

Department of History PhD Qualifying Examination Guidelines

As of August 8, 2026

Overview

A PhD student enrolled in our program will have to pass a PhD Qualifying Examination (QE) which comprises the following:

- A written component, in the form of a response to a set of questions crafted by the Examination Committee;
- The submission of a 20- to 25-page thesis prospectus; and
- An oral component, in which the examinee defends both their written response and thesis prospectus with their Exam Committee.

Upon matriculation, the student should confer with their main advisor on the composition of their exam committee. (The exam committee is typically also the thesis committee.) Students are expected to form their exam committee members and inform the Department administration of its composition by the end (Week 13) of their first semester.

Typically, both the written and oral components of the QE should be scheduled for the end of their second year of candidature, or, at the very latest, by the end of the summer break between their second and third years.

Students should ensure that they meet the following prerequisites for the QE. They must have:

- Passed a minimum of five courses with at least two at level 6000;
- Obtained a minimum GPA of 3.50, and
- Where applicable, obtain satisfactory grades (at least grade C) in the Centre for English Language Communication graduate English courses at intermediate level.

Forming exam committees

An exam committee comprises the student's main advisor and at least two other faculty members from the Department of History. Any faculty member can serve on the committee. Additionally, the candidate may, with the approval of their main advisor, invite one faculty member from another Department to serve on their committee. For strong intellectual reasons, students may also invite faculty members from other institutions. External committee members share the same responsibilities as FASS-based members, i.e. determining a field of interest, setting a reading list, and overseeing the student's progress through the list. Students should make clear these responsibilities and exam guidelines in their correspondences with potential external committee members.

Each exam committee member should be responsible for one exam field, for a total of three fields. Of the three fields, it is recommended that two be of geographical relevance to the student's thesis topic, and that the remaining field be methodological or thematic in nature (e.g. environmental history, gender history, transnational history). With their advisor's approval, and for strong intellectual reasons, the student may invite up to four exam committee members.

Each exam committee member will work with the student to draw up a reading list of key works in their field. Each list should ideally comprise at least 25 works of scholarship; the main advisor may assign up to 50 items, making for a total of between 75 and 100 items. Ordinarily, most items should be books. Others may be field-defining articles or book chapters.

In preparation for the QE, the student should arrange to undertake a graduate course or an Independent Study with each exam committee member, although this is not a requirement. They should, however, maintain regular contact with all committee members regarding their progress through their reading lists over at least one semester.

Written component

The qualifying examination tests the general competence of the student in their selected fields. Each exam committee member (including the main advisor) will set two to three questions based on the reading list they jointly crafted with the student. These questions should prompt the student to demonstrate mastery of the historiography of the field, i.e. the ability to identify, articulate and critique major trends and patterns in the field. The student's main advisor solicits questions from the other members, ensures that there is no overlap, and approves a final set of

questions. Typically, the student responds to two questions of their choice, although this is up to the discretion of the main advisor. This should then be forwarded, for the record, to the Department administration.

The Department releases the exam questions electronically to the student one to two weeks after the student's submission of their thesis prospectus and reading list. The student has 24 hours to craft their answers and submit them electronically to all exam committee members and Department administration. If the student is required to submit more than two responses, they should be granted an extra 12 hours per response beyond the standard two responses.

Each response should not exceed 12 pages (Times New Roman font, size 12, double-spaced), excluding footnotes and bibliography.

Thesis prospectus

With the guidance of their advisor, the student should produce a 20- to 25-page thesis prospectus. This document demonstrates the student's readiness to embark on independent thesis research and writing. It should clearly outline the student's thesis topic, its intended arguments, the state of relevant fields of historiography and the thesis' intended contributions, and key primary source materials or research methodologies.

The thesis prospectus should be written in Times New Roman font, size 12, and double spaced.

Oral defense

The oral defense takes place one to two weeks after the written exam. Exam committee members may raise questions about both the thesis prospectus and written exam responses. The student should have the opportunity to respond to the committee members' queries, both to defend their decisions, but also with the broader view to advance their understanding of research and historiography through dialogue. The main advisor facilitates this discussion and ensures both that the questions posed by the committee members are fair and relevant, and that the student is given the opportunity to respond.

The defense should take place in person, but may be conducted over Zoom if necessary. It typically lasts two hours.

After the defense, the committee convenes privately to discuss the student's performance and to organize substantive feedback to help the student move into the research stage. The decision can then be made known to the student. A form including the proceedings and outcome of the QE, collective committee feedback, and the signatures of all committee members, should then be submitted to the Department administration.

Students are allowed two exam attempts. If a student fails to pass one (prospectus, written exam, oral defense) or all components on the first attempt, they must schedule a second attempt for within three to six months of the first oral defense. Second attempts constitute a complete retake of all components, not just the failed component(s). The student should therefore confer with the exam committee on key areas of improvement. If the second exam attempt is also unsuccessful, the student will be advised to withdraw from the PhD program.

General timeline

End (Week 13) of first semester: Student forms exam committee and informs Department administration

Throughout Years 1 and 2: Student forms reading lists and maintains regular contact with each committee member throughout at least one semester

End of Year 2: Student schedules exam for end of second year (no later than the end of summer break between Years 2 and 3)

- Submission by student: thesis prospectus and reading list
- Written exam: questions are released 1–2 weeks after submission; the student is given a standard 24 hours to complete it
- Oral exam: scheduled approximately 1–2 weeks after the written exam

If necessary, student must schedule a second attempt within three to six months of the first oral defense.