

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, FIELD EXAMINATION

A PhD dissertation represents a focused intervention in a scholarly conversation. The Department of English PhD Field Examination supports an informed and analytical understanding of the contexts for that contribution. It prepares students to write the dissertation, to become a learned member of a scholarly field, and to enter into an academic role through the development of transferrable skills.

Department of English PhD Program:

<https://artsandscience.usask.ca/english/students/graduates/phd.php>

• Rationale

In the Department of English, a field is understood to be an established area of scholarly work. It entails texts, academic criticism, and an historical period, critical-theoretical angle, and/or geographical context(s). A field will shift over time, reflecting emerging trends in literary and textual studies. It represents the professional context within which the PhD candidate is able to position their academic work and to present themselves as a teacher-scholar.

Function of the Field Examination

As a mode of experiential learning, the Field Examination process builds on the time management and research skills, as well as the analytical and communication skills, developed through undergraduate and graduate coursework.

Through the Fields Examination process, the PhD student:

- engages in an independent study of texts and secondary sources, supervised and guided by an Examining Committee;
- acquires a breadth of understanding through an historicized exploration of a body of knowledge;
- applies analytical and theoretical methods towards a depth of understanding;
- develops analytical readings of and stances on material in response to issues central to the field;
- practices written and oral communication skills directly relevant to the doctoral dissertation and defence;
- develops the ability to teach well beyond the subject matter and approaches of their dissertation;
- prepares to participate in the discipline in a confident, poised, knowledgeable way.

The Field Examination process prepares a PhD candidate to:

- draw upon a diverse body of knowledge;
- articulate a coherent literary historical trajectory pertinent to their dissertation;
- understand the significance of broader literary and cultural impulses;
- synthesize and make new, original connections across diverse texts;
- present informed readings and arguments that engage with the complexities of the material;
- position doctoral work and future research in relation to a critical dialogue;
- engage in the wider application of skills as a teacher-scholar, researcher, supervisor, research facilitator etc.

• Procedures

Beginning in 2025-26, the PhD Field Examination is to be completed no later than 31 January of the second year of the doctoral program. It involves an Examining Committee comprising three faculty members: the Supervisor(s) and specialist(s) in the Field.

Process

The student must inform the Graduate Chair in writing of their intention to complete the Field Examination approximately 8 months in advance (i.e. 31 May of their first year of the doctorate). Such notification will include:

- a) the student's choice of a departmental [Fields Reading List](#) representing two-thirds of the readings for the Field Examination, and
- b) the Candidate's List of readings constituting the final third of the readings, drafted in consultation with the Supervisor(s) and, where possible, the other members of the Examining Committee, and approved by the Supervisor(s).

Where deemed necessary by the student and Supervisor(s), a proposal for a unique Fields Reading List must be received by the Graduate Committee at least 12 months in advance of the examination itself. The anticipated Reading List should be comparable in length and scope to those areas for which set lists exist. Once the proposal is approved by the Graduate Committee, the list is developed and approved by the Examining Committee.

Decisions to defer the Field Examination will be made by the Supervisor(s) and the student in consultation with the Graduate Chair. Deferred or Failed examinations must be rewritten no more than 3 months following the original examination date.

Logistics

Written Examination

The written portion of the Field Examination is completed in two three-hour sittings. The PhD student may write the examination either on one day (9:00-12:00, 1:30-4:30) or in two three-hour blocks on successive days.

The exam will be written in a private room; a laptop computer not connected to the internet is provided (Mac or PC). Questions for each sitting are provided at the examination itself. No aids (e.g. Reading List) are permitted, though students have access to the tools provided through MS Word.

Students will typically be expected to write two or three essays for each sitting. Each examination paper will offer a degree of choice among questions.

Oral Examination

No less than a week and no more than two weeks after writing this examination, the student will attend an oral examination of no more than two hours' duration. This oral examination will be convened by the



Graduate Chair or designate, and it will be conducted by the Examining Committee: i.e. the three faculty examiners who set and evaluate the written portion.

