

## **English Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam**

### **Timeframe**

Ph.D. students will take the oral portion of the Comprehensive Exam at the end of their second year, either in early May or late August.

In May, the Exam will take place on one of the two designated Reading Days, as indicated on the FCRH academic calendar. In late August, it will take place on one of two Exam Days.

The May Exam is recommended as it allows students to begin developing the dissertation proposals during the summer before they begin teaching.

### **Exam Format**

The Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam consists of two components:

- A revised course essay; and,
- A two-hour oral exam covering one major field and two minor fields.

### **Exam Committee**

The Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam Committee will consist of four English department faculty members, one of whom serves as the Committee Chair.

The student, in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), will select the Committee Chair, and, in consultation with the Committee Chair, one Committee Member. The two remaining Committee Members will be selected by the DGS.

Committees must be finalized during the Fall semester prior to the May or August exam date (see [Planning and Registering](#) for Exams below).

### **Revised Coursework Essay**

All students will submit a revised coursework essay of journal-article length (6,000 to 12,000 words, including notes and bibliography) tailored for a specific scholarly journal. Essays must be submitted with a 250-500 word abstract of the argument (and its critical significance). The essay should use either MLA or Chicago Style, be paginated, and include the student's name at the top of each page. Although some students may ultimately submit their essay to the scholarly journal, this is not required.

Essays will ordinarily be based on assignments originally submitted in Ph.D. coursework at Fordham. Students should consult with their faculty advisors to determine which coursework essay is most appropriate for revision. Essays revised for publication in the Research Methods course may not be submitted.

Two faculty readers will be identified by the DGS according to expertise and availability. Students may share their work with faculty readers once, before November 15, while revising their coursework essays.

The essay is due on the first day of classes for the Spring semester of the student's second year (normally mid-January - consult the GSAS calendar for the specific date each year). Students must submit five hard copies, as well as a digital copy (by email attachment), of the essay to the Graduate Administrator by 5:00 p.m. on the day of the deadline. No late submissions will be accepted, except in case of emergency.

Within 30 days of receiving submitted essays, faculty readers will return brief evaluative reports to the Graduate Administrator and assign one of three possible grades: "Pass"; "Pass with Reservations"; and "Fail." In case of a split decision, a third faculty member will read the essay. Any student whose essay receives a "Fail" may resubmit it once within 60 days. Students whose resubmitted essays do not receive a passing grade will not be allowed to continue in the Ph.D. program.

Passing essays and reader reports will be distributed to Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam Committees prior to the Exam. The essay, essay grade, and reader reports may all be considered in assigning the overall Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam grade, but the essay is not expected to be discussed during the oral exam.

### **Oral Exam**

The oral exam will last two hours. Approximately one hour will be devoted to the major field and one half hour to each of the two minor fields.

Major fields are normally selected from the historical areas divisions:

- Medieval;
- Early Modern/Renaissance;
- 18th-Century British (including Restoration);
- 19th-Century British (Romantic and Victorian);
- 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century British (including post-colonial and Anglo-Irish);
- Early and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American; and,
- 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century American.

Students should recognize, however, that fields of research both exist within and transcend the chronological and national divisions listed here. For instance, a thorough study of Romantic literature will begin before 1800, and a thorough study of modern literature will involve knowledge of American, British, and Post-Colonial literature of the 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup>-Centuries. Likewise, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American literature is generally considered a field unto itself, as is Early American literature. Students should consult faculty in their exam fields for a sense of the most apt parameters of their chosen major field.

The major field exam will include discussions of both primary and secondary texts, including central field questions and critical interventions.

The first minor field will constitute a substantial historical period. This field will normally be chronologically or geographically contiguous to the major field (e.g., if the major field is 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century British, the first minor field might be 19<sup>th</sup>-Century British or 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century American).

The second minor field will be defined more flexibly, in ways that complement students' teaching or research interests. Students might choose another historical period, a literary genre, a theoretical

tradition, an interdisciplinary topic, a methodology, or any other broadly conceived field that does not significantly overlap with the major field or first minor field.

As students consider potential minor fields, they are encouraged to think creatively about how such expertise might inform their dissertation research or expand their pedagogical range.

During the oral exam, the Committee Chair and one other Committee Member will have chief responsibility for examining the student in the major field; the two remaining Committee Members will have chief responsibility for examining the student in each of the two minor fields. However, any Committee Member may ask questions during any part of the oral exam.

