

# PhD EXAMS HANDBOOK: Evaluative Guidelines, Standards, & Criteria

This document provides evaluative guidelines, standards and criteria for the PhD exam (oral or written) by area, as well as procedures for re-taking the written or oral exam. Students are encouraged to review the criteria with their supervisory committees in advance of and in preparation for the exam.

For a general explanation of overall doctoral examination structure, please see the [Doctoral Examinations webpage](#) or the [Graduate Student Handbook](#)

## **Table of Contents**

English Education.....	2
Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.....	3
Literature.....	8
Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies.....	11
Process for Retaking Written or Oral Exam.....	15

# English Education

## Written & Oral Exams

The written or oral exams take place after successful completion of the portfolio. In our program, students typically take their exam in the second semester of their third year or the first semester of their fourth (depending on the student's pace).

**The student may choose between a written or oral exam.**

**Written Exams:** 4 hours to answer 3 questions

**Oral:** 1.5 hours each committee member typically asks 2 questions

**What to expect:** The English Education faculty want you to be successful in this process. Exam questions cover topics, methods, or major areas of understanding related to the key topics or areas of focus on the reading list. This is your opportunity to show us what you have learned and how you have immersed yourself in the topic and this is your chance to show this off.

The student will:

- Synthesize concepts and ideas from the reading list texts in conversation together
- Situate their own work and interests within theories, methods, and/or histories that define their field
- Identify foundational texts and authors in the field (represented on the reading list), summarize their key findings/theories, and demonstrate how the student's work is connected to those finding/theories
- Identify gaps in the research and describe how their research interests respond to the gap

# Linguistics & Applied Linguistics

## Written & Oral Exams

### I. Overview

The purpose of the PhD Exam is to assess a candidate's academic preparation and readiness to advance to the next stages of their doctoral studies. Candidates are expected to show they have appropriate and readily accessible knowledge of representative primary and secondary works in their area(s) of specialization. To assess this knowledge and preparedness, we have identified three main competencies that are essential in developing a dissertation prospectus and conducting original dissertation research: *1. Disciplinary Competence*, *2. Theoretical & Conceptual Competence*, and *3. Methodological Competence*. The committee's assessment of these three competencies must be based on the student's performance in relation to the areas of expertise and material represented in the bibliography.

#### **1. Disciplinary Competence.**

A doctoral candidate must be able to identify key topics (e.g., issues, concerns, debates, developments) in their discipline, field, or domain and situate their work/interests in relation to existing scholarly conversations and relevant research findings. This first area of the exam asks students to demonstrate their (a) *awareness and understanding* of relevant scholarship, (b) *knowledge of the development and current status* of that scholarly conversation, and (c) *ability to synthesize and purposefully evaluate existing research* to identify gaps, implications, and/or potential areas for further inquiry.

#### **2. Theoretical & Conceptual Competence.**

A doctoral candidate must have a clear and integrated understanding of relevant theories and concepts in the field, the ability to evaluate them purposefully, and the skills to apply them appropriately in analysis. This second area of the exam asks students to demonstrate their abilities to (a) *define and describe* key theories and/or concepts, (b) *describe* one or more key scholars/studies employing those theories and/or concepts, (c) *explain* the application, affordances, and limitations of those theories and/or concepts.

#### **3. Methodological Competence.**

A doctoral candidate must be able to select and apply appropriate research methods or approaches to answer their research questions and contribute new knowledge to their field, discipline, or domain. The third area of the exam asks students to demonstrate their

abilities to explain: (a) the *key characteristics* of one or more research methods or approaches of their choice (including specific tools or instruments, where applicable), (b) the *values and assumptions* underlying the method(s) or approach(es), (c) the *affordances and limitations* of the method(s) or approach(es), and (d) a *clear rationale* for applying the method(s) or approach(es) in their own research.

These three areas correspond with the *Introduction*, *Literature Review*, and *Method* sections of a prospectus and dissertation. They also represent the type of competencies that are important in writing for scholarly publication, in applying for positions that involve scholarly and research activities, and in representing disciplinary expertise to larger society.