Examiners may ask questions about the candidate's written responses as well as items on the Fields Reading List and the Candidate's List. Aids (e.g. Reading List) are permitted.

Evaluation

The written examination must be passed before the oral examination can take place. A pass in both components is required; a pass in one cannot mitigate a failure in the other. A composite grade will be determined by the Examining Committee and will correspond to one of the following: Pass with Distinction, Pass, or Fail.

If repetition of the examination is necessary, usually both the written and oral components are required. The Examining Committee has discretion to require, however, that only the oral be retaken.

Expectations

- Effective use of essay form
 - o Argumentative focus: presentation of a clear and convincing thesis (claim)
 - o Use of critical or theoretical issues, sources to frame responses
 - o Analytical engagement with primary texts
 - o Use of evidence (examples, details) to support claims and readings
 - o Clear sense of structure
 - Logical progression of argument
 - Smooth transitions between well-organized paragraphs
 - o Clear and correct writing
- Clear understanding of topic and clear sense of stance in relation to topic
- Demonstration of breadth of knowledge
 - o Integration, discussion, and analysis of a range of different primary texts
 - o Understanding, application of theoretical and critical materials
- Understanding of contexts where relevant
 - o e.g. cultural or historical movements; literary debates; current academic approaches
- Ability to clarify, elaborate or expand upon, and/or further illustrate aspects of written responses
- Ability to respond to questions in a knowledgeable, articulate fashion demonstrating understanding of the larger field

Students are expected to present original responses to Field Examination questions based on their work with relevant scholarship and criticism. Best practices include identifying influential sources in written responses where those sources may affect the Examining Committee's perception of the originality of responses. Students should clarify expectations of specificity and of citation practices with the Supervisor(s) and Examining Committee. Generative AI is not permitted in the completion of the PhD Field Examination.

Access and Equity Services

As with any aspect of a graduate degree program, a student with a disability or disabilities may determine whether future success in the program of study will be assisted by registering with Access and



Equity Services (AES) and by disclosing accommodation requirements. Once a confidential registration process is complete, the student may choose to initiate standard procedures to determine and implement appropriate accommodation. In the case of the PhD Field Examination, the Supervisor(s) and Examining Committee as well as the Graduate Chair would be informed of accommodation requirements.

NOTE: In keeping with best practices, the Department of English strongly encourages students to create [an individualized accommodation plan](#) in the first year of their degree, working with an Accommodation Planning Committee in order to establish accommodation requirements for the different stages of the program.

To ensure consistency across examinations and to ensure that students meet the core competencies assessed through the written and oral components of the PhD Field Examination, the following have been identified as appropriate accommodations for this aspect of the doctoral program. Other accommodations may also be considered.

- Semi-private room
- No more than one examination per 24-hour period
- Computer
- Alternate format for academic materials (e.g. large print)
- Time-and-a-half
- Memory / mnemonic sheet approved and signed by Supervisor(s) and/or Examining Committee

• Preparation

Studying for the Field examinations can be approached as a project that requires careful time management in establishing schedules, completing the readings, engaging in research, and allowing time for developing analytical stances on the material and debates central to the field. Students are strongly encouraged to work with the Supervisor(s) and, where possible, the Examining Committee towards practices that support success. Please also see videos on Preparing for Qualifying and Comprehensive Exams at: <https://library.usask.ca/studentlearning/workshops/grad-transition-recordings.php>

Recommended Practices

- Establish a timeline for completion of readings and review of materials
 - Schedule deadlines for readings, research, writing exercises
 - Use a spreadsheet to keep track of timelines and progress
- Organize material into groups according to appropriate rationale. Examples include:
 - Chronological: engage with cross-section of readings according to date and historicized cultural and critical contexts.
 - Area-based: engage with sub-sections of reading list (regional, temporal) to gain an understanding of thematic and cultural issues.
 - Genre-based: engage in comparative readings within genre categories to establish sense of patterns and literary trends.
- Make notes



