Comprehensive Exam Guidelines

Department specific

Department of Geology & Geophysics

Ph.D. Students

The Ph.D. comprehensive exam should be conducted soon after the student has completed the coursework listed on the Graduate Study Plan.

The comprehensive exam consists of a written exam followed by an oral exam.

The oral exam requires an outside examiner appointed by UAFs Graduate School Dean.

Determine and agree on the subject areas in which the student will be examined (listed in the GSP). The subject areas are based on students' course work and doctoral research. Typically committee members distribute the responsibility of examining in different subject areas identified.

Written examination practices vary between programs. You are encouraged to have the written exam spread over a couple of days. It is common (i) to examine a student eg. in four different subject areas on four different days within a week or two, and (ii) for each committee member to provide a list of 2 to 4 questions on the selected subject area to the committee chair, who could then administer the written exam.

Each committee member should provide the student with a reading list and clarify his/her expectations.

It is a committees decision whether the written exam should be close book or open book. The committee members also decide whether they would like to give the student access to the internet or not during the written exam. The nature and complexity of the questions, and the following assessment should vary according to this choice. Typically exams where the student has access to the internet should be longer in duration with expectation of substantial depth in the written responses. Committee members should evaluate the written response and communicate their opinion/result to the committee chair.

The oral exam should start with a presentation of the PhD research work completed so far by the student. Though it is not required, this part of the exam can be / should be encouraged to be public. This is a good training for the candidate for the final defense and also facilitates constructive feedback from a small keen audience. It should be followed by a 'close door' oral exam with the committee and external examiner.

The oral examination is an opportunity for the committee to judge the students comfort level in the broader subject area related to a candidates research. It also allows the members to ask for clarification or pose follow-up questions related to the written examination. It is good idea to block 3 to 4 hours in your schedule for an oral comprehensive exam.

Complete and submit relevant paperwork (report on comprehensive exam; external examiners report; advancement to candidacy form). Conditional pass / fail may have consequences (greater for international students), so discuss this with Dept chair and grad school if you are unsure.