## II. Assessment Criteria

1. ***Disciplinary Competence.*** The student demonstrates the following competencies in relation to a chosen discipline, field, or domain:

- Ability to identify key topics (e.g., issues, concerns, debates, developments, commitments);
- Awareness and understanding of relevant scholarship on the topic by directly referencing key scholars, texts, and studies;
- Knowledge of the historical development (past and present) of the topic;
- Ability to synthesize and purposefully evaluate the scholarly conversations and existing research to identify gaps, implications, and/or potential areas of further inquiry.

2. ***Theoretical/Conceptual Competence.*** The student demonstrates the following competencies:

- Ability to define and describe clearly selected theories and/or concepts;
- Knowledge of the key scholars, studies, and texts employing those theories and/or concepts;
- Ability to *explain* the affordances, limitations, and applications of those theories and/or concepts.

3. ***Methodological Competence.*** The student demonstrates the following competencies:

- Ability to explain the *key characteristics* of one or more selected research methods or approaches (including specific tools or instruments, where applicable);
- Knowledge of the *values and assumptions* underlying the method(s) or approach(es);
- Knowledge of the *affordances and limitations* of the method(s) or approach(es);

- Ability to describe a *clear rationale* for applying the method(s) or approach(es) in their own research.

### III. Developing Exam Questions

To assess the student's awareness, knowledge, and skills, the exam questions should collectively address all three competencies (*Disciplinary, Theoretical/Conceptual, Methodological*). Some of the questions may address more than one area.

The topic area, scholars, theories, and methodologies, to be discussed in the student's answers will only come from sources included in their bibliography. Given the time constraints (1.5 hours for the oral exam and 3 hours for the written exam), the recommended number of questions students are required to answer is three; It is also recommended that the exam committee provide multiple questions for the candidate to choose from (e.g., the candidate may be given five questions and asked to select and respond to three).

[NB. In the oral exam, students will be given the questions verbally and on paper (or other text-based mode, if held virtually). Students will only have access to their bibliography; no notes are allowed. The exam questions must be clear, tied to competencies, and only address material in the bibliography. For the written exam, neither the LAL area nor the English Department specify a minimum or maximum word count. Committees should therefore discuss with the candidate any expectations concerning word count/page length for each question and/or the entire exam.]

Here are some sample types of exam questions:

- Trace the historical development of topic/issue "X", discuss the current status of that topic/issue, and suggest possible future directions. (Competence 1)
- For topic/issue "X", explain who the key thinkers/theorists are, how their ideas compare/contrast, and how you locate yourself in relation to those perspectives within the current conversation in the field. (Competencies 1 and 2)
- Compare and contrast two theories of "X." Explain which theory is more useful for your research and why. (Competence 2)
- Explain how to apply theory/concept "X" to analyze situation or text "Y." (Competence 2)
- Take concept "X", define it, discuss issues related to it, and talk about its relevance to your research area/research question(s). (Competencies 2 and 3)
- Briefly define research method/approach "X" and discuss its specific strengths and limitations. Then explain how you plan to use it in your research. (Competency 3)
- Identify and discuss an ethical dilemma that is associated with a particular research method/approach. (Competency 3)

#### IV. Applying Assessment Criteria

Doctoral candidates are emerging scholars with various levels of experience and expertise. As such, the baseline for passing should be *adequate performance* or *at expectation* in all competencies (rather than perfect performance). High pass can be awarded to students who meet expectations in all three areas while showing particular strengths in one or more of the areas.

For each of the areas, each committee member will assign one of the following evaluations: a) **strong performance** (exceeds expectation), b) **adequate performance** (meets expectation), or c) **limited performance** (does not meet expectation). The committee member will then assign the overall score for the exam using the following guidelines:

- 3 – High Pass:** Exceeds the expectation in one or more areas and meets expectations in all other areas.
- 2 – Pass:** Meets expectations in all three areas.
- 1 – Low Pass:** Meets expectations in at least two of the areas.
- 0 – Fail:** Meets the expectation in only one or none of the areas.

Because the exam is taken under time pressure, the focus of the assessment should be on how well the student demonstrates their knowledge, skills, and preparation as a scholar. Using Standard North American English grammar, style, and conventions should not be the basis for determining strong, adequate, or limited performance.

