

PREPARING FOR THE SPECIAL FIELDS EXAM

The Special Fields Exam precedes and is the bridge to entrance into the dissertation writing stage (or Stage III) of the PhD program. It is the program's only official exam; there is no exam or thesis to earn the MA degree, which is marked instead by a successful "Stage II Application." The exam should be taken within 9 months of the end of your final semester of coursework (that is, 8 courses after achieving Stage II if you entered without an MA in English, and 8 courses after your arrival if you entered with an MA in English). After you finish the Special Fields, you are eligible to apply for Dissertation Course Release Fellowships—so you might want to time your exam so it's done and allows time to solicit letters of support for the fellowship application deadline in February of each year.

Typically, the Special Fields is a two-hour oral examination, the general requirements and deadlines for which can be found [here](#). The oral exam is often (though not always) structured around questions developed by the student in consultation with their committee. Some fields (including Medieval Studies and Writing Studies) also include a written component. The student's advisor is normally in charge of setting the format of the exam. For samples of previous successful proposals, email [Stephanie Shockey](#) or the DGS for an invitation to the Box folder.

The exam will usually cover a combination of your general field(s) of study and the proposed focus of the dissertation. Exams are intended to allow space for students to build their knowledge of disciplinary subfields, methods, and conversations; they serve as launching points into dissertation projects. Hence, the exam will usually cover a combination of general field(s) of study and a proposed focus for a dissertation. But exams are never exhaustive. No one can or should read every book in their designated fields of study; scholarly research continues throughout and long after an exam and dissertation. Nor should the variability of exams be understood as obfuscating. They vary considerably from student to student because they are tailored to accommodate students' own interests and objectives as negotiated with their committee chair and members.

Here, for reference, are the four steps students generally take as they prepare for the exam:

- 1) Assemble a committee by choosing a primary advisor (or "committee chair") and 3 other members;
- 2) Prepare a reading list of primary, secondary, and theoretical texts that show both field coverage and the general focus of the dissertation project, accompanied by a rationale explaining the list's contents;
- 3) Apply for approval from the Graduate Program by submitting your rationale and reading list about 2 months before you plan to take the exam; and
- 4) Prepare for the exam, in consultation with your advisor and committee, which may include developing exam questions or other written materials that represent the

breadth of your emerging interests; for Medieval Studies students, this will also require preparing for a translation exam;

5) Take the exam, typically by sitting for a 2 hour oral exam with your committee.

1. Assemble a committee

A Special Fields Committee, which consists of 4 members. Three members must be Graduate Faculty, two of whom must be tenured at Illinois (Graduate Faculty includes professors who were on faculty here but left for another institution). You are not limited to faculty in the English Department, or even faculty at the University of Illinois (you can have one “external” member). One of these faculty members will be your “committee chair” or “advisor,” and will be in charge of running the exam. This committee usually continues on as your Dissertation Committee, but you’re free to change members or the chair after the exam.

Building a committee begins while you’re completing coursework, when you have the opportunity to establish relationships with faculty who specialize in your field(s) of interest. If you applied for Stage II status, you were required to contact a prospective mentor, who might now be a useful person to consider as an advisor. Approach your potential advisor as early as possible, either over email or in person during office hours. Each faculty member has a different advising style, so talk to them about how they normally run a Special Fields Exam.

Tell your advisor which other faculty members you think would be most helpful for your set of interests. Then approach those faculty members (either in person or through email) and ask them to serve on your Special Fields Committee. When you contact them, give them some idea of your field of study and tell them who your primary advisor is. Tell them also that you will be putting together a Special Fields Reading List and that you would like their input and suggestions. Give them some idea of the date of your exam. Sometimes faculty members cannot commit to serve on a committee for various reasons, but your advisor can help identify other appropriate faculty .

It can be challenging to ask a faculty member with whom you’ve not taken a class to serve on your committee. So, if you are eager to work with someone who may not teach a graduate seminar in your coursework semesters, you can establish a relationship by arranging an independent study with them or by visiting their office hours regularly.

