

Milestones and Pathways Toolkit

Preparing for Departmental Examinations

Purpose: A supplementary activity to demystify the departmental examination process and to aid students in their preparation for this exam.

Recommended Duration: 2 to 3 hours

General Description: Qualifying examinations vary widely among disciplines, departments, and universities. Departmental examinations may include, for example, written responses to specific questions, field papers, thesis proposals, oral defenses and interviews, annotated bibliographies, or language tests. In addition to departmental guides and information sessions, a program-specific workshop devoted to preparing students for the various components of departmental examinations can help dispel confusion and set reasonable expectations for graduate students.

We recommend that workshop content be developed by the department (possibly in consultation with the Faculty of Arts & Science) in order to meet the specific needs and requirements of a particular program. The attached toolkit, however, offers general resources and examples that may be modified or customized according to your department's needs. This toolkit provides a list of questions to consider when planning a workshop, links to tip sheets and materials developed for graduate students preparing to complete these exams, examples of examination models currently used at the University of Toronto, a discussion of spaces on campus for holding a workshop, a sample budget and timetable, as well as a generic exam tip sheet that may help you develop your own department-specific tip sheet for graduate students.

Recommended Facilitators: Faculty members in the academic program, ideally with the support of one or more graduate students who have completed their departmental exams.

Recommended Participants: Graduate students in the early stages of preparing for their departmental exams. Numbers will be determined by cohort size. This workshop is best restricted to students in a particular program in order to ensure a focus on discipline and program-specific information.

Suggested Locations: Department Lounge or Classroom Space

For more detailed information and suggested activities, see the attached toolkit. This toolkit is based on activities currently offered through departments in the Faculty of Arts & Science. Please feel free to modify any proposed activity to suit the specific needs of your department. If you have any questions about proposing or preparing your activity, please contact Joel Rodgers (joel.rodgers@utoronto.ca) in the Faculty of Arts & Science.

A. Questions to Ask and Decisions to Make

Schedule the Workshop with Your Program and the Academic Term in Mind. We recommend that you schedule an exam workshop based on when most students in a cohort usually complete these exams. For example, if students complete an exam in September that requires reading over the summer, you may wish to schedule a workshop in late spring. That said, consider the rhythm of the term when planning. For example, Reading Week and exam periods are convenient class-free times, but they also tend to be heavy marking periods for graduate students. Also, remember to allow yourself and your colleagues enough time to plan and prepare the workshop (e.g. purchase supplies, book appropriate space, order catering).

Account for the Variety of Exam Formats (If Applicable). Exams can vary widely even within a department or discipline. If there are a variety of accepted formats within your department, consider inviting faculty members from different sub-disciplines in order to account for a range of potential exam structures and expectations.

Provide Examples from Past Exams. Examples from previous exams help graduate students develop a clear sense of what is required to succeed in their exams, including the level of detail and rigor required of an excellent answer. During the workshop, we recommend distributing and discussing copies of previous exams (e.g. specific questions), as well as successful answers and/or associated reading lists. If reading lists are set in part by graduate students, include some discussion of potential considerations for preparing and focusing the list. Remember to inform *all* students in the program how they can acquire copies of previous exams outside of the workshop.

Prepare Documentation About the Exam Process. In some cases, students will be preparing for their departmental examinations over a long period of time, and it may be difficult to recall some months later the useful information provided during a workshop. A program-specific document, summarizing the exam process and the associated workshop, would make a useful reference source for graduate students.

Consider Running a Practice Exam. During the workshop (or closer to the time of the exam), hold a “practice exam” for students. Exams are uncommon in some fields, and some students may not have completed formal examinations in several years. A trial exam can re-familiarize students with the process and alleviate pre-exam stress by helping them improve through practice.

B. Resources for Departmental Exam Workshops

Tip Sheets and Articles

A variety of universities and scholarly associations have already produced modifiable tip sheets for graduate students preparing to complete their departmental examinations:

“8 Ways to Prepare for Comprehensive Exams” (<http://bit.ly/MPexam8Ways>)

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Graduate Studies

“Preparing for your comprehensive exams” (<http://bit.ly/MPexamAPATips>)

Sadie F. Dingfelder, *GradPsych* Magazine, The American Psychological Association

“20 Tips for the PhD Exam” (<http://bit.ly/MPexam20Tips>)

Department of History, University of Washington

Examples of Departmental Examinations and Guides

Centre for Comparative Literature (<http://bit.ly/MPexamComplit>)

Field Proposal and Paper, Oral Exam, and Thesis Proposal

Department of Cells & Systems Biology (<http://bit.ly/MPexamCellsSys>)

PhD Proposal Examination

Department of Geography and Planning (<http://bit.ly/MPexamGeo>)

Sit Down or Take Home Exams

Department of Statistics (<http://bit.ly/MPexamStats>)

3-Part Sit Down Exam

University of Toronto Departmental Examinations Policy

The University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies sets general guidelines surrounding departmental examinations (<http://bit.ly/MPexamSGS>).

