

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY / KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
REQUEST TO SCHEDULE DOCTORAL PRELIMINARY EXAMINATIONS

INSTRUCTIONS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Introduction: The History faculty and staff congratulate you on reaching this stage of your work toward your doctoral degree. This is an important milestone. The doctoral preliminary examinations (sometimes nicknamed “prelims” and sometimes called “comprehensives” or “comps”) are conducted each Fall and each Spring. The examination process is envisioned as a single examination. However, the written portion consists of several components, and there is an oral phase after the written phase is completed. The components of the written phase evaluated separately, while the evaluation of the oral phase tends to be based on an impression of overall performance, even though individual examiners are entitled to make a determination especially on the basis of their own areas of expertise. As a result, the scheduling of the examination’s components can feel complicated. The History faculty and staff will do our best to be helpful.

What exams do I take? You and your supervisory committee will have determined some while ago your choice of general field examination and the topic and scope of each of three special field examinations. Now it is time to fulfill those commitments. (Keep in mind that one of the special field exams covers a field within a discipline other than history or else an area within history that is clearly unrelated to the intended focal area of your dissertation.)

How do I schedule my prelims? Early each semester, the departmental Director of Graduate Studies issues a notice through e-mail calling on those doctoral students who intend to take prelims that semester to declare themselves. The initial declaration of intent may be simply in the form of an e-mail message, a copy of which should be sent to your major professor and a copy of which should be directed to hoffice@ksu.edu for inclusion in your doctoral student file in the main office of the department. The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) contacts the chair of each general field committee that may be called upon to prepare an exam. Meanwhile, each doctoral student should get a departmental form “Request to Schedule Preliminary Examinations” and work with the three special field examiners to set the circumstances under which each special field exam will be taken. In consultation with you, the examiner will determine the format of the examination: four hours, closed book and closed note, with no Internet access; eight hours, open book and open note, with Internet access at the discretion of the examiner; or forty-eight hours, open book and open note, with Internet access. It is important that you and each of the special field examiners work out the precise and agreed-upon terms of an examination.

It is common that a general field exam will be taken by more than one individual in any given semester, and the chair of the general field committee sets the day, date, and time on which the general field exam is given to those who will take it. (The current practice specifies electronic transmission of the test and electronic filing of the answers, and the time allowed is 72 hours.) Thus, although the relevant general field committee does its best to accommodate the needs of the students taking the exams, keep in mind that this is actually a group experience where other individuals’ needs are being considered as well as yours.

In the written portion of your special field examinations, you have greater control over the day, date, and time of the administration of exams. It is important, nonetheless, that the schedule be hammered out in a timely way so that the administration of all exams may be done effectively from the History Office.

Field examiners send their questions to the Director of Graduate Students, who passes them on to the History Office staff. They in turn generally pass the exams on to the students taking the prelims, and they receive the completed work back from the students. The History Office staff then ensures that a copy of your work goes into your file in the History Office and that the examiners receive the various essays you have written in response to the various tests. The examiners report results to the DGS, who informs students of the results in their exams after they have completed all the written portion of the prelims. The reason for this last measure is to avoid any disruption or disturbance as a student proceeds through all four written components of the exam. The consensus view is that it is better, for example, for a student to write all four written components of the prelims rather than

to hear that one part was passed, another not, and so on while still taking the remainder of the written portion of the prelims.

Please schedule a day, date, time and place for the oral portion of the prelims at roughly the same time as when you are scheduling the written portion. Ordinary courtesy applies. Speak with your major professor and then with the various examiners. (The Director of Graduate Students should be notified when you have firmed up a day, date, and time for your orals, but the DGS is not involved in setting the day, date, and time themselves.) The History Office staff will work with you to see if frequently used space such as EH 201 will be available for your orals, and, if other space needs to be found, they will help to reserve space elsewhere, usually in another room in Eisenhower Hall or in the K-State Union.

Where will my prelims be held? The written elements of your general field examination should be written at a place of your convenience. As noted above, the current practice specifies electronic submission of the exam and electronic filing of the answers, and the time allowed is 72 hours. Use your own good judgment in this respect. You will need to observe whatever guidelines an examiner has set (such as whether the work is “open book” and so on). However, an examiner has the right to specify that the exam be taken at a particular location such as a room in Eisenhower Hall. With respect to the special field exams, depending on the format chosen by the examiner (see the previous page), the four-hour exam will be administered on campus; the eight-hour exam may be taken on campus or at a location chosen by the student, with the determination to be made by the examiner in consultation with the student; the forty-eight-hour exam may be taken at the location chosen by the student. The location of the general and the special field exams, then, is usually specified at the time when you file your “Request to Schedule Preliminary Examinations” or soon thereafter. The oral phase is usually held in Eisenhower Hall (most often in EH 208) or in the K-State Union, and History Office staff will help you to confirm a good space. You should plan on at least two hours, and it is prudent to reserve the room used for the oral phase of the prelims for three hours.

