

**Department of Psychology – Doctoral Program in Experimental Psychology
Biological & Developmental Research Areas Consortium**

Guidelines for Comprehensive Examinations

AIMS OF THESE GUIDELINES

We developed these guidelines as a way to promote a predictable and equitable experience of “Comps” for graduate students and faculty in our program. We hope to foster a sense of fairness by laying out clear, consistent expectations for a common structure, process, and timeline.

PURPOSES OF THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION (“COMPS”)

Comps ideally represent more than a hurdle in the doctoral program. The exam can provide a graduate student with a positive learning experience and an opportunity to integrate, consolidate, and extend knowledge of a specialty within a chosen field of study. The goal is a learning experience that advances professional development, broadens the scope of dissertation research, and helps the student understand its larger context within Psychology. Committee members’ questions can help the student incorporate a broad range of concepts, methods, and disciplines into her or his research and career. The Comprehensive Exam of course also functions to assess the student’s mastery of selected specialty areas through answers to the committee’s questions, both written and oral.

SUGGESTED PROCESS & TIMELINE

Ideally a doctoral student will successfully complete Comps by the end of the 3rd year in the program. The student’s doctoral committee, once formed, is entirely responsible for both the content and process of the student’s Comps. Following are suggested Guidelines for the process, with a recommended timeline. In brief, the Guidelines call for preparing a reading list about 2 months before a roughly 2-day written exam, with an oral defense 2 weeks later:

Schedule the written & oral exams. Choose a date for the written portion of Comps about 3 months ahead, and schedule the oral portion for 1 to 2 weeks after that written portion, when all committee members can attend.

Prepare the reading list. About 10 weeks before the written portion of Comps, the student, in consultation with the doctoral advisor, identifies a list of 5 to 9 specialty areas most central to the student’s graduate education so far, dissertation research, and future career. The student drafts a reading list of key articles, chapters, and books for each area, distributes the reading list to members of the committee, and meets individually with them to refine the list by adding or replacing readings. When the committee is satisfied with the refined reading list, ideally 2 months before the written exam, it becomes the basis for the Comps.

Prepare the questions. At least 1 week before the written portion of Comps, each committee member submits 2 or 3 written questions to the committee chairperson, who consolidates the questions, circulates them to the committee for revisions and approval, and sends the final version of the set of Comps questions to the committee before the written portion of the exam. The student does not see the questions in advance.

Take the written portion of Comps. The doctoral advisor chooses 1-3 questions contributed by each committee member for the written portion of the exam. The student takes the test in a suitable room at UT, using either a UT laptop (with no internet access) or pen & paper, with no reference material (this is, a closed-book, no-notes exam). The student writes on one committee member’s questions in a 3-4 hour morning session, and one committee member’s questions in a 3-4 hour afternoon session, etc., so the written exam is completed in 2 to 2½ days. After each half-day session the student gives completed answers to the chairperson of the committee, who makes them available as soon as possible to other members.

Hold the oral defense of Comps. The student and dissertation committee meet for a 2-3 hour oral portion of the exam in which the student defends his or her answers to the written questions. Committee members may ask about the questions on which the student did not write, or on any topic related to the field of study.

Submit the Comprehensive Examination Completion Form. Following successful completion of the written and oral portions of Comps, the Comprehensive Examination Completion Form, signed by all members of the committee, goes to Connie Ogle. (The student and committee chairperson keep copies.)

What if there is unsuccessful completion of Comps? Should the student fail the written or oral portion of Comps, the examination must be retaken and successfully completed within 6 months of the date of the first oral, for the student to remain in good standing in the program.