#### V. Assessment Grid

Here is the assessment grid to facilitate the assessment process.

LAL PhD Exam Assessment Grid (Oral or Written)				
Criteria	Strong Performance	Adequate Performance	Limited Performance	COMMENTS
1. <b>Disciplinary Competence.</b> The exam answers demonstrate, for a given topic/issue, the awareness of relevant scholarship, knowledge of the development and current status of the scholarly conversation, and the ability	Exceeds expectation	Meets expectation	Does not meet expectation	

ASU Department of English

to synthesize research to identify gaps, implications, and/or possible areas for further inquiry.				
<b>2. Theoretical/Conceptual Competence.</b> The exam answers demonstrate, for a given topic, the ability to define and describe key theories and/or concepts, the knowledge of one or more key scholars/studies/texts and their theories, and the ability to explain the affordances, limitations, and application of those theories and/or concepts.	Exceeds expectation	Meets expectation	Does not meet expectation	
<b>3. Methodological Competence.</b> The exam answers demonstrate the ability to explain the key characteristics of one or more methods or approaches of their choice (including specific tools or instruments, if applicable), knowledge of the values and assumptions underlying the method(s) or approach(es), knowledge of the affordances and limitations of the methods or approach(es), and the ability to describe a clear rationale for applying the method(s) or approach(es) in their own research.	Exceeds expectation	Meets expectation	Does not meet expectation	
<p><b>Notes:</b> For each of the areas, choose a) exceeds expectation, b) meets expectation, or c) does not meet expectation. Then assign the score according to the following guidelines:</p> <p><b>3 – High Pass:</b> Exceeds the expectation in one or more areas <u>and</u> meets the expectation in all other areas.</p> <p><b>2 – Pass:</b> Meets the expectation in all three areas.</p> <p><b>1 – Low Pass:</b> Meets the expectation in at least two of the areas.</p> <p><b>0 – Fail:</b> Meets the expectation in only one or none of the areas.</p> <p>Committee members may provide written comments with their evaluation in appropriate spaces in the grid above.</p>				

Because the exam is taken under time pressure, the focus of the assessment should be on how well the student demonstrates their knowledge, skills, and preparation as a scholar. Using Standard North American English grammar, style, and conventions should not be the basis for determining strong, adequate, or limited performance.

## Literature

Note: The literature area is currently piloting these standards. Please review them with your supervisory committee in advance of and in preparation for the exam.

### Oral Exam

Students take an oral exam approximately four weeks after official submission essay.

### Assumptions:

- **Design of the bibliography:** With input from the committee, the student has designed the bibliography to help them master primary works relevant to their fields of study and to situate their research interests in relation to critical conversations relevant to these works.
- **Parameters of the exam:** The “universe” for the exam is the latest version of the student's bibliography that the committee approved. The bibliography sets the parameters both for exam questions and for expectations of what qualifies for satisfactory responses. In other words, satisfactory answers for passing the exam can be generated from the sources listed on the bibliography.
- **Formulating the exam:** Over email and in advance of the exam, committee members will submit two or three nominated exam questions to the chair of the committee. From the nominations, the chair will select six or so questions that reflect the range of scholarship listed on the bibliography. Committee members may ask follow-up questions.
- **Threshold for passing the exam:** To pass the exam, the student will provide direct evidence, paraphrase, and textual reasoning from the works listed on the bibliography to develop responses that fulfill standards designated below. In order to receive a ‘pass’, the preponderance of the examinee's answers will satisfy the standards for passing in all four areas listed below
- **Threshold for exceeding expectations:** In order to receive a ‘high pass’ the student will meet the standards for ‘high pass’ in at least two of the four areas listed below. Generally, these standards involve students demonstrating their ability to situate the texts on their list in literary, historical, and scholarly contexts that extend beyond the list.

*Standard 1 (Primary Works): The student demonstrates fluency and familiarity with the primary works listed on the bibliography:*

- The student accurately describes what's happening in the primary texts referenced during the exam: for the majority of those works, features of setting, plot, character, conflict, etc.

- The student accurately describes the historical context in which these primary works were composed as contextualized, for example, in the editors' introductions listed on the student's bibliography for the exam.
- The student astutely compares and contrasts primary works from the bibliography.

