

PhD in Comparative Studies
Comprehensive Exams and Dissertation Proposal Preparation Strategies

I. FAU Graduate College Resources

- a. The Graduate College Website <http://www.fau.edu/graduate/>
- b. Dissertation Guidelines: <http://fau.edu/graduate/forms-and-procedures/degree-completion/thesis-and-dissertation/index.php>
- c. [Graduate College's Thesis and Dissertation Formatting Workshops](#)

II. Comprehensive Exams

- a. Program Guidelines for Comprehensive Exams (handout and on program website)
<http://www.fau.edu/comparativestudies/pdf/PhD%20Comp%20Exams%20Guidelines%202%202011%200edited%204%202016.pdf>
- b. Doctoral Supervisory Committees (from FAU Graduate College guidelines):
 - i. Each doctoral candidate shall have an advisor and a Supervisory Committee comprised of at least three members of the Graduate Faculty. One of the members shall serve as the Chair of the Supervisory Committee.
 - ii. The Supervisory Committee shall: approve the student's plan of study; monitor the student's academic progress; approve the dissertation subject; prepare, give, and evaluate the qualifying examination; evaluate the dissertation defense; and approve the final document.
 - iii. The minor, or related fields, if applicable, shall have representation on the Supervisory Committee.
- c. Tips and Strategies for Preparing for Comprehensive Exams
 - i. Overview of Important Strategies for Comps
 - 1. Purpose of comps: (a) To ensure that you have mastered the primary and secondary fields of study that will inform your dissertation and that make up your professional profile as a PhD. (b) To fill in gaps that coursework did not cover. (c) To prepare you to feel confident that you can teach undergraduate courses related to the areas of study on which you are examined. (4) To demonstrate to your committee that you are ready to make an original contribution to scholarship in your field(s).
 - 2. Be sure you know what your committee expects from you and that everyone is working from the same reading list.
 - 3. Do not rely on what your classmates or students from other cohorts say. Every committee is different; every comp. exam is distinct. If in doubt, consult your committee chair and committee.
 - 4. Reading list should be developed as early as possible and as soon as Exam Committee is chosen. It should include seminal texts from both primary and secondary fields in which you have done coursework. Lists are developed with the professors on student's committee. In addition to including works studied in classes, a way to prepare a preliminary list to propose to your committee is to consult the disciplinary PhD reading lists at leading programs around the country as well as literary and cultural histories that provide overviews of fields and the corpus of texts most studied in that field. Lists should also include literary and cultural theory relevant to the fields. Lists might also include pertinent literary or cultural criticism (essays and books).
 - 5. Once you have an approved list, you should begin to study for the comps by reading and taking notes on each text. If the text was read in the past, gather previous class notes, personal notes, marginalia, etc. Consult critical histories, articles, etc. to help you synthesize why a given text is important (theme, style, theoretical statement, relationship to other works, genres, movements, etc.). Then, you should begin to draw

connections between the works on the lists, noting relationships between texts, authors, and other movements, etc.

6. Oral Exam: To prepare for the oral exam, re-read your answers to the written questions. Think about ways you might elaborate more if asked to do so. Often, your committee will ask you to expand on your answers, clarify points that are not clear or that may have alternative interpretations, etc. Also think about what you plan to do with the dissertation since the oral exam often phases into a conversation about dissertation proposal planning.
7. Sample questions from written exam:
 1. In *Notions of Identity*, Brinda Mehta notes that “While celebrating the nomadic or migratory subjectivity of Caribbean peoples who configure notions of home and elsewhere through a particular transcontinental circularity, several male critics nevertheless pay marginal attention to the gendering of diaspora as they articulate the ways in which diasporic configurations are problematized by intersectional postcoloniality of class, ethnicity” (3). Choose three theorists from the Postcolonial & Diaspora Studies list who address the gendering of diaspora as a concept. Be sure to provide one fundamental connection that links these three critics, a similarity in their discussion of this gendering of diaspora, and one fundamental distinction that differentiates their approaches. Also, provide one example that each critic gives to substantiate his or her articulation of diaspora. Focus on showcasing the depth and specificity of knowledge you’ve developed from studying for this exam.
 2. Is there an overarching theme to twentieth century African American literature that binds all works together or does the literary history of this period exhibit a fragmentedness? What would that theme or themes be? Please explore the larger implications of your assertions.
8. Links to resources on comprehensive exam preparation:
 - ii. https://rmitchel.uoregon.edu/tip/comp_take
 - iii. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/surviving-studying-comprehensive-exams>
 - iv. For oral exam:
<http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/news/8-ways-prepare-comprehensive-exams>
 - v. <http://www.cla.temple.edu/politicalscience/files/2013/04/StudyGuideforComprehensiveExams.pdf>
 - vi. <http://depts.washington.edu/history/graduate-studies-phd-degree/20-tips-phd-exam>

