

CUA/SLIS COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATIONS

A candidate for the M.S. in L.S. degree must pass a comprehensive examination that tests a common knowledge base that will qualify the candidate to perform professionally at the time of his/her first appointment, and enable the individual to acquire greater expertise as needed.

Students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of the philosophy, history, current issues, social roles, and major problems of the profession in general and in such areas as applications of technology, organization of resources, provision of service, and management of libraries and other information agencies. They will be asked to demonstrate knowledge of the theories and principles on which current practices in the information professions are based. In addition, they will be expected to demonstrate their awareness of the research literature in library and information science and related fields and of their ability to evaluate research findings by supporting their answers with references to the professional literature and to class content.

In addition to the University's policy on comprehensive examinations, the School of Library and Information Science faculty requires that eligible students have a minimum grade point average of 3.0 in classes taken in the School of Library & Information Science, with no outstanding incomplete grades.

Comprehensive examination briefing materials are distributed on the LIBSCI-L list each semester. Questions from former semesters are available at:

<http://slis.cua.edu/courses/comps/pastquestions.cfm>

SPECIAL ACCOMODATIONS

If you feel that you need special accommodations for any reason, please talk with the Dean. We must ask that requests for ADA accommodations be cleared through the campus Office for Disability Support Services (Suite 207, Pryzbyla Center; 202-319-5211; email cua-disabilityservices@cua.edu) - but you are still welcome to come to us first to discuss your needs if you feel more comfortable doing things that way. There is a form for requesting special accommodations on comps – you'll find it on the SLIS web site at <http://slis.cua.edu/forms/CompsAccommodationsRequest.pdf>

Students whose native language is not English will be allowed extra time on the examination upon request, and they are allowed to use dictionaries in their own language. (There will be English-language dictionaries in the examination rooms.) Requests should be made of Tim Steelman (steelman@cua.edu).

Students entitled to special accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act should contact both Tim Steelman (steelman@cua.edu) and the CUA Office of Disability Support

Services (Suite 207, Pryzbyla Center; 202-319-5211; email cua-disabilityservices@cua.edu) to discuss their needs.

Students taking comps for the second time are also given special accommodations (including privacy and extra time).

WHAT HAPPENS THE DAY OF COMPS

The first day (Friday), please check in with Louise Gray at least half an hour early, to get your room assignment and the special number by which you will identify yourself on your exam papers. Cell phones, PDAs and similar devices will be collected and safely stored for you during the exam. Normally your room assignment will be the same for both days of comps – but if not, you will also give you instructions for the second day. You are encouraged to bring food and drink if you wish, as well as a pen or pencil with which to jot notes on scrap paper. If you find the noise of others working at computers is distracting, you might want to bring earplugs. Food and drink are to be left outside the exam room

When you reach the room where you will take the exam, the exam proctor will give you a sealed manila envelope containing everything else you will need - a computer disk, a copy of the questions, and some scrap paper. You will be asked not to open this envelope until the exam begins. Exam rooms will have clocks and English-language dictionaries, as well as extra supplies (disks, scrap paper, pens). The proctor on duty will be a member of the SLIS faculty or staff.

Each day, there will be five questions on your exam. You choose two (2) to answer, and given three hours in which to write. When you are finished, you save your work to the disk you were given and print copies of each answer. (Paperclips will be provided to clip these together). You put the disk and print copies of your answers in the manila envelope you were given, and give them to the proctor.

When you are done with the Friday exam, you are free to leave. On Saturday, you should normally go straight to your exam room. There is no need to check in with Tim again. When you are finished with the Saturday exam, please join us for a party to celebrate. AGLISS traditionally throws a party for comps takers at the end of the second day of the exam.

GRADING OF COMPS

The comprehensive exam is graded on a pass-fail basis. Students must pass three of their four questions to pass the exam. All SLIS faculty participate in grading. The student's identity is kept confidential throughout the grading process. You'll be known only by the special number that you were specifically given for taking comps.

The comprehensive exam is written and approved by the faculty each semester. The process begins with each faculty member submitting at least two questions to a committee that prepares a draft of the exam. The committee presents its draft, along with copies of the questions they didn't use, for the faculty's approval. The faculty makes changes, substitutes questions, etc., until they have an exam acceptable to all.

After students have completed the exam, two faculty members are assigned to read each question. Normally one of them is the faculty member who originally wrote the question. In this first round of grading, responses to each question are graded either "passing" or "marginal". Students who pass at least three of their four questions have passed the exam.

Students with two or more "marginal" answers advance to a second round of grading, in which all their marginal responses are read by the entire faculty (with the exception of the dean) and are graded either "pass" or "fail". Faculty do this individually and record their grades and comments. Any student who has passed at least three of four questions after this round of grading has passed the exam.

The faculty then meets to discuss only the students who wrote two or more answers failed by a majority of the faculty. Comments made by each faculty member are read, the decision is discussed, and a final vote is taken (with the dean voting only if needed to break a tie). Only at this point is a decision to fail final. Students failing two or more questions fail the comprehensive exam. The dean first notifies failing students by telephone, and then sends out written notification to everyone. Students who fail are asked to meet with the dean to hear comments on the questions, to help in preparing to retake the exam, and choose a faculty member with whom to work in preparing for this. The comprehensive exam may be retaken once, by registering to take comps along with other students at the regularly scheduled time in a future semester or summer session. Special examinations are not given.

