History Graduate Field Handbook

Program Overview

The History PhD program trains students to become innovative scholars and committed educators. The department has forty full-time faculty members, plus another fifteen faculty members of the Field of History from other departments at Cornell, and admits up to ten students each year. Because of the department’s size and Ithaca’s location, ours is a close community that values diversity, intellectual exchange, and creative collaboration. Upon entering the program, students select a main advisor, but consistent interaction with the entirety of their special committee is a key feature of our training. All our students acquire broad knowledge of theory and research across three concentrations/sub-fields, which may include a minor concentration from another discipline outside history. Faculty strongly support thematic, transnational, and interdisciplinary approaches to the past, and encourage students to take seminars in topics and methods in other departments and programs as part of their coursework. Teaching too is a robust component of our program: students gain at least two years of experience, both as teaching assistants in lecture courses taught by faculty and as instructors in seminars of their own design through Cornell’s Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines. Most of our graduates go on to hold academic positions in educational institutions, but many have successful academic-adjacent careers in government, law, libraries, museums, media, and university administration.

Degrees

The graduate program in history is oriented toward the doctorate. Students who, having entered the Ph.D. program, decide in their 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year to pursue a terminal MA instead, may do so. Incoming Ph.D. students who hold a master's degree from another university must still complete the requirements listed below. No formal transfer credit is given, but the Special Committee normally takes previous graduate work in history into account, which may speed the student's progress toward the doctorate.

Student Learning Outcomes

When students complete the Ph.D. in History, they should be able to:

1. Make an original and substantial contribution to the discipline, producing publishable scholarship.
2. Have a broad knowledge of theory and research across three concentrations/sub-fields (which may include one minor concentration from another discipline outside history).
3. Demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of one major historical concentration/subfield.
4. Communicate research findings effectively in written and in spoken presentations.
5. Demonstrate effective skills in undergraduate teaching.
6. Uphold professional and ethical standards in the discipline.
Orientation

During registration week, the Director of Graduate Studies holds a meeting to orient new students about the Program and Cornell. The department also holds an annual picnic during that first week to welcome new students and introduce them to faculty members and continuing students.

The Special Committee

- Students must identify a Special Committee Chair or a temporary advisor no later than three weeks after the first registration in the Graduate School (submitted to the Graduate School via Student Center). If unable to appoint an advisor, the doctoral student must appoint the DGS as a temporary advisor.
- Students are encouraged to have a full committee by the time of the Q Exam (end of their second semester), but they must have a full committee in place by the end of the third semester.
- Committees must include two faculty from the field. Additional members may come from other fields at Cornell.
- It is possible to add an ad hoc member from another institution.
- It is possible to split fields between 2 faculty members (so that you might have more than 3 special committee members).

The History Department strongly recommends that students read the Graduate School’s Advising Guide for Research Students: https://gradschool.cornell.edu/academic-progress/advising-guide-for-research-students-2020/

Concentrations

The Graduate Field of History offers advanced study in the following areas of concentration:

The Graduate Field of History offers advanced study in the following areas of concentration: African history, American history, American Studies (minor, only for persons not majoring in American history), ancient history, ancient Greek history, ancient Roman history, early modern European history, English history, French history, German history, history of science, Korean history, Latin American history, medieval Chinese history, medieval history, modern Chinese history, modern European history, modern Japanese history, modern Middle Eastern, premodern Islamic history, premodern Japanese history, Renaissance history, Russian history, South Asian history, Southeast Asian history.

Students’ areas of concentration are determined in consultation with their advisor and the other members of the special committee.
Courses

