



## GRADUATE WRITING CENTER

### Comprehensive and Qualifying Exams

Some Texas Tech graduate programs have cumulative exams that determine a student's ability to progress towards their degree. The Graduate Writing Center offers support for these exams only with the prior written permission of the relevant faculty member(s) (e.g., committee chair, advisor, etc.). However, even with this permission, consultations on exams of any kind are limited to sentence-level issues like grammar and concision, rather than our usual approach, which includes more big-picture organization and brainstorming.

To support you in your Comprehensive or Qualifying Exam process outside of consultations, we have assembled the following resource with suggestions that you can work through individually whether you are studying for your exam, writing it, or revising it.

**Before the exam** The synthesis of sources for your exam begins long before the exam itself. Below are some suggestions on how to approach your exam during the studying phase:

*Familiarizing yourself with the literature* — Depending on your department, or even the members of your individual committee, expectations surrounding preparation for your exam will vary. In some cases, your committee members may provide a highly structured list of topics or individual sources you must become familiar with. Alternatively, you may be responsible for compiling your whole reading list. Many exams will include both required and student-compiled sources. Be sure to discuss expectations with your committee early in the exam preparation process so you can be sure you're on the right track.

Once you understand the goal of your reading list, compiling it can include practices like manually following interesting citations you find in other sources or using automated tools like [Research Rabbit](#), [Connected Papers](#), [Consensus](#), or [Publish or Perish](#). Pay special attention to sources from classes you have taken or your committee members' recent works.

*Making sense of your sources* — As you read more within your field, your perspective on the ideas and challenges in your field will also evolve. Because of this, it is likely that you will alternate between annotating, organizing and synthesizing your sources as you are preparing for the exam.

- Annotating — Taking notes on your material is an important, and often very personalized, step in the research process. In addition to the more detailed observations you might make while studying for your exams, scholars often compile informal annotated bibliographies for their own later reference. In creating an annotated bibliography entry:
  - Consider the entry as a memo to yourself: *Why* did I deem this source important?
  - Make sure to note all the elements that are relevant to you (methods, instruments, arguments, claims, findings, etc.).
  - Describe any notable strengths, novelties, or weaknesses of the source.
  - Don't forget to include citations
- Organizing — In parallel with annotation, it is important to group your sources in a way that supports your research. A few methods are listed below that can be used in conjunction with the annotated bibliography described above.

- Literature crosswalk (Matteson & Warren, 2020) — When you read sources for coursework or research, you will notice not only results or claims, but also variables, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and/or themes of interest. Tracking these as you go will help you more easily synthesize your knowledge for any future project, including your exams. [Matteson and Warren \(2020\)](#) offer an excellent, low-tech framework for organizing this information.
- Citation managers — Citation managers often include features that allow you to tag or otherwise label your sources according to topic, methodology, or other useful-to-you distinctions. For an overview of the current citation managers from the TTU library, see here: <https://guides.library.ttu.edu/citationmanagers>.
- Synthesizing — Comprehensive or qualifying exams aren't just about passing the exam; they're about preparing you to think holistically in the next phase of your academic or professional career. Look for connections, tensions, and differences as you are reading through your sources. You can use these observations to anticipate questions about the topics or connections that your committee might like you to reflect on in your exam.

*Asking for advice* — Your peers who have already done their exams, as well as the members of your committee and other trusted faculty, are wonderful resources for finding sources and strategies to help you prepare for your exam. Members of your cohort, lab, or research group may also have advice on determining what structure, length, depth, or specificity is likely to be expected in a particular advisor or committee member's question, and therefore in your answers. To get the most out of this advice, make efforts at your own synthesis first and check in throughout the process of studying for your exams as your understanding continues to evolve.

**During the exam process** The exam process is your opportunity to demonstrate the hard-won knowledge and perspectives you've gained in your studies thus far. However, taking the exam goes beyond just presenting the appropriate information; a scholarly approach includes paying attention to both *what* and *how* you are writing. Keep the following steps in mind as you work on your exam:

*Consider the question(s) carefully* — Ask yourself the following about each question in your exam:

- What are the main parts of the exam question?
  - Which elements need more attention than the others?
  - Which elements are equally important and need to be balanced?
- Which sources are relevant to the question?
  - How will you incorporate each of them?
  - Have you cited the key materials from your coursework and research on the topic(s)?
- How will you synthesize the relevant information?
  - Have you integrated information across disciplines, methodologies, findings, or committee members' research areas where it is applicable to the question(s)?

*Frame your answer* — Take a moment to restate the important elements of the question(s) in the opening paragraph of your answers. This will help you keep these elements in mind as you write your answer and when you revise it.

