

The Comprehensive Exam

Students must pass their comprehensive exams prior to officially submitting their dissertation proposal.

Students will form an exam committee by inviting one faculty member from each area of concentration to serve on the committee, and together they will build three reading lists representing three areas of concentration for the plan of study. The student should share some proposed reading titles with prospective committee members at the time of the invitation. When the student has received agreements from three faculty members, he or she then schedules a committee meeting in which the student and committee members negotiate the final reading lists and discuss possible exam questions. Committee members should be part of the English faculty unless there is a special need from outside the department. In that case one member may be selected from another appropriate department.

Once the reading lists are finalized and the parameters of the exam questions are determined, the committee meets without the student to finalize the questions.

The student will be asked to sit for two four-hour periods (a week apart) and write answers to questions representing each area of concentration. These might include one essay question from each area, identification questions and short answer, or something similar. The committee will decide the format of the questions and all members of the committee will evaluate the exam.

Next the student will be asked to compose an additional response that requires the student to synthesize and apply material from the three areas. The student has two weeks from the time she or he receives the question to write an article length paper responding to a specific question or to compose an original paper that synthesizes the areas. The committee will decide the format. While the student is working on the paper, the committee will evaluate the written exam.

When the student turns in the completed synthesis paper, the committee has two weeks to read and evaluate the paper and to schedule an oral exam. Although the written portions of the comprehensive exam are scored by the three-member committee representing the three areas of concentration, the student's exam responses and synthesis paper should be shared with the Graduate School appointee on the supervisory committee prior to the oral exam.

The oral portion of the exam will last no longer than two hours. During this time, the supervisory committee, which includes the Graduate School appointee, will ask questions arising from the student's written exam and paper. The committee meets separately to determine whether or not the student has passed and reports the results of their deliberations to the student within an hour of the completion of the questioning.

In accordance with Graduate School policy, a negative vote by more than one member of the student's committee will signify failure of the comprehensive exam. A candidate is allowed to take each examination twice. The Graduate School appointee will not participate in the scoring of the written portions of the exam, but she or he will participate in the scoring of the oral exam. Candidates will re-take only those portions of the exam which she or he has failed. The supervisory committee will specify a period of time not less than 1 month that must elapse before the failed examination can be repeated. Exceptions to this time limit will be considered by the Dean of The Graduate School upon presentation of written justification from the chair of the supervisory committee in consultation with the committee members.

Should both attempts to pass an examination result in failure, the candidate may request to take the examination a third time. A request for a third examination requires the support of the supervisory committee and program administrator and the approval of the Dean of The Graduate School after consultation with the Graduate Council.

If the committee believes the exam answers and paper are strong enough, the student will pass and move on to the proposal. If the student passes the exams, she or he may then ask a faculty member to serve as director of the dissertation. In consultation with the dissertation director, the student forms a dissertation committee (referred to by the Graduate School as the supervisory committee). Generally, the supervisory committee for the comprehensive examination and for the dissertation is the same, and must consist of at least four individuals, with one being the Graduate School appointee. However, if changes are needed in the makeup of the committee, students must submit a Change of Plan of Study form. Once the dissertation committee has been formed, the student must submit an official dissertation proposal to the director of the dissertation. When the director gives approval, the student may share the proposal with the rest of the committee.

Approval of the proposal is the final step in the Exam process, making it impossible to pass the Comprehensive Exam without a dissertation proposal.