Mental Health and Safety

Departmental examinations are stressful, and graduate students may experience heightened levels of anxiety during this time. It may helpful to include some discussion during your session of reasonable time and stress management in your field, as well as broader anxieties, including “imposter syndrome.” See, for example, **“Impostor Phenomenon and Graduate Students”** (<http://bit.ly/MPexamImpostor>), developed by the Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo.

C. Meeting Spaces for Workshop

Book a space that suits your workshop's purpose. For example, if students will be writing a mock answer to an exam question, you may book a computer lab for the workshop. Alternatively, if students will practice answering questions for an oral examination, it may be better to book a seminar-style classroom space. In general, we recommend using department space for hosting a session on departmental examinations. If there is no appropriate space available in the department, you may be able to reserve other space on campus.

Booking a Room

Rooms can be booked through ACE (osm.utoronto.ca). Pictures and descriptions are also available on the ACE website. There is no rental fee for University of Toronto departments to use these classrooms, but there may be a fee to use the built-in A/V. Any A/V requirements should be noted on the booking request.

D. Budget and Money Questions

The essential budget item for a departmental examinations workshop is likely going to be the cost associated with purchasing snacks and/or lunch. However, A/V rentals, or other supplies, may also be required. **Designate in advance who is responsible for purchases and collecting receipts.** Keeping track of spending can be hectic. Designate one person who will be responsible for collecting receipts before and after the sessions. (It may be unfair to ask one graduate student to cover all costs in advance. Consider distributing these costs among organizers.) Consult with your department's business officer when preparing a budget for the workshop. The University of Toronto has set guidelines covering reimbursement rates for meals (see <http://bit.ly/MPperdiem>).

Sample Budget for a Departmental Exam Workshop

Location: Department Lounge

Duration: 3 hours

Participants: 2 to 3 faculty members and 12 doctoral candidates
(the number of participants will vary depending on cohort size)

<i>Lunch & Refreshments</i>	\$ 255	\$17 per person to cover lunch (sandwiches), light beverages, and healthy snacks
TOTAL	\$ 255	

E. Sample Timetable and Topics to Cover

Note: Workshop content will reflect program-specific procedures and requirements. The following structure is based on a department in the social sciences.

Timetable for 3-hour Workshop

9:10	Overview of the Examination Process
9:30	Evaluation Criteria and Sample Exams
10:00	Snack Break
10:15	Practice Exam
11:15	Strategies for Reading and Preparing for the Exam
11:40	Time and Stress Management
12:00	Lunch

Sample Topics to Cover

Overview of the Examination Process	Evaluation Criteria and Sample Exams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The exam process (including timelines and regulations) • Forming and consulting with an exam committee [if applicable] • Preparing the reading list and defining major thematic areas [if applicable] • Tackling a comprehensive reading list 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Evaluation Process • Written Answers / Oral Defense [if applicable] • Example questions and answers • Discussion: what defines a successful answer? an unsuccessful one? • Possible post-exam outcomes
Practice Exam and Strategies	Time and Stress Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice exam: participants complete a mock answer to an old exam question • Strategies for answering questions • Reading and note-taking strategies • Paper and digital organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing your time in the days before, during, and after the exam • Managing pre-exam stress & anxiety • Mental health and wellness resources on campus

F. Sample Tip Sheet for Graduate Students*

Schedule and set limits for your study time. Preparing for an exam can feel all-consuming. Schedule specific blocks of time to read and study for the exam, while giving yourself space to rest and relax.

Try to identify gaps in your knowledge. Identifying what you don't know can help you prioritize where to spend your time and energy preparing for an exam. Moreover, identifying areas that require further study is an essential part of academic research.

Read strategically and thoroughly. Try to divide your studies into grouped themes or areas. Demonstrate a detailed knowledge, but do not try to cover "everything." Carve out your specific areas of expertise.

Keep detailed notes as you read. Practice writing detailed, expository notes that capture the essential content of your readings. Abbreviated notes may be difficult to interpret later. Your exam notes may also be useful in your later research and teaching.

Organize your notes. Decide early how you will organize your notes, as well as what citation method you will use to keep track of more specific information.

Consult senior graduate students. Senior candidates who have completed the exams can help you identify what practices and strategies are essential in your field. Senior graduate students may also offer suggestions on how to form or tackle your reading list.

Do practice exams. In order to prepare for the pressure of the exam, practice answering questions under conditions similar to the ones provided by the exam. For example, if you will have to write three essays in four hours, give yourself an hour to write an answer to one essay question.

Form a "mock" oral examination to defend your answers. If your departmental examinations include an oral defense component, practice responding to questions in the moment. Ask senior candidates and colleagues in your department to form a "mock" committee evaluating your answers.

*Adapted from Sadie Dingfelder's "Preparing for your Comprehensive Exams" for the APA's *PsychMag* and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's "8 Ways to Prepare for Comprehensive Exams."