

Comprehensive Guide to the Oral Exam and Prospectus Stage September 2026

In the third year of the English and Comparative Literature doctoral program, students face two main academic requirements:

- (1) pass a readings-based Oral Exam -- the culminating event for the MPhil degree; and
- (2) complete a Dissertation Prospectus -- the first major project of the doctoral phase.

Below is an overview of the third year, with deadlines and details about what each phase of this process entails.

I. Deadlines

For all the below, we strongly encourage students to complete each task well before the listed deadlines, which denote the absolute latest dates at which each phase of the program can be accomplished. Note, too, that these are just the central department deadlines. The syllabus for the Third Year Proseminar will have additional assignments and deadlines. You will receive a copy of the Proseminar syllabus as soon as it is finalized.

Please note, wherever the instruction “submit” occurs below, you should submit the relevant work to your dissertation/exam committee members, the DGS, the Graduate Coordinator, and the faculty member leading the Third Year Proseminar.

By June 1, 2026: Students finalize a 4-member committee of faculty advisors and submit preliminary copies of their lists.

By Sept. 1, 2026: Submit revised versions of Oral Exam reading lists; enroll in Third Year Proseminar during August registration window.

September, 2026: Students must meet with each committee member at least three times before orals. Begin planning and scheduling those meetings. Talk with your committee members about what you'd like to get out of Orals meetings, including their expectations for writing, reading, and the exam.

Dec 1, 2026-Jan 19, 2027: Schedule the Oral Exam for a 2-hour time period before March 13, 2027.

By March 13, 2027: Deadline to take Oral Exam.

By April 2, 2027: Students identify a 3-member dissertation committee and submit first draft of Dissertation Prospectus; schedule meeting to discuss the draft prospectus (must meet no later than April 16).

By May 3, 2027: Students submit final draft of Dissertation Prospectus

By May 17, 2027: Within 2 weeks of receiving draft prospectus, committee members confer

to decide whether they wish to approve the prospectus or ask for further revisions.

June 1, 2027: Deadline for any prospectus revisions requested by committee.

II. Details

A) Assembling the oral exam lists

One of the oral exam lists should be a “Major List” that surveys key works in your primary field of knowledge (about 50 titles). Two members of the committee are tasked with guiding you through the “Major List.”

The two other lists are to be “Minor Lists” that survey about 25 titles in another field. The third and fourth members of the committee will guide you through the Minor Lists, with one committee member assigned to each list.

The “Major List” (about 50 texts, plus selected secondary literature) is intended to help set a broad context for dissertation work. At the same time, this list should help prepare you for a job market in which, while some positions are advertised in particular “fields” (historically- or conceptually-defined), most hiring committees expect candidates to have broad general knowledge and an ability to teach introductory survey courses in one or more areas.

The “Minor Lists” (approximately 25 texts each) are more selective surveys of material from the period before or after that of the general field; or from another subfield within the general period; or from literature written across a range of areas during the same period; or from a group of theoretical readings.

For examples of orals lists that students have created in the past, consult the “English Grad Career Resources” site on Courseworks. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

After making progress on reading over the summer and fall, students will begin to identify approximately 25 texts across all their lists that seem particularly germane to the areas, ideas, and questions that they expect to explore in the doctoral stage of the program via their dissertation. Flagging these texts (with your guidance) will help them construct something like a core bibliography for the eventual dissertation, combining primary and secondary texts as appropriate. This exercise will also build their consciousness of working in a specific scholarly field or interdisciplinary area, and it will encourage them to begin making the kinds of creative intellectual connections, and distinctions, that characterize successful dissertations.

Note: while you should certainly think about how their Oral Exam reading will form the basis for your dissertation, we emphasize that Orals lists (and the major list especially) should also be thought of as broad surveys or potential teaching fields. The Orals process should not only prepare you for the dissertation; it should provide a basis for your future pedagogy, and for future research of various kinds.

B) Working with your committee

Students should plan to meet with each member of their committee regularly and should at minimum meet with each member three times over the course of the pre-Orals process. Meetings

may be collective (e.g., both Major List examiners meet with them concurrently) or individual, but they are required.

