

Common RLL General Examination

Purpose: Candidates are expected to demonstrate breadth of knowledge and acquaintance with their field, to define their area of specialization and show their mastery of it, and to present their methodology and perspective. As they move to the status of ABD, candidates are recognized as sufficiently prepared to teach broad overviews of their fields to non-specialists.

Timing: The general examination is taken in May, during the spring term of the third year in the graduate program. In some cases, and with approval of advisers, it may be taken in December of the fall term of the third year.

Examination Committee: At the end of their second year, and in consultation with their main advisor, students establish their examination committee. The committee's role is to advise candidates as they constitute their lists and draft their essays, and to administer the examination. Normally the academic adviser of the candidate chairs the committee. It comprises at least two RLL faculty members, and at least one faculty member who represents the candidate's field. When possible, the committee should include more than two RLL faculty, including faculty members representing other areas of specialization than the student's chosen area. It is also recommended that one faculty member from another section be included whenever possible. In some cases, a faculty member from another department may join the committee.

Lists of materials: After the end of their second year, each candidate starts creating three lists, comprising in total about 90 to 100 items.

The first list constitutes the "field" covering a wide chronological and spatial array including several subfields (subfields are defined by each section). It comprises about 50 to 60 items.

The second list constitutes the "area" and represents the specialization of the student. It comprises about 30 to 40 items.

The third list constitutes the "prospectus list" and introduces the problem and specific sub-areas the candidate will address in the dissertation. It comprises about 10 items.

Examples:

1) Field list: Spanish studies; area list: contemporary Latin American cultures; prospectus list: literature written by women between the 1960s and 1990s

2) Field: Italian studies; area: Medieval literature; prospectus list: theories of language, discourses about language in the 13th and 14th c.

3) Field: French studies; area: 20th and 21st c. francophone literature; prospectus list: literature and law

4) Field: Brazilian and Portuguese studies; area: 16th-17th c Portuguese literature; prospectus list: gender and *genres* in poetry

The lists are structured chronologically or geographically. They are expected to be balanced in such a way that the field list complements the area and prospectus lists rather than overlapping

with them. Therefore, the field list should mostly comprise subfields that are not the area of specialization of the candidate.

Sections may decide to substitute course work for a subfield, which then may not be represented in their lists. This should be clearly explained to new students entering the program, so they can choose their courses judiciously. It is up to the sections to decide how many subfields need to be represented in the lists, and how many courses can be accepted as substitutes. It is also up to the sections to decide what texts or items need to be present on the lists of all students.

Written component of the examination: As they establish their lists, students work on two essays (8-10 page for each) presenting two large themes broad enough to be relevant to the different subfields represented on the list. Through examples selected in all subfields, candidates demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge and their ability to read critically across time, space, and genres, using their themes as points of entry. The essays include references to theoretical and critical works and give the committee a sense of the methodologies used by the candidates. They should not be a mini-dissertation prospectus, but a broad map helping to structure the lists and constitute the indispensable background for the prospectus. Of the two essays, one is written in English and the other in the Romance language of the field.

Candidates start working on the essays in consultation with their main advisor, and eventually with the other members of their committee.

Examples of themes: Memory and history; Encounters with strangers; Displacements; Aesthetics of hybridity; Illnesses and their cures; Heroes and heroism; Food and meaning; Poetic of the sea; Mapping knowledge; Dreams, fantasies, illusions; Utopias and heresies; Real and imaginary libraries; etc.

Both the three lists and the two essays need to be finalized, approved and shared with all members of the committee three weeks before the date of the examination.

The graduate coordinator keeps examples of lists and themes for consultation.

Oral examination: The examination lasts no less than two and no more than three hours. It starts with a brief presentation in English of the essays, followed by questions on the essays and on any item of the lists that faculty members decide to address. The questions are informed by the two themes proposed in the essays. Follow-up questions may address other topics or matters. The questions are not seen in advance by the candidates. Their goal is to assess the knowledge and familiarity candidates have with the field, their ability to think on their feet, and to go back and forth between concepts and particular traits of the works they have studied. The conversation is divided between English and the Romance language of the field. The examination concludes with the candidates presenting a brief oral account of their dissertation project.

Beside the prescribed opening and conclusion, sections may structure the oral examination differently, either around the themes in the essays, or by subfields, or by lists. They may decide to divide the exam equally between a part in English and a part in the Romance language, or to move back and forth between languages. In any case, each faculty member present should have the opportunity to ask more than one or two questions. The expectations of the section and their particular way of carrying out the examination should be made clear to candidates in advance.

Grades and feedback: The members of the examination committee evaluate and comment on the essays and the oral examination immediately after it has been administered, and the committee communicates its feedback right away to candidates. The scale used is: Distinction; high pass; pass; fail. Assessment and grade are recorded in a written report signed by all members of the committee. The graduate coordinator is in charge of filing the report in the candidate's dossier. If the committee judges that the examination does not earn a "pass," the candidate is asked to take the examination again within six months. If the candidate fails a second time, he or she is not authorized to continue in the Ph.D. program.

Application: All RLL graduate students entering the program in 2017 and later will take general examinations in their new form common for all sections. Students who entered the program before fall 2017 and who have not yet taken their examination will have the choice between taking the examination in its old form, according to their section guidelines, and taking the examination in its new common form.

Note: The new form was voted unanimously by all RLL faculty present at the departmental meeting of April 25, 2017. Faculty on leave or absent were kept abreast of the proposal via email and given opportunity to voice their opinion. In the end, no one rejected the proposal.