

## Best Practices for Graduate Exams and Prospectus (Revised, based on department discussion, 5/31/2023)

*Note: The following Best Practices for Graduate Exams and Prospectus for the History Department's graduate programs complement the official guidelines "[Doctor of Philosophy – History](#)"*

- The ***purpose of the field exams*** should ideally be to examine the ability of a student to provide a structured diagnosis of their fields of scholarship in a time-bound manner. The committee and examiners can have their own standards for ensuring the student can (1) teach those fields, (2) situate their future research in them, and (3) dialogue with other scholars in the field of history broadly.
- The standard PhD exam will consist of two written exams and two exams administered orally. The student may choose which two of the first three fields will have a written exam. Each written exam will be an open-book, take-home exam and must be completed within eight hours. The written exams must be completed within a period of two quarters. Within a month of passing the last written exam, the student must take an oral examination in all four fields.
- ***Primary field:*** The primary exam field, which provides the intellectual basis for the dissertation, can combine a geographical area/formation with a specific time period and students can delineate sub-topics they want to specialize in and be examined on.
- ***Two secondary fields:*** Students prepare two secondary exam fields within the department's Ph.D. fields. Students may compile reading lists that fulfill a thematic and a comparative focus. Hence, one secondary field can be thematic where students focus on one (or more) theme(s) or relational category of historical analysis (e.g. status, rank, class, race, gender, sexuality) in one geographical area (or even an imperial formation) but across time periods. The other secondary field can be comparative where students focus on systems or structures or processes (e.g. state formation, enslavement, colonialism, empire, migration etc.) across two or more geographical areas in similar time periods.
- In the ***fourth, complementary field***, students have options. Instead of having a standard oral examination in which a student answers questions from their fourth field examiner, students may choose to do a project. They may, for example, write a bibliographic essay, do a public history project, prepare an annotated syllabus, or complete a digital humanities project. If this option is taken, a student may use the oral exam time to introduce their bibliographic essay, public history project, syllabus, or digital humanities project to the committee. Projects may **only** be done in the fourth field. The project must be completed before the oral exam so that the student can present the project orally and answer questions about it from committee members. Projects should be shared with the entire committee before the oral exam.

**Examiners:** The examination committee consists of one examiner for each of the four fields. The written exams are assessed by the field examiner and by a second reader. There is the option of having two examiners for one field. Written exams receive a letter grade; projects and oral exams are evaluated on a pass/no pass basis. The chair of the exam committee should consult with the other committee members and approve the plan for the exam as a whole.

The **oral exam** covers all four fields, but it should focus mainly on the fields that did not have a written exam (and on the prospectus, if it is being discussed at the exam). Committee members in fields with written exams may ask follow-up or clarifying questions. Students should begin working on the prospectus, in consultation with their advisor, well before the oral exam.

- The **prospectus** should contain a discussion of (1) research questions, methodology, and significance of the project, (2) historiography, (3) relevant archives, sources, bibliography, and (4) timeline for completion of research and dissertation writing. Early on in the program, the dissertation advisor provides clear guidance in terms of expected length (usually between 15-30 pages) and scope of the prospectus. Whereas the dissertation project and a prospectus draft can be discussed during the oral exam, the formal submission of the prospectus must follow within two months after the completion of the general exams. If the committee does not approve the prospectus, members provide detailed feedback for revisions. (See the prospectus guidelines in the [Graduate Handbook](#), page 23)
- **Exam/prospectus timeline:** Ideally, students should complete their exams and submit their prospectus by end of the third year. However, advisors must be mindful that international students, once advanced to candidacy, need to complete their dissertation within nine registered quarters at P2 status. After nine registered quarters post advancement to candidacy, students enter P3 status. International students will be charged non-resident supplemental tuition. Students who have entered P3 status (domestic or international) are ineligible for central fellowship support.
- Some fields may decide to compile **suggested reading lists** that are periodically updated. The reading lists serve as a basis for exam preparation. Students are encouraged to work with examiners to shape these reading lists according to their interests. Availability of reading lists will save students time and create some uniformity and transparency of expectations in each field.
- **Archive of student exam readings lists:** The department will create a BOX folder to which all students upload their exam lists.
- There should be a **standard expectation** in terms of **length of exams** (about 3,000 to 4,000 words) **and readings lists** (about 50-75 major works in the field).
- Once students have completed their readings for a specific field, the examiner invites them to design **possible questions** they would like to explore in their written exams.

Subsequently, as part of the final preparations, the examiner will discuss these questions with the students and then write up similar but not identical questions for the exam itself. Students should discuss possible question areas for oral exams with their committee members ahead of time, just as they do for written exams.

- ***Exam Language:*** The examination committee may decide that a student can write an exam in another language than English.