

## Guidelines for the Written and Oral PhD Examinations

In addition to successfully completing the required and optional graduate course work, the PhD candidate will successfully complete three examinations. These evaluations include the written preliminary examinations, the oral preliminary examination, and the final oral defense of the dissertation.

### Preliminary Examinations

The Preliminary Examinations are conducted to assure that each student has achieved a comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the chosen areas of concentration. The student should demonstrate the ability to bring that knowledge to bear on specific problems, issues or situations through systematic, integrated and logical analyses. The major professor will supervise the student's preparation for the examinations. The student, in consultation with the POS committee, will use the *Ph.D. Concentration Area Declaration Form* to identify Area One and Area Two for evaluation to Ph.D. candidacy.

Area One and Two will be given equal weight in the overall evaluation of the student's preparation for Ph.D. candidacy. In Area One, the student will take a written examination prepared and evaluated by a preliminary examination committee consisting of members of that concentration area. In Area Two, the student will submit a paper for evaluation to their POS committee. For students who have chosen the option of developing one of their own concentration areas, the formally offered concentration area automatically is Area One and the developed concentration area is Area Two.

- Students are discouraged from taking examinations for a concentration before course work for that area is completed.
- Students should know that the examinations are not merely over course work but about issues and directions of the discipline and its sub-areas. Consequently, students are expected to know the body of literature and the major themes and scholars that make up a concentration area. The student, in consultation with the POS Committee, are encouraged to prepare for the Area One and Area Two exams prior to the semester in which the exams are given.
- The Committee Appointment and Program of Study must be approved by the Graduate College before the department will allow students to take the preliminary examinations.
- If appropriate, the student should meet with the major professor and contact the Disability Resources Office to arrange for accommodations permitted in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The graduate coordinator, in conjunction with the Disability Resources Office, arranges accommodations.
- Students will receive an overall grade of Pass or Fail on the examinations. Students must pass *both area* examinations before proceeding to the oral examination.
- Students will have two opportunities to pass each area examination. Should a student fail twice, he/she may appeal to their POS committee to remain in the program and retake the examination a third time, but it is expected that students will offer compelling evidence that they are better prepared for a third attempt. The POS committee will substantiate in writing to the department chair its recommendation to allow or refuse a third examination. The department chair will decide if the student will be allowed to take the exam a third time. Should the student fail the third time, he/she will be dropped from the program and counseled to seek other options.
- The minor department or the representative of that department serving on the student's POS committee should arrange for minor preliminary examinations as they deem necessary.
- Co-majors can choose from the two exam procedures for their sociology concentration.

### Preliminary Examination in Area One

- Testing will occur twice during the academic year, the fourth and fifth Mondays in the fall and spring semesters. The graduate coordinator will arrange for and conduct the examinations.
- Students must notify the graduate coordinator of their intent to take this exam by the final class day of the fall semester to write exams in spring semester and by the final class day of spring semester to write exams in fall semester. No preliminary examinations are administered during summer.

- All students within a concentration taking an Area One examination during a particular semester will sit for the same examination at the same time.
- The examination committee for each concentration will be appointed annually by the department chair and will consist of the concentration coordinator who will serve as chair of the examination committee plus two other faculty members from the concentration.
- The identity of the members of the examination committee shall be open information, but advice on preparing for the examination should be sought from major professors, POS committees, and the concentration coordinators. To the extent possible, the examination committee will not know the identities of students taking the examination.
- Length of each preliminary examination will be five hours. Additional time may be granted when English is not the student's first language.
- If appropriate, the student should meet with the major professor and contact the Disability Resources Office to arrange for accommodations permitted in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The graduate coordinator, in conjunction with the Disability Resources Office, arranges accommodations.
- The student may take into the exam an alphabetized list of references, organized within topical areas but without annotations, prepared in consultation with their POS committee. That reference list must be approved by the major professor and sent to the graduate secretary prior to the day of the exam and each student's reference list will be attached to his/her exam upon completion of the examination.
- All members of a concentration are invited to submit questions for the concentration examination.
- The examination committees are encouraged to provide students options in selecting questions, but, students should expect one or more mandatory questions.
- The examination committee will have two weeks from the time it receives the student's examination to determine whether it will receive a grade of pass or fail and prepare comments to students including strengths and weaknesses along with suggestions on how the responses might have been improved.

