

Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour
Comprehensive Examination Procedure
October 15, 2007

Overview

The comprehensive exam in the Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour is treated as one of several components of the program meant to ensure that all PhD candidates acquire training that strikes an ideal balance between breadth of knowledge across the discipline and depth of knowledge within the candidate's area of research specialization. The comprehensive exam consists of an approximately two-month period of time during which the student and examining committee target one or more areas of study that ideally complement the remainder of the student's program of study (i.e., their research specialization, courses, and independent study modules with faculty). These targeted areas of study are the focus of a directed program of reading by the student that takes place over the course of the exam period, and during which the student is encouraged to tap into the expertise of members of the examining committee informally. A written submission based on the program of directed reading is due one week prior to the end of the examination period. An examination committee meeting, at which the student is examined orally, marks the end of the examination period.

Time Frame of the Exam

The comprehensive exam should be completed within 20 months of entry to the PhD program, but must in all cases be completed within 24 months of entry to the PhD program. The exam period is initiated with a (brief) meeting of the comprehensive examining committee, at which the process of selecting the area(s) of study and a set of directed readings begins. Within two weeks of this initial meeting, a final reading list must be submitted to the Graduate Studies Committee. The exam period ends with a second meeting of the comprehensive examining committee. This second meeting should occur approximately two months following the initial meeting, but in no case more than three months following the initial meeting. The student's written submission is due one week prior to the date of this second meeting.

Summary

Start date	Brief initial meeting of examining committee
Within two weeks of start date	Description of study area(s) and written submission requirements, as well as final reading list, due to graduate studies committee (submit to Nancy)
One week prior to final meeting	Written submission due to examining committee
2 months after start date	Final meeting of examining committee

Comprehensive Exam Committee Structure

The comprehensive exam committee consists of the supervisory committee (including the supervisor) and may include as many as two other faculty members chosen for their expertise in the areas covered by the comprehensive exam. The Chair of the committee must be a faculty member other than the supervisor, and at least two members of the committee must be faculty members in the Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour. Finally, at least two members of the committee must not be directly supervising the student, which implies that in cases of co-supervision the minimum number of committee members is four rather than three.

Identifying the area(s) of study and reading list

The area(s) of study to be covered by the comprehensive exam will be chosen through a process of consultation between the student and examining committee. The student and examining committee should strive for area(s) of study that complement the remainder of the student's program of study (e.g., other independent study modules and courses taken by the student), with the overarching aim of balancing breadth of knowledge across the discipline and depth of knowledge within the student's area of specialization. Overlap between the area(s) of comprehensive study and area of research specialization is expected to vary from candidate to candidate, as a function of whether breadth or depth is deemed the primary objective. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the examining committee to ensure that the

area(s) of study for the comprehensive exam contribute toward the program's joint breadth and depth objectives. Identification of a reading list is the joint responsibility of the examining committee and student. A final set of readings is to be submitted to the Graduate Studies Committee within two weeks of the start date.

The Written Submission

The written submission can follow either of two general formats:

- (1) Students may submit a written paper to the examining committee that integrates the material in the reading list in accord with themes identified by the examining committee. A suggested maximum length for this paper is 15 pages (double-spaced), but the examining committee may adjust this constraint as it sees fit. The paper is due one week in advance of the date of the final meeting of the examining committee.
- (2) Alternatively, students may write an examination held within a single working day (9:00am – 5:00pm), one week prior to the date of the final meeting of the examining committee. In this case, students will submit answers to the exam questions electronically, with the suggested length of the examination not to exceed 15 pages (double-spaced).

A short description of the requirements of the written submission, together with a statement of the area(s) of study and the final reading list, should be submitted to the Graduate Studies Committee within two weeks of the start date of the exam period. In the event that the written submission falls short of the standard required to proceed to the oral examination, the Chair of the examining committee will notify the student within three working days of submission.

The Oral Examination

The oral examination will take place at the final meeting of the examining committee, which is to be scheduled by the student. The target date for this meeting is two months following the initial meeting of the examining committee and one week following completion of the written submission. In no case should the oral examination take place more than three months following the initial meeting of the examining committee. For the oral examination, each member of the examining committee should be prepared to ask the student at least three questions. The format of the exam will follow that of a thesis defense, with most of the questions asked in a first round, and follow-up questions asked in a second and subsequent rounds.

Grading of Comprehensive Examination

The written submission and oral examination will be evaluated as a package by each member of the examining committee, applying a grade of Pass with Distinction, Pass, or Fail. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the examining committee to arrive at a final grade using the grades of the individual committee members, with the stipulation that a final grade either of Pass with Distinction or Fail requires at least two such grades from individual committee members.

Failing Grades

In the case of a Fail grade on the first attempt at the comprehensive exam, the student will be allowed a second attempt. At the discretion of the examining committee, the second attempt may require an additional written submission, an additional oral examination, or both written submission and oral examination. The examining committee may also add material to the original reading list for a second attempt at the comprehensive exam. The time frame for a second attempt may be shorter than the recommended two months for a first attempt (see above) if agreed upon by both the student and examining committee. Failure on a second attempt at the comprehensive exam will lead to automatic withdrawal from the PhD program.