

Digital Media PhD

Comprehensive Exam Requirements

Approved April 7, 2021

In term 5, it is recommended that each doctoral student have completed their comprehensive essays and oral defense.

Students are expected to complete the comprehensive exam, which shall take the form of three essays or two essays and a prototype, followed by an oral examination, normally in the second term of PhD II (term 5). Students who have not defended their comprehensive exams by the start of second term of PhD III (term 8) may be deemed to be making insufficient progress towards their degree and may be withdrawn from the program (excepting accommodations for disability, documented illness, or bereavement).

The objectives of the comprehensive examination are to equip students with the specialized knowledge they need to undertake research for their doctoral dissertation and to prepare and qualify students to teach undergraduate courses in Digital Media.

A. Choose your areas

By the end of the summer of PhD I (term 3), students will be required to select or construct three areas. Distinct and separate reading lists for each part are prepared by the candidate in consultation with and with approval of the supervisory committee at the beginning of term 4. It is understood that all areas must integrate theoretical and historical perspectives, although some areas may emphasize more theoretical or historical scholarship.

Part I – Major General: This section of the examination is designed to assess the candidate's overall command of a general area of study within Digital Media. The reading list will be a bibliography prepared by the candidate in consultation with the supervisory committee. This section of the examination is designed to ensure that candidates are aware of major theories, debates and controversies in the field.

Part II – Major Specific: Designed to assess the candidate's mastery of a specific thematic or conceptual field within Digital Media.

Part III – Minor or Prototype: The Minor field essay is designed to assess the candidate's knowledge of a field clearly distinct from the Major fields, either an alternate general area of study, or a "constructed minor" focused on a specific thematic in an alternate area of study. The Prototype option requires students to create a technical prototype or working proof of concept that demonstrates the candidate's fluency with the technology chosen, and which is articulated in the proper context of related technical research and research-creation. The prototype will be documented (1000 words 4-5 pages) and in the documentation the project will be situated in the field and the student's research.

B. Compose your reading lists

The student will work closely with their supervisory committee to build reading lists with annotated bibliographies for each of the three areas they have selected. Each reading list should include 2-3

books and 10-15 essays (if fewer books are selected due to the particularity of the field, note that one book is roughly equivalent to 8-10 essays/research articles). It is expected that these reading lists include canonical material—and it is the student's task to investigate and identify these foundational texts, guided by faculty advisors—in addition to less canonical material that develops new research in the area or might be of specific relevance to the student's future dissertation work.

Students are advised to examine anthologies and collections in their areas: the introductions to these volumes often sketch out and comment upon the history, development, and research questions of the field.

It may also be helpful to keep a list of keywords for each area (e.g., library subject keywords) to help in organizing the reading lists. Some texts may overlap over the three areas but these should be the exception rather than the rule. It may be more helpful to organize reading lists in each area by sub-fields or topics rather than an alphabetical ordering.

Consistent use of citation style is of primary importance. Digital Media recommends use of the Chicago Manual of Style or APA bibliographic formats. Whatever style is chosen, consistent use is required. All students are encouraged to use a bibliography program.

C. Compose your research questions

Concurrently with the compilation of reading lists, the student will work closely with their supervisory committee to compose the research questions (essay titles) that will motivate the comprehensive essays themselves. Formulating strong research questions helps students, on the one hand, to develop a better understanding of the foundational knowledge and dominant paradigms and perspectives within a research area—the status of the question—and, on the other hand, to identify new potential avenues of research which open up new perspectives and interventions into a research area. Students should ask themselves: what are the key questions that interest them in relation to the questions that dominate the field? All research questions and essay titles must be approved by the supervisory committee.

D. Write your essays

The comprehensive essays are an examination method that enables students to draw out interpretive and methodological frameworks for the areas of knowledge in which they will be tested. The comprehensive essays further allow students to begin formally to develop frameworks that will help to support and provide foundations for their doctoral research. The comprehensive essays shall normally comprise short essays of 2500-3000 words (10-12 pages double-spaced), not counting footnotes and bibliography. In other words, students can put a lot of material in the footnotes (including salient quotations) but it is important that the students be able to write a succinct field essay within the 12-page limit.

Finally, it is the responsibility of the student to drive the field essay process forward within program deadlines. When students submit field essays (and prototypes) to their committee members, they should give them suggested deadlines for feedback (the FGS guidelines is 2-3 weeks), which can be negotiated depending on faculty schedules. Students are also responsible for being persistent in arranging meetings with their committee as a whole and/or individual faculty.

The format of the prototype, if chosen, will be determined with the supervisory committee but will include 4-5 pages of supporting documentation that includes an historical and/or theoretic contextualisation that situates the work created.

The supervisory committee must confirm that the student has successfully completed the comprehensive essays and that an oral examination can go forward. Students should allow time for the supervisory committee to review their work (2-3 weeks) and also allow time to complete any edits the committee might recommend.

E. Oral examination

After successful completion of the comprehensive essays, an oral examination will follow normally within a month, with the members of the supervisory committee. The student and the committee members should bring copies of the comprehensive essays for reference. Students may also bring any research sources (books, etc.) for reference during the exam. The candidate is permitted to speak for 5-15 minutes at the start of the exam to outline the comprehensive areas, and to discuss the process of formulating the reading lists and essays, including obstacles and problematics in the fields themselves. The committee members ask the candidate questions, usually in two rounds, that probe, critique, or request expansion on various issues in the essays, or on readings on the comprehensive lists. The committee will decide whether to ask questions about each of the three comprehensive essays in turn, or asking questions about the comprehensive as a whole.

Students must successfully demonstrate knowledge within the designated areas of the examination and covered by the comprehensive essays. The purpose of the oral examination is both to ensure that the student can demonstrate and articulate this comprehensive knowledge separately from the comprehensive essay, and to generate a productive conversation between the comprehensive exam committee and the student directed towards the formulation of the PhD dissertation proposal.

Immediately after the oral examination, the committee will confer and provide the candidate with one of three possible grades: Pass with distinction, Pass, or Fail. The Graduate Program Assistant will provide the primary supervisor with the student's Comprehensive Exam Progress Report form, which will be signed by the committee following the exam.

Should the student fail the oral examination, the student will have two terms to resubmit the comprehensive essays and retake the oral examination. Should the student fail a second time, they will be required to withdraw from the program.

FAQ:

- Reading lists may include materials authored by supervisors or members of the committee. This is not required, nor expected, but may often arise given that students may be working with committee members deeply aligned to the student's focused research areas (it may even arise that such a publication was co-authored with the student). Nevertheless, a reading list should incorporate a diversity of perspectives beyond materials authored by the committee. A healthy reading list will incorporate both well-established as well as recent contributions.
- Regarding the scope of major general / major specific / minor: For major general, one can imagine the broad topics of a conference or possibly a journal; for minor/specific, consider what would be the subject of a panel within a conference, or a special issue of a journal, or an edited collection of papers. Minor may also (but does not have to be) a body of work conventionally considered outside the core of the Digital Media field.
- Essays and prototypes should be completed individually, not as a collaboration.
- Essays and prototypes should be new work. Prototypes (if that option is chosen) could be a new component of a larger work. It should involve a comparable amount of time to produce as the essay option. 1-3 weeks per essay/prototype is reasonable.
- Students are developing and sharing templates (e.g. in Overleaf), for reading lists, comp essays, dissertation, etc.