The Ph.D. Exam

The Ph.D. exam is comprised of a four-hour, open-book, written exam and an hour-long oral exam. The exam takes place in the second or third Ph.D. year, as determined by the director of graduate studies, and focuses on a small archive of literary, philosophical, and literary critical works (approximately 50 works) established by the student. This “major field list” should be organized around a broad topic that will in many cases anticipate the larger field within which the dissertation project will be situated. Some examples from previous exams: “Discourses of Madness from Kant to Musil,” “Worldly Provincialism: German Realism 1850-1900,” and “The Aesthetics of Sacrifice in Postwar German Literature and Art.” Works on the list should be grouped into clusters according to categories and questions relevant to the topic. These criteria should be expressly formulated in the list. Students are encouraged to meet with as many faculty members as possible as they work on these materials. In consultation with the director of graduate studies, they should determine an exam committee of three faculty members: An exam chair plus a second faculty member (normally both members of the department) to compose and evaluate the written examination questions, and a third faculty member (from either departmental or resource faculty) to serve as an additional examiner for the oral exam. The exam chair oversees and schedules the exam with the examiners.

Five weeks prior to the exam, each student will submit to the exam committee and to the director of graduate studies a final draft of the list. As noted, the list should be organized by way of the categories and questions that indicate what the students considers to be the salient issues animating the different clusters of texts. Faculty will use this list as a guide in preparing the exam. Within two weeks of the exam, the full committee will meet with the student for an hour-long discussion that will encompass the exam and plans for the dissertation. Students should then begin work on their dissertation proposals. The final proposal is due no later than one quarter (not including summer) after passing the Ph.D. exam.

For further details regarding the Ph.D. exams, including a detailed timeline, please consult the Program Completion Plan.