

MSU Philosophy Department Graduate Program Best Practices & Comps FAQ [updated: 11/28/2023]

Any Advice Upfront?

- All students are advised to look over the handbook. This is a useful tool for committee members as well. The latest handbook is on the Department's website: <https://philosophy.msu.edu/graduate/graduate-resources/>
- A short form of important program signposts – the “Cheat Sheet” – is available on the same web page.
- The GradDirector has overseen past comps processes and can offer helpful advice. The GradDirector also is the final approver of all committees and signs off on milestones. Accordingly, the GradDirector should be cc'd on emails regarding committee decisions, milestones, exams, policies, fellowships and any other matter related to the graduate program.

What are the Goals of the Graduate Program Related to Comps (from the Handbook)?

Students in our program are expected to be developing, to a professional level, the following capacities and competences.

- To read philosophical texts both canonical and current, closely and accurately, with mastery of distinctive terminology and recognizing distinctive kinds of argumentation.
- To discern and articulate philosophical issues and questions that arise in or are pertinent to those texts.
- To engage skillfully in philosophical conversation, comment, and critique.
- To make a substantial contribution of their own to the discourses within the discipline (and as appropriate to the student's interests, across disciplines) both within the student's area of specialization and over a range both historical and topical that is considerably wider than that area.
- To write philosophical essays that clearly articulate views, positions and arguments in the literature and clearly articulate the author's own views, positions and arguments; effectively to present philosophical positions, doctrines and arguments orally.

What is the Goal of Comps?

The department decided years ago to conceive of comps as a transition to the dissertation. Most US philosophy departments that are not focused on one particular area prefer this version over comprehensive exams that only cover seminars taken in the program. The comps exam should enable students to get a broad and basic foundation for entering phase II in our program.

Do I need to have a Dissertation Committee for Comps?

No. The guidance committee that was in place for phase I in the program usually also is the committee for comps. However, students who prepare for comps should begin to think about the members of their guidance committees after phase I; i.e., their dissertation committees. Note: though this can be

confusing, dissertation committees are still called “guidance committees”! Though it is not necessary to have the dissertation committee in place for comps, it is highly recommended that at least the guidance committee chair will also be the dissertation advisor. Note that the committee can still be changed at any time.

When is it Done?

According to the department’s milestones, comps should be done by the end of the 7th semester in the program. Note that students who are in danger of not having done comps by the end of their 10th semester in the program will receive a dismissal warning letter from the GradDirector. Comps should be done once a student has finished course work. Students can still take 1-2 classes during comps preparation. In these cases summers should be taken into account for preparatory work. It is recommended to devote one semester to comps.

What is in the Comps Memo?

Comps must be shared with a memo; former memos can be found in the Sharepoint folder system of the graduate program; the memo should contain the following.

- The reading list(s)
- An abstract of the comps areas by the student
- Conditions (detailing any accommodations) and timeline for completion and evaluation

Note that the comps memo should contain a passage that acknowledges possible alterations to the timeline necessitated by emergencies, family issues, health, etc. (see also the passage below on accessibility)

What are the Filing Requirements?

According to MSU regulations, comps need to be filed. GradSecretary and GradDirector need the following.

- An email from the student’s chair confirming that the student passed and the date on which you passed.
- A copy of the comps memo (will be filed for other committees to be consulted).
- a copy of the student’s written comps exam (will be filed in the student’s folder).

Note that, although, according to MSU policies, the main component of the comps exam needs to be done in writing, an oral component can be required by the student's committee.

Note that if students intend to do comps during summer, they need to be enrolled at the minimum required level in either spring or fall.

How is Comps Done?

The format of the comps process should be negotiated between student and committee. Possible formats are as follows.

- A sit-down examination taken without access to books and notes on a single date, normally a 6-hour examination (two 3-hour sessions with a lunch break).
- A take-home written exam offering a number of questions from which the student chooses an assigned number, taken in a set period of time (10-21 days would be usual); usually three essays around 3600-4200 words.
- A take-home written exam offering a number of questions from which the student chooses an assigned number, taken over the course of one semester (around 6 weeks for each essay), length: usually three essays around 3600-4200 words.
- One longer essay, which might be a critical survey of the literature covered by the reading list, with a focus on some particular topic(s) or thread(s) within it. The student will be given a title or topic, suggestions or instructions, a length and firm due date. This would normally be a 9-12 week project; expected length: 10,000-15,000 words.
- A critical review of the existing literature in a particular field if the dissertation area warrants it and requires a very specialized approach.

Are there any Recommendations for the Comps Format?

In cases in which students have a very clear vision and prep-work for the dissertation, a one essay exam with a substantial use of research literature might work best; in cases in which students need more orientation and background the 3 essays with more primary material should be preferred (I understand that the difference between primary and secondary sources can be difficult to be made in certain fields and discussions).

How do we Improve the accessibility of the comps process?

The department of philosophy is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs and activities: accommodations and needs should be a priority. We want to create an atmosphere in which students should be able to freely speak about their needs.

- Should the student wish to utilize their Accommodation Letter from RCPD, the student should contact their chair. Chair and students should discuss whether the remainder of the committee be notified about the Accommodation Letter. Accommodation Letters should be used in a timely fashion, ideally before the comps process begins.
- The student is entitled to request a meeting with an RCPD rep. The chair should ask the student whether such a meeting with the RCPD rep, chair, and/or committee is desired.
- Irrespective of whether the student has access to RCPD services, students' wishes and expressions of needs should nevertheless be given full consideration.
- Emergencies and family situations should be considered. For example, extensions to comps timelines should be granted on the basis of health or family issues.

What is Negotiable?

Almost everything! Our past praxis has been to avoid extreme pressures. Students should be challenged, but they should also feel comfortable with time limit(s) given for the exam.

Are there any Recommendations or is there Helpful Advice from Students who have Recently Done Comps?

- Develop your reading list with an eye to your dissertation.
- Review past comps memos. These memos also contain reading lists, and this can be helpful for getting an idea of what other graduate students in the program have done in the past.
- Consider a non-traditional structure for the exams; i.e., either write one essay of substantially higher quality and length; or write one essay at a time (read one list over four weeks, then write one essay in the following week, repeat two more times).
- Discuss and adjust with your guidance committee (chair) the comps memo. Preparing comps is not just getting the reading list together; make sure that you are on the same page with your committee on what your essays should look like and what will be expected of you. For example, are you expected to make a surprising/novel argument? Or just exegetical work? Something in between?