

Montana State University
Graduate School Policies and Procedures

Current Policy

Comprehensive Examination



The comprehensive examination is the major academic examination during the doctoral study that assures that the student has attained sufficient mastery of their discipline. Some departments use the passing of the comprehensive examination as the qualifying examination that admits the doctoral student to candidacy. This examination is valid for five (5) years from the term of successful completion.

Note: See [Video Conferencing Policy](#).

WRITTEN AND ORAL — The comprehensive examination requirements are department specific. In the case where a department has written and oral examinations, the graduate committee will determine if the student has passed or failed the requirements. A student must have an approved [Graduate Program of Study & Committee](#) form on file with The Graduate School prior to sitting for any portion of the comprehensive examination or dissertation defense. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that all committee members, including the graduate representative if applicable, are available when scheduling the comprehensive examination. See [Optional Graduate Representative](#).

MINIMUM REGISTRATION — The student must be registered for a minimum of three (3) credits at MSU during the term in which the examination is taken. If the student wishes to sit for the comprehensive examination during the time between terms, then the student must be registered for a minimum of three (3) credits in the term prior to or immediately following the time between terms.

DEADLINE — The last day to take the comprehensive examination is on or before the fourteenth (14th) business day prior to the end of the term the student intends to graduate.

COMMITTEE REPRESENTATION — See [Committee](#)

GRADING — The comprehensive examination is graded with either a passing or failing grade determined by a majority vote of the student's approved graduate committee.

REPORTING THE RESULTS — The graduate committee and department head are responsible for submitting written notice of the results of the comprehensive examination to the student and to The Graduate School no later than five (5) business days after the examination is held or

after each section is administered. The [Report on Comprehensive Exam/Dissertation Defense](#) is to be submitted to The Graduate School by the department, not the student.

FAILED EXAMINATION — The student is allowed two (2) total attempts to pass the comprehensive examination. At least six (6) months must elapse before the second (2nd) attempt at the examination. Failure to pass the second (2nd) attempt results in termination of graduate study and dismissal from the academic program. Students who are dismissed from the program due to a second (2nd) failed attempt are ineligible to reapply to the same degree program.

Revised Policy

Mastery of Foundations¹ Examination for Doctoral Students

This is a major academic examination whose intent is to assure that the student has attained sufficient mastery of the foundations of their discipline. Departments may use the outcome of this examination as a condition for the student to prepare their research proposal. This examination is valid for five (5) years from the term of successful completion.

Note: See [Video Conferencing Policy](#).

WRITTEN AND/OR ORAL — The administering of the mastery of foundations examination, written and/or oral, is department specific. Regardless, the student's doctoral committee or a general faculty committee will determine the outcome of the exam(s). If the examinations are linked, the student should refer to the departmental handbook for procedural information. A student must have an approved [Graduate Program of Study & Committee](#) form on file with The Graduate School prior to sitting for any portion of the examination. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that all committee members, including the graduate representative if applicable, are available when scheduling any portion of the examination. See [Optional Graduate Representative](#).

MINIMUM REGISTRATION — The student must be registered for a minimum of three (3) credits at MSU during the term (fall, spring, summer) in which any portion of the mastery of foundations examination is taken. If the student wishes to sit for the examination during the time between terms, then the student must be registered for a minimum of three (3) credits at MSU in the term prior to or immediately following the time between terms.

DEADLINE — The last day to take any portion of the mastery of foundations examination is on or before the fourteenth (14th) business day prior to the end of the term the student intends to graduate.

¹ This exam also may be known as a "comprehensive examination" or "qualifying examination"

COMMITTEE REPRESENTATION — See [Committee](#)

OUTCOME — The outcome of the mastery of foundations examination unless otherwise stated in the departmental handbook is either pass or fail as determined by a majority vote of the administering committee. Each portion of the exam may have its own outcome and in some cases, the outcome of one portion may negate sitting for the other portion of the exam. The student is advised to refer to the department's handbook. Also See Failed Outcome.

REPORTING THE OUTCOME — The outcome of the mastery of foundations examination must be reported to the Graduate School and will become a part of student's record. If the portions (written, oral) are linked, one outcome is reported.

The student's doctoral or general faculty committee and the department head are responsible for submitting a written notice of the outcome of the examination to the student and to the Graduate School no later than five (5) business days after the examination is held or after each portion is administered (if the portions are not linked). The Report on Mastery of Foundations Exam/Dissertation Defense form is to be submitted to the Graduate School by the responsible party, not the student.

FAILED OUTCOME — The student is allowed two (2) total attempts to take and secure a positive outcome the mastery of foundations examination. The first opportunity to take the 2nd and final attempt is the start of the next term (unless specified differently in the departmental handbook). The 2nd and final attempt may not be taken in the same term as the research proposal or defense of dissertation. The student must be registered for a minimum of three (3) credits at MSU during the term in which the second (2nd) attempt at the examination occurs.

Failure to pass the second (2nd) attempt results in dismissal from the academic program. Students who are dismissed from the program due to a second (2nd) failed attempt are ineligible to reapply to the same degree program.