- History doctoral students are required to take at least 7 graduate-level (6000-level or above) seminars before they can take their “A” exams (see below). Usually, these seminars are completed over the course of the students’ first two years in the Ph.D. program. One of these seminars will be History 7090 (see below) and one may be History 6000 (Graduate Research Seminar), which is designed to support students who want to focus on their dissertation prospectus or an article for publication.
- All first-year students are required to take History 7090, Introduction to the Graduate Study of History, and must complete this course satisfactorily to remain in good standing.
- All first-year students are expected to take at least three courses (including at least one seminar) for credit during each of their first two semesters in residence. Regular letter grades must be received in these courses. Incompletes are strongly discouraged and must be finished by the beginning of the second year.
- It is recommended, but not required, that graduate students take History 6000, Graduate Research Seminar, in their first or second year. This course will be offered at least once per year, usually in the spring.
- All graduate students must complete one research paper by the end of the second year. The paper should be original scholarship of article length, based on the use of primary sources (for intellectual history that means original texts) subjected to professional source criticism, as well as secondary sources. This requirement can be met by completing a joint reading/research seminar or a dedicated research seminar.
- Cornell’s Satisfactory Academic Progress policy stipulates that students in research degrees must maintain a minimum GPA of 2.25 to be in good academic standing or to be eligible for federal loans.
- The Department of History strongly discourages but allows Incomplete (INC) grades. Incompletes incurred during the student’s first year must be completed by the beginning of the second year.
- The Department of History allows students to audit seminars, but not for credit.
- Students who, having entered the Ph.D. program, decide in their 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year to pursue a terminal MA instead, may do so. Requirements for the terminal M.A. are: History 7090, one foreign language or statistics; a two-semester residence requirement of full-time, satisfactory study; completion of a Master's thesis, and a final examination, by a special committee of two faculty members.

Field Exams & Dissertation Requirements

Pre-Q Exam & Q-Exam: History has a Pre-Qualifying (Pre-Q exam), required at the end of the end of the student’s first semester, and a Qualifying Exam (Q exam), required after
the first year of doctoral study, designed to determine students’ ability to pursue doctoral studies. Students who pass the Q Exam continue in their doctoral studies (Code F.3.)

Pre-Q Exam: The student must meet with all members of the Special Committee no later than the second week of the second semester. This preliminary meeting, known as the “pre-Q”, with the entire committee is devoted to evaluating the student's first semester and planning a direction of course work and foreign language training for ensuing semesters.

Q Exam: At the end of the second semester, the student must take a Qualifying Examination. The purpose of this exam is to evaluate the student’s progress. In advance of this meeting, committee members examine written work (at least two substantial papers) produced by the student for first-year courses. At the oral exam, the committee discusses with the student her/his scholarship and future plans and decides if she/he should proceed in the Ph.D. program, should devote the second year to a terminal M.A., or should leave the graduate program after the first year of study. The chair of the special committee communicates the results of the Q Exam to the GFA to be included in the student’s file.

A Exam: History doctoral students must take an A Exam. It can be completed after two semesters of registration and must be completed before the start of the 7th semester (Code F.1.c.). Ph.D. candidates usually take the “A” exam following two years of coursework. This exam must be completed sometime between the end of the second year and the beginning of the fourth year.

Students must have resolved all incompletes before being permitted to take the “A” exam. Fulfillment of the foreign-language and other requirements (including further language requirements in some concentrations) as a student’s committee may set must also be demonstrated before a candidate for the Ph.D. may take the examination admitting to candidacy. The examination is taken after a student has earned at least two residence units of credit.

The A Exam must cover one major and two minor concentrations, and is partly oral and partly written. The format of the written exam will be determined by the special committee. The oral examination is two hours in length (with one hour normally devoted to the major concentration, and 1/2 hour to each of the two minor concentrations). The oral exam should be scheduled at least three days following the last of the written examinations. A dissertation prospectus may be expected by the special committee in order to discuss research plans at this meeting.

Students can receive a pass, a conditional pass, and a fail on the A Exam.
The Dissertation Prospectus: All graduate students must turn in an approved dissertation prospectus no later than three months after the completion of the A Exam. The prospectus should be article length, situated in the secondary literature, and should identify (where appropriate) the necessary archival sources. The entire special committee must approve the prospectus.

The Dissertation: The Special Committee establishes the deadlines for completion of dissertation work. The dissertation must satisfy the members of the Special Committee and meet the formal requirements of the Graduate School.

B Exam: Students take a Final Examination (B Exam, the thesis defense) upon completion of the dissertation and all requirements for the degree, no earlier than one month before completion of the minimum registration requirement (Code F.1.d.). The B Exam is a meeting of the student and the Special Committee. The student must file a form scheduling the exam, and the Graduate Field Assistant must circulate an announcement of the date, time, and location of the exam at least seven days in advance. The exam usually lasts about two hours.

Filing the Dissertation
Candidates normally have sixty days following the exam to submit the final version of the thesis to the Graduate School. Dissertations must be filed online; instructions can be found at http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/thesis-and-dissertation. The Graduate School will charge a late-filing fee if this requirement is not met.