- Summarize key plot points, characters, scenes, themes
- Identify how texts compare and contrast to each other
- Identify how and where texts illustrate significant generic conventions, literary traits, poetic devices...
- Identify how texts relate to debates either in their time or in subsequent criticism
- Identify how texts relate to different theoretical paradigms or approaches
- Identify the significance and implications of the texts for the larger field / the field as a whole
- Draft written responses to texts or clusters of texts. Examples include:
 - Informal reflections or explorations of material
 - Word clouds, diagrams, journal entries, jot notes...
 - Paragraphs focused through a claim (topic sentence) and involving the application of terminology towards close readings of passages and/or compare-and-contrast analysis
 - A two- to three-page (double-spaced) "field statement" for each area of the list
 - i.e. a condensed overview of the key debates, terms, and developments in the areas
 - Position statements
 - Argumentative stances developed in relation to key critical issues and drawing upon materials from list
 - Fields Examination-like questions
 - i.e. working from an understanding of the material, create your own questions based on genre, themes, critical debates, terminology....
- Establish schedule of meetings with Supervisor(s) (weekly, monthly...)
 - Identify goals of each meeting in advance
 - Material: what readings, what theory, what criticism...?
 - Topic: historical and cultural contexts, genre and generic conventions, literary terminology, theory, themes, narration / voice, characters, passages, imagery...
 - Preparation: what tasks should be completed in advance? What kind of discussion will take place?
- Engage in multiple methods of discussion and review
 - In student-Supervisor(s) meetings:
 - student-led review of key issues
 - Supervisor(s)-led question-and-answer session
 - possibility of sample questions and responses
 - reflect on close readings, application of terminology, understanding of area, argumentation, persuasiveness of analytical claims
 - possibility of timed practice exam with Supervisor(s)
 - potential for feedback?
 - With Examining Committee:
 - clarify readings, theoretical approaches, trends...
 - discuss exam-taking strategies

• Written Examination

The Written Examination is less a test of your knowledge and more an opportunity for you to *mobilize* your knowledge in establishing stances and claims. It is a demonstration of your ability to contribute knowledgeably to discussions important to your field as a peer amongst experts.



Recommended Practices

- Read the questions carefully.
 - Identify what each question is actually asking
 - Identify which questions you will answer and why
 - e.g. which questions will allow you to use a breadth of texts and not repeat examples
 - e.g. which questions will allow you to demonstrate range in relation to terminology, concepts, issues, theoretical lenses
- Brainstorm your responses and establish an argumentative line before drafting.
 - Reflect on the prompt(s) and consider the implications in terms of debates, issues, concepts
 - Apply that thinking to the material that you plan to discuss; reflect on further possibilities
 - Establish the stance that you will prove in each paragraph by sketching out topic sentences
 - Use topic sentences to establish claims (not summaries or observations) and arguments relating to important issues that need to be proven with reference to materials on your Reading List
- Leverage the five-paragraph essay form, even if you write fewer than five paragraphs.
 - Use your introduction to provide a direct response to the prompt:
 - Identify your basic approach and the texts or material
 - Outline the claims or stances that will be proven in each paragraph
 - State the result of the analyses: present the concluding claim or thesis that indicates the importance of your work with the texts
 - Establish topic sentences and ensure they connect back to the stated focus of the response / represent a specific stage in your argumentative line
 - Include examples in paragraphs to support and expand upon the claim being made
 - Invoke terminology, context to support the arguments and claims where necessary
- Consider strategic writing practices.
 - e.g. if there are 90 minutes per question, take 20-30 minutes to plan out the argumentative line—that is, the main claims and structure of the response—before writing
 - e.g. review and revise topic sentences to ensure they reflect most accurately the claim that you prove in the paragraph in question
 - e.g. write the final version of the introductory paragraph after you have written the body paragraphs and conclusion
 - this ensures you reflect the argumentative line you actually present
 - e.g. revise after writing rather than editing while drafting

• Oral Examination

The Oral Examination enables you to reflect and expand upon your responses, and to engage with questions and material not covered in the written examination. It is an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to converse in an informed way about a range of topics, your ability to work with different ideas or approaches in the moment, and your ability to think critically about important issues based on your knowledge of the field.



