ICR Prelims Guidelines
Guidelines Distributed on October 5, 2010

ICR Faculty has updated and amended 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. 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. 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. Identify 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. The dissertation committee need not be identical, and it is not unusual for a student to choose an examiner for the prelims who will NOT be on the dissertation committee. 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 and your work long after your dissertation is deposited, not just through job seeking but also through fellowship applications, continuing advice, publication opportunities, etc.

b. Composition.
ICR requires that the committee include at least one member with a faculty appointment outside the College of Media. Because almost all of the ICR faculty have an outside appointment, this requirement can be filled quite simply. However students are encouraged to abide by the spirit of the requirement. If your work is anthropological in nature, for instance, you may want to have a voting member of the anthropology department involved; this is part of the freedom of interdisciplinarity.

c. Graduate College Requirements
In addition to this departmental requirement, the Graduate College rules read as follows:

i. ... the committee must include at least four voting members. At least three of these voting members must be members of the Graduate Faculty and at least two must also be tenured. A revision to the Policy on Doctoral Committees, January 28, 2004 allows this last requirement to be met by term members of the Graduate Faculty who retired or resigned with tenure for a period of five years following their resignation or retirement; that period may be extended at the request of the unit, so long as the faculty member remains actively involved in the graduate program. Non-voting members may be appointed but are rare on preliminary examination committees.

ii. 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. Almost all 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 meaningfully prepare for the exam question. A faculty member is not required to disclose the specific question to the student. ICR keeps an open file of previous prelim questions that both students and faculty are welcome to review. 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. [A file of previous prelim questions I available for both faculty and students to review.]

When You Have Identified Your Committee

You will report their names to your advisor who will report the committee to the departmental staff, who will send this information to the ICR Director, who will forward paperwork to the Graduate College after approval. This process officially appoints your committee, and committee members will then receive a “notice of appointment” from the Graduate College. Your advisor will contact committee members and ask for their questions in writing. Advisor will check questions for overlap and conflict and submit them to staff. Departmental staff 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

Pick up the question from the departmental staff. 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 examination with minimum fuss. The candidate has a choice whether to take a four-hour exam in the ICR offices or a twenty-four hour take-home exam, without prejudice. The twenty-four hour format 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 departmental staff.

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 to also discuss the proposal with the other committee members at an early stage of its formulation. Proposals vary according to field and discipline, but the departmental 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 writteins 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 Oral Examination

Once the writteins are completed and the dissertation proposal is approved by your advisor, staff schedules the oral defense and distributes all of the documents: questions, answers, and proposal. Once a time has been settled on, departmental staff 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, but this is not encouraged. Faculty should be given a minimum of 3-4 weeks to read the material before 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

[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, contemporary departmental culture includes the possibility 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:

If the Graduate College is not informed of the result of the preliminary examination within six months after the scheduled examination date, the committee is considered dissolved. The Graduate College may reinstate the committee if a preliminary examination date is scheduled within two months after the committee dissolution date, and the department sends a memorandum to the Graduate College giving the scheduled examination date and certifying that all original committee members have agreed to meet at that time.

The Graduate College is majestically agnostic about the subsequent fate of a dissolved
committee, deferring to the department’s policies. It is presumed that the department will not treat this as a “fail,” though, as the Graduate College will not have recorded a “fail” grade. In the (extremely rare) case of a “fail,” the candidate may begin the process over again if the Director and the Graduate College are willing to appoint a new prelim committee.

**ABD**

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