

# Comprehensive Examination Policy

## Goals and Principles of the Comprehensive Examination

The PhD Comprehensive Exam:

- is understood to be an examination of broad expertise in an area, not specific background for a research agenda.
- implies exposure to a broad spectrum of materials in an area, designed to ensure general knowledge of research conducted in that area as well as preparation for future teaching.
- is a way demonstrate expertise in a particular subfield or area

## General Requirements for Students

PhD students must complete two comprehensive exams in two different areas. PhD students are encouraged to complete one exam at the end of their first year and one exam by the end of their second year. Students should aim to take at least one course in the area prior to taking the comp exam in that area. Whenever possible, students should take the exam in the term following completion of a core course and other courses in that area.

## First and Second Exam Format

NOTE: Students may elect to take their second exam in the same format as the first.

	<b>First Exam</b>	<b>Second Exam – Focused Option</b>
<i>Reading list covered on exam</i>	Entire reading list  If the list has supplemental readings, the student should read supplemental readings in two modules.	Three sections (including all supplemental readings) from the existing list. These sections are selected by the student and agreed upon with the committee during an initial meeting (no fewer than 12 weeks prior to the exam).  These selections should make up 20-50% of the total list.
<i>Question and answer options</i>	Student writes three full answers (parts A, B, C, each have two questions; student selects one question from each part)	Student writes one answer to a question selected from three options
<i>Days to write exam</i>	Five business days; Exams assigned 9:00 AM Monday morning of exam week and due by 5:00 PM Friday of exam week	Three business days; Exams assigned 9:00 AM Monday morning of exam week and due by 5:00 PM

### General Area Responsibilities

- The designated areas are required to offer a core course in their area at least once every two years (as set out by the 2007 policy update) to allow students to have regular access to courses to help prepare for the comprehensive exams.
- Core courses will be offered at least every other year in all core areas; yearly in theory and methods.

### Areas of Comprehensive Exams

- Comprehensives will be offered in the following core areas of department specialization, Colonialism, Racialization, and Indigeneity; Sociology of Crime and Law; Sociology of Culture; Gender; Global Migration; Health & Mental Health; Political Sociology; Qualitative Methods; Quantitative Methods; Social Networks; Theory; and Work, Stratification & Markets.
- Students may request to take a comprehensive exam in the following areas: Aging & Life Course; Environmental Sociology; Family; Social Policy; and Urban Sociology. Students may file a request with the Grad Office to take an exam in one of these areas of expertise at least six months ahead of time; if the Associate Grad chair is able to form a faculty comp committee in that area, s/he will approve the request.
- Areas of comprehensive exams may change over time. Requests to supplement or change the currently offered areas must come from a group of at least five faculty in a developing area. These requests will be considered by the Graduate Program Committee and brought to the Faculty for approval.
- No comprehensives in other areas will be offered by the department.

### Procedure for Comprehensive Examination Committees

- Within each core area, faculty members will appoint a rotation of people to serve as Chair (1 faculty member) and committee members (2 faculty members). Normally each member serves a two-year term. The Associate Graduate Chair in consultation with the Chair of the Graduate Department appoint the standing committee based on these nominations. It is assumed that there will be a regular rotation of faculty.
- For areas in which there is a core or required course, the faculty member teaching a core or required course in the area in the past two years will normally be one of the faculty on the committee.
- The Graduate Office will post the names of Comprehensive Exam committee members on the website.
- If a committee member cannot fulfill her/his complete term due to an unplanned research or other leave that comes up during their term, the committee member must notify the Area head and the Associate Graduate Chair as soon as possible. A new committee member will be appointed to complete remaining time of the term. The

Associate Graduate Chair will make the appointment in consultation with the faculty in the area and with the approval of the Chair of the Graduate Department.

### Responsibilities of Area Comprehensive Examination Committees

- The Area Head is responsible for three key procedures:
  1. Ensuring the area updates its reading list approximately every other year, by February 1 for use in the following academic year;
  2. Setting a date for the exam committee to meet with all students taking the exam at least once before students take their exam;
  3. Ensuring the exam committee marks the exams, discusses the exam and provides the decision and comments to the Graduate Office in the designated time frame.
- Committee members will write the examination questions and submit them to the Graduate Office at least one week prior to the examination date.
- Committee members are responsible for making themselves available to meet with and for maintaining contact with students taking comprehensives for the upcoming sitting. Typically, a meeting will be set by the Area Head in early May for the August exam and in early November for the February exam.
- Prior to focused second exams, the meeting between the student and the committees will entail discussion and approval of the designated reading sections selected by the student. Committees must approve the section selections to ensure sufficient coverage as is appropriate for the particular subfield.
- Faculty may provide assessments of students' practice exams if they wish but are not required to do so. Students who ask faculty to do so should realize that the responses to a practice exam would not necessarily be equivalent to responses received when an entire committee is deliberating.

