

The PhD in French & Comparative Literature at Columbia

Revised Requirements, effective Fall 2024 (for graduate students entering in 2024 or beyond)

Overview

The PhD in French trains students in French and francophone literature, culture and history, preparing them for academic and academic-adjacent careers. The program consists of approximately two years of coursework, including both required and elective courses, an MA Essay, qualifying examinations in the student's primary areas of specialization and a dissertation that represents an original contribution to scholarship in their field. Students also receive pedagogical training and teach undergraduate students. A minimum of two years of teaching is required; most PhD students teach for three years.

Students must meet the requirements established by the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society (ICLS) as well as the French Department requirements laid out in this document.

Advising

First-year students are assigned an academic adviser from among the department's faculty and also receive guidance from the Directors of Graduate Studies (DGS) of French and of ICLS. They must meet with the DGS of French regularly, at least once per semester, to touch base on their completion of program requirements and their course selection. In the second semester, they choose an adviser from among the French faculty with whom they work on their MA Essay, a first draft of which is due at the latest on October 1st of their second year in the program. After receiving feedback from their faculty adviser, the student should submit the final version by November 15.

In the second year, students work with a committee of three faculty members on their Qualifying Exam reading lists (the exam itself is taken in Y3). At least one member of the exam committee must have a full or joint appointment in the French Department. One member of the committee is usually the anticipated dissertation sponsor.

The dissertation committee consists of three core members (including the sponsor). The primary sponsor must be from the Department of French. Two additional or 'external' members join the committee as the project approaches completion. All five members participate in the defense. The 'external' members are faculty members in other departments at Columbia or at other universities.

Students are advised on job placement by the DGS and the Placement Officer as well as by their dissertation committee. In the fifth and/or sixth years they participate in workshops that prepare them to apply for academic positions and postdocs. Students interested in other careers can seek guidance from the Placement officer and the DGS but are also strongly encouraged to participate in career workshops and programs organized by GSAS, including GSAS COMPASS.

Coursework

Courses that count towards graduate credit at Columbia are at the 4000 level or higher (though students may count one 3000-level language course towards the degree if they wish). 4000-level courses are open to both undergraduate students and graduate students, while classes at the 6000 level or higher are open only to graduate students. Students should consult the [Directory of Classes](#) in order to see current and past course offerings. They can also consult the Department [website](#) to see which courses are taught in French and which in English.

The MA in French & Comparative Literature requires 8 courses and the MA thesis. The required course, Theory of Literature I (GU 4000), counts towards these 8 courses, but the required French Lecture Series and M.A. Essay Direction (see below) do not. The PhD in French & Comparative Literature requires an additional 8 courses (16 total).^{*} Among these 16 courses, students must take 6 courses required by ICLS (see [ICLS Requirements](#)). Only one language course can count towards the degree, and it must be at the 3000 level. Students may take additional courses beyond these requirements.

^{*} The dissertation writing workshop is not included in the 16 required courses.

PhD students may wish to avail themselves of the Inter-University Doctoral Consortium (IUDC), a partnership with CUNY, Fordham, the New School, Princeton, Rutgers, and Stony Brook that allows doctoral students to take courses at these institutions. PhD students in their second year and beyond can register. With special permission of the DGS and the instructor of the course, exceptions may be made for first-year PhD students.

Required courses

In the first year, students take the fall Proseminar (assuming it is offered) or take Theory of Literature I (GU4000), which offer an introduction to close reading, the *explication de texte* and fundamental research techniques.

In the spring of their first year, freestanding MA and PhD students should register for M.A. Essay Direction (GR8092). This is not a taught course. Instead, students should meet with their prospective MA adviser, agree upon a topic, and set up a schedule for research and writing. At the end of the semester, students will receive a grade of CP (credit pending) for the course. The grade will be overturned for a letter grade once the MA Essay is graded in the fall semester of Y2.

