

PH.D. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

The following information was originally an integral part of the Guide for Graduate Students

No sooner than the last semester of coursework, and after satisfying the language requirement, you must take a comprehensive examination over all fields. For full-time students, the expectation is that you will take the comprehensives before the beginning of your seventh semester, but in any case within six months of finishing the required coursework.

The comprehensive examination consists of a series of essays that you will write over a whole semester, or longer at the discretion of your committee or if you are part-time. The exam is not timed and you are allowed to use whatever outside sources you wish. However, they are not collaborative papers that you can submit to your advisors for comments and suggestions while you are writing them. After the essay questions or topics have been formally assigned and you begin the exam, you are not allowed to discuss their substance with any faculty members. Of course, as with any writing, you must give proper citations for any source you use, whether for direct quotation, paraphrase, or appropriation of ideas.

Preparation for the comprehensive examination should begin with the first Ph.D. class, and, for M.A. students anticipating continuing in the Ph.D. program, with the first graduate class. Students should consult with their field advisors or prospective field advisors upon entering the program about the nature of the exams and what they should be doing to prepare for them. This should include preparing in every class, whether this is assigned or not, a written electronic document summarizing and analyzing the important issues, scholarly debates, important books and articles, and other field-specific concerns, which you can later use as the basis for your Comprehensive Examination essays. This document need not be in the form of a formal paper, but it should be well thought out and not be a mere concatenation of notes.

At the beginning of each semester, the professor in each graduate class should discuss with you and all M.A. students with interest in continuing for the Ph.D., what you might do in this particular class to prepare for comps. Many professors may forget to do this, so you should remind them if necessary.

Your Comprehensive Committee, which you and your advisor pick and which the Graduate Coordinator must approve, administers the exam. In most, but not all cases, the Comprehensives Committee is identical to the Advisory Committee. It must comprise at least one representative from each of your minor fields and two from your dissertation field. The examination consists of the essays and oral examination described below.

Since the examination is designed to test your knowledge of each field, it will not be confined to material covered in classes and the books and articles you read in them. We expect you to demonstrate an intellectual command of the subject matter, historiography, current scholarly controversies, bibliography, and whatever else is expected in each field. While reading lists for exams will vary in length and content, in most cases they will include at least 30-50 monographs in minor fields and at least 60-100 in the major field, and/or the equivalent in major articles.

The faculty decided to prepare in each Ph.D. field a limited and basic list of about thirty books or the equivalent to be read by all students with either major and minor fields in their area. This list

is meant only to be a starting point. You are expected to survey the entire field and consult with your field advisors about the final reading list, to customize it for your needs and interests and those of the particular field advisor. You should also consult with your field advisors about the parameters of the exam.

Some fields felt that such a limited list was unworkable for their field and submitted much larger lists. Students in those fields should consult with their field advisors immediately for guidance. Some fields have not yet submitted their lists. We will post these as soon as possible. Some other fields intend to post longer lists as a supplement to their basic lists, and we will also post these as soon as possible. You can find all the lists at

http://www.memphis.edu/history/gradguide/phd_comps_reading_lists.htm.

At least one full semester in advance of the examination (and usually earlier than this), you should prepare a list of all the books and major articles that you have read, or plan to read, including those on the common list, and papers that you've written in each field and submit this to the members of the Comprehensive Committee. You should then meet with each committee member to see if the examiner suggests that you do any specific additional readings and to begin to formulate the content of the written exams. However, it is ultimately your responsibility to survey the literature of the field.

In most cases you will take only Reading for and Writing Comprehensives classes in the semester(s) of the comprehensive exam, so that you can devote your full effort to it. To register you will need to fill out and have the professor of each section sign the appropriate form, http://www.memphis.edu/history/pdfs/reading_for_comps_form.pdf, then take it to Karen Jackett, who will enter a permit.

The timetable for completing the examination is determined by the professors in consultation with you, and need not be before the end of the Reading for and Writing Comprehensives classes. So long as you are making progress on the exam you should always receive a **S** grade, not an **IP**.

In the course of the comprehensives semester(s) you will prepare essays of about thirty pages length in each minor field and two such essays (or one longer one) in the major field. Your field advisors, in consultation with you, will determine the format and content of these essays, based upon the nature of the field, the content of their coursework, and the reading lists and bibliographies developed for the Reading for and Writing Comprehensives courses. The essays will be based on a series of broad questions and, in most fields, be historiographical in nature. They will draw from, but not be a mere compilation of, the written documents, described above, done in each class.

You should discuss with your committee whether it would be advantageous to work on all exams for the entire examination period, or whether it would be better to stagger them, so that you could continue to consult with your professors in the fields in which the exam questions had not yet been posed. You must complete the exams in the course of not more than two semesters.

Following submission of the written portion of the comprehensives, you must schedule a meeting with all members of the Comprehensive Committee for the oral exam. Those not in Memphis may participate by audio or video conference. In the course of this exam, members will discuss the written comps with the student, ask for clarifications and elaborations, make suggestions and corrections, and ask further questions concerning the fields. Until the completion of the oral

component, no one can correctly tell you that you have successfully completed any field exam, although they may choose to tell you how you did on their written part.

After the oral exam, the committee will either unanimously pass you, pass you with distinction, or require you to retake one or more written parts. At this stage, you will pass the comprehensive exam only if the committee unanimously concurs. Note that even if some committee members feel that you performed adequately in their fields, you do not formally pass their parts and fail others; you can only pass or fail the exam as a whole.

A rewrite of an exam will necessarily involve a major reconceptualization and revision of your essay, and may not be resubmitted sooner than the semester following the first attempt. After you have rewritten all required parts, the committee may choose to hold another oral exam, or it may decide simply to vote on whether to pass you or not. In either case at least three of the four committee members must approve in order for you to pass at this stage. Note that this is ***not*** the same as saying that you may fail one part of the written exam and still pass the comprehensive examination, since faculty will normally be unwilling to pass someone who is judged to be unsatisfactory in any area. If there are more than four members of the committee, as sometimes happens, there can still be only one dissenting vote at most for you to pass.

Upon successful completion of the comprehensive examination, submit the comprehensive examination form, <http://www.memphis.edu/gradschool/form/comps2.php>, to the Graduate Coordinator and the departmental office, which will then send the form on to the Graduate School, thereby notifying it formally of your “late doctoral” status.

It should go without saying that plagiarism is unacceptable and will result in dismissal from the program. We will submit all essays to TurnItIn.com.