



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY PHD STUDENT HANDBOOK

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FOR POLICY INFORMATION RELEVANT TO ALL OF PSYCHOLOGY'S GRADUATE PROGRAMS, PLEASE SEE THE [PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENT HANDBOOK](#)

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THE PSYCHOLOGY EXPERIMENTAL PhD PROGRAM

PROGRAM INFORMATION

The purpose of the M.S./Ph.D. program in Experimental Psychology is to train highly qualified students for research and/or teaching careers in university, business, industry, and community settings. This program is designed around an apprenticeship model in which students and their major professor(s) design training plans to meet the individual student's expectations and career goals. Research interests on the Experimental faculty are centered broadly around topics in Behavioral Neuroscience and Cognitive Psychology.

During the first year, all M.S./Ph.D. students participate in a course in research design and methodology; a course in statistics; and introductory courses in their specialty area. After the first year, students participate in advanced courses, seminars, and individualized research practica, which become increasingly specialized and focused. Three milestone projects are required: an empirical Masters Thesis; a Mid-Point Project which can be satisfied with several options; and an empirical Doctoral Dissertation.

In addition to working closely with a major professor, all students are expected to affiliate with at least one research group during each year and to maintain active research involvement each semester. Students are expected to take more responsibility for formulating and conducting scientific inquiries and for preparing reports for the scientific community as their training progresses.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Specific details of what courses are required of students in the Behavioral Neuroscience versus Cognitive Psychology concentrations can be found in the [graduate catalog](#). Note that students must follow the requirements in the catalog that corresponds to their start date *OR* a newer catalog. Experimental PhD students on assistantships must maintain enrollment in at least 9 credit hours for fall and for spring semesters unless they are late-stage doctoral students (i.e., taking dissertation credits). In rare cases, a student will be granted permission to enroll for heavier load (i.e., > 9 credit hours), but approval must be obtained from the Program Director and Department Chair to do so.

LATE STAGE DOCTORAL CREDIT HOUR ENROLLMENT

Advanced doctoral students are considered "Late Stage Doctoral status" and are able to be recognized as full-time students (even if they register for fewer than 9 credit hours) once they have completed Mid-point Project requirements and have submitted a [Comprehensive Exam Results Form](#) to the University. Under this policy, late-stage doctoral students can request to be considered a full-time student if they: a) register for at least one credit hour and, b) maintain at least part time work on their Dissertation research. Students who certify that they meet both of these requirements are recognized as full-time students and are eligible for department, university, and external funding. Students who certify that they meet both a) and b) may continue to receive this benefit for up to four semesters (excluding summers).

RESEARCH PRACTICUM HOURS

If you wish to get course credit for working on a research study or for completing an independent research project other than a thesis or dissertation, you must have an agreement with the professor who will be overseeing the work and assigning the grade. These “courses” are graded as S (satisfactory) or U (unsatisfactory) akin to a Pass/Fail system. If the work is research related, then it is considered Research Practicum (PSYC 7/8601 through PSYC 7/8609). If the work is more like an independent study, then it is considered Special Problems (PSYC 7/8615).

The Special Problems and Research Practicum courses are available in 1, 2, and 3 hour sections. Expect to do approximately 50 hours of work for every 1 hour of course credit. Your project and the hours required are to be negotiated with the faculty member who is overseeing the work.

FUNDING

GRADUATE ASSISTANTSHIPS (GA)

All doctoral students in good standing will receive a 20-hour per week (September through August) assistantship in exchange for a tuition waiver, fees, and a stipend. The stipend is typically \$18,000/year before you get your Psychology masters’ degree, and \$19,000/year after you get your master’s degree (completing an empirical thesis). Note that tuition remission is provided during the fall and spring semester only. Tuition remission for summer credit hours is typically not covered except in rare instances, and must be approved by the student’s mentor, graduate director, and the department chair in advance of the summer GA contract being issued.

Typically, students in the Experimental PhD program receive either a Research Assistantship (RA) or a Teaching Assistantship (TA). More senior students may also be allowed to teach their own section of a course (TE) as the instructor of record, which will account for 10 hours of their guaranteed 20 hour GA. Continuation on an assistantship is dependent upon academic and assistantship performance. Academic probation or unacceptable assistantship performance are sufficient grounds for termination of support. Graduate students are not typically supported more than six years.

Graduate students on external funding (i.e., individual or faculty grants) have their own leave policies. For departmental assistantships, vacation is limited to university holidays and 2 to 4 additional weeks. Time off should be scheduled and negotiated in advance with the supervising faculty member. Please note that in most positions you will be expected to work even during Fall and Spring Break (as the university remains open during these periods) unless you have arranged for time off with your supervisor.