*Pace yourself* — Every writing process includes preparation, writing, and revising. Consider how much time these things usually take you and be sure to allot the appropriate time to each aspect.

*Acknowledge your limitations* — Once you have your degree, you will likely encounter situations that require you to use your knowledge and perspectives to tackle broader challenges. For this reason, comprehensive and qualifying exams may include opportunities to practice applying theory to new ideas or contexts. This allows the committee to understand your mastery of certain concepts or frameworks and your facility at applying them. If a question seems to go beyond the specifics of what you've studied for, it's okay — even encouraged — to acknowledge what you are and are not sure about and then describe what your next steps would be to address answering the question. For questions like these, what you can reason through is just as important as what you already know.

*Trust your gut* — You have studied for this. Now is the time to get your ideas out of your head and into your document. Don't fixate on perfection the first time around. You can always revise what you've written, but you can't edit a blank page.

*A note about oral exams* — If your exam includes an oral component, the above suggestions still apply. It is appropriate to take a moment to consider the question before beginning your answer, to reflect the key components of the question back to the examiners, and to address any oversights or needed adjustments if you realize you have neglected something in your answer.

**Once you have a draft** Congratulations, you've drafted answers to your comprehensive or qualifying exams! However, your first draft is rarely your final one. Before you submit your exam, take a few moments to ask yourself these revision questions:

- Does your answer display synthesis of the relevant concepts and literature?
  - Don't get lost in the weeds; stick to major themes and concept-mapping between them.
  - Be sure that any examples used support your larger argument.
  - Demonstrate how the principles you've studied in your discipline fit together from an aerial view.
- Can the reader easily tell where you transition from one element of the question(s) to another?
  - Questions often have multiple parts. Use the language of the question to help distinguish which part of the question you are addressing with your answer.
  - Don't be afraid to move things around – organizational changes can impact your argument. Reverse outlining can help you see what's already there and where you might have gaps: [Humanities](#), [STEM](#)
- Have you properly cited all key sources?
- Have you checked for and corrected any grammatical issues?

**Consultations** Consultations on comprehensive or qualifying exams are different than the Graduate Writing Center's typical consultations. As discussed above, consultants cannot work with you on exams at all without prior permission from the relevant faculty member(s). And during exam consultations, the last two questions on the list above, citation and grammatical issues, are the only two we can offer support for. We hope that this resource has served as a helpful alternative.

For more information about other GWC programs and services, including writing groups, thesis and dissertation boot camps, workshops, and foundational writing skills intensives, please check out our website at [www.grad.writingcenter.ttu.edu](http://www.grad.writingcenter.ttu.edu). We look forward to seeing you soon!

## Comprehensive/Qualifying Exam Checklist

**During your preparation** Are you engaged in the following processes?

- ☐ Familiarizing yourself with the literature
- ☐ Making sense of your sources using
  - Annotation
  - Organization
  - Synthesis
- ☐ Asking for advice

**During the exam** Have you considered not only *what* you're writing but also *how* you're writing it?

**Content** — In your draft, have you considered the question(s) carefully?

- ☐ What are the main parts of the exam question?
  - Which elements need more attention than the others?
  - Which elements are equally important and need to be balanced?
- ☐ Which sources are relevant to the question?
  - How will you incorporate each of them?
  - Have you to the key materials from your coursework and research?
- ☐ How will you synthesize the relevant information?
  - Have you integrated information across disciplines, methodologies, findings or committee members' research areas as it is applicable?
- ☐ Have you framed your answer(s) for your committee?
  - Do your answers clearly establish your perspective in the context of the question and your discipline?

**Writing Process** — In your writing process, have you done the following?

- ☐ Paced yourself
- ☐ Acknowledged your limitations
- ☐ Trusted your gut

**During the revision stage:** Check over your answers with the following questions in mind:

- ☐ Does your answer display synthesis of the relevant concepts and literature?
  - Don't get lost in the weeds; stick to major themes and concept-mapping between them.
  - Be sure that any examples used support your larger argument.
  - Demonstrate how the principles you've studied in your discipline fit together from an aerial view.
- ☐ Can the reader easily tell where you transition from one element of the question(s) to another?
  - Questions often have multiple parts. Use the language of the question to help distinguish which part of the question you are addressing with your answer.
  - Don't be afraid to move things around – organizational changes can improve the clarity of your argument. If you're not sure what you've covered already, reverse outlining can help: [Humanities](#), [STEM](#)
- ☐ Have you properly cited all key sources?
- ☐ Have you checked for and corrected any grammatical issues?

