

Preliminary Examination Guidelines and Procedures

General Guidelines

Research projects for the preliminary examination help prepare students for dissertation work and provide an assessment of which students are prepared to advance to candidacy. Examples of acceptable research projects include intervention studies, measure development, individual differences studies, observation studies, surveys, modeling of extant data, meta-analysis, and systematic reviews. Note that this list is not exhaustive, and students should discuss options with their advisors.

Students should work with their advisors to plan the research project for their preliminary examination. Planning should start no later than the student's second year in the program.

Students must have completed the majority of their core coursework when applying for the preliminary examination and have attained a 3.25 GPA. Students must complete all coursework, research competency requirements, and pass the preliminary exam before they can fully advance to candidacy and register for dissertation hours.

Scoring

1. The exam is evaluated by 2 readers. The two scores are averaged for each category.
2. **Evaluation Decision**
 - a. **Pass:** Average score between readers is 80% or above, and a score of at least 5 is obtained in each category.
 - b. **Revise and Resubmit:** On the first attempt, students scoring between 50% and 79% will be allowed to revise and resubmit the manuscript based on the readers' feedback. If the student receives a score of *Revise and Resubmit*, they have 2 weeks to revise and resubmit the manuscript. The student may revise and resubmit only once. If the student does not meet the criteria for a Pass on the second attempt, the student will be given a Fail.
 - c. **Fail:** On the first attempt, a student scoring below 50% or scoring 5 or below in any category, will receive a Fail. On the second attempt, a student scoring below 80% or a scoring 5 or below in any category will receive a Fail. If a student receives a Fail, the student will not advance to candidacy and must withdraw from the program.

Preliminary Examination Evaluation Procedures

1. The student will identify a research project in collaboration with their advisor.
2. They will also identify a second reader for the evaluation of the preliminary exam. This reader may be involved in the design and implementation of the study or only serve as an evaluator. These responsibilities should be delineated at the beginning of the project.

3. The student must submit an intent to take the preliminary exam no later than the semester they plan on submitting the exam. Note that the student's advisor, second reader/evaluator, and the program director must approve the preliminary project.
4. Students have 3 semesters (including summer) to complete the exam once they submit the form. If the student needs an extension, they must provide a written request to the LITS faculty committee with a plan and timeline for completing the preliminary exam.
5. Students should complete the exam by the deadlines provided by the director each semester (typically at the end of October, March, & June) to stay on-track for registering for dissertation hours if they pass the exam.
6. The student will work closely with their advisor (and possibly second reader) in designing and conducting the research study for their preliminary exam. Responsibilities and a schedule for completion should be clearly outlined. Planning for publication and final authorship should begin early in the planning process. IRB must be obtained for all projects involving human participants.
7. Although faculty will fully support students in the design and implementation of the project, the student will write the research manuscript independently with limited feedback on it (e.g., in-line corrective feedback) from faculty. When preparing the manuscript, students should use the APA JARS guidelines for quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, and systematic reviews. The student should also review the Preliminary Examination Evaluation Form and Preliminary Examination Scoring Rubric (see below).
 - a. If the student has a disability that may require additional support or accommodations, please contact the program director, Amy Elleman (amy.elleman@mtsu.edu). A letter from the Disability and Access Center (615-898-2783) should be included with any requests for additional support or accommodations.
8. When completed, the student should submit the research manuscript to Angela Morrell, the Program Executive Aide (angela.morrell@mtsu.edu) and copy the program director, Amy Elleman (amy.elleman@mtsu.edu or 615-898-5688). The manuscript will then be distributed to both readers with links to the evaluation form. The evaluation will take approximately 2 weeks to complete.
9. Once the readers complete the evaluation, they will submit the evaluation of the manuscript to the director (and copy Angela Morrell). The evaluation will include direct feedback in the manuscript using the comments feature in Word and a completed evaluation form. Within approximately one week, the program director will report the outcome of the preliminary exam: *Pass*, *Fail*, or *Revise and Resubmit*.
10. If the student passes the exam on the first attempt, they will advance to candidacy and are eligible to take dissertation hours. If the student receives a score of *Fail*, they will not advance to candidacy and must withdraw from the program.
11. If the student does not pass the exam on the first submission but receives a score of *Revise and Resubmit*, the student will have the opportunity to use the readers' feedback to revise the paper for resubmission and re-evaluation. The student should make all changes and write a cover letter (similar to the process used with journal submissions) addressing all of the substantive changes requested by the readers. The

student should also highlight all of the changes made in the revised manuscript. The student will submit the new manuscript (with highlights) and the cover letter to the program director, Amy Elleman and copy Angela Morrell. Angela will send the manuscript to the readers who will have two weeks to evaluate it. The readers will then complete the Preliminary Exam Evaluation Form and submit it to the program director. The program director will then average the two readers' new scores and provide a final score and decision to the student. Note that only one resubmission is allowed. If the student receives a score of 79% or below or if the student scores below a 5 in any category on the second attempt, the student will not be allowed to continue in the program.

12. Students who receive a passing score will be encouraged to work with their advisor to publish the manuscript.

**Preliminary Examination Evaluation Form
Literacy Studies Ph.D. Program – HARD COPY EXAMPLE**

Student Name: _____ **(M#):** _____ **Date:** _____

Evaluator Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Scoring - Each category of the manuscript will be evaluated by two evaluators/readers on the following scale:

0-7 = Needs Improvement 8 = Satisfactory 9 = Very Good 10 = Excellent

Pass: Average score 80% or above and a score of at least 5 in each category.