High Pass:

- In responding to an exam question, the student's response puts specific literary or historical elements of works from the bibliography in dialogue with works not on the list.

*Standard 2 (Critical Concepts): The student accurately identifies and explores apply theoretical, literary and/or critical concepts (e.g., "alchemy," queerness, racialization, specific genre) from the bibliography:*

- The student accurately defines the theoretical concept developed in a given work of criticism or disciplinary conversation across multiple works included on the reading list.
  - For example, the student accurately identifies and discusses the specific genres to which primary works on the bibliography belong, including the textual conventions of a given genre, the sociopolitical context of that genre; and how works on the bibliography that belong to that genre embody/represent significant differences, as well as similarities across these typifications.
- The student systematically applies a designated concept to specific primary works while referencing specific details of the primary work.
- The student articulates a range and variation of that concept's use in relation to works on the bibliography.
- The student draws informed conclusions about critical concepts referenced during the exam based on the above three intellectual moves.

High Pass:

- In responding to an exam question, the student's response extends the above intellectual moves (defining, applying, showing range and variation, and drawing a conclusion) to include concepts or works beyond the bibliography.

*Standard 3 (Scholarly Criticism): The student demonstrates fluency and familiarity with the secondary criticism listed on the bibliography:*

- The student accurately summarizes arguments and compares and contrasts those arguments with other criticism in their bibliography.
- The student contextualizes those arguments in relation to scholarly traditions referenced in the bibliography.
- The student evaluates the arguments' strengths and weaknesses, and offers counterarguments.

High pass (at least one of the following):

- The student accurately identifies and evaluates various disciplinary arguments, trends, traditions and debates within the knowledge community of literary and cultural studies scholars.
- The student thoughtfully engages with the field's contemporary disciplinary conversations regarding primary works on the reading list (points of disagreement, what's at issue, why the works continue to matter, potential areas for further research, etc.)
- The student employs textual evidence to account for how critical conversations regarding primary works on the reading list have changed over time.

*Standard 4 (Methodological Approach): The student is able to identify the significance of the methodological approach informing a given work of secondary criticism. That is, the student draws on accurate details and contextual information to make grounded, accurate and insightful observations about the function of methodology in and across the literary criticism featured on the reading list.*

- The student summarizes how scholars on the list approach their research
- The student evaluates the applicability of approaches used by scholars on the list to other texts on the list that these scholars do not address

High pass (at least one of the following):

- The student accurately positions a given critic's approach / methodology in relation to larger disciplinary conversations regarding methodology and methods of research

The student situates their own methodological approach relative to scholars on the list and larger disciplinary conversations regarding methodology

# Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies

## Written & Oral Exams

The written or oral exams take place after successful completion of the portfolio.

The purpose of the PhD Exam is to assess the student's awareness, knowledge, and skills that are necessary as they prepare for their doctoral dissertation research. As such, we have identified three main areas of competencies that are relevant to developing a dissertation prospectus and to conducting dissertation research: Area 1: Disciplinary Conversations, Area 2: Theoretical Concepts and Analysis, and Area 3: Methodological Concepts.

**Area 1: Disciplinary Conversations.** A doctoral candidate needs to be able to identify relevant issues in the field and situate their work in an existing scholarly conversation. The first area of the exam asks the student to demonstrate the awareness of relevant scholarship, knowledge of the development and current status of the scholarly conversation, and the ability to identify gaps, implications, and/or possible areas of further inquiry.

**Area 2: Theoretical Concepts.** A doctoral candidate needs to be able to have a critical understanding of key theoretical concepts in the field, to purposefully evaluate them, and to apply them for analysis. The second area of the exam asks students to demonstrate the ability to define key concepts, the knowledge of one or more key scholars and their theories, the awareness of the affordances and limitations of those theories, and the ability to apply at least one of the theories for analysis.

**Area 3: Methodological Concepts.** A doctoral candidate needs to be able to design an appropriate method for their research or analysis. The third area of the exam asks students to demonstrate the ability to define and describe the key characteristics of a methodology of choice, the understanding of the values and assumptions underlying the methodology, an awareness of the affordances and limitations of the methodology, and the potential to apply the methodology in addressing appropriate research questions.