Freestanding MA students and PhD students in their first year also register for the French Lecture Series (GR6020). This 1-point course is a professionalization opportunity for students, who select scholars of French Studies from other universities to give a talk at Columbia. Students introduce the speakers when they come to campus, play a leading role in the Q&A, and have dinner with them following the talk. Generally speaking, the Lecture Series brings two speakers to campus each semester. PhD students and freestanding MA students who register for coursework in their second year enroll in the Lecture Series again in each semester of Y2 and PhD students continue to enroll in the fall and spring of Y3. The Lecture Series is taken for R credit. Once PhD students have taken the Lecture Series for six semesters/three years, they may count the Lecture Series as one of the 16 required courses.

In the fall of their second year, PhD students take the Practicum in French Language Pedagogy (GU 4025). This is taken for R credit and counts towards the required 16 courses for the PhD.

PhD students enroll in the Dissertation Workshop (GR 9701) each time it is offered during spring of Y3 and all of Y4, 5, 6 except in exceptional circumstances where they can demonstrate that they are workshopping their dissertation project in another venue (e.g., the Heyman Center). This course is taken for R credit and does *not* count towards the 16 required courses.

Distribution requirement

Students completing the ICLS certificate must take at least two courses with a significant focus on literature/culture before 1800. At least one of these courses must be taken in the Department of French and the two courses must cover two different periods.

R-credit courses

With the exceptions of the required Practicum in French Language Pedagogy and the French Lecture Series, only one course may be taken for R credit.

Courses in other departments

PhD students may take up to six of the sixteen courses required for the PhD in other departments, provided these classes are at the 4000 level or above.

Incompletes

Per [GSAS policy](#), to remain in good academic standing, a student may carry only one grade of incomplete at a time.

Transfer Credit

It is not possible to obtain “advanced standing” through transfer credits from other institutions attended prior to Columbia. A maximum of two courses can be transferred. These must meet the following criteria:

- 1) They must be graduate level;
- 2) They must be seminars rather than lectures;
- 3) The scope of the course and written assignments must be similar to those of a Columbia French graduate course;
- 4) They cannot have already counted towards any prior degree received.

Students who wish to transfer credits must apply to do so *in their first semester* at Columbia. They should submit syllabi and copies of writing assignments to the DGS. The decision of whether or not to accept the transfer credits ultimately resides with the DGS and with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS).

The MA Essay

The MA Essay can take several different forms, e.g., it can offer an original analysis of a single work, or treat a question or theme across several works. It is often an expansion of a seminar paper written for a course taken in the Department. It can be written in either French or English; the decision on language should be made in consultation with the adviser. The thesis must include a bibliography and footnotes and should reflect the consultation of critical, historical and/or theoretical sources appropriate to the project. It is written under the direction of an adviser from the Department of French. The minimum length is 25 pages, excluding the bibliography and any appendices. Students choose either to defend the thesis in a one-hour examination to a committee consisting of the adviser and a second faculty member, in which case both assign the letter grade, or they can simply submit the thesis to the adviser, who assigns the letter grade. The first draft is due by October 1st of Y2 and the final draft by November 15th. If students choose the defense option, the defense should be held by the end of the fall semester of Y2. Note that, per GSAS policy, all work for the MA, including the MA Essay, must be completed by May 31 of Y2. Students who do not meet this deadline will be regarded as not in good academic standing, may not be appointed to a teaching or research role for the ensuing semester, and may be terminated from their PhD program.

The MPhil (Master of Philosophy)

In order to qualify for the MPhil, the student must already have obtained the MA, and must also pass the Qualifying Exam and the *explication de texte*. Students should qualify for the MPhil by the end of Y3. Per [GSAS policy](#), the latest possible date to obtain the degree is the end of Y4.

The Foreign Language Requirement

Students must meet the requirements established by ICLS.

