

Chapter 10. Comprehensive Examination

Purpose and Dates

After finishing the Research Apprenticeship and prior to the dissertation, doctoral students are required to pass a written and oral comprehensive examination to demonstrate their knowledge of the principles of clinical psychology. The comprehensive examination is a crucial aspect of the program's emphasis on the goal of teaching critical thinking in psychology. The exam is graded for evidence that the student can think like a scientist-practitioner, integrating knowledge on theory, research, and clinical practice and expressing this knowledge coherently in writing and orally to prepare students for professional activities.

Comprehensive exams ("comps") are offered once each Fall and Spring semester. The date will be announced by the Director of Clinical Training or Academic Coordinator. Most clinical students take comps during the first semester of their third year in the program, which allows them to stay on track to finish the program in 5 years.

Degree Requirements (from the School of Arts and Sciences)

<https://arts-sciences.catholic.edu/academics/graduate-programs/resources/index.html>

All students are expected to have gained core knowledge across the domains central to a scientist-practitioner. While students in the program can choose to follow the Children, Families, and Cultures (CFC) focus area, comps questions will evaluate students' breadth and depth of knowledge through a standard set of questions presented to all clinical PhD students sitting for comps in a given semester. Questions may include options for students to focus on child versus adult case examples, but will not include distinct sets of questions based on topic area (e.g., CFC, anxiety, or self-injurious thoughts and behaviors).

Note on DSM-5-TR

The DSM-5-TR was published in 2022 and serves as the basis for coursework in the program. Thus, students are expected to know the relevant material in the DSM-5-TR for comps. The faculty realize that much of the literature is on DSM-IV or earlier, so questions may ask you to know about the literature according to the DSM-IV diagnoses and organization. For example, we have had questions about changes across successive editions of the DSM, and in this vein you could be asked what changes were made from DSM-IV to DSM-5-TR and why (i.e., what conclusions the empirical literature suggested about shortcomings in DSM-IV for a specific diagnosis or grouping of diagnoses, and thus why DSM-5-TR has been changed the way it has).

There are some general changes in DSM-5-TR that you should be able to speak to. Examples are how developmental considerations influenced the organization of DSM-5; the fact that there are no longer five axes and thus how issues such as contextual factors (former Axis IV) are now

addressed; and the new concept of severity ratings.

Format

There are two 3-hour written examination sessions and one 1-hour in-person oral defense meeting.

Questions will address the following topics, either separately or in an integrated manner:

- research methods and statistics,
- psychopathology,
- assessment,
- intervention,
- ethics, and
- individual and cultural diversity.

Each comprehensive examination includes at least one question requiring the student to demonstrate understanding and knowledge of the integration of science and practice. Students are expected to study and master the literature on intervention and assessment. Students are then required to answer questions in which they must apply intervention and assessment science to clinical problems and cases, demonstrating integrative scientist-practitioner knowledge, judgment, and critical thinking. Comprehensive exams also routinely use case examples in some of the questions to provide an opportunity for the student to further demonstrate competency in their ability to integrate theory and research into clinical practice.

Comprehensive Examination Written Sessions. Within each 3-hour examination session, students will be asked three questions. Citations (but not full references) are expected on the answers written on the day of the examination.

After the written examination sessions are concluded, two core faculty will each read all written responses and provide a preliminary rating for each question of (1) inadequate, (2) satisfactory, or (3) exemplary (see Grading below for further details) and prepare questions for the oral defense.

Oral Defense Meeting. All efforts will be made to schedule the oral defense with the two core faculty who scored the written portion one day after the written exam, with a maximum of one week between the two portions if needed to accommodate the graders' schedules. The purpose of the oral defense is to provide an opportunity for students to provide further depth to their responses and actively display critical thinking skills. During this meeting, students may be asked to further elaborate or clarify elements of their written responses. The oral defense will be recorded in case there is disagreement between faculty on the oral defense grade.

Once the oral defense meeting concludes, the faculty members jointly determine whether each question discussed during the oral defense was rated as (1) inadequate, (2) satisfactory, or (3)

exemplary (see Grading below for further details). Responses across the written and oral portions that are considered passing must demonstrate correctness, pertinence, completeness, and organization with no major deficiencies (i.e., a rating of satisfactory or better).

Students are expected to work completely independently on the comprehensive examination. During the exam period (including both the written and oral portions), students cannot discuss the exam with anyone, including current and past students, and especially other students taking the exam. Note also that if faculty respond to a question raised by one student, faculty will send the response to all students (except in the unlikely event that the question is clearly irrelevant to anyone else). Students are not allowed to bring any written materials into the examination sessions.

