



RES Comprehensive Exam Guidelines

(Updated June 2016)

Purpose

- Provide students the opportunity to demonstrate substantive competency in their field(s) of study including strong analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking abilities
- Provide the supervisory committee with an opportunity to assess the student's knowledge of the literature in his/her field(s) of study, and evaluate the student's preparedness for independent and original research at the doctoral level
- Ensure that students have identified an appropriate research field and audience and can articulate that in reference to the standards of evidence and scholarship in the fields that will be drawn upon when undertaking interdisciplinary research.
- Ensure that the student's knowledge is sufficient to teach undergraduate or graduate courses in their fields, where appropriate to the student's career goals.
- Completed as one of three requirements for Advancement to Candidacy, where the other two requirements are completion of all required course work and approval of the PhD research proposal by the supervisory committee.

Scope and Readings

- Gain and demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the theory and methods in her/his research fields germane to the subject of doctoral research. This demonstration normally includes the ability to articulate the past, current and anticipated trajectories of the field (and/or trajectories students recommend and defend as part of exam work).
- Includes scholarly breadth and contextual understanding of fields that are wider than the specific topic in which the student is doing research. The exam is not designed to query the specifics of the student's proposed research and should not be used to do so.
- Scope of effort: A loose rule of thumb is that of the total set of readings across all lists should be roughly equivalent to the reading load of three graduate courses.
- Reading lists:
- There is no designated number of readings per list, this should be decided in discussion with your examination committee.
- Typically include two longer or three slightly shorter lists, each representing a field or area of concentration
- Lists should be prepared in conjunction with the student's committee, and be appropriate to the agreed upon format of the exam (see below).



- Lists must be approved by the supervisory committee and the construction of reading lists should also be seen as part of the student's learning process.

Exam Timing

- All students should be attentive to the goal of moving forward to candidacy in a reasonable time frame, which is itself somewhat variable due to the course work needed to prepare any particular student for PhD level work.
- A typical timeline is to form a supervisory committee by the end of spring term in year one; work to develop their comps topical areas and reading lists over the first summer; and complete the comprehensive papers and exam over the following fall and spring with advancement to candidacy occurring by the summer of year two of studies
- The student should arrange for a committee meeting approximately four to six months in advance of the expected exam date to confirm exam timing and format.

Exam Format-Written Component

Two longer or three slightly shorter papers are generally regarded as sufficient for the written portion of the exam. Often, though not exclusively, the 3rd paper is in an alternate format, such as a course syllabus or other useful equivalent. In the case of a 3rd alternate format paper, options include (but are not limited to):

- a fully fleshed-out research proposal for the research topic agreed to by the committee (but not on the same topic of the thesis research proposal).
- a course syllabus or deeply annotated bibliography. A deeply annotated bibliography will be sufficiently detailed to indicate that the student has read and can extract key lines of thinking from the work, including different intellectual contributions and debates across the list.

In the case of a two-paper exam, the expectation is that one of three lists will be common to both papers or expressed as an equivalent form of integration. It is *not* the case that one list would become under-represented in the exam.

Students generally elect to follow one of two formats, though supervisory committees may opt for alternative formats:

- ONE: Following the development of reading lists and time allocated to reading, a short time frame may be elected to respond to written questions from the supervisory committee. These written exams are completed in a very short time frame, usually 3 to 15 days. Questions are provided to the student on the morning of the first day of the exam, with shorter word counts the norm (5000-8000 words) for each paper when only 1 or 2 days are allotted per paper.
- Ex: Question #1 assigned Monday 9am, due end of day/5pm. Question #2 assigned Wednesday 9am, due end of day. Paper #3 assigned Friday 9am, due end of day.



- Ex: 2: Each paper is completed over three days, in sequence, with one day off in between. Weekends are not counted as days off and in this case all three questions are assigned at 9am at the beginning of each 3-day period.
- TWO: Longer duration written components may be chosen, which generally involve a series of take-home papers with the deadlines for all papers to be set by the committee; this process should not span more than one semester. One paper per month is often suggested, with the assumption being that the paper will be completed within a three-week window, with one week off between papers. Again, the committee can modify these rules as they see fit or as needs tailoring to the student's circumstances.
- The "comps papers" tend to take the form of a critical literature review – based on broad questions posed by the student's committee (sufficiently broad to allow the exam to test in part the student's ability to conceptualize or frame an argument and develop it accordingly).

The Oral Component

- The student's primary supervisor generally chairs the oral defense.
- Once the exam papers have been submitted, students should schedule the oral defense of his or her exam papers. Usually this occurs within two to three weeks of completion of the written proportion, but should not exceed four weeks beyond completion of the written exam.
- If the committee decides that the exam papers are not of a quality sufficient to proceed to oral defense, the student must be notified at least one week before the exam date. Baring this, the oral exam must proceed as scheduled.
- The exam itself is to begin with a brief introduction reviewing the exam structure by the student's primary supervisor. The student is expected to present a 15-20 minute overview of the written portions of the exam.
- Each member of the examination committee is then to be given approximately 15-20 minutes for questions, ending with the supervisor. Each committee member is to be given the opportunity for a second round of questions, not to exceed five minutes each.
- Following the question period, the candidate is asked to leave the room and the examination committee holds an in-camera session to review the quality of the oral defense.
- The examination committee must assess the student's performance on the combined written and oral comprehensive exam as "Pass," "Conditional Pass," or "Fail."
- The Pass/Fail decision is to be made by simple majority of the votes cast by members of the examination committee.
- In the event of a Conditional Pass, the committee may require amendments, revisions or conditions for a passing grade. The committee must then determine the arrangements and timeframe for ensuring that the conditions are met.



- The examination chair will then recall the candidate to the meeting and announce the result of the voting. The chair is to send written notification of the decision made by the examination committee to the RES Graduate Advisor and the Graduate Program Manager.
- A candidate who fails the first attempt of their oral examination may be provided the opportunity to pass a second examination that must take place within six months of the first. Failure to pass a second examination will result in the student being required to withdraw from the PhD program.
- In the case of a conditional pass or fail, the student will be informed in writing with next steps/requirements clearly outlined, with a copy of the memo provided to the RES graduate program office.

Committee Constitution for the Oral Exam

- The examination committee for the oral portion of the student's comprehensive exam is, in most cases, the same as the student's supervisory committee.
- The examination committee must consist of three or more members. All members of the supervisory committee must be included; at least two should be present in person, while the rest may participate by phone or video-conferencing if necessary.
- If a member of the student's examination committee other than the core supervisor(s) is not available because of leave, the exam may proceed. If more than one committee member is not available, substitutions may be made in exceptional cases, but must be approved in advance by the RES Graduate Advisor.

Preparing for the Oral Exam

- Students are encouraged to practice their presentation. It can be helpful to receive feedback from student colleagues including some who have advanced to candidacy.

Other considerations

- Students will receive feedback on their oral defense following the in camera session. Anything but a clear pass will require written documentation to be prepared by the examining committee.
- A clear pass implies satisfactory performance on the oral defense and the written exam
- A conditional pass can result from deficiencies in a written component or based on the oral exam. A substandard written component can result in a conditional pass that can be addressed by committee review without a reexamination. A substandard oral defense that is not deemed a failed exam will require a re-examination by the supervisory committee.
- In the case of a re-examination following a failed exam, the supervisory committee should appoint an exam chair for the re-examination in consultation with the RES graduate program advisor and RES graduate program manager.