

BEST PRACTICES FOR ORAL EXAMS AND THE DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

The following text appears in the Ph.D. Handbook regarding Department expectations and policy:

Third Year Qualifying Exams and Dissertation Prospectus: In the third year of the doctoral program, prepare for their oral qualifying exams and write the dissertation prospectus. Some students may complete outstanding course requirements during the third year. Most third year students enroll in the Third Year Intensive Readings Course (History 298) overseen by the Graduate Program Chair or take directed readings with individual faculty (History 291). The third year is devoted to working closely with faculty in preparing for exams and writing the prospectus. The Third Year Intensive Readings Course (History 298) includes periodic workshops on time-management, orals exam preparation, dissertation prospectus writing, and grant writing. Students may enroll in History 298 for up to 12 credits per quarter.

Orals: The oral qualifying exam is a two-hour meeting during which a student is examined in his/her first and second fields by a committee of five faculty, including the student's advisor and one faculty member from outside the Department who serves as an exam referee. Faculty must be fulltime and members of the Academic Senate. Students select their exam committee members in consultation with their advisor. The oral exam is normally held at the end of winter term or beginning of spring term in the third year. *Students must notify their advisor and committee members at least one quarter before the date on which they intend to take the exam.*

Reading Lists for Orals: In consultation with advisors and committee members, students prepare a list of books and articles for each field in which they will be examined. Normally, a student prepares a list with each member of the committee, except the outside referee. Reading lists for fields may be divided up temporally (early-modern, 19th century, modern, etc.) or thematically (tropical disease, medicine and the body, etc.). While there is no set number of books or articles on any one list, the total amount of reading on all lists should not exceed that which a student can reasonably cover in a six month intensive reading period. The goal of reading for orals is to familiarize the student with the major debates and issues in a given field, in preparation for teaching. Normally, students work with advisors to prepare general questions on the fields. These questions, or key debates, might or might not be raised during the actual exam, but students will have a strong sense of what is expected of them in the exam prior to examination.

Dissertation Prospectus: After passing the orals qualifying exam, a student presents his/her dissertation prospectus for formal approval in a colloquium including all members of the dissertation committee. Normally the colloquium meets for one and a half hours. Students usually select three faculty members to serve on the dissertation committee. (The dissertation committee need not be composed of the same faculty who examined the student in orals.) The principle dissertation advisor must be a member of the History Department and the Academic Senate. Under the advice of the student's advisor, one faculty member of the dissertation committee may be from outside the university.

The prospectus is a concise discussion of the student's planned project of research. It should be no more than 15 pages, double-spaced, slightly longer than a grant proposal. The prose should identify the major themes and questions the project will engage, briefly discuss existing historiography and other

research on this topic, and explain why this is a valuable project of study. A good prospectus usually includes brief discussion of planned chapters and planned archival research.

Both oral exams and the prospectus colloquia must be completed by the end of spring quarter of the third year. Exceptions may be granted through petition to the Graduate Program Committee and Department Chair. When the oral exam is completed, the student is advanced to candidacy for the Ph.D. and considered A.B.D. (All But Dissertation).

IMPORTANT NOTE ON ORALS AND TIME-LIMITS FOR THE DISSERTATION: Once you have finished your oral exams, you have 12 quarters (not counting summer terms) in which to finish and file your dissertation. If you are an international student (or otherwise do not have California residency) you must finish and file your dissertation within 9 quarters (not counting summer terms). Students who surpass these time limits are considered “2DocA” and are ineligible for most campus funding. They also receive lower priority for teaching positions. *International students (and other non-California residents) who exceed this time limit must pay non-resident tuition to remain enrolled at UCI.*

BEST PRACTICES FOR ORALS:

- 1. Discuss the composition of your orals exam committee with your advisor.** It is best to discuss who will be part of your exam committee with your advisor in the spring of your second year or the summer before your third year. Your exam committee will need to be composed of a total of five UCI Academic Senate faculty members. Including your advisor, a total of three members will need to be from the History Department. One member must be from outside the Department. The last member may or may not be from the History Department. With approval from your advisor and Graduate Division, this member can also be from outside the University. These members will be noted on your Ph.D. I Form.
- 2. Ask faculty to serve on your oral exam committee and get a commitment from them.** Be sure to tell them the approximate date (quarter) you plan to take your exam. Orals examiners must be present for your exam, in person or through video conferencing (Skype).
- 3. Meet with each of your future examiners to discuss the list of reading you will develop with them. Remember, the purpose of orals is to examine your preparedness to teach in a particular field or fields.** Usually, a student’s first field is broken down chronologically, with one list (and one examiner) on each time-period. (For example, one list on colonial/early-modern history, one list on the 19th century, one list on the 20th century.) However, the field (and your different lists) may be divided in other ways—thematic and/or a more specific topic and time period (Cold War America; The Age of Revolution, etc.) What is most important is that your orals lists give you the chance to read broadly in your first field with the goal of preparing you as a teacher. The lists should allow you to become familiar with the most important debates and topics of your field. One or more lists may deal with your second field, either another regional

area (Latin America, World) or a thematic field (Gender & Sexuality; Science & Medicine). These lists, too, should deepen your broad knowledge of that field.

