The Ph.D. Examination and Prospectus in Comparative Literature
Revised July 2014

The following is a guide to the Ph.D. exam and prospectus for graduate students and faculty in Comparative Literature at Rutgers. It appears on our website (http://complit.rutgers.edu/) and in the Graduate Student Handbook.

Exam Rationale and Reading List

The Ph.D. examination has two components, written and oral. Based on a lengthy and highly individualized reading list, it is designed to test each student broadly and in depth about the major texts (including, if relevant, film and works in other media), topics, theories, and critical histories of the student’s chosen field. We do not think of the exam as its own end, disengaged from later dissertation research and writing. Rather, it is an occasion for students to begin formulating ideas and arguments that will be refined and extended in the coming months.

The reading list, selected by the student with strong input from the chair and other committee members (see below), should include roughly one hundred works that serve as the basis for the dissertation. No two lists are similar. When approved by all members of the committee (usually in the semester before the exam), the list should then be filed with the Graduate Director.

Examination Committee

The examination committee consists of three faculty members, a chair and two others. The chair must be Core or Affiliate Faculty in Comparative Literature and is usually the professor who has agreed to direct the student’s dissertation. The other members of the committee should, if possible, be Core or Affiliate faculty in Comparative Literature. The Graduate Director may grant special permission to an exam committee member who is not on the Core/Affiliate roster.

Exam Timing

Graduate students in Comparative Literature usually have five-year funding packages. Because of the comparative nature of course work in our field, students entering with a B.A. may not be prepared to take their Ph.D. exam before the end of their third year in the program. By contrast, students entering with an M.A. often take their exam earlier in the third year. Since the timing of the exam thus can vary considerably within a graduate cohort, all students should meet with the Graduate Director to discuss scheduling possibilities at the beginning of their third year.

Exam Procedures, Written and Oral

The committee chair, in concert with the student, chooses a Friday-Monday span for the written exam AND an oral exam date no more than two weeks later.

The orals must take place in the Comparative Literature building, 195 College Avenue.
Marilyn Tankiewicz, the Administrative Assistant in Comparative Literature, should be asked to reserve the Seminar Room (with the upstairs Graduate Lounge as a possible alternative) for the oral exam.

**The written exam:** The committee chair solicits one question from each committee member, compiles the three questions into one document, and sends it as an email attachment to Marilyn on the Thursday before the designated Friday. The document should contain these instructions:

> Answer **TWO of the following three questions in essay form and return them as an attachment to Marilyn Tankiewicz (marilyn.tankiewicz@rutgers.edu) by noon on Monday, (day/month). Each of the essays should be between 10 and 20 pages in length. They must also be lucid, thorough, well organized, and footnoted where appropriate.**

On the Monday, as soon as she receives the student’s essays, Marilyn forwards them to the exam committee chair and prints out a copy for the student’s files. The chair then forwards the essays to the other members of the committee.

Within two weeks, all three committee members read the essays and decide whether the student merits a pass and can go on to orals. If so, the orals date is reconfirmed.

**The oral exam:** The orals should be wide-ranging. The student may be asked to respond to the question she or he did not answer for the written exam or to questions about any of the items on the reading list.

In Comparative Literature, students pass or fail their exams; we do not designate “high” or “low” pass. Special commendations can be added later to the student’s file or remembered for a letter of recommendation.

**Note:** Our two-part doctoral exam, put in place when the Graduate Program was revised in 2003, has proven to be a productive and even enjoyable part of a student’s graduate work at Rutgers. We hear again and again that written exams became building blocks for dissertation chapters. The oral exam has also been a positive and confirming moment of the transition to dissertation writing. Indeed, if committee members deem it appropriate, they can devote the last part of the orals to discussing the dissertation prospectus.

**The Prospectus**

The dissertation prospectus is a succinct document of no more than ten double-spaced pages. It should contain the central questions and arguments underpinning the dissertation along with a tentative chapter breakdown. An extensive bibliography should be appended.

The prospectus is due within the first three weeks of the semester following the term in which the exam was taken. However, we encourage students to submit the prospectus as soon after the orals as possible with the understanding that writing, once underway, tends to modify most research plans. We want our students to move forward with their work without further delay.