On assistantship, you get paid monthly, on the last business day of the month beginning at the end of September and ending at the end of August each year. The university requires that regular paychecks be handled through direct deposit.

EVALUATIONS

ANNUAL EVALUATION OF STUDENTS

Each year, you will receive feedback from your Program Director and Major Professor about your progress in the program. Ideally, you will be talking with your Major Professor throughout the year. The experimental program conducts a formal evaluation of students at the end of each spring semester. First-year Experimental PhD students are also evaluated at the end of their first fall semester. See the graduate handbook for more details on evaluation procedures.

PROGRAMS MILESTONES

Each Experimental Program milestone has a committee and involves a proposal of the planned project and a defense of the final project. See the graduate handbook for information on the requirements for milestone committee composition. A committee is involved throughout the process. Topics for these milestone projects must be empirically based, psychological in nature, and acceptable to the committee. Each milestone has paperwork to accompany it. Forms must be completed, signed, and handed in upon completion of each stage for each milestone. You can get the requisite forms off the [psychology department webpage](#). Here is an overview of the milestones for the Experimental MS/PhD.

MS/PHD MILESTONES

- I. Thesis
- II. Mid-point Project (one required)
 - a) Major Area Paper
 - b) Completing an empirical manuscript, submitted for publication
 - c) Specialty Exam
 - d) Submission of a grant with the student as Principal Investigator
- III. Dissertation

THESIS

A thesis is required of all doctoral students. The thesis is intended to be a demonstration of the student's ability to plan, organize, conduct, and report a research/scholarly project under the guidance of a faculty advisor. The thesis is primarily viewed as a research training experience. Compared to later research projects and to the dissertation, the thesis may reflect greater involvement and contributions of the thesis chairperson. The thesis typically begins during or before the fall semester of the student's second year in the program. The student is urged to begin planning the thesis during the first year of graduate training by selecting a thesis chairperson and forming a thesis committee. The thesis research is typically conducted during the second year and the thesis is usually completed by the spring or summer of that year.

The final defense includes an oral examination which assesses not only mastery of the thesis topic but also broader awareness of the theoretical and empirical issues in contemporary psychology. This oral examination meets the university's requirement for the M.S. comprehensive examination.

As students are only able to apply 3 hours of thesis credit (PSYC 7996) toward their degree program, students are *strongly urged* not to enroll for thesis credit hours until the semester during which they expect to defend the thesis project. Students must have accumulated 3 credit hours of PSYC 7996 by or during the semester they defend. No degree credit is given for additional hours of PSYC 7996. If the thesis is not successfully defended, the student must continue to enroll for at least 1 credit hour each fall or spring semester thereafter until the thesis is defended. Enrollment in summer is not required unless the student plans to defend and graduate in the summer.

MID-POINT MILESTONE

The second, Mid-point milestone may be started at any time after the completion of all master's degree requirements, typically during the third or fourth year of residence and must be completed before the student presents the dissertation proposal for committee approval. Students in the doctoral Experimental program can satisfy this milestone using any of several options listed under the Programs Milestones header above. The question often comes up, "Which is the best option to do?" This depends on several factors and should be decided in consultation with your Major Professor.

Specialty Exam

The specialty exam is a comprehensive written and oral exam in the student's major area of specialization and is intended to be a demonstration of the student's ability to review and integrate a broad range of psychological research. The minimum standard for the written component consists of four questions given over six hours on no more than two days. Students take the exam in the Psychology Building. The committee chairperson is responsible for providing a copy of the written exam and the student's responses to the committee for review. All committee members evaluate all written responses. The oral component is used to explore the written performance and the student's knowledge beyond the written responses.

Major Area Paper

The MAP provides the opportunity for evaluation of the student's ability to write a review and integrate a broad range of psychological research. The MAP is a review paper that follows the model of a Psychological Bulletin or Psychological Review article. The student develops a general outline and initial reading list with the guidance of the committee chairperson. The committee then meets to review the plan. The committee evaluates the final paper and the student defends the paper in an oral examination. The MAP may provide up to 6 credit hours (PSYC 8620) toward the PhD degree.

Empirical Manuscript Submitted for Publication

This option cannot be satisfied with the submission of the master's thesis research for publication. While this work may be related to the Masters Thesis, it must represent a significant departure and/or extension. It should be a product submitted as a peer-reviewed manuscript for publication in a mainstream journal. The committee is responsible for evaluating the substantive nature of the

manuscript. The minimum length of the manuscript and nature of the journal are secondary, but important, issues that must be considered by the committee. This milestone is satisfied with the submission of the manuscript and the successful final defense meeting; it need not be accepted for publication.

