

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

While preparation for the Comprehensive Examination may begin as early as admission to candidacy, serious work on it should start at least six months before you plan to sit for the exam. You should begin by setting up a meeting with the DGS to discuss your plans and to get advice on your reading lists and committee. At this stage, you should identify the five faculty members who will serve as your Comprehensive Exam committee. You should also decide on your Comprehensive Exam areas and begin to revise the paper you intend to submit as part of the Portfolio.

Once a student has met all eligibility requirements (see the paragraph on Eligibility below) and has received the DGS go-ahead to begin preparing for comps, he or she should enroll in three 3 s.h. independent studies (selecting appropriate courses from the ENGL:7000-level series, one with each of his or her comprehensive exam area directors). Please note that the department does not offer independent study credit for reading groups. Enrollment in these independent studies may be concurrent or staggered over semesters, provided that the student hits the 60 s.h. mark by the end of the semester in which he or she takes the Comprehensive Exam. Students should discuss expectations for exam preparation with their area directors, and these expectations should be summarized on the online independent study approval form, which the student must fill out and submit in the first weeks of the semester (see Graduate Webforms at <https://english.uiowa.edu/graduate-program/graduate-webforms>). Students often prefer to assemble various components of the Portfolio concurrently and over the summer months, when they may not be enrolled—the nine independent study credits may thus be regarded as a tally of work completed toward comps.

Reading for the Examination and crafting the Portfolio (which includes writing an introduction, developing at least one course syllabus, drafting five questions, writing a review essay and annotated bibliography, and final revision of the Article) will usually take about six months. No later than three weeks before the date of the oral exam, students must fill out the webform “**Eligibility to Sit for Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination**” and upload the entire Portfolio with the webform “**Ph.D. Comprehensive Portfolio Form.**” At this time you should also contact the GPC to schedule your oral examination. The department will provide free photocopying of five copies of the Portfolio for all students who meet the three-week deadline.

APPROXIMATE TIMETABLE FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

Six months in advance of oral exam:

- meet with DGS to discuss comprehensive areas, preliminary reading lists, and composition of your committee
- meet with GPC (Cherie Hansen-Rieskamp, 308C EPB) to discuss Short Hours Form and future course registration
- choose three faculty members to supervise the Portfolio:
 - 1 member—Historical Period (typically becomes the exam director)
 - 1 member—Special Area
 - 1 member—Article
- begin work on the Portfolio
- begin reading, writing annotations, and revising the Article to be submitted as part of the Portfolio (accomplished by enrolling in three 3-s.h. independent study courses, one with each area director)
Notice: If applying for an MA *en passant*, please contact the GPC at the beginning of the examination semester to discuss the Graduate College Guidelines.

Three months in advance:

- choose two at-large members of the exam committee
- continue working on the Portfolio

Three weeks in advance:

- submit the webform “**Eligibility to Sit for Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination**”
- submit the webform “**Ph.D. Comprehensive Portfolio Form**” and upload entire Portfolio
- contact GPC to file paperwork (“Request for Examination” and “Plan of Study” forms) with Graduate College, to photocopy five copies of the Portfolio (optional), and to schedule a time and place for the Oral Exam

Two weeks in advance:

- distribute copies of the Portfolio to all five committee members, preferably in electronic form

COMPREHENSIVE PORTFOLIO AND EXAMINATION

Eligibility

The Comprehensive Examination is taken after a student has fulfilled the foreign language, seminar, and distribution requirements, and should occur no later than five semesters after admission to candidacy (although if a student has fewer than 24 s.h. of total graduate credit at the end of the semester of qualification, he or she is allowed five semesters after the completion of 24 s.h.). Students are eligible to take the examination during the semester in which they will have completed 60 s.h. of work. Of those 60 s.h., no more than 9 s.h. should be in Independent Study or S/U courses. The remaining 51 s.h. should be in regular graded courses at the 3000-level or above, and at least 30 s.h. of those courses must be ENGL courses at the 5000-level or above.

1. Coverage

The Comprehensive Examination contains three parts, each under the supervision of one of three core members of the committee. These parts carry equal weight and represent the culmination of work over a period of time in different courses as well as independent work completed specifically in preparation for the examination. The three parts of the examination are as follows:

a. Historical Period: This part of the examination requires broad knowledge of writings in at least three different genres from a historical period of at least 100 years to be selected by the student. Examples of historical periods in recent Portfolios include:

- English Literature before 1500
- Early Modern English, 1546-1667
- Nineteenth-Century British
- American Literature 1914-present

b. Special Area: This part of the examination requires specific knowledge of the literature, criticism, and/or theory that constitute a particular field of study. This area, which must be demonstrably distinct from the Historical Period and Article, may be a second historical period, a literary genre, a body of theory, a major author or group of authors, a theme or topic, writing theory and/or pedagogy, or an interdisciplinary subject. Like the Historical Period, the Special Area allows candidates to develop and demonstrate their grasp of a field in which they hope to write and teach.

c. Article: This part of the examination is a 25-35 page essay of publishable quality written in consultation with a faculty member, approved by that faculty member, and submitted as part of the Portfolio. The Article might start from scratch or begin with a paper written for a previous course, but in its final form it should elaborate a sophisticated critical position with respect to a literary theme, issue, author, period, text, or group of texts and should ideally become part of the dissertation.

