

## ICR Preliminary Exam Guidelines (Revised March 2016)

*The ICR faculty has prepared this document in response to demand for clarification and structure from the student body. Prelims are a very important process for doctoral students. Faculty have sovereignty over some of the elements, and we have to abide by Graduate College regulations, but our ICR culture strives to give students flexibility and choice. Prelims is one of the few times in your academic career when several informed faculty members will be focusing their critical faculties on YOU. By the same token, all faculty agree that you are encouraged to take these swiftly as we really want you to work on your dissertation rather than spending years preparing for and taking prelims.*

ICR's prelim procedures are designed to facilitate student progress. Prelims certify that the candidate is fully prepared to write a dissertation and then go on the job market. More specifically, the candidate is supposed to have reached an understanding of the larger field within which you will work, to have taken a stand within that field, and to have identified and proposed original dissertation research that will make a contribution to that field. Traditionally ICR prelims examine the work the student has already done. New material should be covered during the dissertation process. However, the prelim "defense" quite often does cover your dissertation proposal in some detail. It is up to you, your advisor, and your preliminary examination committee as to the balance that is struck during the prelim defense between you demonstrating familiarity with your completed coursework and you demonstrating that you are ready to begin your proposed dissertation.

Because ICR emphasizes diversity and interdisciplinarity, the prelim process builds in a significant amount of flexibility in topic for both candidates and examiners. As a result, like the rest of the program, the prelim process foregrounds topical flexibility with guidance and oversight by the advisor.

### When to Take Prelims

When you have completed coursework, including any incompletes, and when you've completed the program of studies that the Program Evaluation Committee has approved, you're ready to take prelims. (Note: You *must* complete and get approval of an [Application for Advancement to Candidacy](#) before you can take prelims.) ICR recognizes that there will always be modifications to a program as a student's career unfolds, and makes it the student's responsibility to keep the Program Evaluation Committee informed of changes.

## Prelim Process

### a. Identifying a committee

Typically you will do this in consultation with your advisor. Your committee should include people who are familiar with your work. Usually you will have taken one or more courses with them, but this is not always the case. Most prelim committee members will go on to serve on your dissertation committee. That said, the dissertation committee need not be identical. It is considered wise to choose the committee so that some examiners will cover broad fields while others focus on more specific research areas. Remember, the members of your committee will likely also be the people who later write letters of recommendation for you. So a good committee will include the people who can best attest to all of the virtues that you want future employers to be aware of. Ideally members of your committee will support you long after your dissertation is deposited, not just through job seeking but also through fellowship applications, continuing advice, publication opportunities, etc.

### b. Composition

Because the ICR expects its students to take courses outside the College of Media, the ICR recommends that the committee include at least one member with a faculty appointment outside the College. Some of the ICR faculty already have an outside appointment, so you can fill this requirement that way. However, students are encouraged to abide by the spirit of interdisciplinarity. If your work is anthropological in nature, for instance, you may want to have a voting member of the anthropology department involved.

### c. Graduate College Requirements

In addition to the above ICR requirement, the Graduate College rules read as follows:

*. . . the committee must include at least four voting members, at least three of whom must be members of the Graduate Faculty, and at least two of whom must also be tenured at the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois. . . . The tenure requirement can be met by term members of the Graduate Faculty who retired or resigned with tenure for a period following their resignation or retirement, according to the Policy on Graduate Faculty Membership.*

For ICR students, these requirements are easily met. Almost all ICR faculty are also members of the Graduate Faculty—you may assume that they are for purposes of composing your committee. Many are also tenured. Faculty who have retired or who have left the university seeking greener pastures remain eligible for three years at least, but you can generally assume that their eligibility will be freely extended.

### Approaching Potential Committee Members

Ask whatever way you wish. Usually you set up a meeting to ask “will you be on my committee?” and discuss what your research project is and what you anticipate the examiner will ask you about. If you are approaching an examiner from outside the department, there is a chance they will not know how ICR does these things. If this is the case, ask your advisor to explain the procedures. This is an important step as departments have widely differing approaches to prelims. Faculty around campus are usually honored to be asked to participate in prelims in other units, and ICR has a long history of happy collaboration with faculty elsewhere.

### Discuss Your Prelim Question

Negotiate with each examiner. It is the advisor’s responsibility in concert with the student to fashion the areas in which examiners will ask questions, and to seek to avoid overlap or conflict. There are many ways in which faculty in ICR go about fashioning questions. The general rule is that students will not be surprised in their written questions, and that whatever the arrangement is with a faculty member, the student will be able to prepare meaningfully for the exam question. A faculty member is not required to disclose the specific question to the student. Most ICR faculty members will negotiate a specific question. Some will negotiate a reading list instead, and some will do a combination of both. Some will ask you to come up with a question, and then shape it more to their liking. Some will ask you to propose a reading list. Outside faculty usually want to honor local custom, but occasionally will expect to do things differently than ICR faculty customarily do. If this is the case, you must be prepared to yield to their preferences or consider working with faculty whose practices are more like the ones at ICR.

### When You Have Identified Your Committee

You will report their names to your advisor, who will report the committee to the designated ICR staff person in the College of Media office, who will submit an online request to the Graduate College for formal appointment of the committee. Your advisor will contact committee members and ask for their questions in writing. The advisor will check questions for overlap and conflict and submit them to staff. The ICR staff person will have these questions on hand for you to take your written exams.

