

A BRIEF ESSAY ON FIELDS

by Caleb McDaniel

Ever since a few weeks after the beginning of time, first-year students in the Hopkins history department have been asking anyone who will listen, "What is a field?" Through no fault of the well-meaning informants to whom this question is directed, most answers have featured blank stares, awkward shifting in seats, and artfully executed changes of the subject. But I say this is no fault of the answerers because the question at hand is so profound. Do you expect a five-minute answer to the question, "What is the time-space continuum?" or "Why are we here?" Of course not. Nevertheless, throwing caution to the wind, I herein attempt a brief essay on one of life's most enduring imponderables.

I. THE SIMPLE DEFINITION OF A FIELD

The simple definition of a field is that there is no simple definition of a field. (See above.) Once you have grasped this crucial point, you will be a long way towards understanding fields. To put the point more directly, a field is whatever you want it to be. Or, to switch immediately back to indirectness, it is *almost* whatever you want it to be. A field does have a few required components, but the beauty of a field is that these requirements really are few. Below I have tried to list the (nearly) universal attributes of Hopkins fields:

A. **There are four of them.** Be alert, dear reader! Here is a concrete fact on which you can depend! When you find yourself foundering in the quicksand of confusion, cling to this point as if it were Gibraltar. You are *guaranteed* that, whatever fields are, you will have completed four of them before you leave Hopkins with a Ph.D.

B. **For every field, there is a faculty advisor.** You will have one main faculty member who will direct each field and decide when and how a field has been completed. Already, though, the essential flexibility of fields forces us to qualify this seemingly absolute statement. You may have one main advisor for a field but also work closely with another faculty member on the field. And while most of your advisors will need to be members of the History Department (especially the advisor for your major field; more on that below), it has happened that advisors from outside the department and even from outside the university have directed Hopkins fields.

C. **One field is your "major field"; the other three are not major fields.** The most important consequence of this distinction is the length of time it will take to complete a field. Your "major field," which by a felicitous coincidence is directed by your "major advisor," will take your first two years to complete. The other three fields will each take one year to finish; you will finish one in your first year and the other two in your second.

II. APPROACHING A LESS SIMPLE DEFINITION OF A FIELD

Now that we have established some basic features of fields, we can actually get around to the real question, "But what IS a field?" Despite my previous section's confident and utterly misleading heading, so far I have successfully put off this interesting query. Why not put it off some more? Before you can really grasp the idiosyncratic nature of fields, you must first clear

your mind of many conceptual cognates that are easily confused for fields. As in all matters definitional, it may help to say what is *not* a field.

A. **A field is NOT a “course.”** Perhaps in your not-so-distant undergraduate past, you were accustomed to registering for “courses.” At the beginning of each semester, you looked in some kind of “schedule” of courses, each of which was worth a certain number of “credits” and met at a certain time. Forget about all that. You will still do something *like* registration at Hopkins, but you do *not* “register” for fields, you do *not* receive “credits” for fields, and there is *no* “schedule” of fields. All of these things would require formal structures, and you may be starting to see that fields flee from formality.

B. **A field is NOT a “seminar.”** Seminars are the kinds of things you attend. Fields are not. As we will see below, seminars and fields have an important working relationship, just as a wedding and a marriage are intimately connected. But “a wedding” and “a marriage” are two different things, aren’t they? One goes on after the other one ends. Think about *that*.

C. **A field is NOT on your transcript.** Many students are surprised to learn that the blood, sweat, and tears that they put into understanding fields – let alone the work they put into completing them – are not rewarded with any kind of formal recognition on their transcripts. This is because, strictly speaking, fields are a fiction of the history department. We made them up. If you ask people in the registrar’s office about your field, they will look at you in the same way James Earl Jones looked at Kevin Costner in that movie where the latter came busting into the former’s loft, yapping about this field of ball-playing dead guys in his backyard. “In your dreams,” they’ll say. So even though you must complete fields to satisfy the department’s requirements for graduation, these fields will receive nary a mention on any official documents from the University. They will only be mentioned in your letters of recommendation and your own personal statements to potential employers.

III. FINALLY, FIELDS

Once you have clarified for yourself what are *not* fields (if you’re still having trouble, it may help to repeat the subheadings of the preceding section in a monotonic chant), you are ready to get straight to the heart of the matter. Now, finally, I will eschew obfuscation. Now, at long last, I will pull back the shrouds of mystery that have so far ensconced this essay and reveal, in its unadorned simplicity, the true nature of fields. Now, since I’m running out of ways to stall, I will be forced to say directly, “THIS is a field.”

A. **A field is an area of study.** There, wasn’t that easy? Fields are areas of study that *you* define, which is the only reason it is difficult to give them a generalized definition. If you insist on a generalization, here is one: every student has a unique combination of fields especially suited to his or her historical interests. Thus, you might define your area of study chronologically – e.g., “Early Modern Spain” – or geographically – “The American South” – or thematically – “Gender in Medieval France” – or as a hybrid of all the above – “Urban History in Nineteenth-Century China.” I hesitate to give such examples because they might limit your vision of what a field can be. A field might be broader than some of these examples, or it might be more specialized – “Early Modern Spain,” say, but with an emphasis on religion; “The American South,” but with particular interest in Reconstruction politics; “Race,

Gender, and Class in America,” but especially in the Midwest. To return to the beginning of this essay, a field is basically whatever you want it to be. It is an area of study whose boundaries are agreed upon by you and your field’s advisor. In the case of your “major” field, you will work for two years on this area; your other fields will take one year each.