Portfolios from past Comprehensive Exams are available for student review. Please schedule an appointment with the GPC to view and print electronic files. Below are three examples of Comprehensive Examination areas, offered for the purposes of illustration:

Sample Portfolio 1

Historical Period: English Literature before 1500

Special Area: Violence and Trauma in English Literature before 1500

Article: “Chaucer in Revolt: Violence in 1381 in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”

Sample Portfolio 2

Historical Period: Early Modern English, 1511-1667

Special Area: Shakespeare Studies: Spying Out Rumors of Authorship Article:

“Puns, Spies, and Hidden Intentions: Quibbling Authorship in *King Lear*”

Sample Portfolio 3

Historical Period: American Literature, 1914–present

Special Area: The Beat Goes On: Women Writers and the Beat Canon

Article: “Faulkner’s Corpse Bride: Revenging the Ravaged and Queering the Funeral”

2. The Committee

The Comprehensive Examination committee consists of five tenure-track faculty members, at least two of whom must be tenured faculty. The directors of the three principal areas of the examination, who must have appointments in the English Department, will form the core of this committee. In addition, each candidate asks two faculty members to serve as at-large examiners. One of these at-large members must be from the English Department, while the other can be either from English or another department within the University of Iowa.

3. Reading Lists

In consultation with the directors of the Historical Period and Special Area, students will prepare two lists of readings for the examination. The Historical Period list should consist of 70-100 items covering 100 years and at least three different genres; a small number of the items (usually no more than ten) should be key historical and/or critical works about the period. The Special Area reading list should include 35-40 items, and is typically heavier on critical and theoretical texts.

PORTFOLIO

The Portfolio consists of five sections: a five to seven page Introduction, five substantial questions based on the Historical Period list, a ten to fifteen page review essay discussing seven to ten texts accompanied by an annotated bibliography of every remaining item from the Special Area list, a 25-35 page Article of publishable quality, and two course syllabi. A detailed description of these five sections follows.

Introduction

The Introduction to the Portfolio is designed to provide a five to seven page overview of the materials that follow, showing the relations among them. Because the Introduction represents the candidate’s own sense of the interconnections among the various parts of the Portfolio, it does not require prior approval by the faculty members serving on the candidate’s committee, although the candidate is free to seek their advice while drafting the Introduction.

Historical Period Questions

The Historical Period list should consist of 70 to 100 texts. As a way of coming to terms with the fundamental issues animating the chosen historical period, the candidate should formulate five broadly conceived questions written in consultation with the area’s director. The director must formally approve the questions via the webform “Ph.D. Comprehensive Portfolio.”

Special Area Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography

The Special Area is examined via a ten to fifteen page review essay, which delineates the area through key primary and/or secondary texts. The essay should examine seven to ten texts from the reading list of thirty-five to forty items. Each one of the remaining texts from the Special Area list should be annotated separately in a full paragraph (250-300 words), following standard bibliographic form (i.e., citing author, title, and publication information for each item). The purpose of the review essay is to allow the candidate to articulate important issues or patterns linking the texts in the Special Area. It should result in a working document that might be the basis for future investigations, including the dissertation. The purpose of the annotated bibliography is to provide a detailed synopsis of texts that can then be referred to in writing the dissertation or in preparing for job interviews. The Special Area list, review essay, and annotated bibliography are written by the candidate in consultation with the area director. The area director’s approval of the Special Area via the webform “Ph.D. Comprehensive Portfolio Form” indicates that the review essay and annotated bibliography are ready to go forward for defense at the oral exam.

Article

The Article should develop a sophisticated and original argument with respect to a literary theme, issue, author, period, text, or groups of texts in twenty-five to thirty-five pages. It should be of publishable quality and follow an acceptable format (e.g., MLA or Chicago) for citation of sources. The Article may represent new work, but more often develops out of a paper originally written for a course and subsequently revised under the guidance of its director, who is usually the faculty member for whom the paper was first written. With the help of comments and advice offered by the committee during the oral exam, the candidate should plan to submit a revised version of the Article to a scholarly journal for consideration. The Article must be approved by the area’s director via the webform “**Ph.D. Comprehensive Portfolio Form.**” Ideally, the Article should form the basis of the student’s dissertation, though this is not required.

