

**Addendum to Handbook**

**Graduate Program of Sociology**

**Department of Sociology  
University of Colorado at Boulder**

Cohort Year 2017

## **Guidance for SOCY Students Preparing for the Specialty Comprehensive Exam**

**Revised December 2018, Implemented for All Cohorts**

***Note that these recommendations are not intended to replace your advisor's guidance, but rather to provide general guidelines that may be useful. You should consult with your advisor to see if they have other suggestions or different ways of proceeding.***

The goals of the specialty comp exam are: (1) to demonstrate broad knowledge in three areas of sociology, as a way of demonstrating expertise and preparation to teach and conduct research in those areas, (2) to exhibit high-level writing and thinking skills to integrate and critically engage with large literatures, and (3) to read deeply in a student's areas of interest working towards identifying a dissertation topic. See your Graduate Handbook: <https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/students/graduate-students/resources>. Students may petition the Graduate Committee for exceptions to the guidelines based on their specific circumstances.

General guidance:

1. The exam should be completed after you have finished your 45 hours of graduate course work but before the start of your fifth year in the program.
2. Start by choosing your three specialty areas within sociology. These areas should be fairly broad—for ideas, you can look at the list of ASA sections at <http://www.asanet.org/asa-communities/asa-sections>. Many students dedicate up to one third of each area's list to readings that are more narrowly focused on their specific interests (e.g., one third of the readings on a sociology of health list might be on the student's particular interest area of smoking). Most likely, the areas of focus will be related to your eventual dissertation. If you are enrolled in a graduate certificate program, make sure to check whether there are requirements about the topics or format of your specialty comp exam.
3. In consultation with your advisor, identify your five-person committee (of which at least three members must be tenure-track faculty in our department), usually consisting of three primary members who write questions and grade the exam, and two secondary members who weigh in if there is disagreement. Make sure that your committee has at least one faculty member who is competent to write exam questions in each of your three specialty areas. When you approach a faculty member to ask them to serve on your committee, specify if you would like them to be a primary or secondary member and let them know what the specified role will entail for your comp exam. Your adviser should help you decide about primary versus secondary members and about what the people in each role will be doing for the exam.
4. Using other students' exam lists as templates, begin building your reading list in each area. The list should include texts that represent core readings in your subfield, although part of the list can be tailored more to your specific research interests. The list can include readings you have done for classes, readings people have recommended to you, and other readings you identify that look interesting. Consider searching the internet for existing lists in your specialty areas to get more ideas. The length of the list depends on the ratio of articles to books. If the list is mostly articles, you might aim to have about 35-40 readings per area, for a total of about 100-120 readings for the exam. These numbers go down as more books are on the lists relative to articles. The first draft of the lists should be shorter, perhaps 25-30 readings per area, because committee members will likely ask you to include additional readings.
5. With your advisor's approval, circulate the list to your committee members for additional suggestions. When your committee agrees that your list is comprehensive, each committee member must indicate approval on a signature form. Alternatively, you may receive approval via email from committee members, copied to the graduate program coordinator.

Link to webpage with Specialty Area Reading List Approval Report:

<http://www.colorado.edu/sociology/students/graduate-students/forms-deadlines>

6. Once the committee members are satisfied with the list, please file the following two pieces of paperwork with the graduate program coordinator at least 3 weeks before your exam:

Doctoral Exam Report (this form is used for comps and dissertation; the graduate program coordinator will submit this form, once committee member names and the time of exam are supplied):

<https://www.colorado.edu/graduateschool/sites/default/files/attached-files/docexam-fillable.pdf>

Candidacy Application (student completes this form):

[https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/sites/default/files/attached-files/candidacy\\_application\\_form.pdf](https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/sites/default/files/attached-files/candidacy_application_form.pdf)

7. You should typically give yourself one semester or one summer after the list is approved and before you take the exam, to devote time to reading your list. Make sure to spread the reading out, perhaps aiming for two articles per day. But do not spread the reading out over too long a period, or you may forget details of the readings. There are effective memory retrieval practices that can be useful; see <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/retrieval-practice/> or <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2016/06/learning-memory.aspx>. A semester or summer tends to be ideal. Take a lot of notes, and have your notes in a searchable format. This could be as simple as using Microsoft Word to take notes on each reading, adding key words to the notes that help you search for the information easily using the “Find” command.
8. Complete your readings at least a week or two before the exam, so that you have time to integrate the bodies of literature you have read, taking notes as you go. For each area, consider questions such as: What are the broader conversations and debates occurring in this subfield? What does this literature do a good job explaining? What is missing? What are the most important areas for future research? What assumptions does the literature rely on, and are they reasonable assumptions? What methods are most frequently used in this literature, and what are the pros and cons of those approaches? Which theories and explanations do you find the most and the least compelling, and why?
9. As you start to read your list, work with your advisor to set exam dates. The exam is intended to take approximately 8 hours to write each of the 3 responses, but you have one week (e.g., Friday at noon to the following Friday at noon) to complete the exam and return your responses. The grading standard remains the same as in the past. You are responsible for scheduling the exam, usually by emailing your committee members to check the dates with them. Decide on where you will write your exam, consider how best to set up your workspace, and discuss time management strategies with your advisor. You will receive your entire exam at the start of the week and turn in the whole exam at the end of the week.
10. Your responses should each be in the range of 10 to 12 double-spaced pages per area (not including references), but this may vary depending on your advisor and committee. Also ask how many question options there will be for each area. Typically there is either one question, or your choice of two.
11. Before writing the exam, consider using some time to outline your response and make sure your core arguments are clear. Students approach the writing differently, but it may be useful to draft your main arguments first, then go back to fill in citations and add specific examples from the literature. Make sure you are backing up your exam responses as you write them in case your computer crashes. Ask your advisor if you should be providing reference lists for each question or one list for the entire exam.
12. Make sure you have addressed each part of the question and made clear and cohesive arguments in your response. Showing that you can use literature to craft a compelling argument may be more important for graders than how many or which specific citations you use to support your points.
13. Your exam will typically take several weeks to grade. Before the exam, we recommend that you talk to your advisor about how the exam will be evaluated.