Grant Submission with Student as PI

For this option, the study idea and the written work comprising the grant proposal are the student's original contribution. The prototypical grant submission would be a federally funded pre-doctoral fellowship (e.g., NIH F31 grant). Other grant mechanisms may be approved by the student's Second Milestone committee, but they should be comparable in scale to the NIH F31.

DISSERTATION

The dissertation is viewed as the capstone of the doctoral student's academic training, reflecting the student's capability for independent research. All phases of the dissertation research (including proposal of the problem, design of the research, collection and analysis of the data, and writing of the final report) are primarily the responsibility of the student, with the dissertation chairperson serving mainly as a reviewer and sounding board. Upon completion of an independent dissertation research project acceptable to the faculty, each student will take a final oral examination which focuses on the dissertation, but which may also address broader questions related to the student's area of specialization.

Dissertation credit hours (PSYC 9000) must be taken for a minimum of 6 hours and can be taken for a maximum of 9 credit hours. Students are strongly urged not to enroll for PSYC 9000 until they are within a year of defending their dissertations. A student who fails to defend the dissertation during the semester in which he or she first enrolls in PSYC 9000 must continue to enroll for at least 1 credit hour each fall or spring semester thereafter until the dissertation is defended. You do not need to enroll in summer unless you defend in the summer. You can count only 9 hours toward your degree.

MILESTONE DOCUMENTS

Preparation of the Proposal

Proposals for the thesis, mid-point project, and dissertation are prepared by the student with assistance from the committee chairperson (Major Professor). The proposal must be submitted in final written form to each member of the full committee at least two weeks prior to the meeting at which the proposal is to be defended. The proposal will include a detailed and specific account of the research or scholarly project to be conducted by the student. Note that thesis and dissertation projects must also be approved by the university's IRB or IACUC committee.

The proposal for the Specialty Exam will include reading lists developed in coordination with each committee member, and a plan for which faculty members will cover major vs. minor parts of the exam. Members who cover major parts of the exam provide 2 hours' worth of questions, and members who cover minor parts of the exam provide 1 hour worth of questions.

The proposal for the MAP or other options for the second milestone includes a detailed outline of the review and/or theoretical analysis to be conducted, an argument indicating why this topic is of importance in contemporary psychology, and an initial reference list.

Note: The Psychology Experimental PhD program has a strict policy on the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence for graduate research, which is highly relevant to preparation of milestone documents. Please see Appendix A for specific recommendations for when generative AI is and is not allowed.

Defense of the Proposal

An email announcement to all psychology graduate students and faculty must also be sent two weeks in advance of the proposal meeting date. The student will defend the thesis, mid-point project, or dissertation proposal to the committee at a formal meeting open to all interested persons. For proposal defense meetings, decisions of the committee are made by a majority of committee members (and therefore do not have to be unanimous). The committee can vote to do one of the following: (a) accept the proposal, (b) accept the proposal contingent upon minor modifications stipulated by the committee and without holding another committee meeting (although committee members should examine copy of the modified document), (c) require extensive revisions in the proposal and schedule another meeting of the committee at which the revised proposal will be defended, or (d) reject the proposal and require the student to prepare a new proposal. In the last case, the student may choose a new chairperson, committee, and topic. Again, decisions of the committee must represent a majority of the faculty members for the proposal to be considered “accepted.” After all modifications have been completed and the proposal accepted, the committee members and the department chair sign appropriate department and Graduate School forms.

Final Defense

The final report for the thesis, mid-point project, or dissertation is defended at a formal committee meeting open to all interested persons. This meeting is announced publicly (i.e., a department-wide email is sent) at least two weeks in advance of the meeting date at which time copies of the final report are distributed to each of the members. Following the defense of the report the committee may vote to do one of the following: (a) accept the report without modification, (b) accept the report contingent upon minor revisions stipulated by the committee without holding another committee meeting even though committee members must examine a copy of the modified document, or (c) reject the report until specified major revisions are made and another formal committee meeting is held for reexamination of the same study.

For final defense meetings, decisions of the committee are made by a majority of committee members (and therefore do not have to be unanimous).

Note: By default, milestone proposal and defense meetings are expected to be in-person. However, students can seek approval from their committee to conduct their proposal or defense meeting via teleconference if their circumstances make an in-person meeting impractical or otherwise not optimal. Even if the meeting is to be held virtually, a department-wide email must still be sent two weeks in advance that contains the link to the meeting. It is not appropriate to indicate in this email that the link will “be made available on request.”

