

M.A. Linguistics Comprehensive Exam Study Guide

Procedures:

The MA Comp is a 4-hour written exam designed to assess your knowledge in key areas of linguistics. It will cover material that you will have learned in your classes, and will take place at the end of your final semester of MA coursework. Early in that final semester, you should meet with your advisor to discuss when the exam will take place and address any questions you might have.

What to expect:

→ This is a **comprehensive** exam. You should have had ENGL 7511 (Survey of Linguistics) as well as at least 5 other courses addressing specific linguistic topics (18 hours total), possibly including ENGL 7514 (Sociolinguistics), ENGL 7507 (Empirical Research Methods), ENGL 7510 (Language and Gender), ENGL 7501 (History of the English Language), ENGL 7516 (Phonetics and Phonology), ENGL 7512 (Morphology and Syntax), ENGL 7517 (Discourse Analysis) and/or other courses approved by your advisor. This exam is designed to assess the whole of the coursework you have undertaken in your M.A. studies.

→ You should have at least a general knowledge of all of the levels of theoretical linguistic analysis including Phonetics, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics, and Pragmatics, since these are included in the Survey of Linguistics course (ENGL 7511) – see Key Concepts section below. NOTE: For each level of linguistic analysis, there are a few foundational concepts (e.g. in phonetics, there are ways that consonants and vowels are classified – place of articulation, manner of articulation, etc.). These basic concepts often have sections devoted to them in introductory linguistics textbooks. Familiarize yourself with these and know how they can be identified and replicated.

→ If you have had extensive coursework in a particular area, your exam may also include more detailed questions about that area (e.g. if you took ENGL 7507 (Empirical Research Methods), you might be asked to explain the difference between and advantages/disadvantages of qualitative v. quantitative research).

Key concepts:

Descriptive vs. prescriptive vs. universal grammar

Arbitrary relationship between form & meaning

Characteristics of what counts as language. Language must 1) have a predictable structure (i.e. rules of grammar), and 2) because of this, be infinitely variable

Levels & types of linguistic analysis – (phonetics → morphology → syntax → semantics
→ pragmatics → sociolinguistics/discourse)

Inflectional vs. derivational morphemes. Know what they are and what they do (including the 8

inflectional morphemes of English)
Free vs. bound morphemes
Content v. function words
Word formation processes (e.g. blending, clipping, etc.)
Affixes – prefix, suffix, infix
Syntactic categories – NP, VP, AdjP, AdvP, PP
Complementizers (know what they are – sentences within sentences that are often marked by the word “that”)
Heads v. complements
Transitive v. intransitive verbs
Syntax Phrase structure rules -- know the names of types of phrases (e.g. a noun phrase (NP) must at least have a noun to be a noun phrase, a verb phrase (VP) must have a verb, a prepositional phrase (PP) must have a preposition AND an NP, etc.)
Surface structure vs. deep structure
Open & closed-class words
Count v. mass nouns
Heads & complements
Compositional semantics v. lexical semantics
Semantic Entailment
Pragmatic Implicature
Conversational Maxims – Quality, Quantity, Relation, Manner (what are they and how do they manifest in interaction?)
Metaphors & idioms
Phonetic characteristics of vowels and consonants – (e.g. consonants are classified according to place of articulation, manner of articulation, and whether they are voiced or voiceless – 3 categories. Vowels are classified according to front/middle/back, high/mid/low, tense/lax, and rounded/unrounded)
Complimentary Distribution
Phonemes/Allophones
Minimal pairs
Basic phonetic transcription
* Phonetic vowel classifications – Learn the vowel chart! (e.g. /i/ is a high, front, tense, unrounded vowel)
* Phonetic consonant classifications – Learn the consonant chart! (e.g. /p/ is a bilabial, voiceless, stop)
Qualitative v. Quantitative v. Mixed Method research

Format:

Short answer/definitions: In this section you will be asked to explain some key concepts. Know the linguistic terms and be able to give examples!

Possible Applications:

Morphology – divide words into morphemes and identify/describe each of the morphemes from a given word OR start with a word you are given and add as many morphemes as you can, noting how each one you add changes the meaning.

Example: *rearrangement*. 3 morphemes
[arrange] = free base
[re-] = bound derivational morpheme meaning ‘to do again’ as in **re**apply
[-ment] = bound derivational suffix; creates nouns; meaning ‘result of an action’ as in displacement**.**

If you are given a set of words and translations from a given language, you should be able to identify morpheme patterns and deduce additional morphemes.

Syntax -- understand transformational processes. Be able to articulate the difference between deep structure (d-structure) and surface structure (s-structure). Be able to identify and produce examples of d-structure and s-structure of transformational processes (e.g. Wh-question formation, active-passive transformation, and Prepositional Phrase transformation).

Be able to take an s-structure sentence and identify the d-structure (or vice versa).

You should also be able to break sentences into component parts and understand, identify, and explain components of syntactic phrases (e.g. what components must a noun phrase have, what other components may be present, what order will they appear in in English, etc.)

Semantics – understand semantic (lexical) truth conditions and relationships and be able to identify entailment. Be able to identify metaphors and idioms and explain how they can create a semantic problem.

Pragmatics – Understand Grice’s maxims and be able to identify violations in context. Be able to identify cases of implicature – what is implied?

Phonetics – identify characteristics of phonetic sounds/symbols; identify transcribed words (e.g. place of articulation, manner of articulation, voiced/voiceless, rounded/unrounded, high/mid/low, front/mid/back, etc.)

Phonology – identify common features of phonemes; identify patterns of complimentary distribution. (e.g. one type of sounds might never occur adjacent to another type of sound in a given language)

Essay: You will be asked to write a short essay addressing a question that brings together components of your coursework. Some examples might be: ‘Write an essay explaining what a language needs to have to count as a language, illustrating your point of view with discussion of ideas such as whether animals use language, how creoles/dialects are distinct from *languages*, or

whether images (like emojis) constitute language. Or 'Explain the pros/cons of different research methods -- propose a single research topic and explain how you might use different research approaches to examine it, along with the pros and cons of these different approaches.'