

# Guidelines for PhD Comprehensive Exam in Methods

## 1. General format

The comprehensive exam for the Methods subfield will take the form of a written exam offered twice a year (September/October and May). Students will be given up to 8 hours (though we expect a student to take a minimum of 5 hours) to complete the exam. They can bring any personal notes they desire into the exam room but will not be allowed access to the internet during the examination period. Students will be given the option to take a 30-minute lunch break and two 15-minute coffee breaks during the 8 hour exam period. (If needed, faculty members from the Methods subfield will be available to assist the GPC in proctoring the exam.)

The exam will consist of peer-reviewing a research article. Students will be given a choice of three applied, empirical research articles at the time of the exam, picked by members of the methods subfield. They must select one article to review and answer 3-4 questions about its research design, ethics, and methodology. The questions will be based on the list of “guiding questions” found below. A practice exam will be offered the month before the official exam.

## 2. Guiding questions

- Identify the main assumptions and methodological commitments employed by the author and the way these help frame the research problem and contribution.
- What are the benefits of the article’s chosen methodology? What do the methodological choices allow the author to see that they might have missed otherwise?
- If causal inference is an implicit or explicit goal of the paper, what identification problems do you see with the paper’s research design? If causal inference is not the goal of the paper, then what is the goal? How well does the analysis succeed in its own terms?
- What ethical concerns arise from the current research problem/question and design?
- What other methods could be used to answer the same question and (speculatively) how might that alter the conclusions? Here you might want to think about different methodological approaches not employed in the article (or weakly developed) that would have been helpful to address the research problem/question. In your discussion, specify how the new approach might have been applied, including specifying key assumptions, methodological commitments, and concepts. Think about what a novel approach could have helped us understand that we can’t understand under the current design, and how this new approach could reframe the author’s evidence or supplement their analysis.

### 3. FAQs

#### *How will the articles be picked?*

Members of the methods field will suggest original research articles based on the interests and backgrounds of the pool of students sitting the exam. The articles may be previously published or they may be working papers in public circulation. We will try to select articles that will not unfairly privilege one student/group of students over others so, ideally, the articles will be outside the students' topic/region of expertise. The full group of faculty must jointly approve the final list of articles.

#### *How will the exams be graded?*

The exams will be assessed by a grading committee consisting of members of the methods subfield. Each answer will be graded as high pass, pass, low pass, or fail. If two or more faculty members give any individual exam answer a failing grade, the student fails the exam. Students who fail the exam will be given a single opportunity to retake the exam.

#### *Who will be on the grading committee?*

In future years, the subfield coordinator will select three members of the methods subfield to serve as the comprehensive exam grading committee, ensuring that at least one quantitative and at least one qualitative scholar are involved. However, for the first time the exam is held, all members of the subfield who are not on leave will participate in grading.

#### *Which faculty members are in the methods field?*

Any tenure-track faculty member who has taught a methods class in the last three years is considered a member of the methods subfield and can contribute to the creation and evaluation of the methods field exam. As of September 2025, eligible faculty include Elissa Berwick, Tania Islas Weinstein, Aaron Erlich, Mark Williamson, Erik Kuhonta, Dietlind Stolle, and Maria Popova.

#### *Is there a reading list for the exam?*

We do not expect students to read any particular texts beyond those required by the graduate methods courses at McGill, but students will be responsible for all material covered in the methods courses offered at McGill.

#### *Are references required?*

References should be provided as needed. Students do not need to cite facts but will be expected to refer to important debates in the field.

#### *What will the oral exam cover?*

The written exam is followed by an oral exam. For the oral exam, students should expect questions about the written exam as well about any of the material from methods courses offered at McGill.