2. Doctor of Philosophy Degree

The Ph.D. is designed to be completed by a full-time student in five years. Financial support is limited to this time period. It is the responsibility of each student to be familiar with the information in this document. This document pertains to the post-2017 doctoral program only. For the pre-2017 program, please click here.

2.1 Transfer Credit for Students Admitted with an M.A. degree

The Department of English does not accept transfer credit for course work completed prior to enrollment at Vanderbilt University.

2.2 Course Work

A student must complete a total of 52 hours of course work. Students take 24 hours in their first year, 24 hours in their second year, and 4 hours during the spring semester of their third year. The majority of these courses are graduate seminars that offer in-depth study of a particular genre, author, historical period, or a special topic.

2.2.1 Courses outside of the English Department: Students are encouraged to take up to two courses outside of the Department of English for graduate credit. A student wishing to take additional hours must petition the Graduate Studies Committee, explaining the usefulness and appropriateness of such courses for his/her plan of study. Courses that are cross-listed with the Department of English may also be counted toward the Ph.D.

2.2.2 Undergraduate courses for graduate credit: A student may sometimes find it appropriate to enroll in a 2000-level undergraduate course for graduate credit, but only with the permission of the course instructor and the DGS. In such cases, they will be expected to do
additional work beyond the undergraduate requirements for the course. Please note that not all 2000-level courses are open for graduate credit.

2.2.3 Independent Studies (English 8150): Independent studies are defined as one-on-one tutorials in which student and professor agree on a one-semester course of study that includes a reading list and writing assignments. They are especially appropriate in situations where topics that a student needs for his or her field of specialization are not covered by the department’s graduate course offerings in any given term. Students may take one such course in their graduate career and have the option to petition the Graduate Studies Committee for a second course. Students wishing to do an independent study must consult with the DGS and the Graduate Assistant in order to fill out the necessary permission form. Petitions for Independent studies must be received by November 15th (for the spring term) and by April 15th (for the fall term).

2.2.4 Incompletes: The accumulation of Incompletes in any given term hinders progress toward the degree and may imperil continuance of financial aid. By action of the Departmental Faculty, graduate instructors may give Incompletes only in cases of illness or unusual personal circumstances, and only with the written approval of the DGS. Students who take Incompletes in any year of study must resolve those grades before registering for the next term.

2.2.5 Progress toward the Degree: The following schedule should be followed unless the student applies for and receives a specified leave-of-absence. Graduate seminars in English each earn 4 hours of credit. Note: this is not always so in other departments, where graduate courses tend to earn 3 credit hours. If you take a course in another department, you may have to add 1 hour of ENGL 8150 Independent Study to make up for this deficit (form available in the DGS office).

Typical Schedule:
FIRST YEAR

- Fall semester: 12 hours of course work (3 courses), including ENGL 8110 Proseminar (required)
- Spring semester: 12 hours of course work (3 courses)
- Summer: M.A. thesis (by June 15)

SECOND YEAR

- Fall semester: 12 hours of course work (3 courses).
- Spring semester: 12 hours of course work (3 courses). Shadow a W course or serve as TA for a lecture course. **Important dates:** Comprehensive Exam lists due by May 15.
- Summer: read for exams.

THIRD YEAR

- Fall semester: no courses; read for exams. Register for 0 hours of English 9999 (Ph.D. Dissertation Research) to maintain full-time status. **Important dates:** Tiered exam lists due October 15. Written Comprehensive Exams: right after Thanksgiving Break.
- Spring semester: 4 hours of course work (ENGL 8120 Pedagogy Seminar [required]). Register for 5 hours of English 8999 (Non-Candidate Research). **Important dates:** Dissertation prospectus due by January 20. Oral exams completed by February 1. Final Dissertation Proposal due by March 15. First chapter draft (15-20 pp) due by May 15.

FOURTH YEAR

- Fall semester: 6 hours of English 9999; Project Publish (required); teach one course. Important dates: First chapter submission due by September 1.
- Spring semester: 5 hours of English 9999; teach one course.

FIFTH YEAR
• Fall semester: register for 0 hours English 9999; write dissertation.
• Spring semester: register for 0 hours English 9999; complete and defend dissertation.

2.2.6 Annual Faculty Evaluation of Students' Progress: At the conclusion of each academic year, the Graduate Studies Committee calls a meeting of the entire graduate faculty to evaluate the progress of each graduate student. These evaluations may result in a variety of recommendations (e.g., continued progress toward the degree, academic probation, discontinuation of financial aid, dismissal from the Program). The DGS will communicate such recommendations in writing.