Because exams are highly tailored to each student, it’s important for the student, advisor, and committee members to be on the same page about what the structure of the exam is and what the expectations for successfully completing it are. You and your advisor should discuss these issues ahead of the exam, and the advisor should communicate this information to committee members. This is especially important for committee members who have not administered an exam in English.

2. Prepare a reading list and rationale

This list usually contains about 80-100 texts of primary works, secondary sources, and theoretical texts. The number and type of texts will depend on your field of study. You may want to add other categories or break them down into subcategories specific to your interests

The list should cover major works in your field, but it need not include all of them. You can (and should!) include books you've already read, including in graduate and even undergraduate coursework. Remember that you may need to skim some of the works to extract their basic arguments. The exam may ask you to imagine broader connections between these works—or to focus on a few parts of a few literary works.

You develop this list in consultation with your advisor and, often at later stages, with other committee members.

Lists are accompanied by a rationale (typically 1-2 single-spaced pages) that explains how the reading list covers both a traditional field of study and the student's preliminary plan for the dissertation. The rationale typically discusses what in your field of study interests you, which secondary sources are most useful, which theories you find most relevant, and the general set of texts and themes you want to cover in the dissertation. Ideally it contains a suggestion of how the dissertation will intervene in the field, engage with a new archive, or respond to a compelling new set of theories.

3. Apply for Graduate Program approval

All applications to take the Special Fields Exam must be approved by the Graduate Studies Committee, which is made up of a cross-section of English faculty member. You should submit this application about 2 months before you'd like to take the exam. The Special Fields Exam application consists of a cover sheet, your reading list, and your rationale. The necessary paperwork can be found on the [Graduate Resources Page](#). For samples of successful Special Field proposals from previous students, email [Stephanie Shockey](#) or the current DGS for access to the Box folder that has them collected.

The GSC approves most proposals and may include feedback. The goal of this process is to make sure your plan is comprehensible to faculty who are not specialists in your or your advisor's subfield, a vital skill for professionalization. (Explaining your project to out-of-field readers is a common task throughout graduate study (e.g., in drafting a dissertation prospectus, applying for fellowships) and beyond (e.g., applying to postdocs or jobs, drafting a book proposal). Within two months of submitting your application, you will receive a letter from the Director of Graduate Studies relaying the committee's approval (or disapproval) and outlining the committee's suggestions. These suggestions may contain ideas for additional reading, questions about the overall focus and rationale, or advice about how to frame your interests or project for readers out of field. You should consult with your advisor about the degree to which these GSC suggestions should either shape the exam or be considered useful feedback for the dissertation project.

After getting approval, you may schedule the exam—at a time when all your committee members are available.

4. Prepare for the exam

In addition to reading, exam preparation often involves writing. Some of that writing is informal and idiosyncratic, as in marginalia, notes, mindmaps. Other writing may be more formal or formally required by the committee, as in questions, translations, statements of interest, a pre-prospectus, a course syllabus. Again, the types of writing done in preparation for an exam vary from student to student and in negotiation with a committee chair and possibly other committee members. For general reference, here are some types of writing that can support taking your oral exam:

