

GRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

University of Toronto

Description of Special Fields Exam and Timeline for Thesis Proposal, Reading List, and Special Fields Exam

The Special Fields Examination

The Special Fields Examination is Janus-faced: it occurs at a threshold from which you look back towards engagement with the basic landmarks in a teaching and research field and forward towards your own future critical contributions. To strike a good balance between these competing aims, the exam has three components. It requires (1) a written examination focused on a reading list – this is a take-home exam, which you have one week (7 days, 168 hours) to complete, and in which you select three questions to answer from a list of nine (none of these questions is directed to the thesis); (2) a Position Paper, 3,000 words maximum, which articulates your most recent thinking about your thesis topic and sets out the argument and stakes of the thesis in light of your preparation of the texts on the reading list (to be submitted no later than one week prior to the oral exam, and usually a week after the answers to the written examination have been submitted); and (3) an oral examination, approximately two hours long, focused in part on the written examination, in part on the Position Paper, and in part on the Special Fields Reading List as a whole (the oral exam will generally be held approximately 21-23 days after the day on which you receive the questions for your written examination).

The Special Fields Examination should both prepare you for teaching and scholarly work in a particular field and facilitate the transition to writing the doctoral thesis. Accordingly, the Special Fields Reading List, which forms the basis for the examination, should comprise between 80 and 100 titles, roughly two-thirds (55-65) in a **major field** and roughly one-third (25-35) in a **minor field**.

The **major field** is understood to be one in which hiring is or has been done, e.g. Medieval Literature, Early American Literature, Postcolonial Literature, etc.: *it is the established field to which your dissertation will make an original contribution* and in which (should you intend to pursue an academic career) you eventually hope to be hired. You should start by consulting the department's [Research Areas](#): in some cases, you will be able to select a research area *as* the major field (Early Modern Literature or African American Literature, for example); in other cases, the major field may be more specific than the research area and fit comfortably within it (Global Modernism is more specific than and fits comfortably within Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Literature, or Twentieth-Century American Literature is more specific than and fits comfortably within American Literature). Note that [Form A: Preliminary Thesis Proposal and Supervisory Committee Request List](#) (also available in [Word doc](#) format) asks you to list your Research Area, which should be one of the areas listed on the [Research Areas](#) page. It then asks

you to list your major field, which may be the same as the research area or may be more specific and fit comfortably within it.

The **minor field** may be a research and teaching field in some way adjacent to the major field – for instance, chronologically (Eighteenth-Century Literature if the major field is Romantic Literature) or geographically (Twentieth-Century Canadian Literature if the major field is Twentieth-Century American Literature); a theoretical or methodological school or orientation (e.g., Marxist Literary Theory, Affect Theory, etc.); or, if the minor field is neither adjacent to the major field nor a theoretical/methodological school, then the minor field should complement the major field in some demonstrable way (Medieval Literature if the major field is Victorian Literature and the thesis envisioned is on Victorian Medievalism).

The Special Fields Reading List is drawn up in close consultation with your supervisor and other members of your committee. The list should be given a descriptive title indicating its character and scope. Typically, students simply list the major and minor fields together: for example, “Early American Literature and Affect Theory” or “Contemporary British Literature, 1965-present, and Modernist British Literature.”

Sample reading lists are available from the Graduate English Association’s [Special Fields Repository](#), for which you will require a password: to request one, please email the GEA President, whose email address is listed on the [departmental GEA page](#).

The reading list and a brief rationale for it are submitted as part of a signed and completed [Form B: Supervisory Committee and Special Fields Reading List](#) (also available in [Word doc](#) format), which must be received by the Department by October 1 of Year 2 for PhDs, Year 3 for PhD Us.

At least three months must elapse between submission of Form B and the sitting of the exam.

The written examination is a take-home, open-book examination. You will receive the questions for the exam from the Graduate Administrator and will have one week in which to write up your answers to three of those questions: two about the major field list, one about the minor field list. Upon request and with sufficient notice to the Graduate Administrator (minimum 3 weeks notice), the Graduate Office will provide office space for exam-writing if you would prefer to write your exam in the Department rather than at home or in campus libraries. (Note that this will only be possible within regular department office hours, which are Mondays to Fridays from 9 am to 5 pm.) You will not be expected to go beyond the list to “research” your answers; nor will you be expected to attach a bibliography or include citations. There is a strictly enforced word limit for answers: the three essays that students write in response to the examination questions should not under any circumstance exceed 3,000 words each.