Procedure

Eligibility. For a student to be eligible to take comps in a given semester, the student's Research Apprenticeship must be completed at least 6 weeks before the examination date set by the university. Research Apprenticeship is considered completed when (1) the student has successfully completed three semesters of Research Apprenticeship; (2) the written product from the Research Apprenticeship has been submitted to the DCT and Academic Specialist; and (3) the advisor has signed the "Research Apprenticeship Completion And Eligibility To Register For The Comprehensive Examination" form. Although the minimum time between completion of research apprenticeship and comps is 6 weeks, it is advisable to allow a longer period to prepare for comps.

Registration for comps. Students must register for comps in the semester they take them. Students registering for any course work during the semester they take the Comprehensive Examination are assessed no additional fee for the exam (register for PSY 998A, Doctoral Comps with classes). However, graduate students who have finished their course work and residency requirement (3 years of full-time enrollment) and who want only to take the Comprehensive Examination in a particular semester can register for the comprehensive examination only (one credit hour of tuition, zero course credit) during the semester that they take the examination (register for PSY 998B, Doctoral Comps without classes).

Registration for the M.A. Degree. Doctoral students in Psychology are eligible to receive an M.A. degree when they have passed comps. As a part of registration for comps with the departmental Academic Specialist, there are graduation and admission to doctoral forms to fill out. **Note that this MA degree is in Psychology, not Clinical Psychology; the Department does not award a master's degree in clinical psychology.** Students who have received their M.A. degree should make sure to represent the degree accurately on their vita.

Examination sessions. On the first day designated for comps by the Department, students take a written exam on their topic in two sessions (usually 9am-12pm and 2-5pm, but check these hours to be sure in the semester in which you are taking comps). The questions asked in these sessions

are not provided in advance.

Question Writing and Grading

Examination questions are written and graded by several faculty. The faculty in charge of writing questions may vary from semester to semester. All students taking comps in a semester are given the same examination session questions.

Each question is graded by two faculty members. Written exam answers are identified only by a number, so that readers are not informed of the identity of the student while grading. Preliminary ratings are assigned independently (i.e., faculty do not discuss students' answers with each other until the exams have been graded by all readers). Final ratings are determined jointly by the two faculty who conduct the oral defense.

Answers are rated on a 3-point scale. The department has adopted the following guidelines for grading questions:

- (3) Exemplary: Within the examination context, the answer addresses all parts of the question well; it is correct, pertinent, complete and well organized.
- (2) Satisfactory: The answer on the whole is acceptable with no major deficiencies in correctness, pertinence, completeness, and/or organization.
- (1) Inadequate: The response is below an acceptable level. While some parts of the answer may be correct and pertinent, the overall quality of the answer is less than acceptable due to a lack of correctness, pertinence, completeness, and/or organization.

All questions are weighted equally, meaning that students must receive satisfactory or exemplary ratings on each question based on the written and oral examinations overall in order to pass. To pass, each question must receive an overall score of 1.5 or higher based on the following calculation: average of raters' 1 & 2 scores on the written exam multiplied by 50% plus the score on the oral defense multiplied by 50%. Both faculty members must agree that the student passes the comprehensive exam. If there is disagreement between the two faculty, such that one scores the answers as failing, a third faculty member will be asked to score the responses to provide the deciding evaluation. If the two faculty disagree as to whether answers are satisfactory or exemplary, the answers will be given a final evaluation of satisfactory. The Comprehensive Exam Rating Form is used to document preliminary and final ratings as well as any comments from the faculty graders.

A student who fails the exam, according to university regulations, is allowed to take the comprehensive exam a second time. New question(s) will be written for topics (e.g., assessment, intervention, research methods, etc) that the student received a failing grade (<1.5 across the

written response and oral defense), and a second oral defense will be scheduled. The same conditions for passing apply to the retaken exam.

The clinical faculty provides written feedback on the exam to a clinical student who fails the first exam, with the aim of providing information to help the student prepare for taking the exam again. The faculty also will work with a student who has failed comps; for example, a student may request to do a reading course that will concentrate on preparation for comps.

Comps Study and Writing Tips

Below are some tips based on students' and the clinical faculty's combined wisdom as to how students can best study for and write passing comps answers. Naturally, we cannot promise that following these strategies will lead to a passing grade, but previous students have told us that these tips are very useful, or at least help to relieve some anxiety.

Deciding when to take comps. Most students take comps in their third year, and taking them in the Fall of the third year allows the student to stay on track for finishing in 5 years. Some students do not finish Research Apprenticeship until close to the date for registration for comps and may need to think about whether they have allowed themselves enough time to study. It is recommended that students consult with their advisors about whether they are ready to take comps. Although the advisor cannot offer assurance of passing, he or she may be able to offer perspective on whether the student is on track for taking comps or should take another semester to study.

Study tips. Some students report that they found journal articles more useful than chapters or books. We expect citations (and references in the paper) to original empirical articles as well as review articles, so keep this in mind in your studying.

