

Guidelines for Ph.D. Written-Exam Reading Lists

Coverage

As you start compiling your reading list for the Ph.D. written exam (the first of two doctoral candidacy exams), keep in mind that the area covered by the written exam should be noticeably broader than the area covered by your dissertation. The broad area of specialization covered by the exam—and represented by the works you select for your reading list—should include the more specific research area you intend to inhabit while writing your dissertation but should usually not be limited to that focus. You can think of your reading list for the exam as representing multiple research areas, and multiple teaching areas, and you can plan on marketing your research interests and teaching expertise to search committees in terms of these areas when you go on the academic job market. Because the broad area of specialization covered by the Ph.D. written exam usually includes multiple research and teaching areas, students often divide their reading lists for the exam into sections and use subheadings to organize their bibliographical entries.

Number and Types of Works Included

Because students' reading lists for the Ph.D. written exam reflect differing research interests and areas of expertise, reading lists naturally vary in terms of the number and types of works included. As you define your broad area of specialization, and begin to compile your reading list, you might initially think of including 75 to 100 entries, with perhaps half of them being books and half being articles, although the number and types of works included will change, of course, as you receive feedback from your Advisory Committee and your reading list evolves.

Your reading list may include works you know well, works you need to reread, and works you've never read. For secondary sources, you may have reason to include older material but should typically concentrate on publications from the past twenty years or so: in addition to helping you develop a broad area of specialization, the process of reading for the Ph.D. written exam should help you position your dissertation research within a current scholarly conversation, once you start writing your dissertation. Depending on how you and the chair of your Advisory Committee decide to define your broad area of specialization, you may not need to include a large number of purely theoretical texts on your reading list. The members of your committee will, however, expect your reading list to demonstrate that you are making informed methodological choices; therefore, your committee members will expect to see a respectable amount of theory, or theoretically rich analyses, on the list. Even in the earliest versions of your reading list, you should include your selections as full bibliographical entries in the correct (usually MLA style) form so that you and the members of your Advisory Committee can more easily consider publication dates and any particular editions you may be using.

Interaction with Your Advisory Committee

It is critical that you have regular interaction with your Advisory Committee while compiling your reading list for the Ph.D. written exam. Be sure to communicate regularly with the chair of your committee, in particular, consulting with him or her about the coverage of your reading list and about the number and types of sources you are including. Whenever you are in doubt about how to proceed with your reading list, meet with, and talk directly to, the chair of your committee. When your chair says you are ready to do so, share your list with the other two members of your Advisory Committee and ask them to respond to it. You should give your reading list to your chair, and then to the rest of your

committee, as early as possible, because the committee members may well want you to make major changes to the list (for example, to add more theory or to replace older secondary sources with more recently published material) before they feel you are ready to schedule the Ph.D. written exam.

Exam Preparation

Once your entire Advisory Committee has approved your reading list for the Ph.D. written exam, you will likely need to spend the next several months preparing for the exam by reading your way through all the works on the list and carefully taking notes on them. As you prepare, keep in mind that the exam is open note and open book: you won't need to worry about memorizing information, but you probably will want to take thoughtful and well-organized notes, in anticipation of using your notes during the exam. While reading through your list, you will almost certainly want to write summaries of some of the works and perhaps want to write detailed responses to some. Be sure, however, also to take notes that will enable you to synthesize the works—that is, to make meaningful connections among them. In some few cases, you may realize while reading something that it isn't especially useful for your purposes; in such cases, you may ask your committee members whether you can remove it from your reading list.

Format and Expectations

The format of the Ph.D. written exam provides each student with 72 hours (three consecutive days) at home to compose essays in response to the questions on the exam. Most Advisory Committees include three questions on the written exam, and the format for your particular exam may or may not provide a choice in answering the questions. Your exam could require you to write on three out of three questions, to write on two out of three questions, or to answer one question and then choose between two others.

Each student is expected to write approximately 30 double-spaced pages in response to the exam questions—about 15 pages on each of two questions, or about 10 pages on each of three questions. Because the written exam is open book (as well as open note), students are expected to provide full documentation, including parenthetical citations and a “Works Cited” page, with each essay submitted.

When your Advisory Committee assesses your responses to the exam questions, the committee will not expect you to have generated publishable ideas and prose. In assessing your exam responses, the committee will, however, consider the following: 1) your knowledge of your broad area of specialization; 2) your understanding of the current scholarly conversation(s) to which your dissertation will contribute; 3) your ability to analyze intelligently, and to synthesize with purpose, the works on your reading list; and 4) your ability to write coherent, detailed, and persuasive essays under pressure.

Sample Reading Lists and Exam Questions

The questions used with the Ph.D. written exam vary as widely as do the reading lists developed by students who take the exam. If you are a graduate student in our department, you can access samples of reading lists developed by students in the department who have recently passed the exam, as well as samples of exam questions recently used by the department faculty. To access the sample reading lists and exam questions, go to the secure SharePoint site at:

<https://uasharepoint.uark.edu/sites/engl/GradAdvising/default.aspx>