Guidelines for the Doctoral Exam
Saint Louis University
Department of English

Option A:

The student takes a six-hour written exam. If the student’s primary examiners designate this exam as a pass, the student then takes a two-hour oral exam, approximately two weeks later. Should a student fail to pass the written exam, they may retake it once in an attempt to advance to the oral. In each exam, the candidate is examined on a major period and two of the following four categories, all chosen by the student in collaboration with her or his examining committee.

The categories are:

- A period adjacent to the major period (a period adjacent to 17th Century British literature, for example, would be Restoration Drama)
- A genre (e.g. the Novel)
- A major author (e.g., Virginia Woolf)
- Critical theory (such as Marxist theory, composition theory, etc).

The first three hours of the written exam will be on the major period. The second three hours will be on the other two categories. The first hour of the oral exam will cover the major period; the second hour will cover the other two categories.

In conjunction with the faculty advisor(s)/examining committee of the student’s choosing, the student will draw up three reading lists, one for each category. The list for the major field should consist of a minimum of 40 to 50 primary works; this should be supplemented by lists of 20-25 works from each of the secondary areas. A “work” should be a substantial piece of writing – for example, a novel, or a group or volume of poems or short stories. Accordingly, the entire exam should cover between 80 and 100 “substantial” works.

Some Definitions:

“Period”: A student may study a period that is traditionally or untraditionally defined. To provide a traditional example, the choice of British Romanticism as a period would represent a choice to work very intensively in this chronologically limited but extremely rich area. Or, a student might choose as a period nineteenth-century British literature, a broader specialization. One might choose to study twentieth-century American texts, or might choose, instead, to study transatlantic twentieth-century British and American texts.
The Doctoral Exam/2

N.B.: All the items on the list for the period would be primary texts. The student also will be responsible for informing her or his reading of these primary texts with a knowledge of relevant critical works.

"Genre": A genre is broadly defined: the novel, the short story, drama, narrative poetry, lyric poetry, the essay. A very narrow definition of genre would defeat one of the points of this element of the exam: to assure historical breadth. Again, all of the items on this list would be primary texts, and one would be responsible for preparing in addition the body of relevant criticism and theory.

“Major Author”: A major author would be an author of a substantial amount of work. For this category, secondary texts might be appropriate on the list. Few authors would have thirty substantial works to their name, but beyond that, it would be important for the student to be able to put the author in context and to have a strong knowledge of the critical reception of the writer in question. The major author can be an author from any period of literature, including the period that represents the candidate’s specialty.

“Critical Theory”: The category of critical theory could be defined by the student and committee as a survey of critical theory, or as an intensive study of a particular area of critical theory.

Option B:

The student will take a six-hour written exam and a two-hour oral exam. In each exam, the student will be examined on:

A major field and a minor field

Four hours of the written exam will be on the major field, and four hours, on the minor field. Eighty minutes of the oral exam will be on the major field, and forty minutes of the oral exam will be on the minor field.

As in Option A, the candidate will compile her or his reading lists in conjunction with faculty examiners and advisors. The lists for the major field will include at least 60 works, and the list for the minor field, at least 30. Both the major and minor fields can be defined as a period, a genre, critical theory, or as an interdisciplinary area.
Examples of Option B fields of specialization:
The student might define the major field as 19th and 20th century American literature, and the minor field as narrative theory. Or, the student might choose as a major field, Medieval and Renaissance literature, and the minor field as drama.

Selecting a Doctoral Advisor:

As a first step toward forming one’s doctoral exam committee and in consultation with the faculty, the candidate selects an advisor. This choice will, of course, entail a preliminary – though not irrevocable – choice of a primary field of doctoral concentration. Part of the object in choosing an advisor is to establish a supportive relationship that will help the candidate shape, refine, and even amend the choice of fields in which he or she will be examined. Faculty will work with students in choosing advisors based on their preliminary areas of interest, their desire to work closely with particular graduate faculty, and the willingness and availability of those faculty to work with them. Customarily, the student’s advisor serves as the chair of her or his doctoral exam committee.

*Students entering the doctoral program will, therefore, need to be thinking rather seriously in their first year about which field they might want to make their primary area, and with which faculty they might want to work. Until doctoral candidates have an advisor, they will be advised by the Chair and the Graduate Director, who will assist them in initially designating a literary field and in choosing an advisor.*

Creating a Doctoral Examining Committee:

*No later than the last semester before completing a student’s coursework, the candidate should, in consultation with her/his advisor, select two persons from the graduate faculty to join the advisor in forming a committee to prepare the candidate’s written exam. This is the core group that will help the student develop his or her reading lists. This same group will be responsible for creating questions for the student’s written exam, and for evaluating the result. The student’s advisor will select a date for the written exam.*

Prior to the written exam, the advisor and the candidate also will seek out two additional graduate faculty members to comprise the committee for the student’s oral exam. These choices should be made with an eye toward the relevant expertise demanded by the candidate’s choice of fields. One of these examiners may be from outside the university, if there are compelling reasons – for example, if a student wishes to include faculty from nearby institutions at which she/he took classes while a graduate student. Such faculty must be approved by the Graduate School in order to serve as doctoral examiners (or as dissertation readers), a process for which the candidate’s SLU advisor is responsible.

Revised and updated
August 2008