

Field and Focus Papers FAQs: Getting Started

1. Must I have a full committee prior to beginning my first exam?

Students must have a full committee in place prior to beginning examinations. Establishing the full committee during the Exam Prep stage will help the student and the Committee Chair approach the three examinations with an eye for how the areas relate to one another, the market, and the potential dissertation project.

2. What are the two parts of a Field and Focus paper?

The field section of the paper is a critical survey and discussion of the literature in a particular area of research. This section should not be presented as an annotated bibliography, but as a conversation across researchers on the topic. Students might look to the way many book introductions and articles survey and interpret a critical field for models of this form of critical work. The field discussion may be organized chronologically or thematically.

The focus section of the paper picks up a theme from the broader conversation and explores it in depth. It might also pick up on one element of the field that is relevant to the dissertation and go into it in more depth. (For example: field: public sphere theory/focus: public sphere theory in composition.)

3. How may coursework be used to inform Comprehensive Examinations?

It is possible, but not required, that one or more of the field and focus papers be developed in conjunction with a seminar taken in the comprehensive exam year, or with a teaching practicum taken in that year. In this case, the reading and topic of the seminar or the undergraduate class associated with the practicum would form the basis for the development of a more comprehensive reading list and set of questions that the student would develop in consultation with the advisor/instructor. A “seminar” may be a Directed Study in a student’s intended comprehensive examination field, if none are offered by the department during the student’s time in course work, and if the student receives approval from the Department and the Graduate School (see Directed Study form). Just as with a regular seminar or teaching practicum, a student may build upon a Directed Study foundation when later pursuing a comprehensive examination in that field. The student should determine if the instructor would be willing to serve on the comprehensive examination committee prior to designing a Directed Study course with her or him.

Reading Lists

1. How many texts should be on the reading list?

Reading lists vary, but each should include approximately 40-50 entries in total, comprising primary and secondary works. Reading lists should be introduced by a rationale of approximately 100 words. The rationale will define the field and explain the criteria or lines of inquiry guiding the choice of texts to represent that field.

2. What are the differences between the reading list and the bibliography?

The reading list is a broad collection of texts which constitute a field of primary and critical literature. Students should be familiar enough with these texts to speak in the oral exam about how they pertain to the field and focus paper.

The bibliography is a subset of the reading list; it includes only those texts discussed directly in the paper.

Overall, the reading list as a combination of texts which the student has read and studied in detail to write the paper (the bibliography), and other texts which the student would want to study more deeply in order to turn the paper into an article or a dissertation chapter.

Writing the Paper

1. What is the length of the field and focus paper?

Each field and focus paper is typically 20-30 pages in length, in consultation with the professor advising the list.

2. Are there examples to look at?

Example Field and Focus papers are available on Sharepoint>Shared Documents and upon request from the Graduate Office (h.hardy@northeastern.edu).

3. What are some ways for me to think about Field and Focus and their relationship?

In the field part, the student lays out a broad area of content and provides an analysis and overview of how it has been framed and discussed by previous scholars. In the focus part, the student performs a specific investigation or application of that material, making an argument of his or her own regarding a smaller selection of texts. The process prepares the student to work in the broad arena the field outlines, and gets him or her started doing independent critical work within that field.

4. May I create a teaching portfolio for one of my field and focus projects?

Yes. Students should consult their field supervisors to determine if this is appropriate for their academic program. The teaching portfolio will normally include a course rationale and full syllabus, along with course bibliography, lesson plans and assignments.

Oral Examination

1. When should I schedule the oral examination?

Students have one calendar year from completing course work to finish the exams. (“I” grades do not stop the clock.) Students must receive passing grades for three field and focus papers before taking the two-hour oral examination. Prior to scheduling the oral examination, the student’s papers should be circulated to the full committee; every committee member should receive all three papers at least two weeks in advance of the exam. The committee chair will notify the student when the oral examination may be scheduled. The student will be responsible for securing a room.

2. What happens at an oral examination?

The purpose of the oral examination is to demonstrate for the full examining committee that the candidate has command of the comprehensive examination fields and is ready to make the transition to the dissertation. Students should be prepared to answer specific questions about their line of argument, how they understood a theoretical issue, or how they interpreted a text. At the end of the exam, the committee will turn to discussing the dissertation project and how the area papers inform that larger project. The student is expected to discuss, at least, preliminary notions of a dissertation project at the exam.

The student brings a copy of the CSSH Comprehensive Exam Results form, available from the Graduate Office, to the oral examination.

3. What happens after the oral examination?

Following the oral examination, the chair of the examining committee will submit the student’s signed CSSH Comprehensive Exam Results form to the Graduate Office. Students who pass the exam will receive letters from the Department and the College congratulating them on advancing to doctoral candidacy and outlining enrollment and time limit expectations for the dissertation years. The prospectus should be completed and approved within six months of the advance to candidacy, and the prospectus/first chapter presentation should happen within one year of the advance to candidacy.