- **Questions:** A broad set of developed questions that highlight the most important themes and potentials that emerge from the reading list and guide a dissertation project. The number, length, and style of questions varies by advisor and student (e.g., the number ranges from 4-10 questions, and the style might be short and general, dense and specific, or somewhere in between, though often including a constrained “syllabus” of readings necessary and generative for answering the question).
- **Statements of Interest:** Statements of interest are like the answer form of questions, explaining the themes and potentials that emerge from the reading lists and perhaps identifying avenues for the dissertation or goals for future research.
- **Translation:** Students in Medieval Studies sit for a translation exam along with their Special Fields. This exam consists of one section in Old English and one in Middle English, with one verse and one prose passage in each language. Students are allowed a dictionary and a grammar, but not other translations.
- **Syllabi or proposed course lists:** Reading often inspires ideas for teaching. Preparing undergraduate or graduate syllabi or composing a list of short course descriptions can document the relevant readings and catchy topics that emerge from your research.
- **Pre-prospectus:** A pre-prospectus can form a useful hinge between the field fidelity of the exam and the idiosyncratic intervention of the dissertation. A pre-prospectus might document the most valuable texts and theories from your lists while charting the additional research necessary to the prospectus and dissertation.
- **Prospectus:** Some advisors work with students to have a first or final draft of the dissertation prospectus to circulate to the exam committee ahead of their oral exam. If a prospectus is required, the advisor will have worked with you for some months on the document well before the exam. See below (under “Coda”) and on the department’s website for [Stages of the Program](#) for more information on the prospectus.

If any of these written materials are required by the committee or you’d like them to have access to them during the oral exam, you typically circulate them a month in advance of your exam.

In addition to writing, many students prepare for their Special Fields Exams by staging a “mock exam” with graduate colleagues or their advisors.

Working with your committee as you prepare for your exam is vital. Committee members tend to have distinct perspectives on how to read, what to attend to in your reading, and what to expect in the oral exam itself.

5. Take the exam

Depending on your field, project, or committee, written material may be a formal aspect of your exam, but, more commonly, the heart of the Special Fields Exam is a 2 hour oral exam. Committee members take turns asking you questions inspired by your lists, rationale, and any other written material you’ve submitted. You and/or your advisor may want to preface that conversation with a brief presentation by you, one that sets the stage by revisiting your rationales, identifying what you’re most interested in getting from the exam discussion, and/or explains how your reading has and will inform your dissertation project or career trajectory. Be prepared for the committee to confer at both the start and conclusion of the exam, at which points you’ll be asked to step out of the room. At the end of the exam, your committee will welcome you back to the room with your results. After the exam, your advisor may meet with you to discuss some of the suggestions and ideas that emerged; committee members may also want to set up individual meetings.

During the exam, committee members ask questions that are generally meant to help you articulate the most interesting aspects of and connections between your readings, including their potential for a dissertation project. Prepare for the exam to take conversational turns in directions you may not have anticipated. Faculty examiners may ask you to consider new angles or pursue particular lines of thought. If the exam wanders too far from your interests, it’s okay for you to gracefully focus on readings and topics that are relevant to your interests and goals. One way to think about approaching the exam is to think of yourself as inhabiting your teaching persona. You are already comfortable in front of a room of students exploring topics that you know a lot about (such as the writing process, literary or film studies, etc.). For the exam, you have become an expert on several topics, and one of the goals of the exam is to practice being comfortable articulating that expertise in conversation with other experts, just as you might at a conference Q&A or in other professional conversations.

It is unusual—and in some instances prohibited—for students to take notes during their own exam. Your advisor may take some notes for you, and you can certainly take notes afterward, particularly if you gleaned valuable insights or ideas from the discussion or came to a crystallization of your own thinking while explaining it to others.

Coda: Writing the Prospectus

The prospectus is a 5-10 page summary of your research plan for the dissertation, including a description of the project, precis of each proposed chapter, and a select bibliography of works or archives cited or to-be-consulted. (Some advisors ask students to write a prospectus or pre-

prospectus *before* the exam so that document can be discussed during the oral exam and filed directly after it.)

Keep in mind that the prospectus is a plan and not a contract. The contours of your dissertation will shift as it takes shape

The prospectus should be submitted within 4 months of your exam. You may take longer if needed, but be aware that, to apply for and take a course-release fellowship, your prospectus must be approved by your committee, so there is an incentive to getting through this task as quickly as possible. When you have written your prospectus, ask each member of your committee to approve it by sending an e-mail expressing their approval to [Stephanie Shockey](#), cc'ing you (the student). After your prospectus is approved, you are officially in "Stage III" of the program—the "ABD" or "All But Dissertation" stage.