### Reading List

- Area reading lists are developed by all faculty in each area, not just by exam committee members. The lists should be updated about every two years and sent to the Graduate office by the Area Head by **February 1** for use the following academic year.
- Areas may solicit student input for regularly updating the list.
- Updated reading lists will be submitted to the Grad Office/Graduate Program committee for approval.
- Reading lists must be organized according to modules for subfield areas with books, chapters or articles related to that topic listed underneath. Reading lists are not an alphabetical ordered list of readings.
- There will be core readings for each module. Some areas may choose to include supplemental readings for each module (maximum of 4 readings).

- There will be a minimum of 150 units and a maximum of 200 units in each list.
  - One article = one unit.
  - A book will count as five articles if it involves over 200 pages of assigned reading, three articles if between 100-200 pages, and one article if less than 100 pages of assigned reading.
  - Chapters and articles are considered equal.
  - Any reading list with at least 20 books will have an upper limit of 240 readings.

### Dates and Procedures for Taking Comprehensive Exams

- There are two dates to take an exam set by the graduate office: late August and early February. Committees may not alter the dates of these exams.
- Students who intend to take the exam must notify the Graduate Office and the Area Committee members by April 15 (for August exam) and October 15 (for February exam).
- Students must sign the [comprehensive examination request form](#) and attain signatures from the committee members and submit the form by the dates listed above. This form indicates an understanding of the general instructions for the upcoming exam, including being responsible for knowing and understanding academic integrity guidelines.
- Committees should meet with all students who intend to take the exam in early May (for August exam) and in early November (for February exam), to provide instruction and answer questions about the upcoming exam. Faculty should also be available for consultation while the student is studying for the exam.
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### Marking the Comprehensive Exams

- Exams will be graded as a “pass” or “fail”. Students must provide full answers to all three questions (first comp) and to one question (second comp).
- Exams are graded holistically and are given a passing or failing grade based on the committee’s overall assessment of the work.
- Exams will be anonymized before they are sent to committee members. The 2<sup>nd</sup> focused exam option will not be anonymized.
- Comprehensive exam committees must submit their assessment of the exam to the Graduate Office within three weeks of the exam’s completion date. The Committee Chair is responsible for ensuring this takes place. Students will receive results in approximately four weeks after completing the exam.
- Deliberation process: Committee members must discuss their individual assessments and decide if the exam is a pass or a fail.
  - The Committee Chair is responsible for organizing the committee members’ comments.
  - The committee can either submit a response detailing each individual committee member’s comments OR write a general summary of the committee’s appraisal.

- If the exam decision is made up of a compilation of individual committee member's comments, comments must be clearly identified, allowing students to follow up and discuss ideas further with specific faculty members.
- Assessments should be approximately one single-spaced page. Committees that decide to issue a failing grade for an exam must be sure to provide adequate justification for why the exam does not meet the standards for a pass.
- If a student fails the first take of the exam, the student may take that area exam a second time. The student will take the exam in the same area, normally at the next sitting of the exam. The re-take must occur within one year of the first attempt.
- If the student fails the exam the second time, current rules and regulations apply, including the student's right to appeal to the Standing Committee overseeing appeals and the department's right to recommend to SGS that the student no longer be eligible to continue in the PhD program.

### Criteria for a "Pass"

A competent (i.e., passable) exam will do each of the following:

- complete all three of the assigned essays in the time allotted
- engage with the test questions as asked
- present a thesis (a central argument to be defended) for each question, not just a summary of readings
- structure answers to defend this thesis
- demonstrate familiarity with the key issues, thinkers and/or traditions on the comps list pertinent to the exam questions
- back up assertions with citations (and where necessary, quotes or other appropriate evidence); backing up assertions should also, where necessary, include providing appropriate empirical evidence.
- consider conflicting positions on the questions asked
- present ideas in a style that is clear and cogent

A superior exam answer will also:

- display an awareness of deeper issues whose outcome affects or modifies the position advanced
- show a sufficient command of the literature to offer creative synthesis (e.g., by discerning differences, connections, or implications) or a new typology of the literature
- offer fresh insights into the questions.