Please note that sometimes an individual examiner participates at a distance (telephonically or through video conference technology). But please be aware that the Graduate School has guidelines to ensure that these means are used effectively and in ways that ensure quality, so you should be sure to check the Graduate School’s web page for any current guidelines in this regard.

Who arranges for the ballot? You do. The Graduate School’s web page includes forms for graduate students at the doctoral level, and one of these is the request for a ballot for the doctoral preliminary examination. This form requires the signature and approval of your major professor. When the Graduate Office receives this form, the staff there will review your file to be sure that all requirements of your program of study have been fulfilled as well as any other related requirements (such as required foreign language or languages). Then a ballot is sent to your major professor. If you pass the writtens, move directly to orals, and then pass the orals, this one ballot suffices. However, if you fail all or part of the writtens or, later, do not pass the orals, it is customarily necessary to get a new ballot from the Graduate Office. (In general, it is not permissible for a faculty member to hold a ballot for a protracted period such as six months or more.)

How do I learn the results? You will be notified of the results of the written portion of your exams by the Director of Graduate Studies after you have completed all the written tests. In the event that results begin to reach the DGS while you are still taking the writtens, the results will be held until you have finished writing. If results begin to come in after you have finished writing, the results will be relayed to you as soon as possible after they reach the DGS. Please be sure to keep your major professor and the other members of your graduate supervisory committee properly informed. If you pass all parts of the written phase, you proceed to the orals. There, when the examiners have questioned you and when discussion is complete, you will be asked to leave the examiners to discuss the results. Soon after, you will be asked to return to the room. The major professor and the various examiners will convey to you their assessment.

What happens if I pass all parts of the prelims? First, of course, you should celebrate. The milestone that is superior to *taking* your prelims is the milestone of *passing* them.

Even at this happy moment, there are practical considerations. For one, you will want to be sure that all examiners have signed the ballot in the appropriate places to indicate that you have passed the prelims.

Also, the form on which the outcome is reported (in ballot form) also contains a section on “Admission to Candidacy.” The term “candidate” means “candidate for the degree,” and, specifically, it means that you are now finished with everything required for the doctorate except for the dissertation. All members of your graduate supervisory committee must sign the recommendation concerning candidacy. Please keep in mind that sometimes an individual is a member of your graduate supervisory but is not an examiner covering a special field of your prelims. (Similarly, it is possible to have an examiner who is not a member of your graduate supervisory committee.) Thus, the signatures in the ballot portion of the form will not be identical to those in the portion dealing with admission to candidacy.

We recommend that a copy of the signed ballot and recommendation for admission to candidacy be made and placed in your file in the History Office.

Whether you take your ballot to the Graduate Office for filing or whether your major professor gets it there is really up to your major professor.

The form includes a place to indicate the title of your dissertation. But we might think of it as the “subject” rather than the exact title, even though you should emulate the form of a title. You are not bound exactly to this title and subject.

The Dean of the Graduate School appoints an “outside chair” for your defense of dissertation. This individual is unlikely to be an expert on the content of your dissertation, although the Dean does make an effort to appoint chairs who have at least some passing interest in your subject. Indeed, one key reason why you are asked to enter the title of your dissertation on the form is so that the Graduate Dean can make a good choice of “outside chair.” The fundamental role of the “outside chair” is to be the representative of the entire graduate faculty of Kansas State University, to ensure that all regulations and guidelines of the Graduate School are followed, and to affirm that the History faculty are staying true to the department’s own established procedures.

Once you have achieved candidacy, it is your obligation to remain “continuously enrolled.” That is, to remain in candidacy, you must register for at least one credit hour in each regular semester (Fall and Spring) until you have defended your dissertation and filed the final revised version. So, stay enrolled. Also, stay in touch with your major professor and the other members of your committee.

You now have one great and, we hope, exciting task ahead of you – completing your dissertation. Ordinarily, the Graduate School allows you five years in which to complete it.

Questions? If you have any other questions about the preliminary examinations, always be sure to discuss matters with your major professor and other faculty advisers. Feel free, too, to contact the DGS.