

SIUC Department of English
Take-Home Preliminary Exams
Format Guidelines

The take-home preliminary exam format is designed to expedite production of a student's dissertation prospectus and to issue in a useful written product. As with the traditional-format exams, the take-home format asks students to demonstrate a broad, thorough mastery of an historical period and/or subject matter. That includes major and minor works, bibliography, historical and intellectual background, and the relevant critical and theoretical scholarship.

Within these parameters, however, a wide variety of options are possible. The "literature review" format for take-home exams includes questions that ask for both secondary and primary source review. Students might imagine major area exams either as preliminary writing for the literature review section of a prospectus or as a preliminary framing argument for a survey course in a major field. For minor areas that will form an integral part of the dissertation, students should consider take-home exams as potential pieces of a prospectus or introduction. For minor areas with more tangential relationships to the main project, students should view the exam as an initial survey of pivotal works that could form the basis for a later literature course. In short, the main goal of the take-home preliminary exam is to make sure that the writing students produce is in some sense useful beyond the confines of the exam.

In general, take-home exams last four to six weeks, depending on whether a committee chooses to stagger questions or due dates. That is, some committees might provide all questions at the beginning of a four-week period and ask students to complete the entire exam at their own pace. Other committees might stagger questions so that students submit answers serially over the course of six weeks. Still other committees might ask students to compose a minor area exam over a much shorter period of time (a weekend or even a week).

Students should consult with all members of the committee to decide on format and timetables. When forming preliminary examination committees, students should ask explicitly which format faculty prefer or anticipate. In other words, do not ask someone to be on your committee if you're ideologically opposed to her preferred exam format. Although format decisions are the result of faculty-student discussion, faculty members have final authority to decide formats and timetables in cases of intractable disagreement.

A defense is required for all preliminary exams, regardless of format. Students and faculty should plan exams with this requirement in mind: e.g., it would be unwise to schedule a month-long take-home exam on 20 April, unless faculty and student are willing to meet in the summer or delay defense until the following fall semester.