2.3 The Foreign Language Requirement

Students are required to pass a foreign language translation exam by the end of their fifth semester. They cannot sit for their comprehensive until they have passed this requirement.

Students may take the exam more than once, starting in their first year. Tests are coordinated and administered in September and January. Students should notify the DGS's office before the beginning of the semester if they intend to take a translation test during that semester. Whenever possible, members of the Department of English will conduct the tests. The exam typically consists of excerpts from scholarly articles/books or fiction in the student’s chosen language.

Exam details are as follows:

• There is a two-hour time limit. Each student is permitted to use one online dictionary during the translation.
• There is no limit on re-takes, except in cases where the department has to pay for a faculty member from another institution to create and grade the exam. This would be the case when a language in which a student would prefer to take the exam is not taught at Vanderbilt. The limit in those cases is one retake.

• The student must show that he/she is able to comprehend a scholarly source text in a foreign language. Criteria for passing are a good command of the structure of the language; a strong understanding of the meaning of the source text at the sentence level; and completion of a translation of at least 2/3 of the original text. Each exam is chosen so that a competent test-taker can complete it in two hours.

2.4 The Comprehensive Examination

Students take their comprehensive exams in their third year. All Incompletes must be resolved and the foreign language requirement satisfied before a student may sit for this exam. The comprehensive exam has several components:

• The written exam (administered right after Thanksgiving Break).
• The dissertation prospectus (due January 20)
• The oral exam (by February 1)
• The formal dissertation proposal (March 15)

2.4.1 The Written Examination

The written examination must be completed in December of a student’s third year for that student to be in good academic standing. The exam will begin at 4:00 P.M. on the Monday after Thanksgiving Break and will be completed by 9:00 A.M. on Thursday of the following week.
Students will choose to answer one of three questions in each examination field and will write a conference-length paper (2,500 words, excluding foot- or endnotes) for each of the three exam questions they choose. The exam essays are expected to show research skill and acumen, strong critical familiarity with both primary and secondary texts, and the ability to state and sustain a critical argument. The writing submitted for the exam answers must be original writing. Each student will receive the exam from the DGS office and return the completed exam as an e-mail attachment in MSWORD to the Graduate Assistant, together with the printed exam questions.

2.4.1.1 The Comprehensive Examination Committee: Students will set their examination committees in the early spring semester of their second year of graduate school, and they must register their committees with the English Department by February 1 of that same year (registration forms will be made available in January). The exam committee is composed of three English Department faculty and one outside reader. The outside reader reads the written examinations but does not grade them. He/she participates in the oral examination, serves on the dissertation committee, and participates in the dissertation defense. Students should consult with their other committee members about the most appropriate faculty member to fill this role.

Students must register outside readers with the Department before the written examination takes place. If the reader is a faculty member at a university other than Vanderbilt, the Graduate School requires the following documents: (a) a copy of the reader's Curriculum Vitae, and (b) a brief essay from the student which describes how the reader's scholarship will contribute to the student's dissertation-writing process.
2.4.1.2 The Examination Fields: The written exam covers two major fields and one minor field. These fields may be organized historically, generically, theoretically, or in other ways that reflect a coherent argument. At least one field must cover a historical period.

The Department does not impose numerical requirement on reading lists. The length of each list will be determined through consultation between the student and his/her examination committee members. Major lists tend to fall between 75-100 texts; minor lists tend to fall between 50-75 items. Each student should have an early discussion with his/her exam committee to sets these target numbers.

The minor list typically supplements the two major lists. This can work in a number of ways. The list sometimes provides context by taking the study of a particular issue, movement, or genre backward or forward historically. It sometimes concentrates on a sub-genre, development, debate, or other focal group of texts. It sometimes assembles texts -- theoretical, historical, or otherwise methodological -- that the student and committee members anticipate will provide an analytic structure for the dissertation. The Department recommends that each student conduct an early discussion with his/her committee about the most effective ways to utilize this third list. The three fields and the reading lists are subject to the approval, first, of the candidate's committee (by May 31 of the second year), then by the Graduate Studies Committee.

