

November 2007

THE DOCTORAL EXAMINATION

The doctoral exam is comprised of two written parts, a primary research area (five hours) and a secondary area (three hours), followed by a two-hour oral exam. The exam is given by three English faculty members, two for the primary research area and one for the secondary area.

Written Examination

- The exam committee chair is one of the primary research examiners and is chosen by the student, in consultation (if he or she wants) with the graduate-program director. The exam chair should be designated on the exam rationale.
- The student is responsible for initiating meeting with all of her or his examiners to talk about the reading lists. It is perfectly acceptable (even encouraged) to ask your examiners about the format and content of the exam.
- The two primary research area examiners must work together and submit one exam, not separate ones.
- The exam committee chair, working with the department coordinator, is responsible for getting the questions from the committee and making all arrangements for the exam.
- The chair is responsible for informing the student about the rules and procedures for the exam.
- The chair should review the questions from the committee for clarity well before the exam in case any revisions have to be made.
- Students may write the exam on paper provided by the department or on a computer arranged by the department.
- Students are strongly encouraged to type their exam. If they write the exam, it is imperative that their writing be legible.
- Students may have their exam lists with them while taking the exam. The department coordinator will provide them with clean copies of the lists along with their exam questions when they arrive to take the exam.
- The written exams are honor system. This means there will be no proctor. You may take breaks as needed.
- Students may keep a copy of their exam questions and answers.
- The department coordinator will distribute all parts of the exam to all committee members.
- All parts of the exam must be read by all committee members.
- Committee members should not communicate with students about their performance on the written exam.

Oral Examination

- The oral exam may not be waived.

- The oral exam will be scheduled as soon as possible after the written exams, and usually no longer than a week later.
- The committee should meet before the oral exam to discuss their opinions of the written exam, to voice any concerns they have, and to arrange for the conduct of the oral.
- The chair, in consultation with the committee, decides on the order of the questioners, the allotment of time, and any other procedural matters (such as taking a break about half-way through the exam).
- Normally but not necessarily, the oral begins with questions by the examiner in the area established as the strongest by the written exam or with questions in the primary research area.

Results of the Examination

- The chair should excuse the student for the committee deliberation.
- The committee should give itself ample opportunity to discuss the grades and performance of the student.
- Each member of the committee should discuss the student's performance on his or her part of the exam and assign a grade of fail, pass, or distinction.
- In the area with two examiners, the two must agree on a single grade.
- Students may be awarded distinction on either or both parts of the exam.
- In the case of failure, committee members should pool advice to be passed on to the student about how to perform better at the re-exam.
- The chair should invite the student back to receive the committee decision, at which all committee members should be present.

In the Case of Failure

- It is usually not best at this moment for committee members to discuss at length why the student failed or what he or she can do to improve in the re-exam; rather, what is usually best is to set up a specific appointment in the very near future between the student and the committee member(s) deemed most appropriate to communicate this information at length and in detail.
- The chair should, however, make absolutely certain that the student knows that he or she can take a re-exam in the failed part or parts any time after a period of at least three months, and that if on financial aid, he or she must take the re-exam at the next regularly scheduled time (May, August, January).

Re-examination

- The written re-exam must be read by all members of the committee, not just the examiners in the failed part.
- All members of the committee must be present at the oral, even if the student passed their part, in which case they would not question the student.

- If the student doesn't pass the failed part or parts in the re-exam, he or she may not continue doctoral studies, so it is important that all members of the committee be involved in the deliberation.
- All committee members should be present when the chair advises the student of the decision.
- In case of a second failure, once again lengthy explanations at that point are usually not best; rather, the student should be assured that the department will provide guidance about alternate careers, and the chair should make certain that the student does not leave without a definite appointment in the very near future with the graduate-program director to discuss such matters.