

FIELD DEFINITION FOR SPECIALIST EXAMS

Students should define the fields for their specialist exam to clarify their own ideas on what particular expertise they need to acquire in preparing for their thesis topics. Such an exercise is useful in other ways. Writing a field definition informs members of the specialist committee of the student's interests, helps them construct an appropriate reading list, and suggests the kind of guidance a faculty member should think of providing.

Such a definition of fields should begin with an overall view of the area in which the student will be writing a thesis. This will be broader and more general than a thesis proposal, although the closer you are to a thesis proposal the better. In practice, however, it is unlikely your ideas will have crystallized to the point of a thesis proposal and not at all necessary at this stage that you have one. After all, the point of the exercise is to lay the groundwork for elaborating a thesis proposal, and introductory secondary sources are your main concern.

After mapping out and justifying the chronological and geographical limits of your proposed work, you can begin with some of the traditional labels such as "history of scientific ideas", "institutional history", "social history of science/technology", "philosophy of science", etc. Your area may need more than one of these labels and you may need to add a few more specific ones, such as "history of technical design", "history of instrumentation", or "history of clinical diagnosis". In all cases, you should elaborate as much as possible on the content of these labels: for example, you might be interested in doing the "history of engineering", more precisely the "technical education of engineers", and you would like to do this by examining popular manuals and texts for craftsmen after the invention of printing.

This example indicates your work will be the confluence of a number of currents of thought and knowledge. Before launching into your project you would need to know more about the history of printing, in particular

the book trade, something on social and institutional history of trades and crafts, perhaps something on the history of education, as well as something on the general political and social history of the period that you are studying in the country you are studying. You will also need to know something about the particular trades and crafts you wish to examine. Your life becomes more complicated if you want to do a comparative study dealing with several different countries or cultures.

You will probably need an examiner on general history of the period, somebody who can handle the technical education, and another person with some familiarity with the techniques practiced by the communities which interest you. In your statement defining your field you should sketch out the axes of your interest, justify their importance, and exclude some other perspective that could be used. You might decide, for example, that the social and institutional history of guilds is of less importance than a knowledge of the techniques themselves or vice-versa. A detailed history of printing and knowledge of the technical capacities of presses to produce illustrations may not be central, but then again this might be the primary avenue of approach. The difference of emphasis would affect the numbers and kinds of people you choose on your specialist committee. You should not forget to mention the historiographical approach you will be pursuing and say why you have decided on this one in preference to others. A final and very important part of the definition would be an indication of the kinds of questions you will be asking, the sources and methods you propose to use to answer them, the relation of the questions in different fields to each other, and how each field complements the others.

Structurally, your statement should be composed of distinct sections for the individual sub-fields and general sections introducing your statement and pulling the diverse field together into a coherent whole. Suggest possible readings for each of the fields and remember that the exam is based on secondary sources. Try and keep your statement to about 4 double-spaced pages in total with each field getting at least a page.