

Department of Education, Culture & Society Qualifying (Preliminary) Exams

Qualifying exams (also known as prelims) are the exams that doctoral students take after they have completed **27 hours of coursework** and **before** they have completed **36 hours of coursework**. The goal of the exam is for students to demonstrate a high level of competency in mapping and analyzing fields of research around two questions that interest them in a manner that shows how particular empirical and conceptual work has framed, studied, as well as rendered particular findings.

The qualifying exams are not intended as a preliminary literature review for the dissertation. Rather, they serve as a bridge between the structured inquiry of regular coursework and the independent inquiry represented by the dissertation. The prelims may address a topic or theory related to the dissertation, but their primary purpose is to launch students into independent research on a set of topics that interests them. The student chooses a topic that requires substantial familiarity with one or more research literatures bearing on a question and develops a question and reading list before enrolling for qualifying exams.

I. Qualifying Exam Questions

The exam has two questions:

1. The first question should address a particular theoretical framework or the relationship between two or more theoretical frameworks that the student is interested in. The question should be generated by the student with input from the committee and should focus on the student's research area of interest.
2. The second question should address praxis and be generated collectively between the student and the committee and aim to deepen the student's understanding of either:
 - a) One of the disciplinary sub-fields represented in the department, or
 - b) One theoretical framework or the relationship between two or more of the theoretical frameworks the student has investigated in a preliminary way in their course work.

II. Reading lists

- a. With the assistance of the committee the student generates one reading list for each question.
- b. The reading list will include a combination of texts that the student has already read and texts not yet read.

- c. The length of the lists should include 20 to 25 items (combination of books, articles and chapters).

III. Exam format

Each question should be 20-25 pages (*not including references*). The manuscript expectations are described below.

IV. Procedures

1. The qualifying exam committee will consist of three ECS faculty members. A student who is enrolled in a joint Ph.D. program (such as that between ECS and the Writing Program) may have one member on the committee from outside the ECS department, otherwise all members of the qualifying exam committee should be full-time ECS faculty.

The qualifying exam committee often overlaps with the dissertation committee, but not always. Sometimes students change their mind about the topic they're interested in over the course of the prelims. The dissertation committee has five members and may include one or two members from outside the department. University guidelines require that at least one member of the dissertation committee be from outside the home department. Up to two outside faculty are permitted. The majority of faculty on the committee must be from the ECS department, and the Chair must be from the ECS department. Students should be advised at the outset and reminded later that they will be forming a new (though possibly overlapping) committee for the dissertation. Hence, the Qualifying Exam Committee's work is complete once the student's preliminary committee's comments and assessment are submitted to the student and grades are officially submitted.

2. The committee should be formed after the student has completed 24 hours of course work and before they have completed 36 hours of course work.
3. The student must bring their committee together for a meeting to discuss the reading lists during the last half of the semester *prior* to enrolling in the qualifying exam(s). The formal meeting at which the question and reading list(s) are finalized must be scheduled during either the first or the second week of fall or spring semester. The prelim committee makes any final changes to the question and reading list before the end of the second week of classes. The question and reading list(s) that the student and committee agree upon then become the contract between the student and committee. This is not to say that the student may not add other readings, but the list represents the readings for which they are held accountable. The intent is to contain the prelim experience so that it is more manageable than a dissertation proposal, in which the project and reading list might change midstream.

4. The exam must be taken when the student has completed 27 hours of coursework and before they have completed 36 hours of coursework.
5. Full-time students should enroll for 6 credit hours in *ECS 7961: Directed Reading for Doctoral Preliminary Exam* during the semester they take the exam. Students should enroll in 3 credit hours with the Chair of the committee and 3 credit hours with another committee member. Part-time students should enroll for 3 credit hours with the Chair of the committee when they take the first exam and another 3 hours with the Chair when they take the second exam.
6. Students may discuss their exam(s) with their peers (other students), but should not discuss their exams or ask any faculty for feedback before their exam is completed.
7. Students will schedule an oral defense 3 weeks after the exam(s) have been submitted and before the end of the semester.
8. In case of “failure,” revisions should be completed **within one month of the oral defense.**

V. Timeline

- a. Exam question(s) and reading list(s) should be finalized **no later** than the second week of the semester.
- b. The exam(s) shall be completed and submitted by the 12th week of the semester.
- c. The oral “defense” shall be completed before the end of the semester. At this meeting, the committee offers the student feedback on their paper(s), asks questions, and makes suggestions for the next prelim or the dissertation proposal. No formal presentation is expected from the student, but he or she may wish to talk with the committee about struggles with the literature, surprises, questions, or anything else that was part of the process.

VI. Assessment of Preliminary Exam

Preliminary Examinations are assessed with the following expectations:

- **Quality of writing:** The mechanics of the exams should align with publication standards. This includes clear and clean grammar as well as a thorough spell check. The student should adhere to APA formatting.
- **Quality of the argumentation and organization of the essay(s):** Different sub-disciplines within education employ, at times, different modes of argumentation. Readers/evaluators will appraise the essay(s) from the normative mode of

argumentation employed within the field in which the question is situated. The argument(s) should be explicit early in the essay(s). The organization of the essay(s) should guide the reader to understand the argument through appropriate citations and rich examples that are unpacked. The organization should have needed scaffolding to structure the reader's engagement.

- **Analysis:** The student should provide the readers with the needed analysis of the literature that they are presenting. The clustering of studies to constitute a body of literature should include in-depth analysis of how particular conceptual units are linked and what is afforded by joining these units. Quotations equally should be analyzed, or unpacked, to provide the reader an interpretation of what the author of the quote is activating or linking, as well as what the author is placing in the background, when appropriate.
- **Voice:** The writing should be theoretical and pedagogical in its presentation of the argument(s). The student's voice and arguments should be evident and clear. The student's standpoints should be made explicit to the reader early in the essay. Standpoint can be ontological and/or epistemological/theoretical positioning. The articulation of standpoint(s) should be appropriate for the mode or argumentation being employed.