

Guidance for SOCY Students Preparing for the Specialty Comprehensive Exam

Revised April 2021, Implemented for All Cohorts

The aim of the comprehensive exams is for graduate students to 1) demonstrate broad knowledge and proficiency in two sociological subfields; 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 as they work toward identifying a dissertation topic and thereby gain a more sophisticated understanding of the discipline as a whole. Ideally, students will be able to use the knowledge gained from this process as they develop their dissertation proposals. See your Graduate Handbook for the most complete guidelines:

<https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/students/graduate-students/resources>.

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 two specialty areas within sociology. Please look at the list of ASA sections. Most likely, the areas of focus will be related to your eventual dissertation.
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. 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.
4. The reading lists for the areas that are offered will be posted on the department website. You may tailor these lists to your specific interest by adding 10-12 readings of your choice, or about 15% of the total list. You
5. With your advisor's approval, circulate the list to your committee members. When your committee agrees that your list is acceptable, 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

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. 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. You are responsible for scheduling the exam, usually by emailing your committee members to check the dates with them. 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 12-15 double-spaced pages per question (not including references).
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.
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.

Comprehensive Exams Process Specifics

By September 30, 2021, there will be a list of comprehensive exam areas on the department website, along with faculty who serve as primaries and secondaries in those areas. These areas will generally correspond to sections within the American Sociological Association. Students will comp in 2 of the listed areas.

Department affiliates (sociology or closely related PhDs in other departments who regularly serve on comprehensive exam and dissertation committees) will be given the option of listing themselves and looking over reading lists and will usually serve as secondary members. However, because service on comprehensive exam committees is optional for department affiliates, students should plan to find out which affiliates in their areas of interest are available.

Students can petition the Graduate Committee to do an exam in a different subfield if they can find a department faculty member or a department willing to serve as a primary for that section.

The comprehensive exam committee is not the same as the dissertation committee. Students may want to form their comprehensive exam committee with an eye toward the dissertation committee, but they do not have to continue with those same committee members.

Composition of the Comp Committee and Responsibilities of Committee Members

Each of the Comp Exam areas will have designated primary and secondary faculty (again, to be listed on the department website). A maximum of one primary member of the committee may be a department affiliate. At least three members of the committee (including the advisor) must be tenured or tenure track faculty members in the Department of Sociology. All committee members must hold current (regular or special) Graduate Faculty appointments. Emeritus and retired faculty and instructors therefore cannot serve on comprehensive exam committees unless they hold a current Graduate Faculty appointment.

Students decide on their 2 areas and then can ask faculty members from each of those areas to serve as primary/secondary members of the committee. This means that designated primary and secondary faculty commit to serving on committees in areas where they are listed, if asked. The student's advisor will chair the committee and serve as a primary member. If the advisor is not an expert in the 2 areas, they will serve in the overall chair role and as a third primary, reading and providing feedback on both sections. If the advisor is a primary for one of the areas, they should still have an overall supervisory role and provide feedback on the other area.

Students will be required to have one secondary committee member from outside the department. This outside committee member can be a tenure track or tenured faculty member from any department. The student should be sure to convey to the faculty member what serving on their comprehensive exam committee entails (i.e., usually just suggesting a few readings, perhaps reviewing the exam questions in advance, and being ready to grade the exam in the event that the primaries cannot agree on a grade). Students are responsible for finding out about department affiliates and outside members who would be available to serve on committees.

Primary committee members' responsibilities include: developing and maintaining core reading lists in consultation with other faculty in the area, creating exam questions, and grading the exam in consultation with the other primary.

The chair of the committee (the advisor) is responsible for soliciting questions from the other primary faculty (and editing them if necessary), setting the timeline for the exam in consultation with the student and the other faculty, and sending the exam to the student on the agreed date (see appendix below for suggested language for when the exam is sent to the student). The chair is also responsible for maintaining timely and regular communication with the full committee, to ensure that, for example, members have access to the final reading lists, are aware of the dates for the exam and the grading process, etc.

Reading Lists

As noted above, the designated primary faculty will be responsible for maintaining an up-to-date core reading list for their area. Ideally, faculty in each of the areas will work together to do so. Core reading lists will be a mix of the canonical readings in a subfield as well as important new readings.

Reading lists may vary in length, depending on whether the list is heavier on books and articles. Core lists will be posted on the department website for students to access and use. For lists that mix articles and books, lists should be in the range of 40-50 readings. Book heavy lists could be in the range of 25-30 readings. Students then may tailor the list to their specific research interests—adding another 10-12 readings or about 15% of the total.

