

Preliminary Examination Format: The Portfolio System

Students will demonstrate their readiness to undertake independent dissertation research by submitting a portfolio of their best work to date. The portfolio format, modeled on the tenure dossier, combines a set of requirements (most of which will be completed in the normal progression through coursework during years one and two) with sufficient flexibility to allow the students to display their knowledge of different fields, clarity of written communication, and evidence of teaching ability.

Each student's portfolio will be divided into three fields of specialization. One of these, the “major” field, will be completed with the student’s main advisor in the department of Romance Studies. The other two, the “minor” fields, will be completed with other faculty in Romance Studies. In addition to the work completed for the three sections of the portfolio, the student will also submit an intellectual statement of three to five pages describing his/her overall agenda and explaining how the three fields cohere. In developing a plan for the portfolio, the student should work closely with his/her main advisor to make sure to receive the appropriate training to work effectively as teachers and scholars in the chosen field(s).

At the beginning of the process, when the faculty member agrees to examine a student in a particular field, together they will establish a set of written guidelines outlining the kind and quantity of written material the student should include in the portfolio. This communication between faculty and student will take the form of a contract, signed by the faculty examiner and submitted for DGS approval. After this contract, faculty may not request additional material. This contract should be signed by the beginning of the second year of course.

Each portfolio will include a reading list connected to the particular field, which will inform the written work presented. The written materials themselves will in many cases include work produced for graduate classes taken during the first two years. Faculty and students can also decide to use previous papers as a basis for expanded theoretical or methodological essays. The particular format for submitted work is quite open: the portfolio can include book reviews, critical essays, historiographical reviews, annotated bibliographies, course syllabi, and research papers. The intention is to build on the student’s previous work by assigning a set of written projects that will allow them to demonstrate their understanding and engagement with a particular body of work. As elements of the portfolio are completed, the student should meet with the members of the committee to discuss his/her progress.

The selection of fields is up to the faculty and students, but should be conceived broadly in order to provide the student with exposure to a range of approaches and fields. A field might be organized around a particular author or group of authors, or a particular historical period. It can also be organized around a broad theoretical inquiry. In addition to preparing students for their dissertation project, the fields also serve to establish expertise in potential teaching areas. It is therefore important for them to include material directly relating to teaching.

Although the precise timing of the presentation and examination of the portfolio will vary, students must complete the process by the end of their third year in the program. Ideally, they will complete the portfolio and defense during the fall of the third year, so that they can complete their Dissertation Prospectus Workshop during the spring semester. Students, however, should begin thinking about the fields for their portfolio, and begin consulting with potential faculty advisors, during their first year in the program. The process of organizing and reorganizing the material they are producing in classes and in independent studies should help students identify their fields and examiners in a timely manner.

Once the student has completed all the work for the three fields included in the portfolio, the faculty examiner for each of the student's fields will evaluate the relevant field section of the student's portfolio, submitting a detailed written assessment to the student, the student's major advisor, and the DGS. Upon receipt of faculty assessments of all sections of the portfolio, the student's major advisor will review the portfolio in its entirety, including the intellectual agenda, at which point he or she will notify the student, other committee members, and the DGS as to whether the student may proceed to the oral examination.

The student's entire committee will then participate in the two-hour oral discussion of the portfolio. In addition to field examiners, students must include one or two additional readers – either from within Romance Studies or from another department – who will read the portfolio materials and participate in the oral examination. At the end of the oral examination, the committee will determine whether the student has completed the preliminary examination requirements and can move on to preparing for the Dissertation Prospectus Workshop.