

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY PHD PROGRAM

September 2016

The Comprehensive Examination process in Anthropology aims to support doctoral students' dissertation research by situating their project in the context of a much broader set of debates. This means that student's comprehensive exam questions are designed with their specific research project in mind, helping them identify the original contribution their research will make by prompting them to consider how their work fits in relation to existing debates. Under these circumstances we treat the process as a breadth requirement that challenges PhD students to step outside their narrow thesis interests.

The Steps

The Comprehensive Examination process includes the following steps: (1) formulating a Statement of Interest, (2) crafting three examination questions, (3) writing comprehensive exam responses, (4) passing the written examination, and (5) passing the oral examination.

1. Statement of Interest

One of the main components of the Research Methods course is to help doctoral students formulate a Statement of Interest. This document, which outlines the research problem and proposed research design, will be circulated to the student's supervisory committee early in the third term of study.

2. Comprehensive Examination questions

Circulating the Statement of Interest should start a conversation between the student and supervisory committee about three possible exam questions. The questions should ultimately support the project, taking into account the likely research design and the student's background preparation. In some cases, this means pushing the student to familiarize him or herself with a new area, and in other cases a question may function more to consolidate and systematize their knowledge in a given area.

Often, but not always, there is one question related to a relevant area of theory, another one broadly exploring methods, and a third question that examines the literature on a specific region. Sometimes students themselves propose general areas they think would make good exam topics, but the final questions are determined by the supervisory committee.

The student and supervisory committee should also agree on the timeline for the submission of the questions and written and oral examinations. The Comprehensive Examination process is normally completed by the end of Term 4 of the doctoral program (see diagram below). However, there is some flexibility to this timeline, as some students may do a preliminary field season during their first summer term, which would delay their comps process.

3. Writing Comprehensive Exam Responses

Once the questions are formulated, the student takes a considerable amount of time to read widely in the topics highlighted in the questions and to prepare responses. Student may work on this through Terms 3 and 4 of their program.

The responses take the form of three essays of a maximum of 5,000 words each (plus references, tables, figures, and appendices, as appropriate). We ask that students stick to the word limit. Students are expected

to synthesize a relatively large literature, pulling out the most important points to answer their specific questions.

For the Comprehensive Examination process to be completed by the end of Term 4, responses should ideally be submitted to the supervisory committee six weeks ahead of the Oral Examination date.

4. Written Comprehensive Examination

The supervisory committee reads the responses within two weeks and meets (without the student) to discuss the quality of each essay. Each response is evaluated as a pass or fail (taking into account both content and form). A majority of examiners must pass a response for it to be declared acceptable. If a majority fails a response, it will be considered a failure. A conditional pass may also be given, in which case the committee will identify specific areas of weakness in the response, and the student will be given an opportunity to resubmit within a month. If at least two of the written responses are passed by a majority, the student is eligible to proceed to the Oral Examination. If a student fails the written portion of the comps, the committee must decide whether s/he will be given an opportunity to rewrite the written responses. In no case will the student be given more than one opportunity to rewrite. If a student is not allowed to rewrite his or her responses, s/he must withdraw from the program.

In all cases, the supervisor has one week following the committee's meeting to compile comments and provide the committee's feedback to the student.

5. Oral Comprehensive Examination

Once the written examination is passed, the student has two weeks to consider the committee's feedback (which may include the suggestion to give some issues additional thought) before the oral component of the comprehensive examination takes place. Additional time may be provided at the student's request.

The oral examination is a formal procedure chaired by the Graduate Chair or designate. Following the procedures used in oral thesis defenses, prior to the exam the examiners will decide on the order of questioning, the number of rounds of questions and the time to be allotted per examiner per round for the questions and student responses. Unlike a thesis defense, however, the student's supervisor asks questions and participates in the examining process.

Following the examination, the student will be asked to leave the room so that the examiners can deliberate. The results of this deliberation, either pass or fail, will be recorded by the Chair on a form provided for this purpose and signed by all examiners. If at least two of the three examiners pass the oral defense of the comprehensive exams, the student is granted a pass. If a majority of examiners fails the oral defense, the student will be asked to withdraw from the program.

What's next?

Students are required to submit a clean copy of their Comprehensive Examination responses to the Graduate Program Assistant, to be placed in their file.

By then, students should be in a good position to write their formal Research Proposal (and move on to the Proposal Defense), as they will have read widely in the relevant literature to help frame the significance of their project.

General Timeline (based on a September start date)