These areas of awareness, knowledge and skills correspond with the introduction, literature review, and method sections of their prospectus and dissertation. They also represent the type of competencies that are important in writing for scholarly publication, in applying for positions that involve scholarly and research activities, and in representing disciplinary expertise to larger society.

## Assessment Criteria

**Area 1: Disciplinary Conversations.** The student demonstrates the following competencies:

- the awareness of the most important scholarship on the topic by directly referencing key scholars and landmark texts;
- an understanding of the historical development of the topic;
- an understanding of the relationship between scholars and their bodies of work; and

- the ability to purposefully evaluate how the conversations/connections are operating in the field, explaining the meaning/significance of those connections and the implications of them.

**Area 2: Theoretical Concepts and Analysis.** The student demonstrates demonstrates the following competencies:

- the ability to define and describe the theoretical concept(s);
- the awareness of the key scholars who developed and significantly utilized the theories;
- the ability to apply the concept in analyzing a situation or a text; and
- an understanding of the potentials and limits of the concept.

**Area 3: Methodological Concepts.** The student demonstrates the following competencies:

- the ability to describe the core tenets, history (where it comes from, how it has been developed, and why it matters now), and scope of the methodology;
- the awareness of controversies associated with the methodology;
- an understanding of the values underlying the methodology;
- the awareness of the limitations of the methodology and the ability to address those limitations; and
- the ability to apply a particular methodology to fit a situation or research question.

### **Developing Exam Questions**

To assess the PhD student's awareness, knowledge, and skills in all three areas of competencies, the exam questions should collectively address all three areas. Some of the questions may address more than one area.

The topic area, scholars, theories, and methodologies, to be discussed in the student's answers will come from sources included in the student's bibliography. Given the time constraints (1.5 hours for oral exam and 4 hours for written exam), the recommended number of questions students are required to answer is three; when appropriate, the exam committee may provide multiple optional questions in each area for students to choose from.

Here are some of the possible approaches for exam questions:

- Trace the historical development of an idea/concept, discuss the current status of the issue, and suggest possible future directions. (Area 1)
- For a particular topic currently relevant to the field, explain who the key thinkers/theorists are, how their ideas compare/contrast, and how the student locates themselves in the perspectives within the current conversation in the field. (Areas 1 and 2)
- Use theory/theories "X" to analyze one situation or text "Y."(Area 2)
- Take a concept (e.g., feminist research), define it, discuss issues related to it, and talk about its relevance to the student's topic/research question. (Areas 2 and 3)
- Design a study to address a given research question. (Area 3)

- Identify and discuss an ethical dilemma that is associated with a particular research method. (Area 3)

### **Applying Assessment Criteria**

PhD candidates are developing scholars with various levels of experience. As such, the baseline for passing should be *adequate performance* or *at expectation* in all areas of competencies (rather than perfect performance). High pass can be awarded to students who meet expectations in all three areas while showing particular strengths in one or more of the areas.

For each of the areas, each committee member will assign one of the following evaluations: a) strong performance (exceeds expectation), b) adequate performance (meets expectation), or c) limited performance (does not meet expectation). The committee member will then assign the overall score for the exam using the following guidelines:

- 3 – High Pass: Exceeds the expectation in one or more areas, and meets the expectation in all other areas.
- 2 – Pass: Meets the expectation in all three areas.
- 1 – Low Pass: Meets the expectation in at least two of the areas.
- 0 – Fail: Meets the expectation in only one or none of the areas.

Since the exams are taken under time pressure, the focus of the assessment should be the demonstration of the student's awareness, knowledge and skills as a scholar. Surface-level issues (e.g., grammar, style, conventions) are important only to the extent that they allow the student to communicate their capacity as a scholar to the audience of committee members.

**Assessment Grid for PhD WRL Exam (oral or written)**

Here is the assessment grid to facilitate the assessment process.