Revise and Resubmit: On the first attempt, preliminary examinations scoring between 50% - 79% may be revised and resubmitted. Students have 2 weeks to revise and resubmit the manuscript. The student may revise and resubmit only one time. If the student does not meet the criteria for a *Pass* on the second attempt, the student will earn a *Fail*.

Fail: On the first attempt, an average score below 50% will earn a *Fail*. On second attempt, an average score below 80% or a score below 5 in any category will earn a *Fail*. If the student earns a *Fail*, the student will not advance to candidacy and must withdraw from the program.

1. Introduction & Literature Review - Score Out of 10: _____

- a. The topic is relevant for the project.
- b. The topic is contextualized by providing theory, research, and/or historical perspectives.
- c. Popular and alternative views are considered.
- d. Relevant primary studies are reviewed.
- e. The study purpose is explicitly articulated and justified.

2. Method - Score Out of 10: _____

- a. Design is clearly explained, and sampling procedure is well outlined.
- b. Participants or units of analysis are described in detail.
- c. Each measure or observation is fully described including information about trustworthiness (e.g., reliability and validity).
- d. Procedure is described well enough to replicate the study.

3. Results - Score Out of 10: _____

- a. Descriptive data are reported with explanations of trends and anomalies.
- b. Reliability and validity indices are reported (if applicable).
- c. When applicable, inferential statistics and effect sizes are reported.

- d. For qualitative research, all factors are clearly and fully described.
- e. Necessary tables and figures are reported with clear explanations.

4. Discussion - Score Out of 10: _____

- a. Main contributions of the study are highlighted.
- b. Study findings are compared to findings from previous studies.
- c. Limitations and suggestions for future studies are provided.
- d. Implications for practice are addressed when appropriate.

5. General Writing Elements:

- a. Coherence among the introduction, research questions, methods, results, and discussion is apparent.
- b. Writing is concise and logical.
- c. Citations are used appropriately and generously throughout the paper.
- d. Primary sources are used extensively throughout the paper.
- e. APA formatting is followed throughout the paper.

• **Total Points** = _____/50 = _____%

• **Decision:** Fail () Return for revision () Pass ()

Rubric for Literacy Studies Preliminary Exam – Research Project

Section & Criteria	Needs Improvement 0–7	Satisfactory 8	Very Good 9	Excellent 10
<p>1) Introduction & Literature Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic relevance • Contextualization with theory/research/history • Popular & alternative views • Review of primary studies • Study purpose is articulated & justified • Research questions are clear 	<p>Topic lacks relevance; weak or missing theory; limited or poorly integrated literature; rationale absent.</p>	<p>Relevant topic; purpose stated; some theory and research included; alternative views minimally addressed.</p>	<p>Well-framed topic; thorough theoretical & empirical grounding; purpose justified; some critical synthesis.</p>	<p>Highly relevant & original; literature comprehensive, balanced, and critically synthesized; purpose compelling.</p>
<p>2) Method</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, appropriate, design & sampling • Participant/units of analysis described • Measures/variables described in detail • Procedures are replicable 	<p>Design is unclear or weak; design does not match the research questions; participants poorly described; measures/procedures vague; no reliability/validity.</p>	<p>Adequate design; design matches the research questions; participants described; some attention to trustworthiness; procedures somewhat replicable.</p>	<p>Strong design for research questions; participants detailed; measures reliable/valid; procedures mostly replicable.</p>	<p>Rigorous, well-matched design; rich participant description; thorough trustworthiness evidence; fully replicable.</p>

<p>3) Results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive data & trends • Trustworthiness indices • Inferential statistics/effect sizes (if applicable) • Qualitative factors (if applicable) • Tables/figures with explanations 	<p>Results unclear, incomplete, or disconnected; missing key data/analyses.</p>	<p>Adequate results; some descriptive/inferential or qualitative findings; tables/figures limited.</p>	<p>Clear, correct analyses; trends explained; reliability/validity addressed; effective tables/figures.</p>	<p>Thorough, precise results; rich quantitative/qualitative evidence; well-explained anomalies; exemplary tables/figures.</p>
<p>4) Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main contributions highlighted • Compared to prior studies • Limitations & future directions • Implications for practice 	<p>Discussion vague, overstated, or disconnected; no comparison to prior work; no implications.</p>	<p>Contributions & limitations present; some comparison to prior studies; implications brief.</p>	<p>Thoughtful, connected to prior work; clear limitations; implications discussed.</p>	<p>Sophisticated, well-integrated with prior studies; contributions to theory/practice highlighted; balanced limitations.</p>
<p>5) General Writing Elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherence across sections • Writing clarity • Citations appropriate & frequent • Use of primary sources • APA formatting 	<p>Disorganized; weak/incorrect citations; multiple APA errors; reliance on secondary sources.</p>	<p>Coherent but uneven; writing adequate; APA inconsistently applied.</p>	<p>Strong coherence; clear, concise writing; APA mostly correct; primary sources well-used.</p>	<p>Seamless coherence; precise, elegant writing; extensive primary sources; nearly flawless APA.</p>