III. Dissertation Proposal or Prospectus

- a. The proposal is submitted to the student's committee as soon as it is ready after the comprehensive exams have been passed. The student cannot advance to candidacy until the proposal is approved by the committee. The student must advance to candidacy in order to begin to earn dissertation credits. The degree requires a minimum of 18 dissertation credits.
- b. It is recommended that you begin discussions about your dissertation during the comprehensive exam preparation period, so that your readings feed into the dissertation proposal. Some students begin drafting a proposal during this period as well.
- c. The proposal/prospectus outlines a program of original research conducted in a comparative manner and should be approximately 15-20 pages. It should address the following items:
 - i. What are the research questions and in what ways is the research original? This discussion engages relevant scholarship on the topic and field.
 - ii. State the proposed thesis of the dissertation and outline the proposed argument of the dissertation.
 - iii. Describe how the subject of this research is to be developed. Describe the methodology and/or theoretical or critical approach (es) to be employed.
 - iv. Describe the works that will be examined and explain why those works were chosen.
 - v. How is the dissertation to be structured? Propose a chapter-by-chapter overview of the dissertation.
 - vi. Include an initial bibliography of primary and secondary literature to be cited and consulted in the dissertation.
 - vii. Some dissertation directors request a proposed timeline for drafting the chapters while others will wait and discuss that at the proposal defense.
- d. Please note that given the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of our program, some professors who serve as directors may have other approaches to dissertation proposals based on their experience and disciplinary traditions. Students should share these guidelines with their directors and ask if they recommend any adjustments or expansions. Like the comprehensive exams reading lists, there should be clarity of expectations between the student and his or her director and committee. Format according to MLA guidelines or other approved style guide.
- e. Recommended formal structure of the proposal document:
 - i. Title page with committee members names and spaces for signatures
 - ii. Abstract
 - iii. Introduction and thesis statement
 - iv. Literature review
 - v. Methodology and theoretical framework
 - vi. Chapter summaries
 - vii. Conclusion stating hoped for contribution to the field
 - viii. Bibliography
- f. Once the director has approved the proposal draft then it is sent to the entire committee at least two weeks before the proposal defense. It is the student's responsibility to organize the proposal defense date, time and place. Gabby can assist you on reserving a conference room. A copy of the approved prospectus (with signatures) must be filed with the PhD Program office to be kept in your file.
- g. Please note that it is absolutely normal for a student to change many aspects of the proposal as she or he write the dissertation. Therefore, one should not be paralyzed at the proposal stage by anxiety that every proposed element must stay in the project. Often new discoveries during the writing process will

modify the theoretical frame, the chapter structure, and even the thesis statement itself. The important thing is to maintain good communication with your advisors as the writing process advances.

- h. Like any good writing, the magic is in the multiple drafting that leads to a better final version after each pass at it. If you feel blocked, free write your way out of it and then revise, revise, revise!
- i. Set a writing schedule with at least 3-4 hours of uninterrupted time devoted to the proposal and later to the dissertation. Also form working groups with others preparing their dissertation and set deadlines for each other and be generous with honest feedback to one another.
- j. Links to resources on dissertation writing and proposals:

<http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/a/sam50/dissguide.htm>

http://web.uri.edu/graduate-school/files/ThesisDissertationProcessRevised_11-03-15.pdf

<https://www.mla.org/Publications/Bookstore/Nonseries/MLA-Style-Manual-and-Guide-to-Scholarly-Publishing-Third-Edition>

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=7&ved=0ahUKEwj38Sxt6rKAhXFLSYKHcsDBTUQFghJMAY&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.utexas.edu%2Fcola%2Ffrenchitalian%2F_files%2FWritingProposals.ppt&usg=AFQjCNEqvUhW3CC2I3H4zwwul-nzZMkL9Q

<https://www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/dec/essay.dissertation.html>

http://gradschool.cornell.edu/sites/gradschool.cornell.edu/files/field_file/WritingAB_WEB.pdf

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/dissertation.pdf>

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/dissertations/>