APPENDIX A

Policy on the Use of Generate Artificial Intelligence for Graduate Research PhD Program in Experimental Psychology University of Memphis

Definition and Operations: This policy concerns the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) for doing graduate-level research tasks and activities. Research tasks and activities are defined as any work that contributes towards theses, dissertations, midpoint projects, conference presentations, grant submission, publications, and/or any other scholarly product identified by a student's advisor. This policy does not necessarily align with the expectations for GenAI use in graduate-level course work or teaching tasks. GenAI includes any system that produces novel text, code, images, videos, audio, or other related media in response to a prompt from the user (i.e., graduate students). This includes but is not limited to systems such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, NotebookLM, DALL-E, Gamma, and MagicSchool. It is necessary to note that this policy does not limit students from pursuing research interests on GenAI technologies or related Artificial Intelligence topics (e.g., neural networks, machine learning, deep learning, large language learning models). The goal of this policy is to provide guidance on ***how and when*** students may use GenAI to perform and conduct their research. If it is unclear whether ***you are researching GenAI*** or ***using GenAI for your research*** or if any of the below policies are unclear, you are expected to speak with your advisor/chair about the confusion and work together towards a common understanding **before** pursuing work with or on GenAI technology.

I. Generative Artificial Intelligence Should Not Be Used Under Any of the Following Circumstances:

- A. Students should not replace their own critical thinking processes with a GenAI tool. In other words, "GenAI should help you think, not think for you."
- B. GenAI tools must not be used to fabricate, manipulate, or singularly analyze data. *Note that GenAI tools may be useful for helping to write analysis code, which is not the same as using the tool to analyze your data for you (Section 2.B). Students are still expected to make their own analysis plan and execute that plan in their respective analysis software.
- C. Students should not use GenAI as a replacement for written communication with peers, students, and professors. *Note that GenAI tools may be useful for helping write particularly challenging communications. However, the tool should be used as an aid and not replace your own writing, which means students are expected to review, edit, refine, and supplement any written communication generated by an AI tool (Section 2.C).
- D. GenAI tools must not be used to write entire sections and/or drafts of scholarly documents. These documents include but are not limited to theses, dissertations, midpoint project papers, grant submissions, conference proposals, and publications.
- E. GenAI tools must not be used as source material for researching a topic and providing references in academic work (definition above).
- F. Information from human subjects, such as their data, should not be entered into a commercial GenAI tool. *Note that if you are using a GenAI tool to code qualitative data as a part of your research interests, you must discuss appropriate uses with your advisor and relevant ethical committees, like the university's Institutional Review Board (Section 2.D).

II. Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools May Be Used Under the Following Circumstances:

- A. Before the use of any GenAI tool, it is necessary that the student follow two necessary criteria regarding (1) communication and (2) disclosure.
 - i. **Communication:** Before using any GenAI tool for one of the following purposes, please communicate your plan to use this tool with your advisor. Advisors and advisees should maintain open and honest communication about their GenAI use and how/whether it falls within one of the following allowable categories.
 - ii. **Disclosure:** After using a GenAI tool for one of the following purposes, it is necessary that the student disclose their use of the tool in all relevant products (e.g., presentations, theses, dissertations). Disclosure statements should be listed in the Method or Acknowledgements section of the product, and the disclosure should include (1) the full name of the tool used, (2) how it was used, and (3) the reason for its use.
- B. GenAI tools may be used to assist students in writing analysis code. Students should not offload any part of analysis fully onto a GenAI tool but may use the tool to help write certain parts of the code that may be challenging to the student, new to the student, or presenting errors that the student cannot readily overcome. Students should be able to explain all steps in their analysis and the code used to analyze their data, even that produced or edited by GenAI. *Note that any human subject data should not be input into a commercial GenAI.
- C. GenAI tools may be used to assist students in writing challenging (e.g., questions to a search committee chair) or broadly shared (e.g., announcements) communications like emails. The student must rigorously review and edit any communications written by GenAI before sharing them.
- D. GenAI tools may be used when their use pertains to the students' research interests. For example, the student may use GenAI tools in a project that tests the efficacy of AI-generated feedback in comparison to peer-generated feedback. Importantly, if the students' research requires that human subject data be input into GenAI (such as in the case of testing AI systems for qualitative coding), they must approve this research with their advisor and relevant ethical committees, like the university's Institutional Review Board. Generally, it is our recommendation that students use only generative models where it can be assured the model does not incorporate data sharing of any kind. To protect participant data, students should avoid commercial models when analyzing data from human subjects' research as it is difficult to assure/prevent larger commercial models from broadly sharing uploaded data.