

## **Theory & Methods Qualifying Exam FAQs**

### **1. Who can I talk with if I have questions about the preparatory memo (given only for the Theory exam) or the Theory or Research Methods exam question?**

You may ask the chair of the relevant qualifying exam committee if you have questions about the logistics, process, or scheduling of the exam.

### **2. What happens if I get sick or have a family emergency the week I am writing the exam?**

Please contact the Graduate Program Director, who will be in touch with the chair(s) of the relevant committee(s) to adjust the deadline.

### **3. When are the Qualifying Exams?**

They are always written before the semester starts in August and before the semester starts in January. Dates of qualifying exams are available each summer to allow time to plan for writing the exam. Please consult the calendar provided to you by the department each year. You can also contact the Graduate Program Director for the specific dates of the written exam. Each committee will then schedule the oral exams based on student and faculty availability.

### **4. Why can't I talk with other graduate students or other faculty (outside of the committee) about my exam?**

Once you receive your exam(s), you cannot consult with your advisor, other faculty, or students. Each exam is a reflection of your own understanding of theories or methods and is to be written independently. If you have questions about the exam process, talk with the chair of the relevant qualifying exam committee.

Peers are a great source of support but may not be the best source of information about the process of qualifying exams. Qualifying exams change and a student's experience from a semester or a year or more prior may not be relevant. It is also possible that students repeat information that is inaccurate. For the best information about the process, please do consult with the chair of the exam committee.

### **5. What is the point of the Qualifying Exams?**

Great question! This is an opportunity for you to integrate knowledge you have gained through your courses and research experience throughout the program. It is a chance for you to show what you have learned as you think about your own research and work moving forward. There is also a TTU Graduate School requirement to have a milestone after completion of classes and prior to beginning dissertation work that marks the beginning of doctoral candidacy.

The oral portions of the exams allow you to clarify information in your written exam and to express your understanding of theories/methods. Speaking about your knowledge will be part of your academic and professional life in the future (oral defense of dissertation, teaching, conference presentations, professional meetings, community engagement).

#### **6. How can I best prepare for Theory Qualifying Exams?**

It is a great idea to talk with your advisor in the year leading up to your qualifying exams and make sure you have foundational knowledge as you prepare for the exams. Use the preparatory memo provided by the committee so you are ready when you receive the question. The question will not ask you to address all possible theories regarding human development or families. The memo will guide your preparations. If you have any questions about this memo as you prepare for the exam, please reach out to the chair of the qualifying exam committee for clarification.

#### **7. How can I best prepare for the Research Methods Qualifying Exams?**

For the methods exam, you will receive a published quantitative research article (which is the same for all students taking the exam that semester) along with a set of questions you will be asked to answer in your written exam. The exam has two major areas. One is to design your own (hypothetical) qualitative study to address the same research questions of the quantitative study (e.g., what are the determinants of adolescents' self-esteem?). You will thus need to know the concepts and criteria for good qualitative research you learned in your class. The second task is to critique the methodology of the article's quantitative study and say what methods you would use (again hypothetically) to improve the quality of the study. You will thus need to know key concepts regarding representative sampling, reliability and validity of measurement, criteria for inferring causality, and the statistical techniques you learned in your courses (QM I through IV). Practical ways to study for the methods exam include reviewing your lecture notes from relevant courses and chapters from methods textbooks. (Please note that the Research Methods Committee does not provide a preparatory memo leading up to the distribution of the methods question like the Theory Committee does.)

#### **8. Are Qualifying Exams stressful?**

Yes, exams can be stressful because they are a milestone marking your entry into doctoral candidacy. The exams are designed to assess your knowledge of some fundamental aspects of our field that you have been exposed to throughout your courses. Please know that faculty are aware that this can be a stressful time for students and do not wish to add to your stress in any way. When you take your oral exam, you will encounter a group of faculty who are rooting for you and believe in your ability to be successful.

#### **9. What happens if I do not pass my Qualifying Exam?**

If you receive a fail on your exam, you will receive a results memo from the committee detailing areas you need to work on for the second time you take the exam. You are welcome and encouraged to talk with committee members after you receive the results memo if you want clarification. You will then take the exam for a second time.

**10. What does it mean if I receive a deferred decision on my Qualifying Exam?**

A deferred decision means that much of your written and oral exam were clear and correct, but there is a portion of the question (written, oral, or in combination) that the committee would like more information about to clarify your understanding. You are welcome and encouraged to talk with committee members after you receive your results memo to gather more information if needed.

If you receive a deferred decision, you have 14 days within which to write your brief (3-page maximum) written response. You will email your response to the committee and there is not a second oral exam. The committee will then reach a decision based on the written response only.

