

**Best Practices for the Comprehensive Examination
Philosophy Department
Penn State University**

Penn State's Graduate School requires that each Ph.D. student "pass a comprehensive examination to become a Ph.D. candidate" ([GCAC-606](#)). The comprehensive examination is administered by the Philosophy Department.

The purpose of the comprehensive exam is to help students develop breadth and depth in areas relevant to their chosen areas of research. The historical and systematic reading lists contain resources that can aid students in developing a dissertation prospectus.

The comprehensive examination process is one that necessitates flexibility because every student is different, students work on a wide variety of topics, and students enter the comprehensive exam process with different levels of knowledge. The specifics of how the comprehensive examination preparation process takes place are, therefore, determined by the student and the dissertation advisor/committee in conversation with one another.

While holding a general principle of flexibility in mind, there are several areas where best practices regarding the comprehensive examination can be recommended:

Number of Questions

Faculty should consider providing students with five questions per exam session, one of which students will answer.

Length of Reading Lists

The length of historical and systematic reading lists is to be negotiated between the supervisor and student. A typical list is recommended not to exceed the length of ten average-length books (or the equivalent in articles).

Timeframe

Because our program provides five years of funding, students are encouraged to defend their dissertation prospectuses by the end of their third year in the program, leaving two years in which they can write their dissertations. This means that students will have roughly half a year (the first half of their third year) in which to prepare to take their comprehensive examination. Accordingly, the preparation of each reading list should take no longer than three months. Lists that include a combination of texts students already have familiarity with and those that are new to them are more likely to be able to be completed within three months.

Thematic Identification

Students are encouraged to identify broad themes across readings that relate to their proposed areas of research and should share those with their dissertation advisor and committee in advance of the generation of questions for the comprehensive examination. In writing

questions for the exam, committee members are encouraged to be sensitive to the philosophical themes the student intends to develop in their research.

Dates of Exam

The dates of the exam should be set by the supervisor and student in consultation with each other.

Length of Answers

Answers to each comprehensive exam question should fall in the range of 4000–6000 words.

Oral Examination

In posing questions during the oral portion of the examination, faculty are encouraged to focus exclusively on the written portion of the exam.

Template

In beginning to draft their comprehensive examination reading lists and rationale, students should consult the comprehensive examination template available on the department website.

Policies and Procedures

Criteria of evaluation for the written and oral portions of the exam, as well as additional details regarding the comprehensive examination process, can be found in [Graduate Program Policies and Procedures](#).