

GRADUATE PROGRAM

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN GERMAN LITERATURE AND CRITICAL THOUGHT

The Department of German Literature and Critical Thought offers a graduate program that focuses on the theoretical and cultural foundations for the development of German literature and critical thought from 1750 onward. In order to acquire a thorough understanding of these foundations, students take a two-year sequence of six required (core) courses and two pro-seminars. Working closely with an academic adviser, students also choose seven electives based on their own interests and the direction of their individual program. Northwestern houses a wide group of related disciplines in which students in the German program are encouraged to participate, including Art History, Comparative Literary Studies, Gender Studies, History, Philosophy, Religion, and Screen Cultures.

The graduate program is home to the annual Northwestern University Department of German Speaker Series. The lectures, which take place during the academic year, are organized entirely by the graduate students, who invite scholars from around the world to discuss papers or pre-distributed materials with the academic community in Chicago.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The graduate program in German Literature and Critical Thought is designed to provide a framework within which students can develop their interest in the relationship between modern German culture and literature and the broad array of discourses — philosophy and critical theory; literary theory and aesthetics; intellectual, conceptual, and cultural history; political theory; psychoanalysis; media studies; etc. — broadly described as critical thought.

Students in the graduate program undertake a course of study that provides them with both broad-based knowledge of theoretical and philosophical texts and a solid training in the German literary canon. Seminars in the German graduate program range from examinations of specific literary topics and authors to innovative explorations of theory-oriented themes and problems. The aim of each seminar is to make it possible for students to acquire the skills to develop a complex and compelling project of their own, which can then provide the basis for an innovative dissertation at the intersection of literary studies and theoretical concerns.

The Department of German at Northwestern is a dynamic and diverse department, with particular strengths in modern critical theory, philosophy, literary theory, and aesthetics; media studies; theology and religious studies; intellectual and cultural history; psychoanalysis;

and German-language literature from the Goethezeit to the present. For graduate students, the department also offers the opportunity to participate in Northwestern's vibrant network of interdisciplinary clusters and programs, including programs in Critical Theory, Comparative Literary Studies, Poetry and Poetics, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Jewish Studies, Global Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies, and Critical Studies in Theater and Performance, allowing students to expand their studies in collaboration with students and faculty across the university. The department has strong ties with several German universities and institutions (including Frankfurt, Vienna, Münster, Bochum, and ZfL Berlin).

A second focus of the graduate program is the development of each graduate student's skills as a teacher, mentor, and communicator. In addition to its tenure-line faculty, the department includes a highly acclaimed group of instructors committed to fostering an engaging pedagogical environment at Northwestern, with whom graduate students work and receive training from as both language instructors and teaching assistants.

ADMISSIONS

The Graduate School (TGS) at Northwestern requires all prospective students to apply for admission. Please see the [TGS Admissions page](#) where you will find the online application. In addition to the Application for Admission and Financial Aid, the German department also requires the following documents for application to the Ph.D. program.

- Copy of transcripts.
- Three letters of recommendation.
- Academic Statement in which the student indicates the reason why he or she would like to pursue graduate studies in the German department and outlines some of the major lines of inquiry that he or she would like to develop.
- A Personal statement, one that addresses the following prompt (500 words max):
 - The Graduate School values varied backgrounds, approaches, and perspectives, understanding them as essential ingredients for true academic excellence. As a Northwestern graduate student, how would you contribute to our dynamic intellectual communities? Your answer may draw upon past or present experiences, whether in academic work, extracurricular or community activities, or everyday life.
- A paper or writing sample representative of their work.
- We do NOT require the GRE from our applicants.
- TOEFL requirements:
 - Internet-Based Test Score minimum requirement of 90; Minimum for the Computer-Based Test is 213 and the Paper-Based Test is 550. The minimum score for the IELTS is 7.
 - International students need NOT take the TOEFL or IELTS if
 - they can provide official transcripts verifying an undergraduate degree from an accredited four-year institution or equivalent, where the language of instruction was English or

- they can provide official transcripts verifying a graduate degree from an accredited institution where the language of instruction was English.
- International students who have received a degree from an accredited, English-speaking institution will not be required to take the new language test (Versant) or attend language course work.

If you have questions, feel free to contact us at german@northwestern.edu.

Prospective students are welcome to visit campus informally and to stop by the department for general information. Admitted students are encouraged to attend a Visiting Weekend in early March, during which time they meet with faculty and current graduate students, tour the library and other campus facilities, and if possible, attend a graduate seminar.

The Application Deadline for admission to the German Ph.D. program at Northwestern University is Jan. 19, 2026.

