substitute, on the afternoon of the next workday (normally a Monday) following the exam. Examiners should complete their assessments and send them to the graduate program director as soon as possible,

normally no later than *seven days* after the student has been examined. The assessments should be written as coherent prose paragraphs indicating whether a student has received a high pass, pass, or fail and commenting on any notable strengths or weaknesses. Evaluations should be written professionally so that they may be read by any students wishing to know the basis for the examiners' evaluations.

If the examiners request an oral component to the Ph.D. Preliminary examination, their comments on the exam will be made available to each student examinant in advance of the oral.

Faculty examiners should wait until all the assessments of a given exam have been submitted before discussing their evaluations with fellow examiners. They may discuss their responses any time after they have submitted their assessments.

The graduate program secretary will arrange the scheduling of the oral component of the Ph.D. preliminary exam. *Orals will not be scheduled unless specifically requested by the examiners.* If readers cannot agree on the evaluation of a Ph.D. preliminary exam, then a third faculty member will be asked to assess the exam and break the tie. If the tiebreaker results in the award of a passing grade on the written component of the prelims and an oral is requested, then the third reader will also participate in an oral defense. If a third reader is unavailable, the two examiners may be asked to confer and reach a consensus.

Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Graduate Exams

Assessment of Ph.D. Preliminary Examinations

1. Ability to Compose a Reasoned and Sustained Response to the Question
 - *High Pass*: Provides a direct response to the question which clearly pursues a reasoned path and may uncover additional questions or complications.
 - *Pass*: Provides a direct response to the question but misses obvious opportunities to develop or complicate the response.
 - *Fail*: Absence of a reasoned or sustained response to the question.
2. Accuracy, Breadth, and Depth of Knowledge
 - *High Pass*: Demonstrates mastery of the area by discussing primary and secondary literature accurately and with an appreciation for complexity.
 - *Pass*: Demonstrates knowledge of primary works but contains inaccuracies, over-simplifications, or little reference to key secondary literature.
 - *Fail*: Does not demonstrate adequate knowledge of primary works.
3. Ability to Establish a Critical Position
 - *High Pass*: Shows independent thinking through critical evaluations of primary or secondary literature.
 - *Pass*: Exhibits elements of independent thinking but without sustained discussion.
 - *Fail*: Response is limited to showing knowledge of primary works without any critical evaluation of primary or secondary works.
4. Writing Quality
 - *High Pass*: Well-organized and fluid, with no sentence-level errors, and a minimum of typographical errors.
 - *Pass*: Organized and less fluid, with few sentence-level errors, and a minimum of typographical errors.

- *Fail:* Poorly organized or replete with intrusive sentence-level and typographical errors.