

The Oral Exam and Prospectus Defense – An Overview of Year 3

As was the case in AY 2025-26, the Year 3 cohort in AY 2026-27 will be relieved from teaching responsibilities, and will be asked to accomplish two things: pass a readings-based oral exam (the culminating event for the MPhil degree), and complete a dissertation prospectus (the first major project of the doctoral phase of our program). Below is an overview of the program, with deadlines and details about what each phase of this process will entail.

I. Deadlines at a glance

*For all of the below, please remember that you are *strongly, strongly encouraged* to complete each task well before the listed deadlines (which are clerical in nature and 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. Some of these will require you to submit documents to the DGS and your committee members as well as the Proseminar leader.

By June 1: finalize a 4-member committee of faculty advisors and share preliminary copies of your lists with them

By July 1: after a month of reading and any early list revisions, share updated versions of your lists with all committee members and the DGS

By Sept. 1: share finalized versions of oral exam reading lists with your committee members and DGS; enroll in Prof. Julie Peters' required, in-person biweekly Third Year Proseminar during the August registration windows

By March 13 (final day before spring break): pass oral exam. *Note that this is the very latest date on which you can take the exam. We strongly encourage you to schedule it well before spring break.*

By April 2: share first draft of Dissertation Prospectus with your (now smaller) 3-member dissertation committee and DGS; set a date to meet with your committee and discuss the draft prospectus (no later than April 16)

By May 3: share final draft of Dissertation Prospectus, taking account of feedback delivered after the distribution of the first draft, to the committee and DGS

II. Assembling the oral exam lists

One of your oral exam lists should be a “Major List” that surveys key works 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 your 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 your dissertation work. At the same time, this list should help prepare you for a job market in which many positions are advertised in particular “fields” (often historically defined) and in which most hiring committees expect candidates to have broad general knowledge / an ability to teach introductory survey courses.

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, please consult the “English Grad Career Resources” site on Courseworks, and feel free to ask around for other potential models. There is no need to reinvent the wheel with each of your lists.

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

But note: while you should certainly think about how your oral exam reading will form the basis for your eventual dissertation, please remember that the 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.

III. Working with your committee

You should plan to meet with each member of your 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 you concurrently) or individual, but they are required.

The exact timing of those meetings will of course vary by student and committee. Some of you may wish to read texts from one list at a time (and thus cluster your meetings with a particular committee member during one part of the academic year), whereas others of you may wish to read texts from all of your lists simultaneously (and thus meet with all your committee members over the course of the year). Whatever the arrangement, the important thing is to confer regularly with all of your committee members and have a plan for regular meetings with each of them. We strongly recommend setting up appointments for all meetings during the first two weeks of each semester.

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

IV. The Third Year Proseminar

To better support your work on the Oral Exam and Dissertation Prospectus, you will be required to enroll in a year-long biweekly support course, the Third Year Proseminar, generously taught by Professor Julie Peters. The Proseminar will be dedicated to introducing you to practices of doctoral research, and to 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. Please register for the Third Year Proseminar during your earliest available registration window, and be sure to enroll for a full residence unit (RU), as you have done in prior semesters.

V. The format of the 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 you've previously shared with your committee 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, you will leave the room and the committee will arrive at their judgement of your exam performance. 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, but to repeat, students who receive a mark of Fail may not. 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 students to do several things: to demonstrate some mastery of their fields and related areas; to give a sense of how they approach their fields; to articulate the primary animating questions and ideas they are considering as a beginning of their dissertations; to be interlocutors with the questioners and with the authors they have been reading; and to show that they are ready to enter into the final stage of the Ph.D. program, where they will be expected to undertake independent scholarship and to become active participants in the discipline.

When the committee's deliberations are finished, you will return to the room and be informed of the decision. Assuming a mark of Pass, conversation will shift to your dissertation plans. 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 for you and the committee to sharpen your ideas and research agenda.

VI. Drafting the prospectus and concluding the prospectus defense

No later than April 2, students who received a mark of Pass on the Oral Exam must share a first draft of their Dissertation Prospectus with a (now smaller) 3-person committee of faculty mentors. Soon after the submission of that draft, and no later April 16, a meeting should be held

with the dissertation committee. At this time, the committee will share feedback 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 and revision suggestions that were 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 that the student has passed their Prospectus Defense.

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

Put most simply, 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.