B. **A field is a future area of teaching competence.** Ideally, once you have completed a field you will be prepared to teach parts of that field at an undergraduate level. If you intend to get an academic job, the fact is that you have chosen to be a product in a buyer’s market. So you should do the best you can to make yourself market-*able*. In large part, this means being able to teach several courses. So even though fields are intended to fit your interests, you want to be somewhat diverse. You don’t want your fields to be “Race in the American South, 1860-1870,” “Gender in the American South, 1860-1870,” “Class in the American South, 1860-1870,” and “Religion in the American South, 1860-1870.”

C. **A field is a discursive process.** These reflections on the meaning of fields should impress upon you the importance of **communicating with your advisors**. Shaping your four fields is an exploratory process; you should identify your interests, identify members of the faculty who share your interests, and **talk with them** about the possibility of “doing a field with them” (grad-student vernacular). Because fields are so flexible, not all faculty members approach them in the same way. They will have different expectations about your work, different understandings of a field’s scope, and different requirements that must be satisfied to complete fields. Clearly, the only way to divine these differences in approach is to **talk with them**, and especially to **talk with your main advisor** about appropriate fields for your particular area of specialization. Most importantly, do not take anything I have said here as absolutely definitive until you **talk with them**. (In case the boldface in this paragraph has not conveyed the subliminal message I’m going for, here it is one more time: **talk with them**.)

IV. GLOSSARY OF FIELD TERMS

Hopefully (I can hope, can’t I?), you are beginning to see that fields are not such terrifying enigmas after all. In fact, they are really quite nice. Unlike other doctoral history programs, which might require you to fulfill comprehensive requirements on subjects that fail to interest you, the Hopkins program offers you flexibility and control over your plan of study. Nonetheless, you might be saying to your self, “Self, I see now that fields are pretty darn cool. But there are still some words related to fields that I do not understand.” Have no fear – a glossary is here:

A. **The “field list”** is a list of important books in your area of study. You should think of yourself as responsible for reading and gaining a basic understanding of these books before taking your field exam (more on that below). Just as advisors approach fields differently, they also approach field lists differently. Doubtless you have heard by now of certain legendary field lists running on for hundreds of pages and needing small beasts of burden for transport from place to place. Mostly these lists really are the stuff of legend, but like most myths they capture a part of the truth. That is, field lists can vary considerably in length. Likewise, the organizing principles of field lists differ according to advisor and advisee. Some advisors already have field lists prepared, and they will give these to you with small amendments based on your interests. Other advisors ask you to take a more proactive role in constructing your field list, and after you have drafted lists they will point out the titles you

have passed over and the titles you should have passed over. Again, as in all matters pertaining to your fields and field lists, you should discuss these things openly and often with your advisors. (See Section III, Subsection C above.)

B. **The “field seminar.”** Most of the time, taking a field will mean attending a complementary field seminar. On a regular basis (usually weekly), you will convene with your advisor and other students who are taking fields with that advisor. Again, there are almost as many approaches to these seminars as there are members of the faculty. In fact, some advisors prefer not to hold a formal seminar; they might simply meet with you individually from time to time to discuss your progress with your field list. But most field seminars take the form of high-powered reading and discussion groups. For some advisors, you will be expected to complete writing and research assignments for these seminars; for others, you will not.

C. **The “write-off field.”** Earlier in this essay I mentioned that you will complete one of your non-“major” fields during your first year. Somehow – who knows how – this first-year field has been given the affectionate nickname, “the write-off field.” Does this mean that you should literally “write off” this field, dismiss its claims on your time, and expend less effort on it? May it never be so! The only reason it is called the “write-off” field is because it’s not covered on your second-year oral examination.. You will need to decide fairly quickly what your first-year field will be; this is, after all, already your first year! But you don’t need to worry about your second-year fields right away. It will take longer for you to formulate these fields because the clarity of your interests and dissertation ideas are still developing. As a result, it is understood that your first-year field may not have a direct connection to your dissertation. And perhaps it is partly for this reason that it came to be known as the “write-off field.”

D. **The “field exam.”** You have defined your field, faithfully attended your field seminar, and mastered your field list. How does the field end? The most common way to complete a field is to take a written exam. These exams will be written by your individual field advisors; they are not standardized by the department in either form or content. This means some advisors may choose to let you (or make you, depending on your perspective) write a seminar paper instead of taking a written exam. In any case, you will take some kind of finishing exam at the end of your first year to complete the “write-off field.” At the end of your second year, you will take three field exams: one for your major field, and two for each of your remaining fields. But wait! That’s not all! At the end of your second year, you will also take an oral examination on your three second-year fields. Got that?

During your ...	You will ...
First year	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Complete your “write-off” field with an exam.2. Begin, but not complete, your “major” field.3. Complete your first-year paper.
Second year	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Complete your “major” field with an exam.2. Complete your two remaining fields with exams.3. Take an oral exam on these fields.

That’s *usually* the way it works. But – do I even need to say it? – for more details about your particular fields, you will have to consult your advisor or an essay less brief. Best of luck!