Comprehensive Exams for MA Students

Preparation for your Comprehensive Exams

As a graduate student, you should be preparing for the comprehensive exam from the beginning of your studies. In each of your classes, you need to prepare a written electronic document summarizing the argument of every book and article discussed, and maintain a document analyzing the important issues, scholarly debates, and other field-specific concerns raised in your classes. If you haven’t done so already, please read the relevant information about your comprehensive exams on the department webpage.

Committee Information

Prior to scheduling your comprehensive exam, you will need a “comps committee.” You should ask at least three faculty members to sit on your MA Comps committee. One must serve as the committee chair. The chair must be tenured/tenure-track faculty. The other committee members can be of any rank, as long as the member has Graduate Faculty Status.

- You should contact potential committee members the semester before you take your comps, but certainly no later than the third week of your last semester.
- Your committee should be comprised of faculty members with whom you have completed coursework.
- You will provide your committee and the Online Program Coordinator with a complete list of courses taken, books and articles read, and papers written. This list will be attached to your test for your use during the exam.

Remember, faculty members are not obligated to be available over the summer to serve on committees or grade comprehensive exams, so check with them if you hope to graduate in a summer semester. Otherwise, plan to take your exam during the fall/spring semesters.

Exam Information

All MA students have the option of taking a written or an oral exam. Students can choose whichever format—oral or written—they prefer. If you would like to take the written exam, it must be proctored. If you’d like to take an oral exam instead, you’ll will coordinate a date, format (in person/Skype/phone) with your committee and with the graduate secretary. There is more information below about the Written Exam Format and the Oral Exam Format.

No matter which format you pick, we recommend that you schedule your exam early in the semester.

- Spring graduation: between February 1\textsuperscript{st} and March 15\textsuperscript{th}
- Fall graduation: between September 15\textsuperscript{th} to October 30\textsuperscript{th}

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Oral Exam Information
An oral exam lasts approximately two hours. Each committee member will review your booklist and prepare questions to ask you during your exam. During the exam each faculty member, in turn, asks the student questions that generally focus on important books and concepts covered in the courses completed by the student.

Written Exam Information
The written exam must be proctored. It is the student's responsibility to secure a proctor. See next section for more details. Each committee member will review your booklist and submit a question (or several, and you will choose one) for your exam. Each answer (in each of the three sections) should average 2000 words in length, for a minimum total of around 6000 words for the entire exam. The word count on your answers may vary, of course, but be sure to answer each question as fully as possible.

- You will have six hours to complete your exam.
- You are permitted to bring a pen and blank sheets of paper with you to the exam. Your book list (submitted in advance) will be provided with your exam.
- You are permitted four 5-minute breaks during the exam period.

Proctoring Information
Written exams must be proctored. If you live locally, you can contact the University of Memphis to schedule an exam date with their proctors. If you do not live in Memphis, your proctor can be at a testing center in a local university, community college, at a public library, or at any number of public testing centers, which can be found at the National College Testing Association’s website: http://www.ncta-testing.org/cctc/find.php. Please note that there might be a fee associated with your proctoring center.

- If you are having trouble locating a proctor, you can nominate a proctor from your community, such as your employer, an HR representative, a senior officer in the armed forces, etc. In this event, the online director must approve your proctor.
- The university has a contract with ProctorU. If you’d prefer to download the software and allow a live proctor to monitor you on your computer for the exam, please contact the online program coordinator to submit the IT request.

Once you schedule an exam date with your proctor, forward the information to the online program director. The director will send the exam materials and instructions to the proctor 48 hours before the exam date.

Assessing your Exam
When assessing the exam your committee will consider the following:
• Do your answers demonstrate mastery of historical themes, historiography, and scholarly discussion in the coursework taken?
• Do your answers demonstrate masterly understanding of the historical content and events and their interrelationships in the coursework taken?
• Did you clearly explain key historical concepts and handle abstract ideas? Did you successfully synthesize and generalize diverse themes?
• Are your answers organized and are the arguments well supported?

The committee may judge the student to (1) high pass (2) pass or (3) fail.
• A unanimous vote is required to pass.
• If you’re taking the written exam, your committee might decide on a provisional pass. Students that pass provisionally only require a few points of clarification—places where committee members would have intervened and redirected if the exam was oral. The committee will work with the student and coordinate an appropriate follow up (email or phone) for a provisional pass. This should be completed within 72 hours of notifying the student.
• In the event of failure, the committee will adopt one of the following:
  o Option 1: permit the student to take either a second written examination or an oral examination within the same semester (if the student satisfactorily completes this option, the original failure will not be recorded on the permanent record; if not the student will be able to take the exam again under option 2), or
  o Option 2: permit the student to take a written examination the following semester. Any student who fails to complete the second examination satisfactorily will be dropped from the department’s graduate program.
• Your committee chair will communicate the results to you, and to the Online Program Coordinator. The Graduate Secretary will prepare the MA Comprehensive Results form, and will acquire all the necessary faculty signatures, and submit it to the graduate school on your behalf. You, the online MA student, do not need to come on campus to file this paperwork.