

FAQ about English PhD Exams

Q: Where can I find the description of the PhD exams in English?

A: See pages 9-11 of the English graduate student handbook AKA “Guide to Graduate Studies: English Literature” (it’s the same page number for both pre-2011 and Fall 2011 matriculation). Please read this entire section—most of your questions about the PhD exams can be answered through information provided in this section of the handbook since it describes the length of the exams, when the exams are offered each semester, how many faculty members sit on the major and minor committee, and other important information about filing paper work, compiling your exam lists, and meeting with your committee members.

Q: Must my advisor be a member of my major exam committee?

A: No—your advisor can serve on your minor committee, although (generally speaking) oftentimes one’s dissertation advisor does serve on the major committee since the major field of study is often the field that the student will focus on for his/her dissertation, which means that his/her advisor is often a specialist in the major field of study.

Q: I’m confused about the role of the dissertation chair versus the advisor?

A: Let me quote from the Graduate School Handbook (<http://handbook.unc.edu/phd.html#dissertationcommittee>):

The *advisor* typically oversees the research progress and serves as the primary mentor. A student may elect to have co-advisors as long as one is from the student's major academic program.

The committee *chair* typically oversees committee meetings and the associated documentation.

In the English Department, the chair is selected at the discretion of the DGS and is a separate role from the advisor (or director—in the English department, we use the terms “advisor” and “director” interchangeably to describe the person who will oversee and mentor you on your path towards writing your dissertation and completing your PhD).

Q: I’d like to work with someone at Duke/NC State/non-UNC Chapel Hill school—is that possible? Can this person direct my dissertation?

A: As per the guidelines of the Graduate School, on all your committees (exam, prospectus, dissertation) you must have three tenure stream members of your department; two members may come from outside the department, either within UNC Chapel Hill or at other institutions. However, your dissertation advisor must be a tenure stream faculty member within the department. You can, with the approval of this advisor, have a co-advisor at a different institution, but you should consult with both the DGS and your dissertation advisor. Please see the PhD Committee FAQ.

Q: How do I get a faculty member from outside of the department approved to serve on my committee?

A: If the faculty member in question is a tenure stream professor within UNC Chapel Hill, there is no paperwork involved. If the faculty member in question is either a non-tenure stream professor at UNC Chapel Hill or a faculty member at another institution, s/he will need to be designated as fixed term Graduate faculty. You will need to acquire a c.v. and turn in this c.v. to the DGS office. If you wish to have non-tenure stream English and Comparative literature faculty on your committee, please consult with both the DGS and your dissertation advisor. For more information you can also see this link to the Graduate School website: <http://gradschool.unc.edu/policies/faculty-staff/faculty/>

Q: Can I have more than five faculty members on my exam committee?

A: While I'm not sure there is a technical rule against this, as far as the graduate school is concerned, within the English department we stipulate that students will have three faculty members serve on the major exam committee and two on the minor exam committee. Additionally, for future committees, trying to find a free two hour block with six (student plus five committee members) people who have busy and conflicting schedules can be ... frustrating, so adding another adult schedule into this mix can be ... even more frustrating.

Q: I want to pick a major and a minor that will position me as a strong candidate on the job market—will those who are interviewing me for academic jobs see my major and minor?

A: The designation of “major” and “minor” is terminology that we use within the Department of English to help students frame their coursework and comprehensive examinations—they are fields of study that will help students write their dissertation. Students are not required to select a “major” and “minor” for the graduate school, since other departments use other criteria/language for course requirements and exams. For example, graduate students in Comparative Literature use the terms “field” and “focus”

for their comprehensive exams. As for which major and minor will allow you to be a strong candidate for an academic job, this is a very personal decision that should be guided by the kinds of intellectual interests that have propelled you to enter into a PhD program—your major and minor should be in fields that you wish to read in/study/ research that will enable you to write your dissertation. No hiring committee will ever know what your “major” or “minor” was since, again, these designations are used in-house. Of course hiring committees will see your transcripts, so they will see that you have taken courses in certain areas, but they will not ask you what you “majored” or “minored” in.

Q: I want to major/minor in a field that is not listed in the graduate student handbook—can I petition for an alternate major/minor?

A: Yes—please go to the department website and find the link to the Graduate forms—click on “Alternative Major/Minor Form” and follow the instructions on the form: <http://englishcomplit.unc.edu/forms>. However, you should consult with the DGS during your course of study plan meeting if you are thinking about applying for an alternative major/minor (and you should also consult with your dissertation advisor).

Q: In the handbook it says that students typically take their written exams in the seventh semester of the grad program—is it possible to take exams earlier or later?

A: Yes—although students who wish to make timely progress towards completion of the degree should err on the side of earlier rather than later. All things being equal, there is no reason that students should not be able to sit for their exams by their seventh semester (generally this means Fall of the 4th year). For students who wish to decrease time to degree and take exams in their sixth semester (Spring of the 3rd year), so long as students have completed course work or will have completed course work in the semester they are taking the exams, they will be allowed to sit for their examinations. This does mean, however, for any students looking to take exams in Spring of their 3rd year that they will need to file the request to sit for exams in the fourth semester (Spring of the 2nd year)—and they will also need to have the pre-exam meeting with the full committee in the fourth semester (again, Spring of the 2nd year), which means that students in their second year will need to have a clear idea of their dissertation project and have had conversations with various faculty about serving on their major/minor committee—and especially this means that they have had a conversation with the faculty member who will be his/her dissertation advisor.

Q: Do I have to submit the request to take exams before submitting my pre-exam meeting form?

A: Yes—generally speaking you should first submit the request to take the exams and then hold the pre-exam meeting with your entire committee.

Q: I've chosen my committee members and turned in the request to take exams—what should I do to prepare for the pre-exam meeting, and how long should it be?

A: You should allow for a one and a half hour block of time for the pre-exam meeting—students typically circulate a doodle poll among their five committee members, usually after consulting with their dissertation advisor about an optimal block of dates (I recommend finding a 3 week block). You should be working closely with your dissertation advisor on your lists (major and minor)—after you have a draft that your advisor has seen, students typically consult with individual members about further edits and additions to the list. After meeting with all committee members, the student should circulate the major and minor lists to the committee members in preparation for the pre-exam meeting. During the pre-exam meeting the committee will discuss the types of questions that students will be asked, as well as the type of ideal answers students should be prepared to give. The majority of time spent in the meeting is typically used to come to consensus about the final reading list for the major and minor fields of the comprehensive exam.

Q: Do I need to write a rationale that explains why I've chosen to be examined in my major/minor fields?

A: Yes. Typically most rationales are no more than a single spaced page. A rationale can be very useful for both students and faculty; it helps students to articulate their intellectual interests and future dissertation projects, and it helps faculty understand what these interests are and what types of research students want to pursue in terms of their future dissertation projects.

Q: When can I schedule the oral defense of my major/minor exams? And how long should I allow for the defense?

You cannot hold the oral defense of your exams until you have passed both major and minor. However, you can circulate a doodle poll after your minor exam so long as you make the defense follow from 3 weeks after the minor exam (typically faculty take 1-2 weeks to grade your exams). In the doodle poll give your committee as many choices as possible in 1.5 hour increments over a period of at least 3 weeks (and be sure to take into account any holidays/breaks).

Also, as a general rule of thumb, 1.5 hours is a good amount of time for your prospectus and dissertation defenses, but of course please consult with your dissertation director.