The exact timing of those meetings will of course vary by student and committee. Some may wish to read texts from one list at a time (and thus cluster meetings with a particular committee member during one part of the academic year), whereas others may wish to read texts from all of their lists simultaneously (and thus meet with all committee members over the course of the year). Whatever the arrangement, the important thing is that you confer regularly with all of your committee members and have a plan for regular meetings with each of them. At their discretion, the faculty member leading the Third Year Proseminar may establish deadlines for scheduling Orals meetings.

In preparation for meetings, we encourage students to produce and share some form of written response to their recently-completed readings. The specific form that writing takes, and the regularity with which it is shared, should be worked out with the members of their committee.

C) The Third Year Proseminar

To better support their work on the Oral Exam and Dissertation Prospectus, students are required to enroll in a year-long biweekly support course, the Third Year Proseminar. The Proseminar will be dedicated to introducing practices of doctoral research and workshopping various documents that will lead to a Dissertation Prospectus by the end of the academic year. In-person attendance in the seminar is mandatory for all students in their third funded year. Students who fail to fulfill their MPhil requirements (including the requirement to attend and participate in the Proseminar) will not advance to doctoral candidacy.

D) Taking the Oral Exam

The Oral Exam is to take place no later than March 13, 2027 (i.e. before spring break). The process and structure of the exam is as follows:

The Oral Exam should be scheduled for a two-hour block of time. During the exam, committee members will ask questions and direct discussion about all three lists, with equal time for each examiner. While the dissertation-related work that students have previously shared with their committee members might come up in the conversation, the primary focus of the exam period should be on the list materials.

After about 90-100 minutes of examination, the student leaves the room and the committee arrives at their judgement. The possible outcomes for the exam are as follows:

- Pass — The student receives the MPhil and moves on to doctoral candidacy, subject to turning in an acceptable final draft of the Dissertation Prospectus.
- Fail — The student does not receive the MPhil and is denied permission to move on to doctoral candidacy, with no possibility of appeal.

- Low Pass — The student receives the MPhil but is denied permission to move on to doctoral candidacy. Students who receive a mark of Low Pass may appeal to their committees to take the exam again. Committees are not obliged to give students permission to retake the exam.

The criteria we have historically set for a successful exam performance are as follows:

The exam is an opportunity for you to do several things: demonstrate some mastery of your fields and related areas; give a sense of how you approach or conceptualize your fields of study; articulate the primary animating questions and ideas you are considering as you begin independent research; show yourself to be a confident interlocutor with your questioners, with other scholars, and with the authors and texts you have been reading; in general, show that you are ready to enter into the final stage of the Ph.D. program, where you will be expected to undertake independent scholarship and become active participants in the discipline.

When the committee's deliberations are finished, the student will return to the room and be informed of the decision. Assuming a mark of Pass, conversation will shift to the dissertation. Importantly, the discussion of your dissertation plans in these final minutes will not take the form of another examination but will instead be an opportunity to sharpen your ideas and research agenda in conversation with committee members.

E) Prospectus

Soon after the exam, students who received a mark of Pass must share a first draft of their Dissertation Prospectus with a (now smaller) 3-person committee of faculty mentors. Within two weeks, a meeting should be held with the dissertation committee. At this time, the committee will share feedback on the Prospectus draft and suggestions for revision.

Two weeks after that meeting, and no later than May 3, the student will share a revised version of the Prospectus that accounts for the feedback conveyed. The committee will then assess the final document and communicate their judgement and any further feedback, either in an in-person meeting or by email. If the Dissertation Prospectus meets the committee's expectations, the student will be authorized to move on to the doctoral phase of the program and GSAS will be informed accordingly.

The criteria we have historically set for a successful Dissertation Prospectus are as follows:

The dissertation prospectus should offer a provisional account of (1) what the argument is, (2) why it matters, and (3) what body of evidence will be drawn on to substantiate it. The "argument" might be expressed as a focused research question, as a hypothesis, or as a tentative thesis. In explaining why it matters, the Prospectus should outline how the dissertation will contribute to, or change, the existing scholarship on the topic. And in describing a body of evidence, the Prospectus should indicate which primary and secondary texts are essential to the project.