

Standards for M.A. Comprehensive Exams
Reubin O'D. Askew Department of Government
University of West Florida

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This document details the process and criteria of evaluation for the comprehensive examination capping the program of study leading to the M.A. in Political Science.

Registration for the Comprehensive Exam & Key Dates:

- Students must complete the Comprehensive Exam Registration Form found on the Reubin O'D. Askew Department of Government website to begin the request for authorization to take comprehensive exams in a given semester, no later than the end of the first full month of the semester. See form for instructions.
- Chair approval is required.
- All coursework has to be either complete or in-progress during the semester that you intend to take comprehensive exams. If any coursework is in progress during the final semester, a coursework completion form will be required. This form cannot be submitted until all course work is complete. It must be submitted prior to sitting for the oral exam. See form for instructions.

Schedule for the Comprehensive Exam

- administered every semester during the 13th week of the semester and exam week
- WRITTEN EXAM begins at 5:00 p.m. (CT) on the Friday of the 13th week of classes and ends that Sunday at 5:00 p.m. (CT). It is sent to the student via email.
- ORAL EXAMS will be scheduled by the comprehensive exam committee chair with request from the student for a 90 minute slot during the week of final exams.

Fields- choose 3 from the 6 core seminars

American Politics
Comparative Politics
International Relations
Political Theory
Research Methods
Study of Politics

The Committee

The exam shall be administered by a committee of three regular faculty members of the Reubin O'D. Askew Department of Government that taught your core courses in the program. First schedule a meeting with the department chair to discuss graduation plans. Then speak with departmental faculty¹ asking about their willingness to serve on your committee. You will need to identify three committee members: one chair, who schedules and presides over the oral exam, and two additional committee members.

¹ Typically, regular departmental faculty have taught you in your core seminars and these are the people who would evaluate you in the “fields” of political science. However, under certain circumstances where regular departmental faculty have not taught your core seminars, the department chair will identify faculty to examine you in that field should you select it.

Once the faculty members have been selected, the student should meet with each faculty member individually to determine the specific expectations for the exam. At this meeting, the student should ask the professor about the exam structure the professor intends to employ, as well as the range of subjects the student should be prepared to address.

Components

Written Examination – The written examination is a take-home exam provided to students for 48 hours. It is comprised of three sections, one for each core seminar selected.

Oral Examination – The oral examination is a panel discussion between the student and the faculty on the exam committee. This exam requires the student to clarify, develop, and defend the answers provided during the written examination.

Structure

Written Examination – The structure of the written exam varies depending on the faculty chosen to sit on the committee. While all exams have three parts developed by three different faculty members, individual parts may consist of one or more questions. Students should preface each answer with the question and the name of the professor for whom it was written. Answers to each set of questions should take no fewer than 6 pages and no more than 10 pages, double-spaced, in Times New Roman 12pt font. Each answer should begin on a new page. Students should use in-text citations to cite the relevant literature in addressing each question, and append a bibliography. Students taking the written examination are required to sign a statement that they worked independently.

Oral Examination – The structure of the oral exam is a defense of each section of the exam to the faculty member responsible for the respective field. Other faculty members may ask questions of clarification or elaboration throughout the exam. Oral examinations last for 90 minutes. At the end of the oral defense of the written exams, the student is asked to leave the room so the faculty on the exam committee may deliberate on final passage. The student is then asked to return, and the decision is announced.

Preparation

Students should be ready in the written exam to address material assigned in the core seminar by the faculty member, but may also include discussion or additional readings recommended by the professor to the student in preparation for exams.

STUDY! It is expected that students spend at least one semester studying in preparation for the comprehensive exams. This can be done while courses are in progress, but students should plan to set aside regular study times throughout the semester leading up to the comprehensive exams. A successful exam will display broad knowledge of the subfield, along with a clear understanding of key authors and their arguments. Students should be prepared to address macro-level questions, and to use textual evidence to support claims in written and oral answers. Citation of course readings with page references is required in the written exam. It is helpful to save all class notes, readings, books and papers for the core seminars in the program.

Oral Examination – Students are not permitted to sit for oral examination until passing the written exam and submitting the coursework completion form to confirm that all coursework is complete. To prepare for oral examination, carefully review the written exams, noting areas in need of clarification, elaboration, or amendment. Students should treat this exam phase as a defense of their work and an opportunity for intellectual discussion. Students should prepare to hear constructive criticism and difficult questioning.

Assessment

The examination committee will assess the strength of the written and oral exams. The written exam serves as a gateway to the oral exam—the student must first pass the written exam before sitting for the oral exam. There are four possible assessment outcomes.

- Students may pass the written examination and pass the oral examination.
- Students may fail the written examination.
- Students may receive a "revise and resubmit" on the written examination. In this case, the student will be asked to respond to specific written feedback in order to more fully develop written answers before being cleared to move on to the oral examination.
- Students may pass the written examination but fail the oral examination.

Decisions to pass on oral examinations can be split. A pass requires two of the three faculty members on the committee to be in agreement. Students failing to pass either the written or oral examination may sit for the exam a second time. This second attempt must be completed before the end of the semester (Fall or Spring) following the failed attempt. The outcome of the second examination assessment is final.

Rubric Summarizing Expectations for Written Exams

Knowledge	Literature	Students should demonstrate a general knowledge of the classic texts in the field areas in which they are choosing to be tested. Scholarly research should be cited throughout student answers. Students should use this research to defend their argument.
	Concepts	Students should demonstrate through their answers an understanding of the concepts of political science as a field of study. Students should have enough familiarity with these concepts to appropriately use them in both their written and oral examinations.
	Theory, Method, and Evidence	Students should be capable of answering general questions on the major theoretical, methodological, and evidentiary fault-lines in the chosen fields. Students should demonstrate familiarity with the principal points made by each side of these disputes, and, if pressed, to make a case for one or the other on theoretical, methodological, or empirical grounds.
Argument	Clarity	Students should make a clear argument, easily stated in a general thesis. This argument should be developed throughout the answer in a clear manner, as well.
	Cogency	The purpose of exams is not only to demonstrate knowledge of material, but also to demonstrate ability in argument and presentation. For this reason, students should not only attempt to articulate an argument throughout the course of their answers, but also make that argument persuasive to an intellectual audience.
	Development	Students' arguments should be logically developed with the substance of the answer used to defend the initial thesis, the arguments and evidence drawn from the body or literature skillfully marshaled in its support.
	Strength	Students should further develop their argument to demonstrate strength in terms of originality and significance.
Style	Grammar	Students should demonstrate a command of the English language both in written and spoken form. Sentences should be in proper structure and use appropriate punctuation.
	Structure	The answers should be in proper structure, addressing the question asked through development of an introduction, body, and conclusion.
	Relevance	Finally, the answers should follow from the question. Students should focus on the issue at hand and limit tangential subject matter. Occasional anecdotes are allowed, but only if they illustrate or make more vivid general patterns in a body of evidence.