Solid Earth Geophysics Supplement to the UAF Department of Geosciences
Comprehensive Exam Guidelines
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How is this document used?
This document should be provided to (1) students who are intending to take the Solid Earth concentration of the MS or PhD in Geophysics and (2) committee members of these students. This document is available online at http://www.uaf.edu/files/geology/solid_earth_comps.pdf

UAF guidelines and Department of Geosciences guidelines

The UAF requirements for graduate degrees can be found here:
http://uaf.edu/catalog/current/graduate/grad1.html
http://uaf.edu/catalog/current/graduate/grad2.html

The comprehensive exam report is downloadable from the Graduate School:
http://www.uaf.edu/gradsch/forms/

The MS/PhD Geophysics curriculum is here:
http://www.uaf.edu/catalog/current/programs/geophysics.html

A comprehensive exam is required within the Department of Geosciences, which has established these guidelines for the MS and PhD exams:
http://www.uaf.edu/files/geology/geosciences_comps_ms.pdf
http://www.uaf.edu/files/geology/geosciences_comps_phd.pdf

Here we explain the comprehensive exam procedures for the Solid Earth concentration for the MS/PhD degree in Geophysics.

MS Geophysics (Solid Earth concentration)

The comprehensive exam needs to be completed before the semester in which the student will graduate. In general, it should be taken as soon as possible once the most relevant coursework for the student’s research topic is completed, and ideally before the end of their second year. MS students take an oral comprehensive exam.

A thesis proposal is required as part of the oral exam. The thesis proposal is due to the committee at least one week before the date of the oral exam; prior to this time the student should discuss and review the proposal with their advisor. The thesis proposal should be 10-15 pages of figures and single-spaced text, in addition to references. The proposal should provide a clear plan for the entire thesis that contains:

1. an explanation of the scientific problem(s)
2. a review of relevant background literature
3. an explanation and documentation of methods to be used or data to be acquired
4. preliminary results
5. the plan for carrying out the research work needed to complete the thesis (with a rough timeline).

The oral exam will begin with a presentation by the student, which should cover some or all of the material within the thesis proposal. The presentation should be about 30 minutes in length and address the categories listed for the thesis proposal. The committee will then ask the student questions about the thesis proposal and any relevant background material related to the student’s research topic. The formal assessment of the oral exam—Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail—will take into account both the thesis proposal and the oral exam.
PhD Geophysics (Solid Earth concentration)

Students should try to complete their comprehensive exam after they have completed the coursework needed for their project, and ideally before the end of their second year in the program. PhD students must take both a written and an oral comprehensive exam. These two parts do not have to be done immediately after the other; the written exam may be taken a few weeks before the oral exam.

The **written exam** will have three parts. Each part will be taken within a 3-hour time limit, with the entire exam to be taken within a single (M-F) week. The exam will be “open-book,” including access to internet and computational resources (if needed). When appropriate for the topic, parts of the exam may be designated as “closed-book”. The topics for the exam, typically three, will be as specified on the student’s Graduate Study Plan. Written exams are graded pass/fail, although the student should expect some follow-up questions in the oral exam based on their answers to the written exam. Students can expect to receive feedback from their committee on the written exam performance before the oral exam.

A **thesis proposal** is required as part of the oral exam and is described in the MS requirements. The length should be 15-20 pages, in addition to references.

The **oral exam** will begin with a presentation by the student, which should cover some or all of the material within the thesis proposal. (Note: A formal external examiner is required, as per UAF guidelines.) The presentation should be 30-45 minutes and should address the categories listed in the thesis proposal. The committee will then ask the student questions about the thesis proposal and any relevant background material related to the student’s general field of study. This questioning should include any areas of concern raised by the student’s answers to the written exam. The formal assessment of the oral exam—Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail—will take into account both the thesis proposal and the oral exam.

**Recommendations for the (PhD) written exam for student and committee**

- The written exam should be based on the topics specified in the Graduate Study Plan. These topics are established at the first committee meeting at the end of the first year. The topics may need to be modified in subsequent years, and these modifications should be documented in the paperwork, after discussion between the student and committee. Ideally there should be three topics in the GSP.
- The comprehensive exam, including the written exam, may include any material that the student has been exposed to in courses, seminars and their research.
- The committee should establish the examination questions 2 weeks prior to the examination date.
- All members of the committee should have an opportunity to review and discuss the questions.
- Each section of the exam should clearly indicate the instructions regarding the time limit, the availability of resources (e.g., Matlab allowed, books, internet, pdf files, etc) and the manner in which the exam is to be completed (e.g., hand-written, typed, access to printer, etc).
- It is the student’s responsibility to have all materials that they wish to access be available at the time of the written exam.
- The student’s written exam should be graded by the Committee within 2 weeks after the exam is taken. (Note that the oral exam can occur any time after the written exam, including before the written exam is graded.)
- An assessment of Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail will be given for each section of the exam.
- The overall assessment (Pass, Conditional Pass, Fail) will be determined by the Committee. If the student is given a conditional pass on the written exam, the student must be given clear actions in the Comprehensive Exam Report.
- The student should meet with each examiner to review his/her exam, especially in the case of a Conditional Pass (or Fail) on a section of the exam.