Under this new approach, students are encouraged to take their comps in the core areas as established by the department. In the rare instance where students petition the Graduate Committee to take an exam in a subfield not currently offered by the department are responsible for making their own reading list, in consultation with the department faculty or affiliate agreeing to serve as a primary member for that section.

Comp Questions and Answers

Students have one week to take the Exam. Students should answer one question per section. They will choose from two possible questions. Chairs are responsible for writing questions in their area and collecting questions from the other primary member. Students are expected to draw extensively from appropriate readings on their lists (unless otherwise specified). The length of answers should be **a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 15 pages**, double-spaced and excluding references. Longer answers are not allowed because this results in equity issues—for example, an answer that is substantially longer than 15 pages might be more likely to result in a high pass.

Grading and Feedback

Students will receive a grade for each question as well as an overall grade for the exam. The grading system will be similar to before. Evaluation options include:

- high pass,
- pass,
- revise and resubmit, or
- fail.

The primary committee members grade each of the questions individually and then assign an overall grade for the exam. If one or both of the questions is judged as an R&R, the revision should happen within 30 days and the exam will be considered a fail until that happens. If students fail one or both questions, the whole exam is considered a fail, and they must retake the exam within one year. The primary members should agree on the grade for the questions and the exam overall. If the primary members are not able to agree on the grade for a question or the overall grade, or if the primaries think that one of the questions should be revised, the secondary committee members will be asked to weigh in and the majority will decide the grade. If the exam has been retaken and the primary members think it is a fail, the secondary members should weigh in on the final decision (and the majority of the committee will decide). The committee members should grade the exam within **3 weeks** of receiving the answers from the student.

Implementation

- Students taking their comprehensive exams in spring, summer, and fall 2021 may choose to reduce their exams to 2 areas, but they will still develop their own reading lists. They should be encouraged to choose areas that are part of the ASA subfield list and to aim for reading lists that will likely be similar to standardized lists.

- The Department Chair will ask faculty at the end of the spring 2021 semester to specify their primary and secondary areas and along with the Graduate Committee will create a list of the areas for which we have faculty readers. During the fall 2021 semester, faculty will develop the core lists for those areas.
- Subject areas will be posted on the department website by September 30, 2021 and reading lists will be posted by December 1, 2021. This new process will be used by students who plan to take their comprehensive exams from December 1, 2021 onward.

List of ASA Sections

ASA SECTIONS

- AGING AND THE LIFE COURSE
- ALTRUISM, MORALITY, AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY
- ANIMALS AND SOCIETY
- ASIA AND ASIAN AMERICA
- CHILDREN AND YOUTH
- COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
- COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES, AND MEDIA SOCIOLOGY
- COMMUNITY AND URBAN SOCIOLOGY
- COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY
- CRIME, LAW, AND DEVIANCE
- DISABILITY IN SOCIETY
- DRUGS AND SOCIETY
- ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY
- ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY
- ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND CONVERSATION ANALYSIS
- EVOLUTION, BIOLOGY, AND SOCIETY
- FAMILY
- GLOBAL AND TRANSNATIONAL SOCIOLOGY
- HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY
- INEQUALITY, POVERTY, AND MOBILITY
- INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION
- LABOR AND LABOR MOVEMENTS
- LATINA/O SOCIOLOGY
- MARXIST SOCIOLOGY
- MATHEMATICAL SOCIOLOGY
- MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY
- METHODOLOGY
- ORGANIZATIONS, OCCUPATIONS, AND WORK
- PEACE, WAR, AND SOCIAL CONFLICT
- POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE WORLD-SYSTEM
- POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY
- RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS
- RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITIES
- RATIONALITY AND SOCIETY
- SCIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND TECHNOLOGY
- SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY
- SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE AND PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY
- SOCIOLOGY OF BODY AND EMBODIMENT
- SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMERS AND CONSUMPTION
- SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE
- SOCIOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT
- SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION
- SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS
- SOCIOLOGY OF HUMAN RIGHTS
- SOCIOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND NATIVE NATIONS (SECTION-IN-FORMATION)
- SOCIOLOGY OF LAW
- SOCIOLOGY OF MENTAL HEALTH
- SOCIOLOGY OF POPULATION
- SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION
- SOCIOLOGY OF SEX AND GENDER
- SOCIOLOGY OF SEXUALITIES
- TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOCIOLOGY
- THEORY