Committee Members will ask students a wide variety of questions relevant to the major and minor fields. These questions may concern primary and secondary texts, literary and cultural history, the analysis of single texts and comparisons of multiple texts, and broad issues of interpretation and narrow issues of fact. But the oral exam is not a mere test of knowledge. In the most successful exams, students will use specific questions as an opportunity to shape an engaging, free-ranging scholarly conversation, one in which they share their best ideas, insights, questions, and hypotheses.

### **Planning and Registering for Exams**

To register, students must:

- Begin planning their exams in consultation with the DGS by the Fall semester of the second year;
- Follow the instructions on the Comprehensive Exam Registration Form (CERF);
- Use the DegreeWorks audit to verify that all of their degree requirements have been met or are in progress; and
- Submit to the graduate administrator a completed, signed CERF by the end of the Fall semester of the second year and a digital copy of it at the beginning of the Spring semester of the second year.

Students taking the May exam should register for PH.D.COMP.EXAM-ENGLISH (ENGL 0930-R01) through my.fordham.edu by the add/drop deadline of the Spring semester, as indicated on the GSAS Academic Calendar.

Students taking the August exam should register for REQUIREMENT PREP (ENGL 0912- R01) through my.fordham.edu by the add/drop deadline of the Spring semester, as indicated on the GSAS Academic Calendar. For the Fall semester of the third year, they should register for PH.D.COMP.EXAM-ENGLISH (ENGL 0930-R01) through my.fordham.edu by the add/drop deadline of the Fall semester, as indicated on the GSAS Academic Calendar.

### **Preparing for the Oral Exam**

Students are required to discuss specific expectations for the oral exam with their committee chairs, and chairs should share these expectations with the other Exam Committee members.

In studying for the oral exam, students often compile lists of authors and texts, both on their own and in consultation with their Committee Members. Doing so can be a useful way of defining a field and reflecting upon its priorities. Reading from lists can also be an effective way to help manage time during the studying process. However, individual Exam Committees will determine if lists will be considered during the oral exam.

It is strongly recommended that, in addition to reading and taking notes, students develop a wide range of possible exam questions and practice answering them orally. Some students form reading and study

groups and conduct informal exam practice sessions with one another or with Committee Members. Above all, students should combine extensive reading with rigorous note-taking and regular speaking practice.

## **Exam Results**

After the oral exam, the committee will grade the student's entire Exam as a whole and immediately communicate the result to the student. Written and oral portions of the exam will be graded together and a student will receive only one Exam grade.

GSAS grades include Pass, High Pass, and Fail. All grades require the agreement of at least three of the four examiners.

A Pass grade requires the oral and written expression of a sound conceptual grasp of literary history and form, as well as evidence of a solid familiarity with the individual works discussed. Successful students are able to respond productively to questions and argue points with clarity and specificity, while demonstrating competent knowledge of their major and minor fields.

A High Pass grade requires a higher order of synthetic understanding, historical range, original insight, theoretical sophistication, and detailed recollection. In assigning a High Pass, Exam Committees look for evidence of serious and sustained independent thinking.

Students who fail the Exam may retake it once, within six months of the first attempt. The first failure does not appear on a student's transcript. Students may read faculty comments on their exams after submitting a written request to the graduate administrator.

Students whose Exam is only marginally passable but not indicative of the ability to complete a dissertation will receive a departmental grade of Low Pass. Because this grade is officially recorded as a Pass, it allows for a student to receive the M. Phil degree. But students receiving a Low Pass will not be allowed to continue work toward the Ph.D.

## **After the Exam**

Students receiving a Pass or High Pass officially become doctoral candidates. Within two weeks of passing their Ph.D. comprehensive exam, they should select a Dissertation Mentor and begin identifying a First and Second Reader, conducting preliminary dissertation research, and drafting a dissertation proposal.

In drafting a dissertation proposal, students should consult the "Dissertation Proposal" page on English Department website, and refer to the Dissertation Proposal Checklist that is linked there.

Students should normally aim to submit an approved dissertation proposal within one semester of passing their comprehensive exams. All students must submit an approved dissertation proposal within one year of passing their exam or face GSAS academic probation.

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For further information about the Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam, please consult the *GSAS Policies and Procedures Guidebook*.