Language Requirements

For students in African, English/British and American history, proficiency must be demonstrated in one foreign language before a Ph.D. candidate is eligible for the Examination for Admission to Candidacy (A Exam). Students in all other fields are required to demonstrate competence in two foreign languages. Language proficiency is determined at the discretion of the special committee and in consultation with the DGS. The general minimal expectation is that students be able to pass a non-introductory placement test in the relevant foreign language(s), but depending on the student’s research, much higher levels of proficiency will be expected. Substitutions for the foreign language requirement may be petitioned.

Funding

Each Ph.D. student is awarded a five-year financial support package, which is guaranteed, on the condition that the student is making satisfactory academic progress

These five (5) years of support typically include two (2) years of Sage Fellowship, three (3) years of Teaching Assistantships, and four (4) summers. The Sage Fellowships are typically taken in the first and fifth year. The Teaching Assistantships are typically taken in the second and third year, with some students working as FWS instructors as early as their third years, and upon students’ returns from their research year. Students who are eligible for summer funding receive a survey from the Graduate School in the spring that must be completed in order to receive these funds.

The field does not guarantee funding beyond these five years, but it will try to secure further funding for students who need extra time to complete their degree. Students are strongly encouraged to apply for external grants and fellowships to supplement this aid package and facilitate further years of graduate research and writing. Especially students in their third year should apply for outside funding in order to secure support for archival research in their fourth year. The Graduate School maintains a database of doctoral fellowships: http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/fellowships.

The field has several departmental fellowships available, but these are counted against guaranteed funding. Of these, the Mommsen (for Medieval history) requires an application. The distribution of the Biggerstaff (for Chinese history) is decided by a committee of faculty. The DGS and GFA decide on the distribution of the others.

The department has some small grants available for archival research and conference travel. To apply, students should submit an official request to the DGS and GFA. The request should include a description of the work to be completed as well as a budget.

**Teaching**

Candidates for the Ph.D. in history are generally required to do classroom teaching as part of the doctoral program. Most graduate students will serve for at least one year as teaching assistants in undergraduate courses. The field does not usually give teaching assistantships to first-year students. However, second through fifth-year students are frequently employed as assistants in undergraduate history courses or are asked to teach a Freshman Writing Seminar (FWS) on the topic of their choice. The faculty encourages graduate students to teach their own courses as part of their professional development. Students are notified of their teaching assignment (TA or FWS instructor) in the funding letter they receive mid-Spring semester. Teaching assignments are subject to change.
**Teaching Assistants:** Once the department has enrollment figures for the following semester, the DGS and GFA will circulate a list of courses to which they expect to assign TAs and ask students to list their top three choices. In deciding where to assign TAs, the DGS and GFA consider a number of factors, including enrollment figures, workload equity among faculty, workload equity among TAs, and the professional development needs of each particular graduate student. The department endeavors to place each graduate student in a course related to his or her field of study, but cannot guarantee that this will always be possible. Because enrollment remains in flux throughout the weeks of the semester, teaching assignments are subject to change.

**FWS Instructors:** Students are asked to indicate their interest in teaching an FWS in the departmental funding survey they receive from the GFA at the end of the fall semester. Those interested will then receive an invitation from the GFA to submit their FWS course proposals in late February or early March.

**Required Training**

All new TAs are required to attend a TA training session run by the DGS at the beginning of the fall semester.

All new FWS instructors are required to take Graduate students who teach an FWS are required to take Writing 7100: Teaching Writing, a 1-credit course offered in the summer (for those teaching in the fall), or fall (for those teaching in the spring). In some cases, the Knight Program permits students to take Writing 7100 concurrently while teaching in the fall.

**English-Language Oral Proficiency Requirement**

The Office of the Provost has established the requirement that all first-time teaching assistants from a country where English is not the first language must demonstrate English-language oral proficiency through a language assessment.

The ITAP language assessments are based on the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the same tool used by our Ivy League peer institutions. Students who have earned a TOEFL iBT speaking score of 28 or higher or an IELTS speaking score of 8.5 or higher are generally exempt from further requirements.

Through the language assessment, a majority of students successfully meet the oral English proficiency expectations for teaching assistants established by the Office of the Provost, and move on directly to their TA assignments. For students who need additional support, the ITAP team offers several free services.
Assessments are offered four times per year in August, December, January, and May. Please see the language assessments page for scheduling details.

History recommends that incoming students take the August exam in order to best be able to support those students in need of further language training as early as possible.

