

Quick Guide to Preliminary Exams Baylor University Department of English

Compiled Fall 2015

What exams do I have to take and how long are they?

The exam requirements are different based on your degree program:

Ph.D. in English Literature

Dissertation Area Exam (3 hrs.)

Major Historical Area Exam (3 hrs.)

Contiguous Historical Area Exam (90 min.)

Other Historical Area (90 min.)

Ph.D. in Religion and Literature

Major Historical Area Exam (3 hrs.)

Religion and Literature Exam (3 hrs.)

Religion Exam (3 hrs.)

See the sample prelim lists in this Box folder for more examples of how previous prelim survivors crafted reading lists according to these exam headings.

When do I take these exams?

Usually, people take exams 1-2 semesters after their last graduate course is finished. Note that you cannot take exams until your foreign language requirements are satisfied. The new procedure (which is in the process of being solidified) is that prelims will take place during the first four weeks of Fall and Spring or the last four weeks of Spring.

Can I take exams in the summer?

No. Sorry!

Who gives me these exams?

You must arrange for different professors in our department (or the Religion Department, if you are pursuing the Religion and Literature Ph.D.) to administer your exams. Usually, your primary examiner (i.e., the professor who gives one or both of your 3-hour exams) is your anticipated dissertation director.

How do I ask these people to give me an exam?

Send them an e-mail or meet with them in person. Tell them you'd like to take a prelim exam with them. Be prepared to share works you'd like to include as well as a focus for the exam itself (i.e., "Victorian Women Writers" or "American Frontier Literature"). Together, you will create a reading list. Also be prepared to articulate an anticipated exam date.

I'm shy. Can you hold my hand when I ask a professor to serve as an examiner?

Yes. Try an e-mail template like this: "Dear XX, I really enjoyed taking your seminar in XX in XX semester. Since I am now finished (or nearly finished) with coursework and continue to be interested in XX, I'd like to discuss taking one of my preliminary exams with you. Would you be willing to meet with me soon to discuss this?" They get these requests all the time. Nothing to fret about.

How long will it take to study for these exams?

1-2 semesters. Usually 2. While you are studying for exams, you should enroll in ENG 6V10 via Bearweb. You need only enroll in 1 hour for each semester. Dr. Russell asks that you only be enrolled in 6V10 for a maximum of two semesters.

How many "works" are included on each of the reading lists? And what counts as a "work"?

This varies depending on your examiner. The standard is 7-10 works for a 90-minute exam and 15 works for a 3-hour exam. A play or a novel is usually considered one work. A collection/book of poetry (as in, Seamus Heaney's *North*) is one work. If you are working out of a "complete poems" text, your examiner will probably select several poems to constitute a single work. At the end of the day, though, your examiner will be the judge of whether or not something counts. He/she may also request that you read secondary literature.

How do I make a list?

The best strategy is to draft a list yourself (using the samples as a guide) and bring it to your examiner. They will add/subtract works to help you finalize the list.

How do I study for these exams?

Remember that "prelims" are a series of timed essay exams. You should read all the works on your reading lists and take notes with an eye toward the *essays* you will eventually write during the exams themselves. Understandably, everyone goes about this process differently. Some people simply read the works slowly, some take extensive notes, some commit passages and lines to memory, and others write actual practice essays.

What sorts of questions will they ask me?

Your examiners will ask you questions that give you the chance to make an argument about texts from your reading list. You can expect questions like "Discuss the relevance of X for the poetry of Q, R, and Z," or "Connect the historical situation of B to the novels of G, H, and Y." You may receive general "compare and contrast" questions. Since this is an essay exam, your response should include a specific and arguable thesis statement that guides the content of the response. Examiners are usually very open about the types of questions they may ask. Some will give you sample questions in order to help you practice. The key here is to ask.

How many words should these timed essays be?

This varies greatly, but, in general, you would be expected to generate about 4,000 words (or more) of content in a 3-hour exam and about 2,000 words in a 90-minute exam. Many people write much more than this. You would be amazed at how much the adrenaline affects your word count (in a positive way!). Always ask your examiners what they expect. You'll be happy to know that the exam computer itself contains a word count function.

Okay. I'm ready to take my exams. How do I schedule them?

Go to the English office downstairs and tell Lois you'd like to schedule your prelims. She will open up the special calendar for reserving the seminar room and ask you to choose dates. You must take all of your exams within 8 working days.

How will I know if I've passed?

Your examiners typically will contact you within two weeks with your results. If you do not hear from them after two weeks, it's acceptable to contact them with a query.

What if I don't pass one (or more) of my exams?

This happens sometimes and it's not the end of the world. You will have the opportunity to take the failed exam(s) over again, but only after a several-week waiting period. Unfortunately, if you do not pass the exam on the second try, the department rules state that you cannot remain in the graduate program. If you don't pass an exam on the first try, it is very important to meet with your examiner to discuss what needs to happen in order for you to succeed in round two.

How long after exams am I expected to defend my prospectus?

Ideally, you will defend your prospectus one semester following the completion of your exams, perhaps sooner. This varies. Dr. Russell's ideal is for you to draft the prospectus while studying for exams, the thought being that you will defend shortly after exams are done.

What is a prospectus and how long is it?

A prospectus is a proposal for your dissertation that outlines your central argument, your knowledge of the critical landscape, your vision for each individual chapter, and an initial bibliography. The standard length for a prospectus is roughly 15 pages of text, but some advisors will require more. Check with your advisor for what they expect.

Am I going to die?

Yes. We're all going to die. But prelims will not be your cause of death. Carry on, warrior. ☺