COURSEWORK

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Courses offered in the department of German are sometimes taught in English and sometimes in German. Graduate students are expected to have near native fluency in English and advanced knowledge of German in addition to a third language relevant for their research area.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There are a total of 15 courses required for the Ph.D.

Core Courses (8 courses)

The following courses are taught on a regular rotating basis with changing topics. Course numbers may be taken more than once with different topics; at least 8 credits from the list below are required for the Ph.D. in German.

GERMAN 401 German Literature and Critical Thought, 1750-1832

GERMAN 402 German Literature and Critical Thought, 1832-1900

GERMAN 403 German Literature, Critical Thought, and New Media, 1900-45

GERMAN 404 German Literature, Critical Thought, and New Media since 1945

GERMAN 405 Basic Issues in Foreign Language Teaching

This course focuses on basic principles of second language acquisition and language teaching methodology. It introduces students to the major trends and theories in language teaching. The critical reflection of pedagogical practices is emphasized.

GERMAN 407 Proseminar

The proseminar is a spring quarter theory and methodologies course in which students develop a research-level paper in conjunction with previous work in other courses. Students are required to present their work in a proseminar during the course of their coursework.

GERMAN 408 Critical Theory and Religion

Electives (7 courses)

Students will choose seven electives appropriate to their research interests: these may be either further graduate-level courses in the Department of German, or graduate seminars in other related departments.

ADDITIONAL DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PH.D.

- Participation in the various departmental colloquia offered throughout the year, including those devoted to professional development
- Qualifying examinations
 - QE1 (Standard Literature List): Generally taken before the fall quarter of the second year
 - QE2 (Individualized Lists): Generally taken before the winter quarter of the third year
- Dissertation prospectus
 - Must be completed by the end of the fall quarter of the 4th year
- German language examination (if necessary): Usually taken during the first year
 - Requirement may also be fulfilled by taking a graduate or upper-level undergraduate class in German or scoring in the advanced category of an official ACTFL test (OPI)
- Third-language examination
 - May be fulfilled by taking a graduate or upper-level undergraduate course in the relevant language, passing a reading exam, demonstrating native competence, or taking an intensive language course during the summer equivalent to second year of college study
- Ph.D. dissertation
- Oral defense of the dissertation

The German Department does not award a terminal MA degree. However, PhD candidates in good standing may request an interim MA upon successful completion of their coursework and qualifying exams, if this is needed for administrative purposes.

TYPICAL COURSE OF STUDIES

- First Year: Fellowship Year
 - Coursework: Students take three courses in the fall and winter quarters, and two courses plus Proseminar in the spring quarter
 - German Language examination
 - First qualifying exam at the end of the summer
- Second Year: Teaching Assistantship
 - Coursework: Students take two courses each quarter
 - Teaching: Students assist with a lecture course taught in English each quarter
- Third Year: Teaching Assistantship
 - Second qualifying examination in the winter quarter
 - Teaching: Students teach the German 101 sequence
 - Apply for external fellowship grants
- Fourth Year: Fellowship Year
 - Usually spent at a university or academic institution in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland and supported either by Northwestern funds, external grants, or a combination of the two
 - Prospectus and prospectus defense in the fall quarter
 - Begin work on the dissertation
- Fifth Year: Teaching Assistantship
 - Continue work on the dissertation
 - Teaching: Students teach the German 102 sequence
 - Third language examination (if necessary)
 - Submission of dissertation to the committee towards the middle of the spring quarter
 - Dissertation defense and official submission of the dissertation at the end of the spring quarter

ABOUT TEACHING AS A GRADUATE STUDENT

Teaching is an essential element of the education and training experience of graduate students at Northwestern in general and the German Department specifically. At least one year is required by the Graduate School. We engage in active discussions with students at the end of each year concerning teaching possibilities and assign courses with a view toward creating the best teaching portfolio as possible.

SAMPLE COURSES

The Construction of the Aesthetic: Kant, Goethe, Kierkegaard, and Benjamin

The aim of this seminar is to reflect on two opposing constructions of aesthetics: the first, developed by Kant, makes aesthetic judgment into the final element of the enterprise of critical self-reflection on which a solid philosophical system can be built; the second, developed by Kierkegaard, presents aesthetics as a mode of life lived in the perpetual avoidance of decision, which constitutes the first, altogether fallen “sphere of existence.” The seminar begins with an analysis of Kant’s Critique of Taste (in the Critique of Judgment); in the second part, it turns to certain sections of Kierkegaard’s Either/Or and Concept of Anxiety; and it concludes with an examination of the long essay Benjamin wrote in the early 1920s on Goethe’s novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*, 1807). In addition to Benjamin’s essay, we read some of his related earlier writings, where he stages critical confrontations with Kant and Kierkegaard. The final part of the seminar will also consider, time permitting, the “inaugural dissertation” Adorno wrote under Benjamin’s influence in the early 1930s (after an earlier, failed “inaugural dissertation” on Kant), *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*.