**Student Progress Review**

The Student Progress Review (SPR) supports regular communication including written feedback between students and their advisors, requiring research degree students and their Special Committee to have at least one formal conversation each year about academic progress, accomplishments, and plans. Students complete a form describing milestones completed, accomplishments, challenges and plans. The Special Committee chair responds in writing and indicates whether the student’s progress is excellent, satisfactory, needs improvement, or is unsatisfactory. Students will receive a link to the SPR from the GFA in April to be completed by early May. First-year students are not required to fill out the SPR.

**History Colloquia**

History has two venues where members of the department present and discuss work in progress. The Graduate History Colloquium is organized by the Graduate History Association and the Comparative History Colloquium by faculty, but both is attended by both graduate students as well as faculty.

**Professional Development**

History appoints one faculty member as professional development officer each year. The professional development officer organizes annual workshops to help graduate students with: developing and writing the dissertation proposal/prospectus, fellowship applications, note-taking and archival research, journal/edited collection publishing, and preparing for the job market (discussing the job market, writing cover letters, teaching and diversity statements).

**Graduate History Association**

The GHA is an organization that acts as a representative and advocate for the graduate students in the History Department. Working with the DGS and the department Chair, the GHA helps ensure students’ needs are met and concerns are heard. It receives department funds each year to spend on social events, sponsor speaker series, and to provide office supplies for graduate student use. It also helps organize the Prospective Student Visit each spring semester.
Graduate Student Lounge
The Graduate Student Lounge is located in the basement of McGraw. McGraw Hall is always open. Students receive the code for the combination lock during orientation. The Graduate Student Lounge has two computers and a printer, and is also where students receive their mail.

Photocopying and Supplies
Students receive funds for photocopying and supplies only when they are TAs. Departmental letterhead is available as needed, and for any other supply needs the students should contact the departmental staff.

History Graduate Student Checklist

Requirements to be completed by the end of the First Year:

- Define Advisor and submit to Graduate School via the Student Center by the end of the third week of the first semester.
- Attempt reading exam in foreign research language(s).
- Complete required coursework, including HIST 7090 in the Fall.
- Complete Cornell Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (ORIA) Training.
- International students who do not speak English as a first language must complete TA assessment.
- Meet with the Advisor and/or Special Committee for the Pre-Q exam by the 2nd week of the 2nd semester.
- Complete at least 1 research paper.
- Meet with the Advisor and/or Special Committee for the Q exam after completing all coursework at the end of the 2nd semester.
- Submit the Student Progress Review (SPR).

Requirements to be completed by the end of the Second Year:

- Define the full Special Committee by the end of the 3rd semester.
- Meet with Special Committee to determine the subfields of study in which the student will be examined for admission to candidacy.
- Complete required coursework.
- Submit the Student Progress Review (SPR).

Requirements to be completed by the end of the Third Year:

- Pass reading exams in foreign language(s).
- Complete A-exam by the end of sixth semester.
- Complete the Prospectus within 3 months of completing the A-exam.
- Submit the Student Progress Review (SPR).
Requirements to be completed in subsequent semesters:

- Submit the Student Progress Review (SPR).
- Complete the B-exam.
- Submit the dissertation.

Useful Links:

Learning Strategies Center [http://lsc.cornell.edu/](http://lsc.cornell.edu/)

Career and Professional Development: [https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/)

Cornell Health Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) [https://health.cornell.edu/services/counseling-psychiatry](https://health.cornell.edu/services/counseling-psychiatry)

Office of Global Learning: [https://globallearning.cornell.edu/](https://globallearning.cornell.edu/)

Multilingual Writing Support (Knight Institute): [https://knight.as.cornell.edu/multilingual](https://knight.as.cornell.edu/multilingual)

Office of Inclusion and Student Engagement: [https://gradschool.cornell.edu/diversity-inclusion/about-oi-se/](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/diversity-inclusion/about-oi-se/)

Office of Student Disability Services [https://sds.cornell.edu/](https://sds.cornell.edu/)


LGBT Resource Center: [https://scl.cornell.edu/identity-resources/lgbt-resource-center](https://scl.cornell.edu/identity-resources/lgbt-resource-center)

Help and Support: [https://gradschool.cornell.edu/student-experience/help-and-support/](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/student-experience/help-and-support/)

Student Governance: [https://gradschool.cornell.edu/student-experience/student-governance/](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/student-experience/student-governance/)

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