Prelims

PRELIMS

The Preliminary Examinations (Prelims) are an important turning point in your graduate career. They simultaneously bring to a close your formal coursework (they are, quite possibly, the last exam you’ll ever have to take), and they help to prepare you for work on the dissertation and for a career of teaching and research.

1.38 Form of the Preliminary PhD Exam: The exam is a written, closed-book exam, paced over the course of three days spread over a time period of no more than one week. You should decide on a time with your examiners, who may or may not be identical to your dissertation committee members, after you have completed the courses required for the PhD degree. The exam consists of three “areas of concentration,” each assigned to a day. The exam is administered at the Department. You should decide on the exact three days no less than four weeks prior, consulting with your examiners and scheduling an examination room with the Department Assistant. It is your responsibility to remind examiners to email questions to both the Department Assistant and Coordinator by 4:00 pm the day prior to the exam. The exam period on each day should not be any longer than three hours. The essays are written on a computer provided by the department. The grading system is pass/fail. Other details, such as the number and kinds of questions to be asked, will be decided by your faculty committee.

1.39 Content and Scope: You will take the exam in one of the “fields of study” defined by the Department (see 1.26). You will not be examined on the entirety of this field, but rather on three “areas of concentration” within it. Some students choose to do two areas within their major field, and one within their minor.

An “area of concentration” is defined according to two criteria:

- It should be a subject broad enough to be the topic for an upper-level undergraduate lecture course (thus, for example, “Modern Landscape Painting,” but not “American Landscape Painting 1850-1900”).
- It should be a subject that has already generated a substantial body of scholarly literature so that preparing for the prelims is not a research project, but rather a process of mastering a readily available body of literature and key art works.

For most students, the three areas of concentration will fall within the chronological and geographical bounds of their field of study, but this need not be the case. For instance, you might want to pursue an area that does not begin or end neatly within a field; or you might want to develop an area that is principally defined around a methodological approach that has not been widely developed in your field of study and will thus require reading in depth in another field.

1.40 The Need for Breadth and Diversity in Defining Areas: In defining your three areas of concentration, you should keep in mind that studying for the prelims is a process through which you should begin to make a transition from the highly structured and fast-paced coursework of the quarter system to the different sorts of intellectual demands that lie ahead. Thus, in developing areas of concentration, you should look forward to what you expect will form the subject of the dissertation, and aim to prepare a broad intellectual foundation to support that more specialized work. You should also aim to develop a range of expertise that will provide bases for teaching. The three areas of concentration are ones that you should expect to list on the C.V. as subjects that you’ll feel prepared to teach.

These two goals—preparing a broad foundation for the dissertation and developing diverse areas of expertise for teaching—are not identical and require that you and your committee discuss carefully how to strike a productive balance between the two.

1.41 How to Select a Committee and Define the Areas of Concentration: The prelims committee will consist of three or four faculty members, two of whom must be in the Department. One faculty member in a different department of the university may be included without special permission. Alternatively, one member may be at another university if you hope to include that person on your dissertation committee and your advisor supports the intellectual rationale for including him or her. In this case, your advisor should explain at the outset that the Department cannot offer any compensation to outside examiners. Your faculty advisor serves as the committee chair and is responsible for coordinating the committee, the areas of concentration and their bibliographies, and the exam questions, and for arranging a meeting with you and, whenever possible, the entire committee to review the results of the exam. You and your faculty advisor should put together the committee during the second year, subject to the approval of the Director of Graduate Studies. Often the prelims and dissertation committees have the same members but that is not required and you should have explicit conversations with committee members about their roles. If you have a four-person committee, make clear arrangements for how the fourth person will participate in one of your three areas of concentration. Expanding the exam to four areas could undesirably delay your completion. If any of your committee members are on leave while you are preparing and/or taking your exams, or if that time falls in summer, be sure to ask in advance when and how you will be able to reach them.

You should arrive at the definition of the three areas in consultation with your committee. Ordinarily, each committee member will have expertise specific to one of the areas, and will work especially closely with you in developing that; however, the possibilities for this sort of correlation may vary widely from one field to another in the Department, owing both to the limited number of faculty in some fields and to the special needs of individual students.

The length of the bibliographies varies by student, depending on the field, the student’s needs and previous familiarity with the area, and other factors. Normally they should be of a length that allows you to complete your preparation in the equivalent of about four months of full-time work.

You should prepare an extensive bibliography for each area, which the faculty will help to condense, ensuring that the list has both historical depth and methodological breadth. No publication should appear on more than one of your three bibliographies. Some faculty may prefer to give you a pre-established bibliography, with the goal of making sure you are familiar with the fundamental texts. In some areas, the committee may also help the student to develop a body of visual material to be studied. It should be clearly understood that the bibliography (and accompanying compilations of visual materials) will be the basis for the exam.

The student gives a copy of all three bibliographies to the committee chair at an early stage in their development and in final form, so the chair may review them and help ensure that they are complementary and avoid overlap among them. The student should also give preliminary and final copies of all three lists to the other committee members. While studying, you should discuss your reading with the committee members several times during the preparation period to ensure that the faculty remains in touch with your developing interests. Some faculty will ask you to draw up a list of issues and themes you have considered while working through the list or to suggest exam questions. These will not necessarily be the questions you are asked to answer in the exam, but preparing and discussing them will help you to prepare for the exam.
1.42 Evaluation and Grading: The committee will usually meet together to evaluate the exam. Each area will be graded "P" or "F." In the case of an excellent exam, a special note may be written and placed in the student's file. If you should fail an area, you will be required to re-take that area in order to advance in the program and pursue dissertation work. Should you fail the area a second time, or should you fail more than one area, you must petition your examiners and the Department in order to continue in the program.

1.43 Preliminary Exam Reading Course: Students begin studying for their preliminary exams in the spring quarter of their second year in a preliminary exam reading course with their advisor. In this course, students develop, and make significant progress in reading, the preliminary exams bibliography in their primary area of research, with regular guidance from the advisor.

1.44 How Long Should You Prepare for the Exam?: Students continue to study for their exams during the summer following their second year and into their third year. While the length of time a student will need to study for the exam will vary with the individual, four months of full-time work should, on average, be sufficient preparation. Thus, the winter of the third year is likely to be the earliest time at which a student can sit for the exams; students should have completed exams by autumn quarter of the fourth year, since failure to advance to candidacy (ABD status) by spring of the fourth year jeopardizes a student's satisfactory standing in the program.