The Position Paper registers your most recent thinking about the thesis topic. The word “position” here has two senses: first, it signals that you should *position* your proposed thesis work in an existing critical, scholarly, or theoretical conversation; second, it indicates that you

should *take a position* in that conversation—i.e., state an argument about your topic and suggest its most salient entailments. You must hand in the Position Paper to the Graduate Administrator in electronic form one week prior to the oral examination. You will have been working on the Position Paper for several months; it is due *after* you have completed the written take-home exam, however, to allow time for any final revisions that may have suggested themselves as you prepared the written examination.

A single grade of Fail, Pass, or Distinction is awarded for the entire examination considered as a whole (written take-home answers, Position Paper, and oral component). In the event of a mark of Fail, a second attempt at the Special Fields Examination (in three parts, as before) is allowed. It must be made within four months or, if the summer intervenes, in the following September. There is no provision for a third attempt should the Special Fields Exam be failed twice.

Arranging the Special Fields Examination: In consultation with you, your supervisor will arrange a time and place for the oral component of the examination. **Note that it is your responsibility to ensure that this date does not conflict with any significant TA responsibilities.** The questions for the written part of the exam are normally given to you 21-23 days prior to the oral component. As specified above, your written answers and Position Paper should be submitted to the Graduate Administrator in electronic form. Again, please note that **the Graduate Administrator requires a minimum of three weeks notice to set up the examination.**

PhD Year 1 / PhD U Year 2

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| November /
December | Associate Director, PhD holds a meeting to discuss the process of choosing a Supervisor, drafting the Thesis Proposal, setting up a Supervisory Committee, and planning ahead for the Special Fields Exam. |
| January /
April | Students consult widely with faculty members regarding their ideas for the thesis and possible supervision or committee membership. They should use their Preliminary Thesis Proposal as a starting point for these conversations. If a SSHRC or OGS program/plan of study was written in the fall, it may serve as the Preliminary Thesis Proposal, but the proposal should reflect your <i>current</i> thinking about your dissertation. |
| May | Students secure a supervisor and work with them to complete Form A: Preliminary Thesis Proposal and Supervisory Committee Request List (also available in Word doc format). |
| May 15 | Students submit Form A: Preliminary Thesis Proposal and Committee Request List. |
| June | Associate Director, PhD, in consultation with DGS, constitutes thesis committees. Any subsequent changes to the committee MUST have the written |

approval of the Associate Director, PhD or the Director of Graduate Studies.

Mid-June / July Students meet or correspond with each member of the Supervisory Committee to discuss the Thesis Proposal and to decide on the initial 40-50 texts for the Special Fields Reading List.

Summer Summer is spent beginning to prepare for the Special Fields Exam by studying the initial texts on the Special Fields Reading list. Students should also make notes about—and, if possible, discuss with their supervisor and committee members—the remaining 40-50 texts on the list.

PhD Year 2 / PhD U Year 3

September Students work with supervisor and committee to finalize the Special Fields Reading List.

October 1 Students submit [Form B: Supervisory Committee and Special Fields Reading List](#) (also available in [Word doc](#) format). Note that at a minimum three months must elapse between submitting Form B and sitting the exam.

October – March Students study the texts on the Special Fields Reading List to prepare for the Special Fields Examination; they also work on drafting the Position Paper.

March-May **Special Fields Examination** is taken. Note: the Graduate Administrator requires a minimum of three weeks to set up the exam. ***Only in extraordinary circumstances are examinations held in July or August.***

School of Graduate Studies Policy on Candidacy

A student who has completed all requirements for the PhD except the thesis (in other words, all coursework, including ENG9900, which may be taken in either Fall of Year 2 or Fall of Year 3 [PhD U Year 3 or Year 4]; the Language Requirement; and the Special Fields Exam) is said to have achieved “Candidacy.” This must occur before the end of the third year of the program (before the end of the fourth year for PhD U students). A student who has not completed all of the requirements except the thesis, or who does not have an approved thesis topic, supervisor, or Supervisory Committee, has failed to achieve candidacy, will be denied further registration, and may have enrolment in the program terminated. (See the SGS Calendar for regulations regarding the time limit for completion of program requirements.)

Revised August 20, 2024