Writing the Revolution

The flyer for a recent conference on the poetics of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe notes: “Research on Goethe’s late style continues to be a desideratum.” The aim of this seminar is to fill this gap by analyzing some of the most canonical texts of Goethe’s late works: *The Elective Affinities*, *The Italian Journey*, *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*, *Faust II*, *The West Eastern Divan*, *On Morphology*, among others. Guiding questions for the investigation are: What is a “late style” as discussed by Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Blumenberg, and Edward Said? How does Goethe fit into the changing cultural understanding of time structures around 1800? Was he naïve or sentimental? How did the notion of “World Literature” emerge? What is Goethean science? All these questions can only be properly addressed by looking at Goethe’s writings through the lens of his intense philosophical reception in the early 20th century (Simmel, Rosenzweig, Cassirer, Kommerell).

Theories of Realism

This course looks at the notion of realism as both historical literary movement and epistemological/aesthetic problem. We will read classic theories of realism by Hegel, Auerbach, Barthes, Lukács, Blumenberg, and others, as well as significant new work by contemporary critics and theorists, together with exemplary texts of nineteenth-century European realist prose fiction. The temporal focus of the class will be mid- to late-nineteenth-century Europe and the particular literary form that dominated at this time; however, we will also go beyond this to look at the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of the notion of “realism” itself. Special attention will be devoted to the following questions: the purpose of genre, the place of the human, the relationship between realism and reality (or the real), the elevation of the ordinary, and the possibilities and limits of representation.

Affective Passages

What is “affect theory”? What is “the history of emotions”? This course charts seminal critical theoretical approaches to literary and cultural analysis through the lens of emotion and affect theory. Beginning with post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the class considers how (or even if) subjectivity and attachment are staged in theory, literature, and film. Is affect merely an expression of contained, individual inner states? How do emotions form and mediate the subject’s relationship to the world? In response to questions such as these, the class will consider connections between emotion and politics and the ways in which this relationship is staged in different media from emotions-on-the-couch to post cinematic affect.

Hannah Arendt: Poetry, Politics, and Thought

This course takes its point of departure from a careful reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt’s massive study of Nazi totalitarianism and its origins in anti-Semitism and European imperialism. For the first three weeks of the class, we will read the three sections of the *Origins* along with a selection of Arendt’s contemporaneous writings on issues at the heart of her study: wide-scale statelessness and forced migration; racism and imperial expansion; totalitarian propaganda and the “holes of oblivion.” Arendt recognized that the *Origins* posed a question that remained unanswered in that work: faced with the manufacture of living corpses, what preserves our humanity and redeems our actions? Arendt’s next major work, *The Human Condition*, thus moves toward an analysis of the conditions and modes of human activity: from the biological life process to the world-creating capacity of *homo faber*, to the urgency and fragility of human action. As we read *The Human Condition*, which seeks to answer the question posed by the *Origins* by accounting for what European philosophy has generally failed to analyze with sufficient clarity — namely, the dimensions of the “active life” — we examine Arendt’s attempt in the same period to review and, in her own way, deconstruct the concepts of thinking around which the ideal of a “contemplative life” concretized. This prepares us for a reading in the final weeks of the seminar of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she re-conceptualizes evil as a certain implementation of systematic thoughtlessness. As we examine these three major works, each of which is a reflection on the relation between language and politics, we will continually attend to the varying ways in which Arendt sought to understand where poetry stands in relation to human “conditionality,” and we will use her often-neglected suggestions in this regard to develop an Arendtian poetics.

Basic Issues in Foreign Language Teaching

Theory and Practical Applications: Basic Issues in Foreign Language teaching” provides students with a theoretical and practical knowledge base for teaching a foreign language within a college-level American educational context by focusing on basic principles of second language acquisition and language teaching methodology. Throughout the quarter, we will be reading and discussing texts that address theoretical issues pertaining to language learning, Theory and Practical Applications: Basic Issues in Foreign Language teaching” provides students with a theoretical and practical knowledge base for teaching a foreign language within a college-level American educational context by focusing on basic principles of second language acquisition and language teaching methodology. Throughout the quarter, we will be reading and discussing texts that address theoretical issues pertaining to language learning, pedagogy, and curriculum and we will examine these issues from the practical context of the language classroom and draw explicit linkage between theory and practice. In that sense,

German 405 is neither a basic “how to” course for teaching methods, nor a pure Second Language Acquisition course. Rather, by engaging in a discussion of major questions and issues important for a number of interrelated fields such as linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, education and language pedagogy, students will be introduced to the practice of self-directed and reflective teaching. This means that students are expected to evaluate theories and research, as well as their own assumptions concerning language learning and teaching.