4. **Ask your committee member for recommendations of key readings for your list(s).** You may want to start by sending them a list of all the books you've read at UCI (or before) on that particular field/topic. These books may also be on your list and you can use them as a basis for building your list(s).
5. **Length of orals lists:** The number of new readings assigned to your list should not exceed that which you can reasonably read in a six to nine month period of intensive study, dedicating approximately 20 hours a week toward preparation for *all* four lists. *GPC recommends a maximum of 160 new books for all four lists combined, or a maximum of 120 books and 40 articles for all four lists combined.* (That is 30-40 new books per list, in addition to what the student has read prior to orals preparation.) If you feel you are being assigned too many readings, you should bring this up with your committee member, or speak with your advisor or the GPC chair.
6. **Begin compiling your orals lists during the summer before your third year.**
7. **Finalize your orals lists during the fall quarter of your third year.**
8. **Set your exam date.** During fall quarter of third year, get an email confirmation from each committee member that this date works for them. Tell the Graduate Program Administrator (Yuting) of your planned date. In the meantime, forward your email confirmation to me (nmclough@uci.edu)
9. **Meet at least once (ideally twice) with each of your orals examiners.** During fall quarter of third year, ask them directly what themes, debates, topics, and questions they feel are most important for you to study and keep in mind while you are reading. Some faculty are quite upfront about the types of questions they will expect you to be able to answer during the exam and will tell you at this time. Others may list general topics and themes. Whatever the faculty member's style, he/she should give you a clear idea of how they want you to approach your list. If you are having trouble getting direction from a particular faculty member, you should bring this to the attention of your advisor or GPC.
10. **Budget time for orals reading.** The graduate program expects third year students to be spending approximately 20 hours per week studying for orals. This takes into account that most students work as TAs for another 20 hours per week. Protect your time. If your teaching work is requiring more than *an average* of 20 hours a week, you need to bring this to the attention of your advisor and/or the GPC chair. The graduate student union has a firm agreement with the university regarding workload and this needs to be respected. It's your job to let your advisor or GPC know if there is a problem.

11. Find a work rhythm that works for you and protect it. Depending on your teaching schedule, set aside a set number of hours each day that you dedicate to orals reading. Treat this commitment as seriously as you do your teaching obligations.

12. Take general notes on your reading.

For each reading, you should be able to identify: A.) The major arguments of the work. B.) The contribution the work makes to the field (i.e. how it changes how we think about a particular issue, what debates it engages in, etc.) Your notes should record these two facets. Avoid taking overly detailed notes. This will slow your reading and may make it overwhelming to incorporate what you've read into your final preparation for orals. Obviously, if a particular work is of deep relevance to your field or your own research, you should take more detailed notes on that text. But for all texts you read, it is recommended to write a short synopsis of the above two issues. Some students use index cards, others make a Word-file that later can be sorted.

13. Reserve a room for your exam.

One month before your exam date contact the Graduate Program Administrator (Yuting) and email your committee members to inform them (and remind them) of the date, time, and place of your exam.

14. File required paperwork. Fill out FORM-I-Advancement to Candidacy and the "Advancement to Candidacy Requirements Checklist," both available from the Graduate Program Administrator and on-line in the History Graduate Program Website. [*Remember, your language exams must be completed before taking orals.*]

15. In the weeks before your exam, you may want to outline "answers" to general questions for each list that you anticipate being asked. Review these prior to your exam.

16. On the day of your exam, show up fifteen minutes early and bring required paper work.

[Form-I-Advancement to Candidacy.] Your committee will sign this document after the successful completion of your exam.

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE PROSPECTUS:

1.) **Choosing a Topic:** You should have a clear idea of your dissertation topic by the beginning of your third year. The process of writing the prospectus will help you focus your ideas. The prose you generate for your prospectus will also be useful for writing grant applications.

- 2.) **Meet with your Advisor:** Early in fall quarter, meet with your advisor to discuss your ideas for your dissertation topic. Ideally, you already should have had conversations about your dissertation topic in the spring of your second year or over the summer by email. You also may have conducted pre-dissertation research in the summer.

