

## **Doctoral Comprehensive Examination**

The Doctoral Comprehensive Examination is intended to assess the competence of students in a range of skill and knowledge areas. There will be considerable variation between students with regard to the exact format of the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination. Some basic options for the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination are provided below. The exact format of the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination will be determined by the members of the student's Dissertation Committee. If the members of a student's Dissertation Committee would like to use a format for the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination that differs markedly from the options presented below, then the new format must be approved by the Director of Graduate Training and the Graduate Programs Committee prior to its implementation.

The timing of the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination will differ between students but most students should plan to take it near the beginning of their third year in the program or when they have completed much of their coursework. It is important to note that students are not permitted to hold their dissertation proposal meeting until after completing the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination. Upon successful completion of the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination and other departmental requirements, students will be admitted to doctoral candidacy.

### **OPTION 1**

Option 1 is a "traditional" examination format that will consist of three sections: Breadth of Knowledge of Psychological Science, Knowledge of Concentration Area, and Basics of Research Design and Statistical Analysis. The members of the Dissertation Committee will decide the exact timing of the exam but students will typically take each section of the exam on consecutive days (e.g., Breadth of Knowledge of Psychological Science on Monday, Knowledge of Concentration Area on Tuesday, and Basics of Research Design and Statistical Analysis on Wednesday). The members of the Dissertation Committee will also decide on other details concerning the examination but students will typically provide their responses to each section without access to any materials (e.g., no notes, no books, no internet access).

*Breadth of Knowledge of Psychological Science:* Student will have 4 hours to write responses to items concerning their breadth of psychological knowledge (e.g., information from the student's area of specialization, other areas of psychology outside the area of specialization, research methods, statistics). The breadth of these items will be determined by the members of the Dissertation Committee. These items will be generated by the members of the student's committee and may concern any issue covered by the student's courses or reading list. The student's committee will decide the number and content of these items. This portion of the exam will usually take place in Pryale Hall and the student will record his or her responses using pen and paper or a computer that does not have internet access. The student will not have access to any materials/notes for this portion of the exam.

***Knowledge of Concentration Area:*** Student will have 4 hours to write responses to items concerning their area of concentration. The breadth of these items will be determined by the Chair of the Dissertation Committee. These questions will be generated by the members of the student's committee and may concern any issue covered by the student's courses or reading list. The student's committee will decide the number and content of these items. This portion of the exam will usually take place in Pryale Hall and the student will record his or her responses using pen and paper or a computer that does not have internet access. The student will not have access to any materials/notes for this portion of the exam.

***Basics of Research Design and Statistical Analysis:*** Student will have 4 hours to display competence in research design and statistical analysis (e.g., write an in-depth review of one or more articles selected by the Dissertation Committee). This portion of the exam will usually take place in Pryale Hall and the student will record his or her responses using pen and paper or a computer that does not have internet access. The student will not have access to any materials/notes for this portion of the exam.

### **Grading**

Option 1 will be graded using the following 5-point scale for each section of the exam:

- 1 = A grossly inadequate or frankly incorrect response
- 2 = An unacceptably weak, but not frankly incorrect response
- 3 = An adequate response
- 4 = A very strong response
- 5 = An essentially perfect response

Each section of the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination will be graded by the members of the student's Dissertation Committee. Mean ratings will be generated for each section of the examination. A passing grade is 3.0 or better. Students are required to obtain a passing grade for each section of the examination as well as an overall average grade of 3.0. Students who "fail" an individual section of the examination will be required to re-take that section on a date determined by the members of the Dissertation Committee. Any student who fails the examination twice may be considered for termination from the program.

### **Studying**

The reading list for the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination will be determined by the members of the Dissertation Committee and the content of the exam will be shaped by the Dissertation Committee. As a result, there is no simple strategy for preparing for the examination that will apply to all students. Rather, students should consult with the members of the Dissertation Committee about the best strategies for preparing for the examination. The intention is for the questions/tasks to be challenging. Most students will prepare by reviewing their readings lists and their course materials. It is important to note that students are expected to demonstrate at least an intermediate understanding of important topics in psychology, regardless of whether they have been covered in coursework. As a result, a major source of information for students is the contemporary research literature. Students are expected to

demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding within their chosen area of specialization.

