

QUALIFYING EXAMINATION IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY PHD PROGRAM

May 2020

The Qualifying Examination process in Anthropology supports students' dissertation research by asking them to consider how their work relates to existing scholarship. The qualifying exam questions should be designed with a student's specific research project in mind and should help the student to: 1) become familiar enough with the relevant literature to articulate the original contribution of their research (in their Comprehensive Exam responses and/or their dissertations) by illustrating how it draws from and builds on existing scholarship, and 2) select appropriate theoretical and methodological frameworks. Large portions of students' qualifying exam responses should be easily incorporated into their dissertation.

The Steps

The Qualifying Examination process includes the following steps: (1) agreeing on the details and timeline for the process, (2) formulating a Statement of Interest, (3) crafting three examination questions, (4) writing qualifying exam responses, (5) committee evaluation of the written qualifying exam responses (the written Qualifying Examination) , and (6) the oral Qualifying Examination.

1. Agreeing on the Details and Timeline

The Qualifying Examination process is flexible to accommodate the many different kinds of research our students undertake. So that expectations for each student are clear, the process begins with the committee and student agreeing on the details and timeline through the completion of the Qualifying Examination Plan form. The form is intended as a living document and can be updated throughout the process.

Students generally begin their qualifying exams in their third term of study, so this step should normally take place before the end of their second term. Some students will be required to submit a reading list of relevant sources along with their Statement of Interest, which will be indicated on the form.

The form will also lay out the timeline for the submission of the questions and the written and oral examinations. The Qualifying Examination process is normally completed by the end of Term 4 of the doctoral program (see diagram below). However, this timeline can be adjusted to suit individual students' needs. For example, some students may do a preliminary field season during their first summer term, delaying their quals process by a term. The timeline can also be revised after the questions are finalized.

2. Statement of Interest

By the end of their second term of study, doctoral students formulate a Statement of Interest. This brief document (750-1000 words) outlines the research problem and proposed research design. It will be circulated to the student's supervisory committee early in the third term of study.

Students may also be required to submit a reading list along with their Statement of Interest and may receive reading recommendations from their committee at different stages of the process. The reading list can include both relevant sources that the student has already read, and those they think they should examine. Where there is a reading list, it should be understood not as required reading, but as sources the student will investigate to determine their relevance.

3. Qualifying Examination questions

Circulating the Statement of Interest should start a conversation between the student and supervisory committee about three possible exam questions. The questions should ultimately support the project, taking into account the likely research design and the student's background preparation. In some cases, this means having the student become familiar with a new area, in other cases a question may function more to consolidate and systematize their knowledge in a given area.

Often, but not always, there is one question related to a relevant area of theory, another broadly exploring methods, and a third question that examines the literature on a specific region. Students can propose general areas they think would make good exam topics, but the final questions are determined by the supervisory committee.

4. Writing Qualifying Examination Responses

Once the questions are formulated, the student takes a considerable amount of time to read widely in the topics highlighted in the questions and to prepare responses, generally during Terms 3 and 4 of their program.

The responses take the form of three essays of a maximum of 5,000 words each (plus references, tables, figures, and appendices, as appropriate). We ask that students respect the word limit. Students are expected to synthesize a relatively large body of literature, pulling out the most important points to answer their specific questions.

While the student may consult with their supervisor and committee members to ensure that they understand the Qualifying Examination questions, or to discuss specific sources or the scope of their responses, faculty members may not provide feedback on drafts of their responses.

The student and committee may choose, if they wish, to set individual deadlines for each of the three responses. **The completed written examination should be submitted as a single word document, with each essay preceded by the appropriate question.**

For the Qualifying Examination process to be completed by the end of Term 4, responses should ideally be submitted to the supervisory committee five weeks ahead of the Oral Examination date. If all committee members and the student agree, this timeline can be somewhat shorter.

5. Written Qualifying Examination

The supervisory committee reads the responses within two weeks and discusses the quality of each essay. Each response is evaluated as a pass, revise and resubmit, or fail. This determination is based on a majority vote and takes into account both content and form. If a majority of examiners pass each of the three questions, the student is eligible to proceed to the Oral Examination. If a majority of examiners award a revise and resubmit to any of the questions, the student will have the opportunity to resubmit that/those response/s, normally within a month. If a majority of examiners fails a response, it is considered unacceptable and there is no option to resubmit. If there are an even number of examiners and a vote is tied, the graduate chair or designate will break the tie. In the case of a revise and resubmit, when the committee evaluates the resubmission(s), the responses are assessed as pass/fail only, with no opportunity to resubmit a second time. A student must pass at least two of the three responses in order to remain in the program. If two or more of the responses receives a fail, either on initial submission or resubmission, the student must withdraw from the program.

In all cases, after the committee evaluates the initial submission or the resubmission, the supervisor has one week following the committee's discussion to compile the comments and provide the committee's feedback to the student.

6. Oral Qualifying Examination

Once the written examination is passed, the student has two weeks to consider the committee's feedback (which may include the suggestion to give some issues additional thought) before the oral component of the Qualifying Examination takes place. Additional time may be provided at the student's request.

The Oral Examination is a formal procedure chaired by the Graduate Chair or designate. Following the procedures used in oral thesis defenses, prior to the exam the examiners will decide on the order of questioning, the number of rounds of questions and the time to be allotted per examiner per round for the questions and student responses. Unlike a thesis defense, however, the student's supervisor asks questions and participates in the examining process.

Following the examination, the student will be asked to leave the room so that the examiners can deliberate. The results of this deliberation, either pass or fail, will be recorded by the Chair on a form provided for this purpose and signed by all examiners. If the majority of the examiners pass the oral defense of the qualifying exams, the student is granted a pass. If a majority of examiners fail the Oral Examination, the student will be asked to withdraw from the program. Where there is a tie, the graduate chair or designate will break the tie.

What's next?

Students are required to submit a clean copy of their successful Qualifying Examination responses to the Graduate Program Assistant, to be placed in their file.

At this stage, students should be in a good position to write their formal Research Proposal (and move on to the Proposal Defense), as they will have read widely in the relevant literature to help frame the significance of their project. In some cases, it may make sense for a student to submit their written qualifying exam responses and Research Proposal at the same time and defend both at a single oral exam.

General Timeline (based on a September start date)