#### Preliminary Examination in Area Two

- Students must notify the graduate coordinator of their intent to submit the written paper for Area Two one semester prior to the semester in which the exam is given.
- The student will write a paper of no more than 30 pages (not including tables, figures, and references) prepared in accordance with the American Sociological Style Guide.
- The paper will be of high quality in writing and organization as expected within the standards of a professional publication.
- The POS committee, in collaboration with the student, will prepare an assignment for a written paper to be evaluated by the POS committee. The selection of the topic or problem should be a joint decision between the student and the POS Committee. The paper is an opportunity for students to demonstrate the quality of mind described by C. Wright Mills as the sociological imagination. As such the paper should represent a scholarly sociological analysis that draws upon the discipline's approaches of scientific inquiry.
- The intent of the paper requirement is to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter they will profess as they enter their careers with a Ph.D. in sociology.
- The topic of this paper must address theories, methods, and/or applications appropriate to the Area Two Concentration regardless of the methodological approaches, quantitative or qualitative. The following elements should be included within the paper and should serve as criteria for evaluation of the paper:
  - 1) Problem statement: The student must identify and discuss a current issue within the concentration area.
  - 2) Identify theoretical and/or empirical issues that are relevant to the defined problem or issue. To do so, it is expected that the student present a logical and critical literature review of relevant work on the issue and in doing so, identify additional theoretical or empirical issues related to the problem.

- 3) Discuss methodological issues that will be necessary to fully explicate the problem or issue. The student should identify relevant methodological issues related to their paper topic or discuss ways of potentially examining the theoretical or empirical issue identified.
  - 4) Locate the topic within the larger area of concentration in sociology. Student should be able to reflect on the importance of the identified issue for the development of sociological knowledge. In doing so, students may also address the implications of their defined issue for different areas within sociology.
- It is expected that the paper will serve as an example of the student's ability to logically present an argument, provide relevant empirical evidence (quantitative and/or qualitative), and identify the importance of the argument and evidence for the discipline of sociology. In many ways, these objectives should reflect the basic requirements of articles found within the discipline's main scientific journals.
  - The assignment (which is the result of the collaboration of the student and POS committee) will be provided to the student after the Ph.D. Concentration Area Declaration Form has been submitted to the Graduate Coordinator. The student will have eight weeks to complete the paper in the Fall or Spring semester in which the paper will be given and evaluated. Upon receipt of the exam paper topic, students will have a two-working day grace period to ask questions, get clarification and feedback on issues and concerns related to the paper topic. At the end of the grace period, students are expected to work independently to complete the exam paper.
  - A formal statement of the student's exam paper assignment will be filed with the Graduate Coordinator following the two-working day grace period in which the student receives the assignment.
  - The student will submit the paper to the POS committee at the end of the eighth week in which it was assigned. The POS Committee will notify the Graduate Secretary on the day that the student submits the paper for evaluation.
  - The POS committee will have two weeks from the time it receives the student's paper to determine whether it will receive a grade of pass or fail and prepare comments to the student including strengths and weaknesses along with suggestions on how the paper can be improved. Failure to submit a paper, or a paper deemed unacceptable by the POS Committee will constitute a failure.
  - A copy of the paper and the POS committee's evaluation will be retained in the student's academic file with the graduate secretary.
  - During the writing of the Area Two examination students are expected to follow the Professional Code of Ethics as outlined in the bylaws of the American Sociological Association (see: [www.ASAnet.org](http://www.ASAnet.org) and follow the link to "Ethics").

### **Preliminary Oral Examination**

Once both written examinations have been passed, the oral examination will be held within six weeks. The oral examination must be satisfactorily completed at least six months before the defense of the dissertation. The student must process the Graduate College form requesting an oral examination at least two weeks prior to the oral examination. These forms are available from the sociology graduate secretary. If a student fails the preliminary oral examination, the Graduate College requires six months to pass before the student may retake the examination.  
<http://www.grad-college.iastate.edu/>.

### **Final Oral Examination**

This is a two to three-hour oral examination that focuses upon, but need not be limited to, a defense of the student's dissertation and is conducted in accordance with Graduate College requirements described in the Graduate College Handbook. The student must receive approval from the Graduate College three weeks prior to the examination date. These forms are available from the sociology graduate secretary.