

COMPREHENSIVE QUALIFYING EXAM (“COMPS”): POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of comps is to ensure that students have mastered a broad, deep, and integrative knowledge of the field of I-O psychology prior to becoming a Ph.D. candidate. The exam preparation process should reinforce what has been learned in coursework and research and build a foundation in other areas that are important for competent research, teaching, and practice. Thus, comps have a developmental and a certification function.

Administration

Comps are offered every Fall and Spring semester, typically starting in the third week of classes. Each student must submit a request for approval to take comps. The Area Director will send an email in advance of each administration with notification that it is time to declare one’s intent to take the exam and choose subject areas (subject areas are discussed in the next section). Students must meet the deadline provided by the Area Director.

Exam Structure

The exam comprises written questions in eight subject areas (four required and four elective). The four *required* areas are Industrial, Organizational, Methodology, and Ethics. The four *elective* areas are selected by the individual examinees at the time intent to take comps is declared, and the selections are subject to faculty approval. For guidance concerning the elective areas, please see “Policy on Elective Comps Areas” later in this document.

The I-O Area Director will assign question writers and reader based on expertise. He/she will also provide the schedule of question administration. Normally there will be eight 2-hour sessions over two weeks, with questions administered on Tuesday and Thursday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It may be necessary to adjust this schedule depending upon holidays, unforeseen events, and the inability to cover all the elective questions in that number of sessions. These testing sessions are “closed-book” meaning that no notes, outside materials, or searching the internet for information is allowed. Students whose native language is not English may request to be allowed an additional hour per session.

Answer Format

Each area must be answered in a maximum of 8 double-spaced pages in 12-point font with 1” margins. Any tables, figures, or appendices the student chooses to include (such displays are optional) do not count toward the page limit, but they should not be excessive. Responses must present clear arguments and demonstrate expertise in the subject area. Responses should refer to empirical findings from relevant literatures. If an area has more than one question, or a question with multiple parts, each question/part must be answered completely within the page limit.

Grading

A single overall grade will be assigned for each area (even for areas with multiple or multi-part questions). Answers to the question(s) in each subject area will be graded on a four-point nominal rating scale by the writer and reader:

- 1 = failed with significant and substantial deficiencies, new question recommended
- 2 = failed with deficiencies, remediation recommended
- 3 = low pass
- 4 = pass

If both the writer and reader assign a grade of 3.0 or greater, the student passes the area; otherwise, the student fails the area. If there is disagreement about passing, the writer and reader will discuss the answer(s) and try to reach consensus. If they are unsuccessful, a second reader will be used to break the tie. If the second reader's grade is 3.0 or greater, the student passes the area; otherwise, the student fails the area.

Passing

Every subject area must be passed in order to “pass comps” and advance to doctoral candidacy. If a student fails 3 or fewer areas, the student may resolve those failed areas as described below. **If a student fails more than 3 areas, the student fails comps outright for the semester.** In that case, the student **must retake the entire exam** the next semester in which comps are offered.

Resolving Failed Areas

If a failed area received a rating of 1, the student will be given a new question to answer for that area in a closed-book 2-hour exam session. **This process must be completed within a four-week period following notification of comps results.** Students are encouraged to seek feedback from the writer and reader to understand why the answer was significantly deficient.

If a failed area received a rating of 2, the student will retake the same question and resolve any deficiencies in a closed-book 2-hour exam session. The student must meet (in person or electronically) with the writer and reader **within two weeks of notification** of comps results to discuss answer deficiencies. **This process must be completed within a four-week period following notification of comps results.**

Answers will be graded as pass/fail. If both the writer and reader agree the new answer is a pass, the student passes the area. If there is disagreement about passing, the writer and reader will discuss the answer(s) and try to reach consensus. If they are unsuccessful, a second reader will be used to break the tie. If the second reader's grade is a pass, the student passes the area; otherwise, the student fails the area.

All areas must be passed for the student to pass comps for the semester. Not resolving all failed areas means that the student fails comps for the semester and must retest.

Retesting

If a student fails comps for the semester, the student must retest the next semester in which comps are offered. As discussed under “Passing”, this retest may involve the entire exam or only those areas that were not resolved successfully. The student will answer new questions under closed-book conditions. If the student failed an elective area, the student may select a different elective area for their retest. However, if a new elective area is chosen, this still constitutes a “retest” (i.e., there will not be another opportunity to retest in this new area).

As students are allowed only two opportunities to take and pass comps, the student must pass all areas upon retesting. The same conditions for resolving a failed area apply.

If a student fails comps a second time, the I-O faculty will review the student’s responses to questions from all subject areas from both comps administrations. The I-O faculty will then collectively make a final summary determination as to whether the responses reflect sufficient expertise to pass comps or whether the student fails comps and will be dismissed from the graduate program.

Policy on Elective Comps Areas

This policy statement is intended to articulate the current approach agreed upon by the I-O faculty for the selection of elective areas and to serve as a guide to students in selection of their four elective areas.

1. Topics for which we currently offer a doctoral seminar are eligible (e.g., careers, team effectiveness, occupational health psychology, selection, training, work-family).
2. Topics for which we do not currently offer a doctoral seminar, but that are commonly included as chapters in introductory I-O psychology textbooks are eligible (e.g., motivation).
3. One of the 4 elective areas can be narrower in scope than the topics described in points 1 and 2 if the topic is the subject of the student’s dissertation. The purpose of this option is to give the student the opportunity to read more deeply in an area than would be expected of the otherwise competent student and to connect the material with his/her intended dissertation topic. For example, a student pursuing a dissertation on underemployment, which falls within the broader topic of careers, could take a question on underemployment instead of careers. A student pursuing a dissertation on the use of simulation techniques to train surgeons could take a question on simulation techniques instead of training. A student conducting a dissertation on counterproductive work behavior (CWB) could opt for a question on CWB instead of occupational health psychology.
4. A narrow topic deemed acceptable for one student does not mean that the same topic is acceptable for a subsequent student.
5. A topic should not be a subsection of another selected optional topic (e.g., students cannot select personality and negative affect as 2 of their 4 areas). Students can select two topics for

which we have two doctoral seminars (see point 1 above) that share some overlap (e.g., assessment centers and selection).

6. The combining of two elective topics to form a third topic area is not acceptable (e.g., students cannot select personality, selection, and personality in selection as three of their four optional areas).

7. Students are encouraged to span both the I and the O side of I-O psychology in selecting their elective areas and should do so in consultation with their major professor.

¹Students completing the OHP concentration must take OHP as one of their four elective areas.

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