REQUIREMENTS

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Successful completion of the Ph. D. degree in German requires:

- Successful completion of the first and second qualifying exams
- Fulfillment of language requirements in German as well as one other language
- Approval of a dissertation prospectus by the end of the fall quarter of the fourth year
- Submission of a dissertation approved according to the rules of The Graduate School; and
- Oral defense of the completed dissertation

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Graduate students have a right to periodic evaluations of their academic progress, performance, and professional potential. Students are required to maintain regular contact with their professors for academic consultations throughout the course of their studies at Northwestern and to discuss their progress on seminar papers, articles, and longer research projects.

There are several formal mechanisms in place for assessing student progress over the course of their graduate career. These include, but are not limited to:

First Year Review

At the end of each quarter of a student’s first year the Director of Graduate Studies will solicit feedback from instructors of classes taken by the student over the course of the year. At the end of the academic year, students will complete a self-evaluation assessing their work and development and submit their choice of a representative course paper written for a class taken over the past three quarters. This paper, as well as the student’s work to date as a whole, will be reviewed by tenure- line faculty to assess the student’s progress. At the beginning of the student’s second year, the Director of Graduate Studies will meet with students individually to discuss their progress and make constructive recommendations for the forthcoming year.

Qualifying Examinations

The qualifying examinations occur in two stages.

First Qualifying Exam (usually taken in the late summer before the beginning of the second year)

The first qualifying examination is principally concerned with literary works and is selected from a department-created list of canonical texts in the German language from the seventeenth century to the present day. The process of the first exam is as follows:

- 1) The student examines the list and picks 5-10 works from each section (depending on length of the works and student's interest) in consultation with a faculty advisor, who acts as exam chair.
- 2) The student selects one further committee member in addition to the exam chair.
- 3) Exams are generally taken in the summer before the beginning of the fall quarter of the second year. The two members of the committee formulate two questions in coordination with one another, covering several different periods. The student has four days to complete the written exam, followed by a one-hour oral defense with the committee.
- 4) A student who is determined by the committee not to have passed the exam will be permitted to retake the exam or part of the exam at the committee's discretion. Exam retakes should be done by the beginning of the student's second winter quarter.

Second Qualifying Exam (usually taken in the winter quarter of the third year)

The idea behind the second qualifying exam is to provide students with a springboard to the dissertation as well as a knowledge base for college-level teaching in German literature. The exam is based on three independent lists of works developed in consultation with the student's advisors. Students generally develop three kinds of lists: 1) a list devoted to a particular critical methodology or theoretical issue, 2) a list devoted to a particular period, and 3) a list that anticipates a future dissertation topic, including a focus on one or several authors.

Students will select a qualifying examination committee by the end of the spring quarter of the second year. The names of the three faculty members on the committee are submitted to the Director of Graduate Studies and the Chair of the German department, along with a description of the three examination lists. In general, each advisor works with the student to develop a single list, although occasionally the entire committee helps with all three lists.

The exam itself consists of short 12- to 15-page "position papers" written in response to the three questions posed by the respective members of the examination committee. Students have two weeks to write the three papers. (There is no need for bibliographical material or secondary literature.) About a week or two after the submission of the papers, an oral discussion of the essays between the student and the committee members is scheduled, at which point the student is notified whether he or she has passed the exam. If the student does not pass, there is the opportunity to retake the exam in whole or in part, depending on the committee members' recommendations. The qualifying exam must be passed in full before the beginning of the fall of the student's fourth year.

DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

(completed during the fall quarter of the fourth year)

After passing the second qualifying examination, the student assembles a dissertation committee composed of a Chair and two other faculty members – which may, but need not be, identical with the second qualifying examination committee – with whom the student begins to prepare and write his or her dissertation prospectus. The prospectus (15-25 pages, not including bibliography) is a preliminary statement of intent and outline of the student's proposed project. It should generally be conceived in the form and language of a grant proposal and is composed of the following five sections:

- An abstract of the project, comprehensible to an audience of broadly educated humanists
- A description of the proposed dissertation, which defines the topic under discussion, provides an account of the basic questions to which it will respond, and locates the project in the critical literature on the topic
- Specification of the methodologies or critical approaches that will be used and/or developed in the course of the dissertation research
- Outline and brief description of the proposed chapters of the dissertation
- Preliminary bibliography of both primary and secondary sources

The prospectus should be completed by the fifth week of the fall of the student's fourth year, whereupon it is submitted to the chair and the other members of the student's dissertation committee. By the end of the fall quarter the student defends the prospectus before his or her dissertation committee, who offer suggestions for proceeding with the research.

