

**Ph.D. Program in English and American Literature, New York University  
Guidelines for Doctoral Examination and Dissertation Proposal Preparation (2019)**

For the doctoral examination, students entering their third year in the program are expected to 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 and secondary texts of a designated *minor field*.

**Doctoral Exam**

The Doctoral Exam is the context in which students demonstrate broad knowledge of a *major* and *minor* field of English and American literature. *Both major and minor fields should be selected from the following categories.* These categories are meant to be general, and correspond generally 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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  
Ethnic American Literature(s)  
Critical Theory

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 primary items and 5 secondary items.
- The examiners should be drawn from the regular and affiliated members of the Department.

**Both lists must be approved by the two faculty examiners 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 prepare for the Doctoral Exam by reviewing the materials on their reading lists and consulting with their faculty examiners as all parties agree is appropriate. The exam-preparation period culminates in the writing of two exam essays in response to questions drafted by the two examiners.

**The Exam: Occurs over the course of one calendar week, a Friday-to-Friday period preceding the beginning of fall semester classes.** This 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. Prior to taking the exam, students will be provided with a blank template of the grading rubric to be used by faculty in assessing the exams.

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 four listed items that they *must* discuss, and engaged texts not on students' official exam bibliographies, 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 that is presented should be crafted so as to allow the student maximum flexibility in addressing the issues. See the attached sample questions in Appendix A for helpful illustrations. The two written exams will be read by both examiners, and each exam will be given a separate grade of *pass* or *fail* by consensus of the two-person examining committee. **The department does not give designations of “distinction” for Doctoral Exams.** If a *fail* grade is given to one or both exams, the student will be permitted to re-take the failed exam(s) 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. When examiners cannot agree on an overall grade for the written examination, the Director of Graduate Studies shall appoint a third reader to decide the overall grade. Examiners will use the grading rubric supplied by the department to provide initial feedback on the exams.

Results for each of the exams will be reported to the Director of Graduate Studies, who will in turn inform the student. Examiners should not inform students of results directly.

Following the Doctoral Examinations, the Examining Committee will meet as a group with the student to discuss the results in greater detail. This meeting will take place no later than two weeks after the return of the grading rubrics to the student. Following this meeting, the Examining Committee will be dissolved and the student will constitute a Dissertation Committee consisting of three members, one of whom will serve as Director. The Dissertation Committee may (but need not) consist of the two examiners plus a third member, from NYU or another Consortium institution.

### **Dissertation Proposal**

Over the course of the exam-preparation period, students should consult with their faculty examiners, the Director of Graduate Studies, and other knowledgeable faculty members about ideas for the Dissertation, and for the composition of the Dissertation Committee, including the Dissertation Director. When the Doctoral Examinations have been completed and passed, and a

Dissertation Committee constituted, the student will consult with the Committee about which next steps to take. Options include proceeding directly to the drafting of the Dissertation Proposal or undertaking a preparatory exercise, such as a synthetic Literature Review (see Appendix B) or an annotated bibliography. The decision regarding a preparatory exercise will depend on multiple factors such as the level of preparation of the individual student as revealed through the Doctoral Examination, the contours of the projected dissertation project, and, above all, whether such an exercise will accelerate or retard the progress of the dissertation. This decision will be reached through agreement between the student and the members of the Dissertation Committee.

The deadline for completion of any preparatory exercise will be determined by the Dissertation Committee but will in no case be later than the eleventh week of the fall term following the Doctoral Examination. Students who elect not to do a preparatory exercise will ordinarily draft a Dissertation Proposal by the same date.

During the Fall term of the third year, all students will take the four-credit Dissertation Seminar I. Depending on the path chosen, this course will supervise the drafting and discussion of the Literature Review or the Dissertation Proposal. It 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, depending on the path chosen, supports the drafting and defense of the Dissertation Proposal or the initial stages of dissertation writing, under the auspices of the 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, for those who have undertaken a preparatory exercise. Those who have not should aim to submit the Dissertation Proposal by the eleventh week of the Fall semester. Submission of the proposal will be followed by an hour-long Dissertation Proposal Defense, to be held no later than three weeks after submission of the Dissertation Proposal. 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, though students who have not elected to do a preparatory exercise should aim at an earlier date.**

## **Appendix A: Sample Doctoral Examination Questions**

The following is a sample question and faculty are not bound to this style of question, topic, etc

### **Sample English Doctoral Exam Questions**

#### **Major Field: Nineteenth-Century British Literature**

Choose one of the following and respond with an essay that is approximately 3,000 to 4,000 words. Your response should be cogent, detailed, and thoughtful.

1. Choose four literary works from your major field list, at least one of which must have been published early in the period, one during the middle part of the century, and one late in the period. For each of these works, briefly discuss the ways that themes having to do with imperialism figure in the text. Devote about 1,500 words to this part of your response. Then develop an argument, of about 1,500 to 2,500 words, about the emergence of imperial concerns as a thematic and formal feature of nineteenth-century British literature.
2. Choose four literary works from your major field list, at least one from each of three different genres. Select these texts because they all examine or deal in some way with a single theme or idea. Develop an argument about genre in the period, paying special attention to generic interrelation and innovation, in which you use the thematic overlap of these texts to highlight their similarities, differences, and relationships.
3. Choose three of the works of secondary criticism on your field list and develop an argument about three of the approaches that scholars took to nineteenth-century literature during the 1980s and 1990s. All of your texts were published during those decades except Lukacs' Theory of the Novel. If you want, you may position the more recent texts in relation to Lukacs' work but this is not necessary. After describing the approaches represented by the three texts you choose (about 1,500 words), discuss the feature of one or more literary texts that each of these approaches illuminates and obscures (1,500 to 2,000 words).

## **Appendix B: The Literature Review**

Students who elect to do the Literature Review will begin by compiling a list of approximately twenty items focused in an area of recognized scholarly significance, delineated by the student with a view to the dissertation project. This list can, and usually will, include both primary and secondary items. Study of these works will culminate in the student's summarizing their import in a formal literature-review essay of 2500 to 3000 words, to be submitted to the 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. Further information and tips for the Literature Review can be found on the departmental website.

