

Standards for M.A. Comprehensive Exams

Department of Government, The University of West Florida

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. First, the fields of study, the components of the examination process, the structure of the exams, and proper means for preparation are provided. Following is a rubric specifying general expectations of student performance on the exam.

Fields

American Politics

Comparative Politics

International Relations

Political Theory

Political Economy

Outside Field (Public Administration, History, Economics, Communication Arts, etc.)—optional.

The Committee

The exam shall be administered by a committee of three regular faculty members, of which at least two, including the committee chair, must be members of the faculty of the Department of Government or have taught one of the core courses in the program. The first step in the selection of the committee is for the student to ask a member of the faculty to chair it. In consultation with the committee chair, the student will select the additional members. The committee may include a member from another discipline, again chosen by the student in consultation with the committee chair. Such outside member will be given a copy of this document and asked to apply the same or equivalent standards of evaluation specified in the rubric shown below to his or her set of questions.

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 seek clarification of the structure the professor intends to employ, as well as the range of subjects the student should be prepared to address.

The chair of the committee is responsible for scheduling the student's written and oral examinations, communicating with the other committee members for purposes of assessment, and presiding over the oral examination.

Components

Written Examination – The written examination is a take-home exam provided to students for 48 hours, comprised of three sections. Students are expected to complete each of the three sections in three hours, for a total of nine.

Oral Examination – The oral examination is a panel discussion between the student and the faculty on the exam committee. This exam serves to clarify, bolster, and defend the answers provided during the written examination. Generally, it will be scheduled no sooner than two weeks after the written exam.

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 with an average of two questions per section. Students taking the written examination are required to sign a statement that they worked independently and spent no more than three hours on each professor's question(s). In terms of formatting, students should preface each answer with the question and professor for whom it was written. Answers to each set of questions should take no fewer than 3 pages or more than 5 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman 12pt. font (or its equivalent). Each answer should begin on a new page. Finally, students should use in-text citations to cite the relevant literature in addressing each question, and append a bibliography.

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. Typically oral examinations last for 2 hours. 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 not only cover the material used in the core seminar or outside field by the faculty member, but also additional readings outside the classroom either used for research by the student or recommended by the professor to the student in preparation for exams.

Oral Examination – To prepare for oral examination, the students should thoroughly revisit the written exams, noting areas in need of clarification, elaboration, or amendment. A week before the oral examination they should contact the examiners individually for feedback on the written part. 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 exams and determine whether or not the student should proceed to the oral examination. There are four possible assessment outcomes. Students may pass the written examination and pass the oral examination. Students may fail the written examination and not proceed to the oral examination. Students may provisionally pass the written examination with the expectation that they will prove themselves in the oral examination. If students provisionally pass the written examination, but fail the oral examination, they must retake the oral exam. Finally, students may pass two of their three sets of questions in the written examination but fail one set of questions. In this situation, students may retake the written exam to address the area of weakness before proceeding to the oral examination. If students fail two or all three sets of questions in the written examination, they may reschedule to take comprehensive exams for a second time. A decision to pass both a student's written and oral examination can be split, but requires two of the three faculty members on the committee to be in agreement. This second attempt must be within the semester following their failed attempt, and the outcome of the second examination assessment is final.

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.