



The following clarification to the Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy is reported as **for information only**, and has been approved on behalf of CGPS by the Dean and Associate Deans of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

<i>Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – current</i>	<i>Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – revised</i>
<p><b>Preamble</b></p> <p>All doctoral programs at McGill require candidates to pass a comprehensive examination or set of examinations or equivalent, such as qualifying examinations, preliminary examinations, candidacy papers, comprehensive evaluations, thesis proposals, etc. The results of this examination determine whether or not students will be permitted to continue in their programs. The methods adopted for examination and evaluation and the areas to be examined are specified by departmental regulations and approved by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. It is the responsibility of students to inform themselves of these details.</p> <p><b>Objectives and Content</b></p> <p>The purpose of comprehensive examinations is to determine whether the student demonstrates the necessary research skills and academic achievements to continue in the Ph.D. program. Objectives may include assessing one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• knowledge of the discipline</li> <li>• understanding of the proposed field of research</li> <li>• ability to conduct independent and original research</li> <li>• ability to present and defend material orally</li> <li>• professional skills</li> </ul> <p>The content of the comprehensive must be consistent with the stated objectives and should be appropriately circumscribed. Students must be given an indication of the range of material that may be covered in the examination and suggestions as to how to cover this material (e.g., via reading lists, courses, etc.).</p>	<p><b>Preamble</b></p> <p>All doctoral programs at McGill require candidates to pass a comprehensive examination <del>or set of examinations or equivalent</del>, such as <del>a</del> qualifying examinations, <del>a</del> preliminary examinations, <del>a</del> candidacy papers, <del>a</del> comprehensive evaluations, <del>a</del> thesis proposals, etc. The results of this examination determine whether or not students will be permitted to continue in their programs. The methods adopted for examination and evaluation and the areas to be examined <del>are</del> <b>must be</b> specified by departmental regulations and approved by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. It is the responsibility of <b>the Unit to make this information widely available and for</b> students to inform themselves of these details.</p> <p><b>Objectives and Content</b></p> <p>The purpose of comprehensive examinations is to determine whether the student demonstrates the necessary research skills and academic achievements to continue in the Ph.D. program. <b>Permissible objectives may only include assessing <del>one or more of the following</del>: foundational knowledge of the discipline (retrospective comprehensive) and/or ability to conduct independent and original research (prospective comprehensive). As such, comprehensive examinations must not reexamine graduate course content completed at McGill. Units must consult GPS guidelines <a href="#">[LINK]</a> for retrospective and prospective exams when establishing their comprehensives.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>knowledge of the discipline</del></li> <li>• <del>understanding of the proposed field of research</del></li> <li>• <del>ability to conduct independent and original research</del></li> <li>• <del>ability to present and defend material orally</del></li> <li>• <del>professional skills</del></li> </ul> <p>The content of the comprehensive must be consistent with the stated objectives and should be appropriately circumscribed. <b>At least 3 months prior to the examination</b>, students must be given an indication of the range of material that may be covered in the examination and suggestions as to how to cover this material (e.g., via reading lists, courses, etc.).</p>



***Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – current continued***

**Format**

Units must provide doctoral students with a written description of the Ph.D. comprehensive process, detailing objectives and content, format, timing, assessment, grading and reporting, failures (and procedures for repeats).

The format of the comprehensive must be consistent for all students within a given program. The following list gives some of the more common formats, which are often combined:

- written examination
- take-home examination
- extended research paper(s)
- written research proposal
- oral examination (which may include or consist of a defence of a research paper or research proposal)

**Timing**

Units must clearly specify when the comprehensive must be taken and how this fits into the program milestones, e.g., whether all coursework must have been completed prior to undertaking the comprehensive and/or whether the comprehensive is the final step before thesis research and writing.

Scheduling of the comprehensive must be specified by the unit and the comprehensive exam must be completed by the end of PhD3. Students must be informed of the date of the exam with sufficient time to prepare for it.

**Assessment**

Evaluation parameters must be made clear, including information about who sets the exam questions and who evaluates the student. If performance is assessed by a committee, it must be made clear how the committee is appointed and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote).