Syllabi (and Optional Alternate Exercises)

The candidate will complete two exercises that demonstrate his or her ability to present a coherent selection of works from the Historical Period and Special Area lists to a specified audience. Drawing from the Historical Period list, the candidate will design a lower-level survey course for undergraduate majors. (At a minimum, all syllabi should include: course title, course description with explicit goals, list of required texts, brief descriptions of assignments, grading scheme with weights of assignments, and reading schedule.) For the Special Area list, there are two options: (a) the candidate can create a syllabus for an upper-level undergraduate course, or (b) **subject to the approval of the DGS**, the candidate can produce an alternate exercise that demonstrates his or her ability to organize and present a coherent selection of works drawn from the Special Area list to a specified audience. Examples might include a proposal for a website, anthology, or museum exhibit.

Avoiding Overlap between Sections

Your goal is a portfolio that demonstrates both a broad range of interests and a mastery of knowledge. You should not encroach on the major issues of your Special Area in your five Historical Period questions and your reading lists for the Historical Period and Special Area must be entirely distinct.

Organization of the Portfolio

In order to help your committee locate items in your Portfolio, it is useful to paginate continuously and to provide a Table of Contents at the beginning. In most cases, the Portfolio should have its items assembled in this order:

- Title page
- Table of contents
- Introduction
- Historical period list (signed by its director)
- Historical period questions
- Lower-level survey course syllabus
- Special area list (signed by its director)
- Review essay
- Annotated bibliography
- Upper-level specialized course syllabus
- Article (signed by its director)

ORAL EXAM

The Portfolio should be given to the Comprehensive Examination Committee at least two weeks before the two-hour oral exam. Because the exam begins with the Historical Period, the director of that area directs the exam. (To clarify a possible point of confusion: it is often the case that the director of the Historical Period does **not** go on to direct the dissertation, since any one of the three core exam committee members is well-situated to serve in that capacity.) Once the committee is assembled, the student leaves the room while members share their views on the quality of the Portfolio and the questions they would most like to ask the student. Then the student is called back into the room for the exam.

Fifty minutes of the oral examination will be set aside to examine the Historical Period. Another fifty minutes will be dedicated to review the Portfolio's additional sections. Although each examiner may raise questions about any portion of the Portfolio and reading lists, the committee will start the exam by asking the candidate to respond to one of the five prepared questions about the Historical Period; thereafter, any of the remaining four questions, as well as all the items on the Historical Period list and the proposed survey course, are open for discussion. Discussion then moves to the Special Area, as the committee inquires about the texts chosen for review, those annotated from the list of 35-40 entries, and those contributing to the advanced course proposed from the area. Finally, the discussion of the Article could productively lead to advice on publication. Students are strongly advised not to read from notes during the oral exam.

At the conclusion of the oral examination, the student leaves the room while committee members evaluate his or her performance. Members prepare a report on the exam for the Graduate College by voting "satisfactory," "reservations," or "unsatisfactory." The committee then calls the student back into the room to convey the results of the vote. **The Graduate College Manual of Rules and Regulations** states, "A vote

of 'Reservations' should only be used when a faculty member feels that the deficiencies displayed by the student were modest and can be readily rectified. In the event of a report with two or more votes of 'Reservations,' the actions required of the student, by the committee, that are necessary to correct the deficiencies must be recorded and submitted to the Graduate College with the examination report form. Copies of the written statement of necessary actions should be kept by: the appropriate departmental executive, the chair of the examination committee, and the student. The statement must specify the time allowed for completion of the aforementioned actions. The language describing the actions must be specific. For instance, if additional course work is required, a list of suitable courses must be presented. If the candidate needs to rewrite his or her research prospectus, the deficient areas must be identified, etc. If the candidate satisfies the required actions in the specified period of time, the appropriate departmental executive will send a written report to the Graduate College indicating the date for which the examining committee considers the actions to have been satisfied. Upon approval of the Dean of the Graduate College, the comprehensive exam will be recorded as 'Satisfactory' as of that date. If the actions are not satisfied on time, or if the actions are not of sufficient quality, the appropriate departmental executive will send a written report to the Graduate College indicating that fact. Upon approval of the Dean of the Graduate College, the comprehensive exam will be recorded as 'Unsatisfactory' as of that date. The candidate will not be admitted to the final oral examination of the dissertation until a grade of 'Satisfactory' has been recorded for the comprehensive exam. In the case of a report of unsatisfactory on a comprehensive examination, the committee may grant the candidate permission to attempt a reexamination not sooner than four months after the first examination. The examination may be repeated only once, at the option of the department."

Graduate College Post-Comprehensive Research Award

After passing their Comprehensive Exam, students may apply for this competitive award, which provides recipients with a semester of protected and supported time to pursue their research. For details about eligibility, applications procedures, and the terms of the award, see <https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/funding/fellowships/internal/post-comp>.