The Department has an online folder with previous comps questions. These are useful for you to see the types of questions that had been asked when comps was structured around topic areas. It is recommended that you review questions across the topic areas (e.g., CFC, anxiety and related disorders, mood disorders, psychotherapy outcomes, self-injurious thoughts and behaviors). It is also useful to take some of the earlier exams under simulated exam conditions. This can help you assess how well prepared you are in both exam content and test-taking skills. Additionally, making up and then answering your own exam questions can help you prepare. If you tend to get anxious during exams, it may be particularly important to practice writing answers under simulated exam conditions.

Examination Session tips. An important tip is to **answer the question asked**. Pay very close attention to the question asked, **answering all parts**. If you do not know much about the topic, it does not help to write about some other topic instead just to show you know something. If you really do not know much about the question asked, tell us what you do know, and closely related

information (but keep in mind it needs to be **closely** related), and then write how you would go about learning more (i.e., a research strategy for this particular topic).

If you're not sure about what a question is asking, it's crucial to let the faculty know that.

If you guess but do not tell us your uncertainty, and if you guess wrong, we will think you do not know the answer and are trying to cover that fact (which leads to a low grade). We try to write clear questions, and before distributing them several faculty read each question to try to ensure its clarity, but sometimes we may write an unclear question. Tell us **why** the question seems unclear to you, what the different possibilities are for what it means, how you are choosing to interpret it (and thus what you will be answering) and why. Then proceed to answer the question you have told us you think we've asked. Even if you've guessed wrong about what we meant, we'll know your reasoning and can judge whether we agree with how you got there. Often, we'll realize from what you tell us that we were unclear, and give you the benefit of the doubt even if you've answered a different question from what we thought we were asking. But this can only happen if you give us your reasoning.

Organization of examination session answers is very important. It's well worth the time to sketch out an outline. (Keep in mind, however, that the outline is not part of the answer.)

Readers will have the impression that you are organized and on top of the material if you use headings in your answer. Don't worry, however, about transitions between sections or parts of an answer. That's an element of polished writing that's not important enough to worry about on the examination session questions.

As noted above, **citations are expected on examination session questions** (but not references).

Any statement that would warrant one or more citations in a paper should have at least one or two citations in an examination session answer. On the other hand, don't limit your content just so you can write down a huge number of names and dates. **It's important to cite not just review articles, but also empirical studies, so plan your studying with this in mind.** In reading citations, readers are aware that you didn't have the sources in front of you. Give as much of a citation as possible; you'll get more credit for the full citation, but absolute perfection is not demanded. On the examination session questions, it's fine to use "et al." for three or more authors even the first time you cite a reference (which is different from correct APA style). Give precise dates if possible; if you don't remember the exact date, say something like "2005 or 2006." It's best, of course, to get the authors right, but if you're not sure, tell us what you think they are.

It's critical to plan your time well. An exceptional answer to one part of a question does not make up for no answer to another part of the question. If you have a multi-part question, put your emphasis in terms of time and writing on the percentage each part is worth. (If percentages are not given, assume there's an equal emphasis on all parts.) Readers take into account that we are only giving you 1 hour per question. We don't expect the same kind of answer you would be able to produce if you had more time, but we do expect you to use your time well.

Comprehensive Exam Rating Form

Student Name:	
Program:	
Written Exam Date:	Oral Defense Date:

Scoring Scheme

(3) **Exemplary:** Within the examination context, the answer addresses all parts of the question well; it is correct, pertinent, complete and well organized.

(2) **Satisfactory:** The answer on the whole is acceptable with no major deficiencies in correctness, pertinence, completeness, and/or organization.

(1) **Inadequate:** The response is below an acceptable level. While some parts of the answer may be correct and pertinent, the overall quality of the answer is less than acceptable due to a lack of correctness, pertinence, completeness, and/or organization.

Examination Session Preliminary Ratings

Rater 1

Question #	Rating (Exemplary/Satisfactory/Inadequate)	Comments
Question 1		
Question 2		
Question 3		
Question 4		

Question 5		
Question 6		

Rater 2

Question #	Rating (Exemplary/Satisfactory/Inadequate)	Comments
Question 1		
Question 2		
Question 3		
Question 4		
Question 5		
Question 6		

Oral Defense Ratings (Joint)

Question #	Rating (Exemplary/Satisfactory/Inadequate)	Comments
Question 1		
Question 2		
Question 3		
Question 4		
Question 5		
Question 6		

Final Status

To pass, each question must receive an overall score of 1.5 or higher based on the following calculation: average of raters 1 & 2 scores on the written exam multiplied by 50% plus the score on the oral defense multiplied by 50%.

Question # (Topic)	Overall Score	Pass/Fail
Question 1:		
Question 2:		
Question 3:		
Question 4:		
Question 5:		
Question 6:		

Final Status	Comments

Signatures

Faculty Name	Signature	Date