2.4.1.3 Preparation for the Written Exam: The exam emphasizes the importance of a broad grounding in each field, while also beginning the transition from general reading to targeted research. In the third year, then, the shared project of the committee and the student is twofold: a) to make certain that the student has a strong knowledge of her or his fields of study; and b) to develop a subset of each list, representing both teaching and research priorities, on which the written exam will focus.
Students will read most, ideally all, of the material on their preliminary lists during the summer after their second year. The fall semester of the student's third year will thus be dedicated to organizing lists into levels of priority, re-reading as particular emphasis and connections develop, and learning the relationships between a general field of knowledge and a particular intervention in that field. The student will be in a position to identify texts of greater and lesser importance to their preparation for exams and to provide a rationale to their committee.

Students will work closely with their committee members throughout the exam preparation process. By September of the third year, each student is expected to work out a biweekly meeting schedule with each of his/her committee members.

2.4.1.4 Lists and Tiers: Each exam list will be divided into two tiers of priority through this process of continued reading and regular consultation. Final lists, with a two-tiered structure, that is, texts of primary and secondary significance to the student's three fields, MUST be approved by the committee and submitted to the DGS's office by November 1 of the student's third year.

While the written exam focuses primarily on the first-tier lists, the second-tier lists also remain important: they will continue to provide context for discussions between student and committee members, and will contribute to the student’s credentials as a scholar and a teacher in her or his fields.

If committee members have reservations about a student’s preparation, they may decide, as a group, not to let the written exam go forward. If this occurs, the student must take the written exam by the last day of classes in their third year. See also Postponement below.
2.4.1.5 Post-Examination Meetings: After the written exam, each student will schedule formal meetings with ALL members of his/her committee. These discussions will address strengths and weaknesses of the exam, as well as areas for further development. They also serve as preparation for the oral exam (see below).

2.4.1.6 Postponements: Postponements (usually only until the following semester) are very rarely granted and only in cases of unusual hardship. A request for postponement must be made in writing to the Graduate Studies Committee. Failure to take the written exam on schedule without an authorized deferral constitutes unsatisfactory progress toward the degree and is likely to result in the termination of financial aid.

2.4.1.7 Retaking the Written Exam: If a student fails all or part of the written exam, he/she will have one opportunity to retake the examination in the spring semester during Spring Break. Failure of all or part of the retake will result in dismissal from the Graduate Program. If the student passes the retake, he/she will submit a preliminary dissertation prospectus to the committee no later than April 15; sit for the oral examination no later than October May 15; and submit the final dissertation proposal no later than June 15.

2.4.2 The Dissertation Prospectus

The dissertation prospectus (10 pages plus a working bibliography, as distinct from the formal dissertation proposal, see below) presents the student’s dissertation project in the most precise terms available at this stage. The student will draw on the experiences of focusing the exam lists and writing the exam essays, linking the prospectus closely to the development of ideas fostered by those earlier stages. The prospectus will concentrate on argument, contribution to the field, research plans, and methodology. Although a list of chapters may be appended, the prospectus
should not be dominated by detailed chapter descriptions. The prospectus has two major purposes: a) to distill the student's plans for the dissertation, and b) to provide a focal point for the oral exam.

The dissertation prospectus must be approved by the student’s committee and submitted to the DGS office by January 20 of the third year.

2.4.3 The Oral Examination

Once the student has passed the written exam and has submitted an approved dissertation prospectus, the two-hour oral exam is scheduled to take place around February 1 in the third year. The outside reader participates in the exam, if necessary via Skype.

While the oral exam may engage questions from the written exam, it prioritizes the dissertation project as represented in the dissertation prospectus. The oral exam leads to the final dissertation proposal and toward the dissertation itself.

If the dissertation committee does not find the discussions that precede the oral exam satisfactory, they may decide, as a group, not to let the oral exam go forward. If this occurs, the student must petition to take the exam at a later date, by which date the student must obtain the committee members’ consent to proceed. The date will be specified in the petition, and the petition must be approved by the student’s committee and by the Graduate Studies Committee. If the student does not pass the oral exam by the set date, he/she is allowed one retake of the oral exam before losing his/her standing in the Graduate Program (see below).

2.4.3.1 Retaking the Oral Examination: If a student fails the oral exam, he/she will be allowed one retake. Failure of the retake will result in dismissal from the Graduate Program.
2.5 The Final Dissertation Proposal

The final dissertation proposal includes an overview of the project – argument, contribution to its field, research plans, and analytic methodology – a description of each chapter, and a detailed working bibliography. It is typically about 20pp. long (plus a substantial bibliography).