- 3.) **Form a Dissertation Committee.** Early in fall quarter, finalize the membership of your dissertation committee and get an email confirmation of the faculty's willingness to serve. Dissertation committees usually have three faculty members but may have four. Two of your committee members, including your committee chair, must be full-Senate members of the History Department. Other committee members may full-Senate members of other UCI departments. With your advisor's permission, one member of your committee may be from outside UC Irvine or may be a non-Senate member of the UCI faculty.

- 4.) **Set a date for your prospectus colloquia with your dissertation committee.** Get emailed confirmations of faculty commitments to the date you've chosen. All committee members must be present on the day of your colloquia, either in person or by video-conference (Skype, etc.) It is important to confirm these commitments now.

***IMPORTANT NOTE ON TIMING:** It is highly recommended that you schedule your prospectus colloquia in the weeks immediately following your orals exam. Department policy *requires* that you hold the colloquia no later than one quarter after orals. However, as soon as you pass orals, the university considers you "advanced to candidacy." The first quarter following you orals counts as your first quarter on the dissertation "clock," regardless of whether you've held your prospectus colloquia. [California residents have 12 quarters after orals/advancement to finish the dissertation; international students have 9 quarters to finish. Students surpassing these time limits are ineligible for most campus funding and receive low priority for teaching jobs. *International students (and other non-California residents) who surpass this time limit must pay non-resident tuition to remain registered at UCI and/or to re-enroll for filing the dissertation.*]

- 5.) **First Draft:** In fall quarter, write a first draft of your dissertation prospectus and circulate it to your advisor. [If you are taking History 298, this will be due as an assignment at the end of the quarter.] It is never too early to start formally writing up your ideas for the dissertation.

- 6.) **Document Length:** The final document you produce as a dissertation prospectus should be no longer than 15 pages, double-spaced, not including the bibliography. The length of bibliography may vary. Your first draft may be shorter or longer, but you should be working toward this goal.

- 7.) **A strong dissertation prospectus covers the following:**
 - a.) Clear statement of what the dissertation will investigate. (What is the central issue, debate, or problematic your dissertation will examine? What questions will you be

asking?) Be specific. Early in the document, there should be a single sentence that clearly states the project's topic. Elsewhere, you will elaborate.

- b.) Discussion of why this topic is relevant or important to study.
 - c.) Concise review of scholarly literature on this topic and discussion of how your project will differ/contribute, etc. [Do not make your entire prospectus a "literature review." This information is important, but it should occupy no more than 25%-30% of your entire prospectus.]
 - d.) Discussion of planned chapters. Be as specific as possible. What will be studied in each chapter? What questions are you asking? How will you investigate this aspect of your project? (You may mention some sources here, but keep your focus on what you want to study and the questions you hope to pursue. Your bibliography will list sources more fully.)
 - e.) Brief discussion of available primary sources, archives, and other field work (such as interviews) that you plan to use for your project. Discuss your timeframe for research. Some students cover this as part of individual planned-chapter discussions. [Your sources will be listed in your bibliography, so this section of the prospectus prose should be no more than a couple paragraphs or a page.]
 - f.) Short conclusion: Why is this project important and exciting?
- 8.) **Compile a bibliography:** The prospectus bibliography should list relevant secondary sources and available primary sources, archives, and other fieldwork you have identified as useful for your dissertation project as a whole. The size of the bibliography will vary, depending on your project. The bibliography should serve as a guide for your research as well as an indication to your dissertation committee of your knowledge of the field.
- 9.) **Circulate a Second Draft.** In winter term, write a second draft of your dissertation prospectus and circulate it to your advisor and other committee members for comments.
- 10.) **Distribute Hard-Copies of Final Draft.** In spring term, finalize your dissertation prospectus and distribute hard-copies to your dissertation committee members.
- 11.) **Finalize the Exam Format:** A month before your colloquia, meet with your advisor to finalize the format of your colloquia. Most students are asked to make short presentations of their project, followed by structured feedback by committee members. Your advisor will set the format for your colloquia.

- 12.) **Remind Your Committee About the Exam:** A month before your exam, reserve a room for your colloquia through the Graduate Program Administrator (Yuting). Email your committee members to confirm date, time, location. Make arrangements for any committee member who will be joining you by video conference (Skype, etc.)

- 13.) **Paperwork:** On the day of your colloquia, arrive early and bring required paper-work: Dissertation Prospectus Notification form, available on the History Graduate Program website or from the Graduate Program Administrator (Yuting).