Recommended Practices

- Bring the following to the Oral Examination:
 - Printed copy of the Fields Reading List
 - Printed copy of your written responses
 - Paper and pen or other writing tools to jot down key elements of questions
- Focus on the scholarly work rather than on yourself.
 - Examiners know what exams are like: you don't have to be self-conscious about typos or spelling mistakes or incorrect names or dates.
 - Don't feel that you have to apologize or provide a metanarrative explaining your process.
 - If your answer is not what you had intended, identify the more convincing position and the reading or explanation that would best support it.
 - Allow yourself to forget it is an examination: see yourself as a fellow scholar with questions and opinions about the material that you have the opportunity to explore at a high level.
- Recognize and answer the question that is being asked.
 - Provide a substantial point that addresses the question and establishes a position that you can then illustrate by mobilizing your knowledge.
- Be confident by being curious.
 - Think out loud and explore positions as you explain your perspectives and stances in a conversational exchange.
 - Rather than repeating or restating a written response, use your expertise to further explain, or to expand or reflect upon it, or to complicate your initial thinking, or to consider other perspectives on the readings and stances you have presented.
 - Work creatively with the implications of your responses by drawing in other relevant material in order to build on readings, claims, and the significance of your stances.
 - Consider how questions and responses may relate to productive problems in the field or may complicate stances and lead to unresolved / unresolvable positions.



• Sample Questions

The questions provided on each Field Examination will reflect both the Reading List and the Candidate's specific interests. They will change in orientation and scope, being tailored for each PhD student. For reference, here are examples of questions used in past Field Examinations.

- What three poets and/or dramatists would you select to illustrate the influence of the protestant reformation on English Renaissance literature? Support your selection with illustrations drawn from one work from each writer (In the case of a lyric poet, you may if you wish refer to more than one poem).
- In his *Defense of Poesy*, Sidney argues the moral merits of imaginative literature against a strain of anti-literature sentiment and, specifically, anti-theatrical bias. Does the literature of this period (including before and after Sidney) lend support to his case?
- A central motif of literary romance is dislocation and displacement (e.g. exile, quest, pastoral retreat). Discuss the motif of displacement in one or two works we would normally class as romances and one or two works we would not normally class as romances. Include Spenser, Shakespeare, and at least one other author in your answer.
- Account for the genesis and popularity of what comes to be known as Gothic fiction during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What sorts of social, cultural, and political circumstances might have contributed to the genre and perhaps for its transformation in mid- and revival in the late nineteenth century.
- Linda Peterson suggests of life writing that what “seemed a minor genre” at the beginning of the century “had become a common, even privileged genre by the late Victorian period.” Peterson traces this change to “the democratization of self-writing.” With this statement in mind, discuss the practice of self-writing during the period with reference to particular texts.
- In his memoir, *Lake of the Prairies*, Warren Cariou writes about his own identity: “I simply don’t *feel* like I am an exclusively Aboriginal person. I have some Métis ancestry, and I have been raised among many Native people, but I didn’t grow up with the sense that I was one.” His reflections may resonate with the ways in which some people think and feel about non-binary gender identities. What are the connections and/or differences between non-binary or queer gender identities and mixed-race identities? How have queer and racialized writers in Canada navigated these intersections?
- With reference to works by three different playwrights, make an argument about the role, and the nuances, of either *violence* or *comedy* on the twentieth century British/Irish stage. In what admixtures do these modes appear, in what contexts, and to what effects? Draw on some scholarly commentary as well as on the primary texts. You may also speak to critical and popular reception.
- In his 1903 study “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel points to the city dweller as being “‘free’ in contrast to the trivialities and prejudices which bind the small town person.” At the same time, he states that “one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons.” How do **three writers** from the long 20th C. engage with the relationship of the individual to conceptualizations of urban community?
- Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* has drawn fire (both friendly and otherwise) for its rearguard attempt to combat what he regards as the dangers of “political correctness.” With reference to appropriate texts, discuss some of the issues surrounding the word “canonicity,” focusing especially on the advantages and disadvantages of an established canon for the contemporary reader.