PH.D. LANGUAGE EXAM

(completed before the dissertation defense)

The graduate program in German Literature and Critical Thought strives to provide their doctoral students with the best training and broadest practical experience possible in teaching and research. To this end, knowledge of at least one other language besides German and English is required. The language requirement for the Ph.D. entails:

- Native or near-native fluency in English
- Advanced proficiency in German language (oral and written)
- Knowledge of at least one further language

Both the German language requirement and the third language requirement can be accomplished by one of the following: a) native proficiency; b) completion of a graduate or upper-level undergraduate course taught in the relevant language; c) passing an examination administered by the department; or d) taking an intensive language course (equivalent to two years of college language study).

NON DISCRIMINATION STATEMENT

Northwestern University prohibits discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived race, color, religion, creed, national origin, ethnicity, caste, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, parental status, marital status, age, disability, citizenship status, veteran status, genetic information, reproductive health decision making, height, weight, or any other class of individuals protected from discrimination under federal, state, or local law, regulation, or ordinance or any other classification protected by law in the matters of admissions, employment, housing or services or in the educational programs or activities it operates, as required by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972; Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended in 2008; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Age Discrimination Act of 1975; the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967; and any other federal, state, or local laws, regulations, or ordinances that prohibit discrimination, harassment, and/or retaliation. Any alleged violations of this policy or questions with respect to nondiscrimination or reasonable accommodations should be directed to Northwestern's Office of Civil Rights and Title IX Compliance, 1800 Sherman Avenue, Suite 4-500, Evanston, Illinois 60201, 847-467-6165. For general inquiries: OCR@northwestern.edu. For accommodation inquiries: Accommodations@northwestern.edu

A person may also file a complaint with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights regarding an alleged violation of Title IX by visiting www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html or calling 800-421-3481. Inquiries about the application of Title IX to Northwestern may be referred to Northwestern's Title IX Coordinator, the United States Department of Education's Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, or both.

INTERDISCIPLINARY PARTNERS

WORK IN RELATED PROGRAMS

Graduate students in the German Literature and Critical Thought program have the possibility to work with a wide variety of associated departments, faculty, and programs. Graduate seminars in the department of German are regularly cross-listed with programs including but not limited to [Comparative Literary Studies](#), [Philosophy](#), [History](#), [Classics](#), [Art History](#), [Jewish Studies](#), [Gender and Sexuality Studies](#), [Performance Studies](#), [Political Science](#), and [Screen Cultures](#), and students are also encouraged to seek out courses and collaborative opportunities in other departments. Both the German department and associated graduate programs also regularly invite distinguished intra- and international visitors for both talks and seminars on topics germane to a broad array of scholarly interests.

GRADUATE INTERDISCIPLINARY CLUSTER INITIATIVE

Graduate students in Humanities and related fields are encouraged to participate in the [Interdisciplinary Cluster Initiative](#), a program designed to help graduate students during their academic career at Northwestern by fostering connections with students and faculty in other programs with whom they might have natural intellectual affinities. Interdisciplinary clusters in different areas of intellectual inquiry have been developed by faculty across schools and programs and will provide a second intellectual home. Clusters offer their own discrete courses as well as sponsor a number of activities and events for students and faculty. Prospective students have the opportunity to select on their application to graduate school the cluster with which they would like to affiliate, though choosing a cluster is not a requirement for admission. Students may affiliate with a cluster at any point during their study at Northwestern. For more information, visit the [website of the graduate school](#).

GRADUATE STUDENTS FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Students who are awarded doctoral fellowships receive five years of full support (with summers), including tuition, a monthly stipend, and health insurance. Typically two out of the five years of doctoral support are non-teaching years; for the other three years, students serve as teaching assistants for the department's undergraduate language and literature program, receiving training as well as practical experience in college-level pedagogy. There are also sufficient funds to support graduate student attendance at professional meetings and conferences, as well as an ongoing lecture and colloquium series curated by the graduate students, which brings in established and upcoming faculty from institutions in the U.S. and abroad. Additional information on graduate student funding can be found on the [TGS website](#).