

Ph.D. Program in English and American Literature, New York University
Guidelines for Doctoral Examination and Dissertation Proposal Preparation
Doctoral Exam

The Doctoral Exam is the context in which students entering their third year demonstrate:

- Thorough knowledge of both the representative principal texts and the principal critical issues within a designated *major field* of specialization.
- Substantial familiarity with key primary texts of a designated *minor field*.

Both major and minor fields are to be selected from the following categories. These categories are meant to be general, and correspond roughly with the conventional historical designations in which our students are likely to teach in lower division undergraduate courses. Within these periods, various emphases and adjustments (the “long 18th century,” for example, or “Victorian literature”) are possible.

- Medieval English Literature
- Renaissance English Literature
- Eighteenth-Century British Literature
- Romantic literature
- Nineteenth-Century British Literature
- Colonial and Postcolonial Studies
- Literature of the Americas
- Twentieth-Century British Literature
- Early American Literature (to roughly 1865)
- Modern American Literature (from roughly 1865 to the present)
- Modern Drama
- African American Literature
- Transatlantic Studies

The major and minor examination fields are centered on reading lists drawn up by the student in conjunction with faculty examiners, according to the following standards:

- For the *major field* list, approximately 25 primary items (i.e., recognized literary texts from within the designated field) and about 10 secondary items (i.e., instances of influential scholarly work in the field that are still informing discussion among specialists, augmented by a few basic literary histories of the period or useful theoretical works originating beyond the discipline of literary studies).
- For the *minor field* list, approximately 20 items consisting exclusively of primary texts.

The student will also compile a

- *topic list*, comprising approximately twenty items focused in an area of recognized scholarly significance, delineated by the student with a view to the dissertation project.

These lists are to be drafted at the end of the spring semester of the second year, each under the supervision of an individual advisor drawn from the regular and affiliated departmental faculty; together the major field advisor, minor field advisor, and topic advisor constitute the Doctoral Exam Committee. **All three lists must be approved by the three members of the Doctoral Exam Committee and submitted to the office of the Director of Graduate Studies no later than April 1 of the spring term of the second year.**

Through the spring and summer of the second year, students will review the materials on their lists and consult with the members of the Doctoral Exam Committee as all parties agree is appropriate. **The exam itself focuses *only* on the major and minor fields, and it consists of two essays written in response to questions drafted by the major and minor field advisors. It occurs over the course of one calendar week, a Friday-to-Friday period preceding the beginning of fall semester classes.**

The writing proceeds under take-home, open-book conditions, with the exam for each field requiring the student to discuss **at least four texts** from the relevant reading list. Each exam essay must conform to stipulated word-length guidelines—3,000-4,000 words for the major field exam; 2,500-3,000 words for the minor field exam. While the essays may address materials in addition to the required four listed items, examiners may not ask students to account for works that do not appear on the approved exam lists *unless* they provide the relevant reference material within the exam question itself. By and large, the shape of the questions should be dictated by the character of the lists themselves. Typically, each examiner provides the student with three questions from which to select the one addressed in the exam essay, and while this is not absolutely necessary, in cases where options are not given the question should be crafted so as to allow the student maximum flexibility in addressing the issues.

The two written exams will be read by all three members of the Doctoral Exam Committee, who by consensus will award an overall grade of *pass* or *fail*. **The department does *not* give designations of “distinction” for Doctoral Exams.** If a *fail* grade is given, the student will be permitted to re-take the exam once, generally by the mid-point of the fall term of the third year and in any case no later than the end of that same term. Students who fail the Doctoral Exam a second time will be terminated from the program.

Literature-Review Essay and Dissertation Proposal

After the student’s successful completion of the Doctoral Exam the Doctoral Exam Committee will be reconstituted as the Core Dissertation Committee. While the two committees might theoretically be identical in composition (with the Topic advisor, and perhaps the Major Field advisor, in any event almost certainly serving on both), it is likely that some retooling will occur, so as to orient the Core Dissertation Committee toward the area to be addressed in the dissertation.

Under the supervision of the Core Dissertation Committee the student will continue reviewing the works on the Topic list through the fall of the third year, with an eye toward developing a dissertation project. That continued study will culminate in the student's summarizing the import of the Topic materials in a formal literature-review essay of 2500 to 3000 words, to be submitted to the Core Dissertation Committee by the end of the eleventh week of the student's third fall semester. The literature review will conclude by presenting a research question—or set of research questions—issuing from the engagement with the Topic bibliography, and to be taken up in the dissertation.

At some point during the final three weeks of the fall semester, the student will meet with the Core Dissertation Committee to discuss the proposed dissertation topic and receive advice about how to apply the findings of the literature review in the drafting of the official Dissertation Proposal. The drafting and discussion of the literature review will constitute the four-credit Dissertation Seminar I (to be registered for during the third fall semester), which will not meet as a formal class.

During the spring semester of the third year the student is enrolled in the eight-credit Dissertation Seminar II, which supports the drafting and defense of the Dissertation Proposal, under the auspices of the Core Dissertation Committee. The Dissertation Proposal, the main body of which runs to 10-15 pages, should contain the following elements:

- A title page including the candidate's name, the dissertation director's name, the date, and the proposed dissertation title
- A statement of the purpose, scope, and anticipated conclusions of the dissertation (4–7 pages), including
 - A preliminary hypothesis or argument
 - Explanation of the major critical concerns, questions, and issues with which the project is engaged
 - Survey and description of the primary materials for research and analysis
 - Summary of the major areas of scholarship with which the project will be engaged
- An indication of the dissertation's basic organization, if not a preliminary chapter outline (6–8 pages)
- A working bibliography

A complete draft of the Dissertation Proposal shall be due to the Dissertation Committee and to the office of the Graduate Program no later than the week following spring break. Submission of the proposal will be followed by an hour-long Dissertation Proposal Defense, to be held no later than the first week of May in the spring term of the third year. The objective of the proposal defense is to determine whether the student is in fact ready to proceed with the project and likely to complete it within the next three years. To that end, the Dissertation Committee will query the student about the plan for preparing the Dissertation, addressing such matters as the type of research required, the analytical methods to be used, the point to be argued, and the order in which the chapters will be written, and offering practical advice as necessary. Summer funding is contingent upon successful defense of the dissertation proposal.

If the committee requires that the Proposal be extensively revised and another Defense scheduled, a second defense must be successfully administered before the beginning of the student's fourth academic year, or the student will be terminated from the program. Once the Dissertation Committee is satisfied with the student's plan for completing the Dissertation, its members sign the official "Approval to Write Dissertation" form and submit it to the DGS. Immediately thereafter, the student begins work on the Dissertation proper. **A complete draft of the first chapter of the dissertation is due for all students by September 1 of the fourth year.**