## **OPTION 2**

Option 2 involves the student writing an independent paper – without feedback or editing from any faculty members or fellow graduate students – on a topic that has been approved by the student’s Dissertation Committee. The topic could fall within the student’s broad area of study but should not overlap too much with his or her thesis or dissertation topic. For example, a student focused on metacognition for his or her dissertation could potentially write an independent paper on topics related to metacognition (e.g., Theory of Mind, categorization, causal reasoning). This independent paper should be an insightful review of a topic that presents a novel synthesis of existing research or provides a novel theoretical framework within which to examine existing research. This independent paper should present novel ideas or insights that have the potential to advance research in that area.

The independent paper should be of high quality. That is, the independent paper could conceivably be submitted to a journal for publication. It is important to note that the student should not be required to receive acceptance in order for the paper to be passable but it should be something that the members of the student’s Dissertation Committee would not be embarrassed for the student to submit to a journal. The length of time allotted to students to write this independent paper will be determined by the student’s Dissertation Committee but it will often be approximately one semester. The length of the independent paper will also be determined by the student’s Dissertation Committee but it will often be at least 8,000 words in length and formatted according to APA guidelines.

### **Grading**

Option 2 will be graded using the following 5-point scale:

- 1 = Not acceptable even with major revision (e.g., seriously flawed logic, inadequate review)
- 2 = Possibly acceptable with major revision (would require major re-write)
- 3 = Needs minor revision but then could be submitted
- 4 = Ready to be submitted
- 5 = Exceptional and would probably be accepted in its current form

The independent paper will be graded by the members of the student’s Dissertation Committee. Mean ratings will be generated and a passing grade will be 3.0 or better. Students who “fail” will be required to revise the independent paper according to the instructions provided by the members of the student’s Dissertation Committee. Any student who fails the examination twice may be considered for termination from the program.

## **OPTION 3**

Option 3 involves the student and the Chair of the student's Dissertation Committee preparing a list of broad topics for the examination. This list should extend across different areas and include topics related (e.g., theory) and unrelated (e.g., methodology, statistics) to the student's dissertation. Emphasis should be placed on the breadth of knowledge to be covered by the comprehensive exam and require students to examine and integrate information from outside the topic area of study (e.g., integration of theories from different disciplines). Once the list of broad topics has been finalized and approved by the Chair of the student's Dissertation Committee, the student – with input and guidance from the Chair of the student's Dissertation Committee – will prepare a comprehensive reading list for each of the topics. The student will be given up to one month to finalize the reading lists to be submitted for approval. The Chair of the student's Dissertation Committee will provide guidance and feedback and ensure that breadth is achieved prior to the lists being provided to the other members of the student's Dissertation Committee for their approval. The members of the student's Dissertation Committee will make any changes to the reading lists that they believe are necessary for the appropriate breadth and depth of coverage. The final reading lists will be approved by the student's Dissertation Committee.

Once the reading lists have been finalized by the student's Dissertation Committee, then the student will have up to three months to prepare for the examination. During this time, the members of the student's Dissertation Committee will generate a list of comprehensive questions for the student to answer for the exam. The members of the student's Dissertation Committee will determine the exact number and nature of the questions but the questions should require sufficient detail and be sufficiently broad so that the student may answer the questions in approximately 15-20 pages of text.

Once the study period has ended, the Chair of the student's Dissertation Committee will provide the student with the list of questions and answer any minor clarification questions the student may have about the examination. Questions related to content or other significant issues will be directed back to the member of the student's Dissertation Committee. The student will have one week per question to complete the examination (e.g., 3 weeks total for 3 questions, 4 weeks for 4 questions). The student will return his or her responses to the Chair of the Dissertation Committee who will then distribute them to the committee for evaluation.

### **Grading**

Option 3 will be graded using the following 5-point scale for each question:

- 1 = A grossly inadequate or frankly incorrect response
- 2 = An unacceptably weak, but not frankly incorrect response
- 3 = An adequate response
- 4 = A very strong response
- 5 = An essentially perfect response

Each question of the Doctoral Comprehensive Examination will be graded by the members of the student's Dissertation Committee. Mean ratings will be generated for each question. A passing grade is 3.0 or better. Students are required to obtain a passing grade for each question

as well as an overall average grade of 3.0. Students who “fail” an individual question will be required to revise their answer to that question following the procedures developed by the members of the student’s Dissertation Committee. Any student who fails the examination twice may be considered for termination from the program.

#### **OPTION 4**

Option 4 will involve meeting two specific requirements: (1) a general exam as determined by area (i.e., Social/Personality; Behavioral Health; Evolutionary and Comparative; Developmental; and Cognition, Perception, and Biological Psychology) and (2) a take-home written assignment. Requirements can be completed in either order.