### Preparing for Your Exams

Review the material you’ve identified as important to your question or area with each examiner. Students may prefer to prepare for written questions one at a time or all at once. A typical approach is to spend a range of time as short as a day or as long as a month between each question, and to time them so that all four questions can be completed within a semester. *The faculty stresses that prelims should not take longer than a semester.* The Graduate College stipulates a six month time limit between the

appointment of a prelim committee and the oral examination. It is important to maintain momentum through the prelim process. The candidate is responsible for this, though the advisor will sometimes provide gentle or urgent reminders.

### Taking the Written Exams

By the time you are ready to take the prelims, the staff member should have the entire packet of questions so that you can schedule the examination with minimum fuss. You can get each question from the designated ICR staff person, keeping in mind that you can receive only one question at a time. For each question, the candidate has a choice whether to take a four-hour exam or a twenty-four hour take-home exam, without prejudice. In recent years most students have chosen the twenty-four hour format, which allows more time and space for reflection but also carries larger expectations for depth and seriousness in the finished product. *Twenty-four hour exams can be taken Monday-Thursday only*. Four-hour exams are shorter than take-home exams [8-12 vs. 20+ pp]. Examiners may encourage you one way or another, though it is ultimately the student's choice. The actual writing of the exam answer is expected to have taken place within the four-hour or twenty-four-hour period of the exam. It is understood that students will have been generally aware of their questions and will have thought through many aspects of them, and in some sense are "assembling" an answer. When you have finished your answer, you submit it to the ICR staff person.

### Dissertation Proposal

The proposal will be taking shape as you write the prelims. A discussion of the dissertation proposal will be a part of the prelim oral exam, and a full dissertation proposal draft will be distributed to your committee along with your answers. The dissertation proposal will take shape through discussions with your advisor. It is generally a good idea also to discuss the proposal with the other committee members at an early stage of its formulation. Proposals vary according to field and discipline, but the ICR tradition includes the following elements:

1. the question you are trying to answer
2. a tentative thesis
3. a discussion of the literature to which the dissertation will contribute and why the dissertation will be important
4. a description of the research that will be executed
5. a discussion of methodology
6. a schema of the dissertation that may take the shape of a chapter outline of the entire dissertation
7. a fairly extensive bibliography

If the student's prelim questions have been well arranged, some of the work behind the dissertation proposal will already have been accomplished in the written answers. It is not unusual to cut and paste sections of prelim answers into the dissertation proposal. However it is a mistake to lean too heavily on the writtens in writing the proposal.

Similarly, it is not unusual that the proposal can be reshaped into the first chapter of the finished dissertation, but you should not plan on that.

### Scheduling the Oral Examination

Once all the writtens are completed and the dissertation proposal is approved by your advisor, the ICR staff person schedules the oral defense and distributes all of the documents: questions, answers, and proposal. Once a time has been settled on, the ICR staff person will arrange a room and see to it that necessary equipment is available. The Graduate College demands that the chair and the candidate be physically present and encourages all other committee members to be so as well. In unusual circumstances up to two members can teleconference via Skype or similar means, but this is not encouraged. Faculty should be given a minimum of 3-4 weeks to read the material before the scheduled defense. Students should exercise courtesy in this delicate matter. Faculty tend to be busy and protective of both their time and latitude. Faculty who feel they've been nagged sometimes develop heightened critical abilities.

### Oral Examinations Involve Both the Written Answers and the Dissertation Proposal

(Note: ICR discourages food and beverages during the oral exam.)

If the writtens are especially strong, the oral exam may give them cursory attention. Customarily, the writtens will open up areas for questioning. Every examiner is expected to have read all of the written material. Faculty tend to follow a few habitual strategies in these questions. Some will focus specifically on your answer to their individual question. Frequently examiners probe to find the limits of a student's knowledge. Cumulatively, the examiners will look for tensions and ambiguities among the different answers. A candidate should always have taken care to avoid saying one thing to examiner A and another to examiner C; the point isn't to tell your examiners what you think they want to hear, but to express intelligently and forcefully your own thinking. The prelims expect you to take a stand. Usually the questioning on the writtens will be separate from the questioning on the dissertation proposal, though inevitably the two intermingle.

When questioning turns to the proposal, examiners usually seek to explore the significance of the research to the field, sometimes to discuss the approach or conceptual framework, and sometimes to inquire into practical details of the research process. The point is to certify that the proposed dissertation is do-able, that the candidate is qualified to do it, and that when it's done it will be meaningful. Often the discussion of the proposal becomes a coaching session. It is a good idea for the candidate to take notes during the entire exam, but especially during the discussion of the proposal. Students should take the proposal very seriously. While sometimes committees might be amenable to passing a student on the basis of a not-fully-thought-through dissertation proposal, it is possible that the prelim outcome will be "deferred" until a more satisfactory proposal is produced.

### Outcome of a Prelim Exam

The three options are pass, fail, or “decision deferred.” The decision must be unanimous. In the likely event of a pass, the candidate proceeds directly to the dissertation. The prelim committee is dissolved, officially, but the candidate will likely continue to work with the same committee as one’s dissertation committee. In the event of a “decision deferred,” the candidate will be given explicit written instructions as to what additional work will be required for successful completion. This will only rarely require another oral examination; usually, it requires submission of supplementary written material regarding the questions and/or dissertation proposal. When the “deferred” grade is reported, a six-month clock starts ticking. According to the Grad Student handbook:

1. the same committee must re-examine the student,
2. the second exam *must* occur within 180 calendar days of the date of first exam, and
3. the outcome of the second exam must be pass or fail.

In the (extremely rare) case of a “fail,” according to the Grad Student handbook, “a student will only be allowed to take the preliminary examination one additional time while working toward the completion of any one program of study.”

### ABD

As soon as your oral exam has been successfully completed you are officially ABD. You may also have a party.