**11. How does the committee determine if I pass or fail or receive a deferred decision on my qualifying exams?**

The HDFS Graduate Student Handbook has the criteria each committee (theory or methods) uses to evaluate your exam. Your result is a combination of your work on the written part of the exam and the oral part of the exam. Sometimes students may lack some clarity in what they have written, but they are readily able to answer questions from the committee in a sharper manner at the oral exam to show their understanding of the material. To pass the theory exam, these are the criteria that need to be met:

- Demonstrate critical thinking about theories and theoretical issues/constructs.
- Demonstrate understanding of (basic) theoretical issues at an abstract level (i.e., beyond the superficial description of concepts).
- Identify, explain, compare, contrast, assess, apply, and/or integrate multiple theoretical perspectives both within and across Human Development and Family Sciences theories.
- Support theoretical arguments and constructs with specific examples and evidence from scholarly literature.

To pass the research methods exam, these are the criteria listed in the Handbook:

- A solid foundation in basic research methods fundamentals as covered in the core course (Research Methods in HDFS) and additionally from the student's own research experiences (e.g., thesis, 7000 research).
- An understanding of qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures as covered in the core courses (Quantitative Methods I—IV in HDFS, and Qualitative Methods in HDFS).

- The ability to design research that adequately addresses research questions or hypotheses.
- A general understanding of the major methodological issues and controversies in family sciences and human development.
- Within the student's specialization area, a sophisticated understanding of methodological problems and the ability to discuss (with reference to specific articles in the literature) various solutions that have been offered to handle these problems, along with the strengths and weaknesses of each.
- Application of the above to critiques of the existing literature and to the development of an original proposal.
- The ability to write an exam paper that specifically addresses the exam question and that is well-organized.

Each committee discusses these criteria after your oral exam to make the determination of a pass, fail, or deferred decision.

A deferred decision is assigned when the committee deems that the exam is neither a pass nor fail. Often the deferred decision is assigned when a portion of the exam does not meet the above criteria, but the rest of the exam would be considered a pass. If you received a deferred decision, your results memo will outline what is being asked of you in your re-write of the exam.

You are encouraged to meet with the chair of the committee within three working days of being notified of the deferred decision. Then you will have 14 calendar days to address the concerns of the committee. Once the committee receives the revised response, they will have an updated decision (pass or fail) for you within two weeks. No oral exam is conducted with a deferred decision. The result is based solely on your written response.

## **12. What tips do you have for me while I write my exams?**

Remember to eat well and get sleep and exercise! Although you have much to do in the time given for your exams, you also need to take breaks for your mental and physical health. Please take care of yourself as you work on your exams.

Also, know there are no “hidden” questions in the exam. You are encouraged to answer the questions that are given and not additional questions that you think may be relevant. Adding extraneous information will be unlikely to be helpful in the outcome of your exam.

You are encouraged to read all of the instructions for the exam before you begin writing. If you begin working on your exam and you do not understand something, please reach out to the chairs of the committees for clarification. We want you to understand the questions so you can clearly answer them.

Make sure you leave enough time to proofread your exam before it is due. You may find it helpful to read your exam aloud to catch some grammatical errors or find places that lack clarity. Take time to check your APA format for references as well.

The 15-page limit does not include your title page, references, and diagrams. The body of your paper is to be 15 pages long.

### **13. What happens in the oral exam?**

You will be invited into a room where committee members are seated around a table; you will take a seat at the head of the table. The committee members will have read your exam with no name attached and only an R Number as an identifier. You will be asked if you have anything you'd like to change or add about your written exam since you will have had time to read and reflect. If you do not have anything to add, that's fine. If you have something you would like to clarify, you may take a few minutes to do so.

The committee members (some or all) will take turns asking you questions about your written exam. Committee members will rephrase questions to make sure they are clear and strive to make sure you and they understand each other. All of the questions will be related to your specific written exam.

You are encouraged to ask for clarification if you do not understand a question. You may take your time before responding if you like. If you need a minute to think about your response, it's fine to take the time to be thoughtful in your response.

The committee does not generally provide you with verbal feedback about your answers during the oral exam. The reason is that the committee will discuss the oral exam and your answers after your oral part is complete. Therefore, when you do receive feedback, there will be agreement and clarity among the committee. The committee would also like to provide the same experience to all students, therefore, they do not provide feedback during the exam.

The oral exam lasts no more than 30 minutes.

### **14. What can I bring with me to the oral exam?**

You are welcome to bring your written exam and notes you have written. You are allowed to refer to these as you answer questions. Some students find it helpful to have notes, but generally students are able to respond to questions based on their understanding of the concepts. In preparation for each oral exam, it's a good idea to re-read your exam paper.

#### **15. When do I get my exam results?**

Although committees will generally decide on their recommendations for each student's grade shortly after all the oral exams, a committee's recommendations must be ratified by the full HDFS faculty at the next available faculty meeting. At the full faculty meeting, the chair of the exam committee will read a letter that has been approved by the committee, recommending a pass, fail, or deferred result. A faculty vote will be held and, provided the faculty ratifies the committee recommendation, a copy of the recommendation letter will be transmitted to each student's advisor. The advisor will contact the student who will also receive the letter by email.