

Guidelines for Comprehensive Exams were Changed March 2019. Students who entered the program Fall 2018 or earlier have the option to follow these previous guidelines.

After the coursework and foreign language requirement have been completed, the student takes the PhD comprehensive examination. This exam consists of a written section (the Preparatory Essay) and a two-and-a-half hour oral exam. Guidelines for the PhD comprehensive examination are as follows:

1. Committee and Reading List

Students will choose a faculty committee consisting of a chair, two additional department members, and an external member from another department.

In consultation with her or his committee, the student will specify reading lists made up of one major field, one minor field, and one field in criticism and theory.

The major field list should reflect the student's area of professional specialization (poetry, 16th-century British literature, 20th-century American fiction, rhetoric and composition, folklore) and should take account of both the student's interests and job market categories. If a candidate chooses a major field that is a single genre (or has an otherwise delimited focus), then the candidate's committee may mandate that the area should extend over at least three centuries.

The minor field list might be a related field (for instance, a student with a major list in African-American literature might have a minor list in twentieth-century American fiction, or one studying Romanticism might have a minor list in transatlantic colonial literature), a secondary field (film or linguistics if the student is studying a literary field; a literary field if the student is studying rhetoric or folklore), a genre or sub-genre (creative nonfiction, the sonnet, etc.), or an area of thematic focus (Transcendentalism, nature poetry, etc.).

The criticism and theory list will vary depending on the topics of the major and minor lists. In cases where the major and minor lists consist primarily of literary works, the criticism and theory list must include sections covering the major works of criticism and/or theory in those fields. The remainder of the criticism and theory list, up to its entirety in cases where both the major and minor list include substantial secondary reading, can be organized around a major subfield of criticism or theory (poetics, psychoanalysis, the history of the novel) or a particular theme (Theories of the Middle Class; The Role of Religion in Contemporary Fiction; Medieval Conceptions of Gender).

All three lists together should comprise approximately 100-120 book length works or the equivalent in scholarly articles or works in other media (as decided in consultation with the committee), with the major list roughly equivalent in size to the combined minor and criticism/theory lists. Where linguistics constitutes one of the fields, the relevant committee member or members will assign, in addition to reading materials, other materials intended to ensure competence in carrying out analyses in phonology, phonetics, syntax, and other areas appropriate to the student's background and interests.

During the semester in which the student begins drafting her or his reading lists (ideally the second semester of PhD study), the faculty chair will convene a meeting with the entire committee, during which the student will present and defend her or his program of study

and draft reading lists. This meeting is known as the Qualifying Examination. During this meeting the committee members will sign the D-1 form; after the meeting the student will prepare the D-2 form for program of study and have it signed by the committee members.

2. Preparatory Essay/Written Comprehensive Exam

During the time a student is preparing for her or his exam, he or she will write a Preparatory Essay of at least twenty-five pages. These essays must not be more than fifty pages. This Preparatory Essay constitutes the written portion of the comprehensive exam, and is designed to give the student the opportunity to demonstrate broad knowledge of her or his fields, deep interest in specific topics relevant to those fields, and initial plans for the dissertation (or, in the case of creative writers, the critical introduction).

This is a highly individualized process, designed to encourage students to shape this process to serve their research needs.

Students will write and submit two different drafts. They will submit a preliminary draft of the essay to committee members for feedback; this must be done the semester before submitting the final draft and taking the exam. When the student submits the final version to the committee, committee members will evaluate it for range and depth of coverage, specificity of references to the works discussed, theoretical grasp of the material and clarity of organization and style. A student should consider the Preparatory Essay an opportunity to address what he or she has learned in the preparation process, and to indicate what questions most interest him or her about the works on her or his lists. The Preparatory Essay is designed to be flexible, but each essay should include the following, in a form agreed upon by the student and the committee:

- Brief overviews of each of the fields represented by the lists, discussing major issues raised by the three lists, and, where relevant, connections among them; these overviews may preface the body of the essay or be folded into it
- Answers to three or four substantive questions about the fields (or, where relevant, problems in linguistic analysis) that were developed in consultation with the committee, and that are meant to serve as talking points for the oral exams
- A preliminary description of the dissertation or, for creative writers, the critical introduction that demonstrates how it will be informed by the student's reading

In order to pass the written portion of the exam the student must receive no more than one dissenting or abstaining vote on the Preparatory Essay. To submit the final version of the preparatory essay, a student should send the essay to the Graduate Secretary who will distribute the exam to the student's committee. Within a week of receiving a copy of the exam, committee members will submit evaluations discussing strengths and weaknesses of the Preparatory Essay to the Graduate Studies Secretary, who will forward them to the student and also place copies in the student's file.

If the student does not pass, the committee will offer advice on rewriting and resubmitting the Preparatory Essay. If the student does pass, the chair of the exam committee, in conjunction with other members of the committee, will schedule the student's oral examination for no earlier than one week, and no later than one month, following committee members' reports on the Preparatory Essay. The Graduate Secretary should be informed of

the time and place of the oral examination. Students must be enrolled during the term in which they take their oral exam (to be administered only when MU is officially in session). The oral exam must be completed at least seven months before the final defense of the dissertation.

3. Oral Exam

While discussion will be guided by the writing students have done in the Preparatory Essay, the examinee should be prepared for questions on any item on their list, in order to demonstrate a breadth of training beyond that displayed in the essays. Exams are commonly structured in two parts, with discussion of the essay in the first hour and discussion of the lists more broadly in the second.

The oral exam will be scheduled for two and half hours and will consist of:

- Two hours of questions, with format and time allotted to committee members arranged beforehand by the chair of the student's committee
- Fifteen minutes during which the committee deliberates about the exam
- Fifteen minutes during which the committee informs the student whether he or she has passed or failed, and discusses the exam with the student

During the fifteen-minute faculty deliberation period the chair of the committee is responsible for taking notes, which will form the basis of a 1-2 page document discussing the exam—things the student did well on, and things he or she might improve. The chair should give a copy of this document to the Graduate Secretary, who will forward it to the student and also place a copy in the student's file.

In order to pass the student must receive no more than one dissenting or abstaining vote on the oral exam. Students who fail the oral examination will be allowed to retake it, but cannot do so sooner than 12 weeks after, or later than the end of the semester following, the initial examination. If the student passes the oral examination, all members of the committee must sign the D-3 form. The chair of the committee is responsible for submitting the D-3 form to the graduate studies office, and the form must be filed with the graduate school within two weeks after the final completion of the exams. Per graduate school rules, failure to pass two comprehensive examinations automatically prevents candidacy.

4. Comprehensive Exam Timeline

Semester Two in the PhD program: Choose a committee, begin to draft reading lists, and take the Qualifying Exam.

Semester Three: Begin reading for exams; meet at least once with each committee member; finalize reading lists.

Semester Four: Continue reading for exams and begin drafting Preparatory Essay; meet with each committee member and during meeting discuss a rough draft of the Preparatory Essay (to be given to committee members at least one week prior to the meeting). Students must give the draft of the Preparatory Essay to committee members the semester before they expect to turn in the final version and take the oral exam, and should then meet with committee members for oral feedback.

Semester Five: Give final draft of Preparatory Essay to committee members; complete oral examination; turn in D-3 form upon passing the oral examination.