Where there is more than one component to the examination (e.g., an oral exam plus a written exam), it must be made clear how these components are factored into the final grade. For example, it must be clearly specified whether each component counts equally, whether the assessment is global, and whether failure of one part of the comprehensive examination (or of one question) results in overall failure.

***Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – revised continued***

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The format of the comprehensive must be consistent for all students within a given program. The following list gives some of the more common formats, which are often combined:

- written examination
- take-home examination
- ~~extended research paper(s)~~ **synthesis of relevant research in the field**
- written research proposal **and/or thesis proposal**
- oral examination **or defence (which may include or consist of a defence of a research paper or research proposal)**

**Timing**

Units must clearly specify when the comprehensive must be taken and how this fits into the program milestones, e.g., whether all coursework must have been completed prior to undertaking the comprehensive and/or whether the comprehensive is the final step before thesis research and writing.

Scheduling of the comprehensive must be specified by the unit and the comprehensive exam must be completed by the end of PhD3. Students must be informed of the date of the exam with sufficient time to prepare for it.

**Assessment**

Evaluation parameters must be made clear **to the student in advance of the examination. This includes including** information about who sets the exam questions and who evaluates the student. If performance is assessed by a committee, it must be made clear how the committee is appointed and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote).

Where there is more than one component to the examination (e.g., an oral exam plus a written exam), it must be made clear **to the student** how these components are factored into the final grade. For example, it must be clearly specified whether each component counts equally, whether the assessment is global, and whether failure of one part of the



***Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – current continued***

All Ph.D. comprehensives must be represented by an administrative course number, usually XXXX 701. Grading of this course can be Pass/Fail or letter grades can be assigned: the same form of grading must be applied to all students in a program. A passing grade is required for students to continue in the program.

**Feedback**

The assessment and reasons for the decision, including identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, must be documented and provided to the student in sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision.

In the case of oral examinations, the student should also be given feedback on presentation, logical exposition, ability to answer questions, etc. To help ensure that assessments can be put in context, units may choose to make a record of the examination (including audio or video recording) and/or to have a neutral observer, chair, or outside committee member, or to make the oral open to members of the academic unit.

**Failures**

The student must be informed in writing by the department that he/she has failed the comprehensive and must be informed of conditions relating to a repeat of the examination, including the nature of the re-examination and committee membership, as well as the deadline for retaking the exam. Units have the right to specify further requirements in the event of failure, e.g., requiring students to take an additional course or courses in areas where they have shown weakness on the comprehensive.

***Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – revised continued***

comprehensive examination (or of one question) results in overall failure.

All Ph.D. comprehensives must be represented by an administrative course number, usually XXXX 701. Grading of this course can be Pass/Fail or letter grades can be assigned: the same form of grading must be applied to all students in a program. A passing grade is required for students to continue in the program.

**Feedback**

The assessment and reasons for the decision, including identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, must be **provided to the student in writing within 2 weeks of the examination. There must be ~~documented and provided to the student in~~ sufficient detail to allow the student to understand the decision.**

In the case of oral examinations, the student **must ~~should also~~** be given feedback on presentation, logical exposition, ability to answer questions, etc. To help ensure that assessments can be put in context, units may choose to make a record of the examination (including audio or video recording) and/or to have a neutral observer, chair, or outside committee member, or to make the oral **presentation** open to members of the academic unit. **If recorded, an unedited copy of the recording must be forwarded to the student within 2 weeks of the examination.**

**Failures**

In the event that the student is judged to have failed the comprehensive, units must allow, without prejudice, one repeat of the comprehensive (in whole or in part) within a minimum of four months and a maximum of six months. After the first failure, a grade of HH (which designates “continuing”) will be recorded on the student’s transcript.

