
Ph.D. Comprehensive Exams in Literary and Cultural Studies

All Ph.D. students in the Literary and Cultural Studies Concentration must take a set of Comprehensive Exams that comprise two take-home written exams and one oral exam. Comprehensive examinations require the formation of a committee consisting of a minimum of three faculty members. Each student will choose a dissertation director from the concentration; the director will chair the exam committee.

Exam #1

The first take-home exam evaluates a student's command of approximately 50 primary texts in a broad teaching area. The scope of the exam corresponds roughly to an undergraduate survey and is based on a prescribed reading list for each area (e.g. British Literature to 1750; British Literature since 1750; American Literature to 1865; American Literature since 1865; African American Literature through the Harlem Renaissance; African American Literature after the Harlem Renaissance). The student writes an essay of 3,500 to 5,000 words in response to a historical, thematic, or theoretical question. The exam is written over the course of seven days.

Exam #2

The second take-home exam evaluates a student's command of at least 35 primary texts and 15 secondary texts (scholarly books, chapters, journal articles) in a specialized research area. The scope of the exam corresponds roughly to an upper-division undergraduate course or graduate seminar and is based on a reading list devised by the student in consultation with the dissertation director and committee. The student writes an essay of 3,500 to 5,000 words in response to a question dealing with a critical problem peculiar to the student's research specialization, whether literary-historical ("Romanticism"), generic ("Slave Narrative"), or thematic ("Leisure in Literature"). The exam is written over the course of seven days. Prior to writing Exam #2, the student submits a rationale (max. 1,000 words) explaining the selection criteria for primary and secondary texts on the reading list.

Exam #3

The third exam comprises an oral defense of the two written exams. The student answers committee questions regarding the arguments, evidence, and methodology of the essays. During the oral exam, the student should also demonstrate a sufficient depth of knowledge to engage thoughtfully with the field and to develop a coherent dissertation prospectus.

To allow time to study for the Ph.D. Comps, as well as to expedite progress to the dissertation prospectus, students should take the exams within two semesters of completing all coursework (including the foreign language requirement). Typically, a student will take one written exam per week for two weeks, followed two weeks later by the oral exam. A student will have a maximum of two months to complete all three comprehensive exams.

A student who fails one section of the Comprehensive Exams will be given one opportunity during the same semester to retake that section. A student who fails more than one section of the exams will be given an opportunity to retake a different set of exams (with all new questions) no later than the following semester. A student who fails the Ph.D. Comps a second time will be dismissed from the program.