*General Exam:* The faculty within each area (Social/Personality; Behavioral Health; Evolutionary and Comparative; Developmental; and Cognition, Perception, and Biological Psychology) will develop a reading list to be used for the General Comprehensive Exam by doctoral students within that area. The reading list will be the same for all students in that area and will be comprised of approximately 80 key sources from a broad cross-section of research topics within that area. For each cohort of Ph.D. students, within each area of the department, a “Comprehensive Exam Committee” (CEC) of at least two to three faculty will be assembled by the Graduate Committee. These individuals will write the questions for that cohort of students. The questions from each year will be saved to create a large pool of questions that can be drawn on in the future, in order to save time. Question content should include two types of questions: *essay* and *identification*. In particular, the CEC should compose: (1) four essay questions that require integration of concepts across content areas of the exam, and that would require at least 2-3 pages of writing to answer sufficiently. An example of such a question is as follows: “Describe the Five Factor Model of Personality; critique its strengths and weaknesses as a model of personality.” (2) Ten identification questions that are narrower in scope, and that could be answered in 1-2 paragraphs. Example of such questions are as follows: “Social Dominance Orientation,” “Life History Theory,” or “Construct Validity.” Students will be required to answer 3 of 4 essay questions and 8 of 10 identification questions. At least one essay question should contain a research methods component (e.g., designing a study to test a particular theory), and at least 3 of the 10 identification questions should be methods oriented.

Students will be given a minimum of two months to study for the General Exam. The specific date of the exam will be determined by the members of the student’s Dissertation Committee but should be taken at the same time for all individuals in that cohort and area. Students are not allowed any notes, books, or internet access while writing the exam, but will be given use of a computer (with no internet access) in order to type their responses. They may not have a copy of their reading list with them during the exam. However, students are expected to be able to include short-hand references to the reading list articles, but leniency should be given with respect to whether these references are perfectly accurate. Students should be supervised by a committee member or other faculty member while they write the exam. They will have 4 hours to complete the General Comprehensive Exam.

### **Grading of the General Exam**

The General Exam portion of Option 4 will be graded using the following 5-point scale for each question:

- 1 = A grossly inadequate or frankly incorrect response
- 2 = An unacceptably weak, but not frankly incorrect response
- 3 = An adequate response
- 4 = A very strong response
- 5 = An essentially perfect response

Each essay question should be graded by at least two members of the student's Dissertation Committee, and averaged to create the final score for that question. Identification questions can be graded by a single member of the student's Dissertation Committee. Any question receiving a score of '1' will be required to be re-written by the student. If the overall average of scores is not a 3.0 or higher, the student will be required to take the exam again. The content of this exam will be determined by the CEC, but may include new questions that did not appear on the original exam.

***Minor Paper:*** The student will write a minor paper (without feedback or editing from any faculty members or graduate students) on a topic that is approved by the members of the student's Dissertation Committee. The topic could fall within the student's broad area of study (e.g., Evolutionary, Comparative, Cognitive, Social, Developmental, Health) but should not overlap too much with their thesis or dissertation topic. For example, a student focused on metacognition for his or her dissertation could potentially write a minor paper on topics related to metacognition (e.g., Theory of Mind, categorization, causal reasoning). This minor paper should be an insightful review of a topic that presents a novel synthesis of existing research or provides a novel theoretical framework within which to examine existing research. This minor paper should present novel ideas or insights that have the potential to advance research in that area.

The minor paper should be of high quality. That is, the minor paper could conceivably be submitted to a journal for publication. It is important to note that the student should not be required to receive acceptance in order for the paper to be passable but it should be something that the members of the student's Dissertation Committee would not be embarrassed for the student to submit to a journal. The length of time allotted to students to write this minor paper will be determined by the student's Dissertation Committee but it will often be approximately one semester. The length of the minor paper will also be determined by the student's Dissertation Committee but it will often be at least 8,000 words in length and formatted according to APA guidelines.

### **Grading of the Minor Paper**

The minor paper portion of Option 4 will be graded using the following 5-point scale:

- 1 = Not acceptable even with major revision (e.g., seriously flawed logic, inadequate review)

2 = Possibly acceptable with major revision (would require major re-write)

3 = Needs minor revision but then could be submitted

4 = Ready to be submitted

5 = Exceptional and would probably be accepted in its current form

The minor paper will be graded by the members of the student's Dissertation Committee. Mean ratings will be generated and a passing grade will be 3.0 or better. Students who "fail" will be required to revise the minor paper according to the instructions provided by the members of the student's Dissertation Committee. Any student who fails the examination twice may be considered for termination from the program.