Examinations

In the third year, students take a two-hour Qualifying Exam for which they prepare three reading lists under the direction of faculty with expertise in these fields. One of these faculty members, often but not necessarily the future dissertation sponsor, should be designated as the Primary Adviser of the three lists and should ensure coherence amongst them. If possible, the lists should be drawn up in preparation for the dissertation project. There is no required length for the lists. Often one of the lists is a longer 'major field' list, with the remaining two lists covering historical and/or critical work but this does not have to be the case and students should discuss their three lists with the Primary Adviser. During the Qualifying Exam, students answer questions about individual works on their three lists as well as broader thematic, theoretical and historical questions. Grading is PASS/FAIL. Students should also consult the [ICLS requirements for the Qualifying Exam](#).

Once students have completed the Qualifying Exam, they progress to a one-hour *explication de texte* exam later in the same semester. A week before the exam, one of the members of the orals committee, usually the intended dissertation sponsor, assigns a passage for analysis. In the exam, the student presents this passage for about 30 minutes, then discusses it with two faculty examiners. Grading is PASS/FAIL.

Students usually take both the oral examination and the *explication de texte* exam by the end of the fall semester of Y3 (i.e., the fifth semester).

Prospectus and Dissertation

After completing all coursework and examinations, students write a dissertation prospectus. This document describes the topic of the dissertation, outlining its anticipated methodology, conceptual framing and structure as well as the original contribution that it makes to a particular field or intellectual debate. The prospectus includes a preliminary bibliography and a chapter breakdown. Students should consult the [ICLS requirements for the prospectus](#). For departmental purposes, it must be six pages long at minimum, excluding bibliography and any appendices. It is written under the guidance of the dissertation sponsor (who must be from the Department of French), with input from the two other dissertation committee members). All three committee members must approve the prospectus. The prospectus should be discussed at a meeting with all three committee members present. Committee members should offer feedback on the scope and methodology of the project.

Students usually submit the prospectus by the end of their sixth semester (spring of Y3). If needed, the DGS may allow an extension to the seventh semester.

Dissertation and Defense

The dissertation, written in English, is usually 250-350 pages in length. It contains the student's original research and argumentation and represents a new contribution to a particular field and scholarly conversation. It is divided into chapters and includes an introduction, a conclusion, an abstract and a bibliography. The dissertation must be formatted according to the guidelines of Columbia University. In addition to the [GSAS guidelines for defense and deposit of the dissertation](#), students should also consult the [ICLS requirements for the dissertation defense](#).

The dissertation is usually defended in the fifth or sixth year. The defense is a two-hour exam conducted by the three 'internal' and two 'external' committee members. Dissertations are either approved with minor changes, approved with major changes to be completed within six months of the defense, or (in exceptional circumstances) failed.

Teaching

Students begin teaching in their third semester, following a pedagogical orientation offered by the director of the French language program. During the first semester of teaching, they enroll in the Practicum in French Language Pedagogy (GU4025). Students typically teach in years two to four, though other arrangements are possible. In their second year, students usually teach elementary and intermediate French language courses. As they advance in their program, they are often invited to teach advanced literature and culture courses. Teaching outside the department, e.g., for the Core Curriculum or the University Writing program, is also encouraged. Students in their fourth and fifth years may propose their own courses under the GSAS Graduate Scholars program.

ENS Exchange

The Department has a longstanding exchange with the École normale supérieure, both the rue d'Ulm (Paris) site as well as the ENS in Lyon. Graduate students may spend one year at either ENS site in Y4-6. The ENS provides access to their library and seminars. Students may also audit classes at other nearby institutions. Students who participate in the ENS exchange typically use their one year of Dissertation Fellowship to cover their expenses (note, however, that the Dissertation Fellowship cannot be used in Y6). Students may also choose to go abroad to other sites more relevant to their research, but there are no other official exchanges in place.

Job Placement

Students receive guidance about applying for academic positions and postdoctoral fellowships in their fifth and sixth years. Placement is overseen by the Placement Officer in collaboration with the DGS of French and ICLS.

Employment

Per [GSAS policy](#), PhD students are prohibited from doing any paid work while they are Dean's Fellows (Y1). As Dissertation Fellows (Y4 or Y5), they are allowed to work up to ten hours a week but not to hold positions as TAs, TFs, Preceptors, or Research Assistants.