

2025 Comprehensive Exam Procedure

The Comprehensive Exam is an inclusive evaluation of the student's mastery of the field of concentration. The examination includes both written and oral sections. The exact content is to be determined by the advisory committee in consultation with the student. Admission to candidacy for the doctoral degree requires adequate performance on the comprehensive examination. Consistent with the timeline included in the department's graduate program policy statement, students are expected to complete the comprehensive exams within 2 semesters after defending their M.A. thesis or completion of their qualifying exam (see the timeline for more information). Thus, students should hold a comps proposal meeting within one semester of defending or completion of the qualifying exam.

Graduate students should choose one of the following options in conjunction with their advisor.

Option 1 - Four Questions

The student identifies four broad research areas and compiles a brief (1-2 sentences) description and preliminary reference list consisting of at least 10 references for each area. This list consists of key papers that represent the student's specific interests within each area. During the proposal meeting the student presents their interest areas orally. The committee suggests any necessary changes and adjourns to write the questions independently of the student.

The four questions (one per area) will include:

- Two literature reviews
- One research proposal – using a different literature review
- One question related to methodology or philosophy of science

The committee has 2 weeks to finalize the questions after the proposal meeting. The questions should both test student's knowledge of the area and provoke reading and thought that will enhance the student's research productivity. The committee may elect to involve the student in the question-writing process (e.g., the student suggests a question during the proposal meeting and the committee revises it). All members of the committee must agree on the four questions prior to delivering the questions to the student. Upon receipt, the student may consult with their advisor and/or committee for clarification of the questions. The student will provide written answers to the committee no later than 2 months after receiving the questions.

Option 2: Psych Bulletin- or Psych Review-style Paper

The student identifies a preliminary topic for a paper that is compatible with the scope of [Psych Review](#) or [Psych Bulletin](#). The document will:

- Provide an up-to-date, comprehensive review (40+ references)
- Be critical; advance a coherent argument, claim, or theory
- Discuss avenues for future research

The student prepares a brief (250-word) summary of the planned focus for the paper as well as a list of representative references (at least 20) to be included in the literature review. During the proposal meeting the student presents their planned topic orally. The committee suggests any necessary changes during the meeting. The student will provide a document to the committee no later than 2 months after the proposal is approved.

The following policies apply regardless of the option chosen:

Timeline

The proposal meeting and oral defense should take place within the same semester (Fall or Spring). For completion in the fall, a start date of September 1 is recommended. For completion in the spring, a start date of February 1 is recommended.

Committee structure

The requirements for the composition of the comprehensive exam committee are the same as the requirements for the composition of the PhD committee.

Proposal meeting

- Proposal documents are to be provided to the committee at least two weeks before the proposal meeting.
- The proposal meeting should be scheduled for one hour.
- A discussion of the appropriate use of GenAI tools should take place in the proposal meeting.

Written document

- Answers should be at most 50 pages in total across all answers (not counting references).
- Students are expected to read/review whatever literature is necessary to provide a thoughtful and comprehensive response, regardless of whether the papers were included on the reading list(s) brought to the proposal meeting.

- The student will be given no feedback about the written document before the oral defense.
- Failure to deliver a complete response by the deadline will result in failure of the comprehensive exam.

Oral defense

- An oral defense should take place 2 – 4 weeks after the written document is submitted to the committee. The defense meeting should be scheduled for two hours.
- In order to pass the comprehensive exam the student must pass two committee votes: a vote at the beginning of the defense meeting on whether the written document is sufficient to merit an oral defense, and a vote at the end of the meeting on whether the combination of written document and oral defense have met the threshold to pass the comprehensive exam. For both votes, if two or more members of the committee vote 'no', the exam has been failed.
- The contents of the oral defense will be primarily focused on the student's written document and the papers included in the student's final reference list. The committee will decide whether the student passes the exam after the oral defense. The committee may vote to pass the student contingent on minor revisions to the document. The committee will set the deadline for any required minor revisions.
- If the student fails the exam, at the discretion of the committee they will be given a single opportunity to repeat some or all of the comps process. A second failure prompts mandatory dismissal from the program.

Stopping the clock

Students may ask permission from the Graduate Committee to stop the 2-month completion clock in the event of extraordinary circumstances. Requests should be in writing, should detail the nature of the extraordinary circumstances, and should list a specific date on which the 2-month clock will resume. Requests will be granted at the discretion of the Graduate Committee.

Expiration date

If more than 4 years have elapsed since the student passed the comprehensive exam and they have not yet proposed the dissertation, they must re-take the comprehensive exam. Please also be aware of the Grad School's policy on this point: "If more than five years have passed since the date of the comprehensive examination, the candidate will

be required to take another comprehensive examination before admission to the final examination."