Criteria	Strong Performance	Adequate Performance	Limited Performance
<p><b>Area 1. Disciplinary Conversations.</b> The exam answers demonstrate, for a given topic, the awareness of relevant scholarship, knowledge of the development and current status of the scholarly conversation, and the ability to identify gaps, implications, and/or possible areas of further inquiry.</p>	Exceeds expectation	Meets expectation	Does not meet expectation
<p><b>Area 2. Theoretical Concepts and Analysis.</b> The exam answers demonstrate, for a given topic, the ability to define key concepts, the knowledge of one or more key scholars and their theories, the awareness of the affordances and limitations of those theories, and the ability to apply at least one of the theories for analysis.</p>	Exceeds expectation	Meets expectation	Does not meet expectation
<p><b>Area 3. Methodological Concepts.</b> The exam answers demonstrate the ability to define and describe the key characteristics of a methodology of choice, the understanding of the values and assumptions underlying the methodology, an awareness of the affordances and limitations of the methodology, and the potential to apply the methodology in addressing appropriate research questions.</p>	Exceeds expectation	Meets expectation	Does not meet expectation
<p><b>Notes:</b> For each of the areas, choose a) exceeds expectation, b) meets expectation, or c) does not meet expectation. Then assign the score according to the following guidelines:</p> <p>3 – High Pass: Exceeds the expectation in one or more areas, and meets the expectation in all other areas.</p> <p>2 – Pass: Meets the expectation in all three areas.</p> <p>1 – Low Pass: Meets the expectation in at least two of the areas.</p> <p>0 – Fail: Meets the expectation in only one or none of the areas.</p> <p>Committee members may provide written comments with their evaluation in appropriate spaces in the grid above. Since the exams are taken under time pressure, the focus of the assessment should be the demonstration of the student’s awareness, knowledge and skills as a scholar. Surface-level issues (e.g., grammar, style, conventions) are important only to the extent that they allow the student to communicate their capacity as a scholar to the audience of committee members.</p>			

# PhD Exam Retake Process:

## When a PhD student fails the oral/written exam

ASU Graduate College Exam Retake Policy: Re-examination may be administered no sooner than three months and no later than one year from the date of the original examination. For the sake of time to degree, the department encourages students to retake the exam by the end of the semester following the original exam. A student may retake the exam once.

### Assumptions

1. Committee and student will be clear as to why the exam was failed
2. The failed grade will be grounded in clear criteria for the exam
3. The failure will be viewed as a pedagogical opportunity to set terms for the student's subsequent success
4. The reading list and committee will stay as close to the original as deemed constructive. Retake typically assumes the student retains the original committee and reading list.
5. The Department of English cannot make accommodations outside of the stated exam process. Any special accommodation for the retake (or the first exam) must be approved by [SAILS](#).

### Process

Note: The exam-retake process should not be construed as lodging a grievance. See <https://eoss.asu.edu/accessibility/policies/grievance>

1. Committee chair provides DGS clear reasons, grounded in exam criteria, why exam was failed.
2. DGS speaks with student and committee chair to address the following:
  - a. clarify that student understands the reasons for failure
  - b. offer student options for moving ahead, in light of the original reading list and while abiding by Graduate College policy for the following parameters:
    - i. Committee: any changes to the committee must be in consultation with, and the approval of, the DGS who will consult with the student and pertinent faculty. Changes to the committee may result in delays in progress.
    - ii. Reading List: confirm the reading list and/or identify any issues that need to be addressed with the committee
    - iii. Oral/written options: the student may choose whether the retake will be oral or written, regardless of the format of the original
    - iv. Exam Criteria: review the area's evaluation criteria for the PhD oral/written exam
    - v. Timeline: construct timeline for student in light of timeframe at the end of this document

- c. offer student time to mull over decisions regarding committee and format: no more than six weeks to inform the committee chair and DGS
1. DGS and student meet to confirm the student's plan, and then the student moves forward. If new or revised committee, the student
  - a. meets with the prospective committee member(s) to set goals and expectations
  - b. notifies the previous committee members (DGS is available for guidance) and
  - c. updates iPOS with the new committee.
2. DGS calls meeting of new committee, with student's knowledge, to secure agreement over the following:
  - a. purpose of committee: to create best conditions for student's retaking of the exam
  - b. reading list
  - c. exam criteria
  - d. timeline
3. Chair of committee calls a meeting of the committee and the student to confirm all are on the same page about
  - a. reading list
  - b. exam criteria
  - c. timeline