The student must be informed **in a face-to-face meeting and** in writing by the department that **he/she has they have** failed the comprehensive. **At this meeting and in the written document, the student and** must be informed of conditions relating to a repeat of the examination, including the nature of the re-examination and committee membership, as well as the deadline for retaking the exam. Units have the right to specify further requirements in the event of failure, e.g., requiring students to take an additional course or courses in areas where they have shown weakness on the comprehensive.



***Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – current  
continued***

If the student does not repeat the exam by the deadline specified by the unit, the HH will be converted into F and the student will be withdrawn from the university. In the event that the repeat comprehensive is judged to have failed, the student will receive a grade of F and will be withdrawn from the university.

*Approved by Executive of Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Feb. 17, 1997 and Council of FGSR March 7, 1997; Revised by GPS July 9, 2014, June 29, 2015, June 14, 2017, and December 18, 2019.*

***Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy – revised  
continued***

If the student does not repeat the exam by the deadline specified by the unit, the HH will be converted into F and the student will be withdrawn from the university. In the event that the repeat comprehensive is judged to have failed, the student will receive a grade of F and will be withdrawn from the university. **In the event that the repeat comprehensive is passed, the grade of HH will be converted to a Pass and the student will be allowed to continue in the program.**

**Appeals**

**A student withdrawn due to failure of their comprehensive exam has 30 days to appeal this decision. They must follow the steps specified under *Requesting an appeal in case of withdrawal due to failure* in the [Failure Policy](#).**

*Approved by Executive of Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Feb. 17, 1997 and Council of FGSR March 7, 1997; Revised by GPS July 9, 2014, June 29, 2015, June 14, 2017, ~~and~~ December 18, 2019 and March 30, 2022.*



## Retrospective comprehensive exams

### Preamble

- Comprehensive exams are a mandatory component of doctoral programs at McGill. There can be no more than two comprehensive exams (a retrospective and/or a prospective comprehensive exam).
- The purpose of a retrospective comprehensive exam must be to test the students' foundational knowledge of the discipline.
- The retrospective comprehensive must not examine competencies that could be acquired through graduate courses at McGill.
- Retrospective comps should be completed by the end of PhD2.
- Retrospective comprehensive exams are not mandatory. Units that choose to conduct retrospective comps must respect the following guidelines.

### Guidelines

1. Every exam question should be reviewed by **at least two** comprehensive exam committee members. It must be made clear to the student how the committee is appointed and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote). The supervisor and the co-supervisor must not participate in the evaluation. If there is an oral component, the supervisor and the co-supervisor may attend but must not participate in the question period. The supervisor and the co-supervisor may attend deliberations to provide context, but they do not have voting privileges.
2. **Prior exams should be publicly posted** on the comprehensive exam section of the program website for students to review prior to the exam. Students must be informed of this online resource prior to the exams. Students should not be required to request copies of prior exams.
3. A **comprehensive exam guideline document** should be publicly posted. This document should encourage students to **review prior exams** and provide a link to their permanent online location. The document should also clearly indicate **typical exam protocols** (e.g., timing, location, question format, grading procedure, threshold required for a pass decision, when/how results are distributed, post-failure options/debriefing) and suggest **effective strategies for preparing** for the exams (e.g., reviewing prior exams, strategies for how to review prior course content, test-taking strategies for recalling content and managing stress during high-stakes, real-time exams). This document should additionally indicate **recourse options following a failure outcome** (i.e., retake protocols, appeal decision in writing to the department and/or the GPS Associate Dean: [associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca](mailto:associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca)). This document should further outline all policies related to **potential accommodations** based on disability, language issues (e.g., international students), etc. (e.g., longer duration for exam completion, alternate formats for high test-anxious students, longer duration prior to retake). If no accommodations are being provided, a statement explaining this decision and detailing other supports being provided (e.g., preparatory sessions) is required.