The proposal must be approved by the student’s dissertation committee and submitted to the DGS office by March 15 of the third year. The submission MUST include a cover sheet signed by the student’s dissertation director (or do-directors), indicating the committee’s approval of the proposal as presented.

After submitting the Final Dissertation Proposal, each student will begin to draft a dissertation chapter. An initial draft of 15-20 pages is due to the dissertation committee by May 15 of the third year. A complete version of one chapter is due for submission for a departmental award on September 1. Students should confer closely with their committee about which chapter to write first. Students will thus enter Year Four fully prepared a) to apply for dissertation-year fellowships (both internal & external) and other research grants, and b) to participate successfully in Project Publish.

2.6. Project Publish (PP)

All 4th-year students are required to participate in PP. In the fall, students will attend three workshops designed to get them going on a publishable essay. In the spring, the locus of work will shift to their dissertation committees, supplemented by peer revision groups, a recommended set of deadlines, and one additional workshop. The workload for students in the fall will be relatively light; in the spring the writing and revision schedule will be more demanding. Ideally, students will begin the spring semester with an article already underway.
2.7 The Dissertation

After submitting the final dissertation proposal (see above), each student will begin writing a dissertation chapter to be completed in draft form by the end of the summer. Students should confer closely with their committee about which chapter to write first.

2.7.1 The Dissertation Committee: Except in unusual cases, which must be approved through a petition process, the Graduate School requires that each Dissertation Committee include at least three English Department faculty members, and limits total dissertation committee size to five faculty members. For most students, the dissertation committee is the same as the committee they used for their exams: it includes a dissertation director (or two co-directors), two additional English Department faculty (one in the case of co-directors), and an outside reader. Students must keep each member of the committee informed of the progress of the dissertation and usually submit portion of their work as it progresses for comments and corrections. Students also need to be aware of schedule the Department and the Graduate School set each term for submission of a final dissertation draft to the committee and a final copy to the Graduate School.

2.7.2. What is a Dissertation? Writing a dissertation is the most demanding project a doctoral candidate undertakes. Students produce a considerable amount of scholarly writing during course work; when appropriate, some that writing can, usually with extensive revision, be incorporated into the dissertation. Many past dissertations can be accessed through the library: https://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/ETD-search/search

While there are no rigid, quantitative guidelines for dissertations, the English department expects a dissertation to demonstrate breadth of familiarity with the scholarship in the field; a
well-defined and sharply-focused approach to a problem in that field; a high level of effectiveness in scholarly discussion; and clear potential for the candidate’s independent research in the field after graduate school. Further, the Department considers the dissertation to be a book-length thesis (200-300 pages) of original, independent scholarship that seeks to make a key contribution to the life of the scholarly community in our fields and in the world. The Department encourages students to publish in professional journals prior to the dissertation, and it welcomes the inclusion of previously published work.

The dissertation will be evaluated according to the following criteria: freshness of contribution to existing scholarship and/or theory; quality of critical insight; both range and depth of scholarship; soundness and appropriateness of method; organization and style. A good dissertation should constitute a significant step toward the writing of a publishable book. (On the transition from dissertation to book, one good source is William Germano, From Dissertation to Book, 2nd ed. [2013].)

The form of the dissertation may vary according to the intrinsic logic of the project and the career aims of the writer. The dissertation must be a book-length thesis of original scholarship. The English Department does not accept doctoral dissertations in Creative Writing (i.e., collections of poems, short stories, novels, plays, etc.). Some book-length theses may include alternative modes of scholarly communication, e.g., images, moving images, interactive text, or other digital formats. Such options MUST be approved in advance by the Dissertation Committee and the Graduate Studies Committee.

2.7.3 Time-to-degree limit: By regulation of the Graduate School, a student has four years after passing the comprehensive examination to complete their dissertation. During this time, a student must maintain continuous registration with the Graduate School, even if he/she is not in
residence (a minimal fee is charged each term). A student who does not complete the dissertation within the allotted time will be terminated from the program and may apply to the Dean of the Graduate School for an extension of eligibility.

2.8. The Dissertation Defense

Students are required to attend a defense of their dissertation during the late spring term of their fifth year. This requirement will be waived by the Graduate Committee only if attendance would create significant hardship to the student. The Department strongly recommends that the final draft of the dissertation is in the hands of the entire committee at least one month prior to the scheduled date for defense. The Department will not usually schedule a dissertation defense with less a month notice.