

PREPARING FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

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Most graduate degree programs include a requirement for the student to pass a comprehensive examination, either oral or written, at or near the end of the student's studies. The use of the adjective "comprehensive" to describe this examination makes it clear that this examination is intended to review the entire academic program of the student. The idea of being tested over one's entire program of study can be terrifying at the worst and even at best can generate an uneasiness that prompts the student to ask what can be done to prepare for such an examination. It is hoped that this guide will help both to alleviate fear and to answer questions that will help the student to be at his or her best for this examination.

The comprehensive examination is conducted by a panel of professors, if it is taken orally, and is prepared by the professors if it is a written exam. The oral version is often preferred because it allows an interchange between the examiners and the examinee. The student should remember that the professors have usually witnessed many examinations and have probably taken one or more such exams themselves. This experience serves to temper their expectations to reasonable levels. A normal human being cannot be expected to remember all of the details of every course that he or she took in the degree program. If the coursework is extended over a long period, the problem of remembering details is made even worse.

Besides being a tool for evaluating the student, the comprehensive exam serves another purpose that is often overlooked by students. The examination, especially if it is oral, provides professors an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and the content of the curriculum. The student under examination is often given opportunity to comment on his or her coursework and to make recommendations to the professors for ways in which the program can be strengthened or made more relevant. Recognition of this second goal of the examination should serve to alleviate some of the fear of the examination. The professors know that failure of an "A" student at the end of his or her program casts doubt on the effectiveness of the program itself. A more likely outcome of a disappointing performance on the comprehensive examination is that the professors will redouble their efforts to better prepare their future students in the coursework phase of the program.

For degree programs that include a thesis, the comprehensive examination is often used to critique the thesis or challenge the student's method or conclusions. Such examinations can be helpful to the student by providing opportunities to make improvements to the research work or to the paper that presents the results of that research. The enterprising student will see the examination as an opportunity to amplify the impact of his or her thesis and prepare it or condensed versions of it for possible publication in national or world journals of scholarly research. Naturally, such comprehensive examinations tend to be of longer duration and sometimes require a second pass at the examination when the thesis has been subjected to extensive modification. Considering the constructive purpose of the critique, there should be little or no embarrassment to the student if such a retake becomes necessary. If the degree program does not include a thesis, the comprehensive examination is almost certain to result in success on the first try.

The student should take comfort in the high pass rate, but should not take the comprehensive exam lightly. It is an insult to the professors if the student is obviously presumptuous that the professors “wouldn’t dare” to fail him or her at this point. The exam is not a joke, and a student who attempts to pass it off lightly with a cavalier attitude may find that the professors, when provoked, can come up with a humiliating set of questions to intimidate the student. I have witnessed this scenario, but it is definitely rare. Even in this situation, the final outcome of the examination is usually a “pass,” but the victory is not a happy one. Sometimes one of the professors will vote to fail the student, but the majority will vote to pass. The student should keep this point of knowledge about human behavior in mind when preparing one’s attitude for the examination. This point should also be kept in mind when selecting dress and grooming for the occasion. Sloppy dress, lateness, or a hurried manner may suggest that the student believes that he or she has many other more important things to be doing than to be taking this examination.

The remainder of this guide attempts to answer some specific questions from my personal experience of taking and administering comprehensive examinations.

QUESTION: You say that “the comprehensive examination is almost certain to result in success on the first try,” but I am still uneasy. Tell me in numbers what my chances for success really are.

ANSWER: *No one can answer this question, but I can tell you this. In my thirty plus year teaching career, I can remember only once or twice in which a non-thesis Master of Science student failed to pass the comprehensive examination. I can remember several in which the student was required to make changes to his thesis and then retake. Also, I have seen a few failures at the PhD level, very few. Even in these instances, the students probably knew in advance of the examination that they were not meeting the expectations of the faculty.*

QUESTION: Should I wear heels or a coat and tie?

ANSWER: *Dress code and custom in our country is becoming less and less formal, but when in doubt, I would choose the more formal route. No one can criticize a person for wearing heels or a coat and tie to add dignity to an event, as of the early twenty-first century. If these words are still being passed around decades later, dress customs may be radically different, and this guidance will be obsolete.*

QUESTION: How should I study for this exam?

ANSWER: *Conventional methods of exam preparation are often not effective for this exam. Because of the breadth of the exam, cramming detailed information on the eve of the exam is probably counterproductive. It is a good idea to sit down and write in your own words three or four valuable points learned in each of the courses you took toward the degree. Reading over your course summaries the day before the exam will help you to be prepared to comment on any course if given this latitude*

during the examination. All of the professors will have access to a list of the courses you took toward the degree, and a frequently heard question in comprehensive examinations is: "Tell us something you learned in course X and why do you feel that it was significant?" For a given course an honest response might be that you don't remember anything significant at all from that given course, but with such a response do not be surprised if the professor asking the question votes to fail you on the examination. This happened to me once.

QUESTION: Must I receive the unanimous vote of the faculty panel to pass the examination?

ANSWER: *The faculty usually tries to reach a unanimous consensus, but if there is an impasse, the majority will rule. In my own PhD comprehensive examination one of the five professors on the panel dissented.*

QUESTION: If the exam is oral, how many professors will be on the examining panel?

ANSWER: *It is customary to have at least three.*

QUESTION: How should I respond to a question if I do not know the answer?

ANSWER: *It's OK to say "I don't know" or "I don't recall the answer to this specific question." After saying this, you might politely say "I do know that ..." and continue by showing some knowledge of the subject area from which the question was chosen. Be sure at first to address the specific question asked, even if your response is "I don't know." Professors who have administered these examinations are usually very familiar with, and sometimes irritated by, responses that do not fit the question asked.*

QUESTION: How long will the examination take?

ANSWER: *Master of Science examinations can be just a few minutes, if no thesis is involved. An average without thesis is thirty minutes, and with thesis: one to two hours.*

In conclusion, keep in mind that the professors identify with both you and your program and want you to succeed, not only in this examination, but in your career that follows. The happiest outcome for them is that you will actually achieve the success that you desire and will remember them for some part in what you have succeeded in doing for yourself. On this positive note, best wishes to you for a constructive and positive experience in your comprehensive examination!