4. Detailed **written feedback** must be provided directly to students following either a pass or fail comps exam decision within two weeks to indicate strengths and weaknesses using accessible language. If grading is numerical in nature, this feedback should additionally detail **scores for each exam question** as well as total exam scores. Students should not be required to individually request feedback following the exam decision.
5. The GPD **must meet, in a timely manner and individually, with each student who fails a comprehensive exam** to verbally explain the [double failure policy](#) and review strategies for improving on the next exam (if the student declines or is not available for an in-person meeting, this information must be conveyed in detail in writing). Following this meeting, the Recommendation Following a First Failure **online form** should be completed by the faculty member (<https://www.mcgill.ca/student-records/forms/staff-gr-programs/>). Students must be given a minimum of four months to prepare for a retake.
6. Given the potential for inequity issues from an EDI (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) perspective (see "Student Experience" section: [https://www.mcgill.ca/equity/files/equity/mcgill\\_strategic\\_edi\\_plan\\_2020-20251.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/equity/files/equity/mcgill_strategic_edi_plan_2020-20251.pdf)), students whose **first language is not English must be ensured appropriate supports** prior to and following comprehensive exams as they are likely to be disproportionately negatively impacted by written/verbal exam formats.



## Prospective comprehensive exams

### Preamble

- Comprehensive exams are a mandatory component of doctoral programs at McGill. There can be no more than two comprehensive exams (a retrospective and/or a prospective comprehensive exam).
- The purpose of a prospective comprehensive exam must be to test the students' ability to conduct independent and original research.
- Prospective comprehensives must be completed by the end of PhD3.
- Prospective comprehensive exams are strongly recommended. Units conducting prospective comps must respect the following guidelines.

### Guidelines

1. Every exam question should be reviewed by **at least two** comprehensive exam committee members. It must be made clear to the student how the committee is appointed and who sits on it, and how the evaluation is to be carried out (consensus or vote). The supervisor and the co-supervisor must not participate in the evaluation. If there is an oral component, the supervisor and the co-supervisor may attend but must not participate in the question period. The supervisor and the co-supervisor may attend deliberations to provide context, but they do not have voting privileges.
2. A **comps guideline document** should be publicly posted. This document should encourage students to **review prior proposal formats**, if possible. The document should also clearly indicate **typical exam protocols** (e.g., timing, location, question format, grading procedure, threshold required for a pass decision, when/how results are distributed, post-failure options/debriefing) and suggest **effective strategies for preparing** for the exams (e.g., reviewing prior exams, strategies for how to review prior course content, test-taking strategies for recalling content and managing stress during high-stakes, real-time exams). This document should additionally indicate **recourse options following a failure outcome** (i.e., retake protocols, appeal decision in writing to the department and/or the GPS Associate Dean: [associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca](mailto:associatedeans.gps@mcgill.ca)). This document should further outline all policies related to **potential accommodations** based on disability, language issues (e.g., international students), etc. (e.g., longer duration for exam completion, alternate formats for high test-anxious students, longer duration prior to retake). If no accommodations are being provided, a statement explaining this decision and detailing other supports being provided (e.g., preparatory sessions) is required.
3. Detailed **written feedback** must be provided directly to students following either a pass or fail comps exam decision in a timely manner to indicate strengths and weaknesses using accessible language. If grading is numerical in nature, this feedback should additionally detail **scores for each exam question** as well as total exam scores. Students should not be required to individually request feedback following the exam decision.

4. The GPD **must meet, in a timely manner and individually, with each student who fails a comps exam** to verbally explain the double failure policy and review strategies for improving on the next exam (if the student declines or is not available for an in-person meeting, this information should be conveyed in detail in writing). Following this meeting, the Recommendation Following a First Failure **online form** should be completed by the faculty member (<https://www.mcgill.ca/student-records/forms/staff-gr-programs/>). Students must be given a minimum of four months to prepare for a retake.
5. Given the potential for inequity issues from an EDI (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) perspective (see "Student Experience" section: [https://www.mcgill.ca/equity/files/equity/mcgill\\_strategic\\_edi\\_plan\\_2020-20251.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/equity/files/equity/mcgill_strategic_edi_plan_2020-20251.pdf)), students whose **first language is not English must be ensured appropriate supports** prior to and following comprehensive exams as they are likely to be disproportionately negatively impacted by written/verbal exam formats.