Father Theall's Suggestions [Updated]

For those taking Comprehensive Examinations

1. **Answer the question that is on the examination**, not the question you wish had been asked instead, nor the question that some sixth sense told you to prepare for that is not on the list. In order to do this properly, read over carefully the five questions given each day and take a few minutes to decide which ones you are best prepared to answer.
2. **The comprehensive questions are designed to be broad in scope and to cut across narrow subject lines**, it is normally expected that you draw upon materials from several courses. If, for example, the question deals with the nature of "professionalism" in

librarianship, you should indicate several areas in which the librarian is given an opportunity to show that he/she is really a "professional". Above all, do not single out one particular area and dwell on that to the virtual exclusion of all other aspects of the problem. The professional librarian, for example, in the selection process must take into account aspects of censorship and intellectual freedom -- but selection involves much, much more than that.

3. **If there is a question involving a topic about which you have strong personal feelings** (and censorship is a good example), take care not to be overly emotional, to the point of irrationality and incomprehensibility. You are perfectly free to disagree with what faculty have said about, e.g., the purposes of the American public library, the responsibility of the public library to serve youngsters doing homework assignments or their parents solving puzzles, or the vexing problems of censorship. But what you may say must be factually sound, logically defensible, compatible with professional (and professional association) policies and standards, and enunciated with civility toward those who hold other views.
4. **Even if it means spending a bit of time making a preliminary outline of your answer, see that it is characterized by unity, coherence, and logic**, and ideally proper grammar, syntax, and spelling. The comprehensive examination is supposed to give evidence not only of the acquisition of factual material - names, dates, expressions of library philosophy, etc., but also of the ability to synthesize these things and express this synthesis with reasonable clarity.
5. **In answering any question, it is expected that you be able to cite two or three books, articles, or other sources** with which you are familiar that bear on the subject, ones that are truly relevant.
6. **Finally, and perhaps the most important of all: do not dismiss a question in three or four paragraphs.** Even allowing for time to choose questions on your strong points and to make a brief outline of your answer, you still have more than an hour to write on each of the two questions. It is impossible to lay down quantitative requirements, but I don't see how any single question can be answered in very much less than a thousand words. Don't resort to such devices as extra-wide margins, spectacularly large fonts, etc. This is not to say that you are to "pad" your answers or use irrelevant "filler" material. When you feel that you have fully answered the question, stop. If the question seems trivial to you and deserving of a short answer, remember that, though one faculty member may have formulated it, the entire faculty approved it for inclusion.

Dr. Pierce's Suggestions for Preparing for Comps

1. **First, register.** Register for COMP 598 "Master's Comps (with classes)" if you're taking another course as well as comps, and COMP 599 "Master's Comps (no classes)" if you're not. Comps are free if you're also registering for a class, but there's a charge (equivalent to one credit hour) if you're not.
2. **Review your notes, and look at textbooks and readings currently used in core courses (551, 553, 555, 557).** Questions drawing on the content of these courses always appear on comps. 600-level electives – e.g., cataloging, collection development, and management – can be useful too, so review any you've taken. I also suggest that students who have time might browse through a year of Library Journal and/or American Libraries, reading articles on current professional concerns.
3. **Find a study group,** or create one of your own. It's more pleasant to go through this with friends, and you learn more by discussing material with others.
4. **Review and try to answer questions asked previously** on the SLIS website at <http://slis.cua.edu/courses/comps/pastquestions.cfm> - but don't go back too far. Questions are written by current faculty and reflect current content of the program. For good advice on taking essay exams, see the Purdue OWL [online writing lab] web site at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_essay.html.
5. When you take the exam, two things to remember:
 - a. **Choose your questions carefully.** The graders will assume they're reading answers written in your strongest areas – make sure that's true! Sketch out a rough outline, to make sure you're covering the whole question, with some sources you plan to cite. Then be sure your answer covers the real question asked – and answers all of it. Many people fail because they fail to answer the question they were asked – not because what they said was wrong. If you don't answer the question asked, the graders will assume it's because you didn't know how to answer it.
 - b. **Referring to the literature is very important--though full and exact citations aren't expected.** Be prepared to mention things you read (by author and/or title or even "a recent article in Library Journal on X topic" - we don't expect you to have full and complete citations memorized). A weak answer with well chosen references to the literature may pass where an equally weak answer without

relevant references will fail. Two well chosen references is probably the minimum expectation here.

Advice from the Purdue OWL web site (see #4 above) on writing an effective essay exam:

1. Read through all the questions carefully.
2. Budget your time and decide which question(s) you will answer first.
3. Underline the key word(s) which tell you what to do for each question.
4. Choose an organizational pattern appropriate for each key word and plan your answers on scratch paper or in the margins.
5. Write your answers as quickly and as legibly as you can; do not take the time to recopy.
6. Begin each answer with one or two sentence thesis which summarizes your answer. If possible, phrase the statement so that it rephrases the question's essential terms into a statement (which therefore directly answers the essay question).
7. Support your thesis with specific references to the material you have studied.
8. Proofread your answer and correct errors in spelling and mechanics.

There's more! Take a look: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_essay.html

COMPS BRIEFING: SOME DEFINITIONS

The most common faculty comment when someone fails comps is: "Didn't answer the question!"

Words are important. Be sure you know what the question is asking before you start. There will be a dictionary in the room if you need one. Here are definitions of some verbs often used in comps questions:

Compare and Contrast

To discuss both similarities and differences between or among two or more things

Critique

1. A critical review or commentary, especially one dealing with works of art or literature.
2. A critical discussion of a specified topic.

[NOTE: **critical** is defined as "exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation"]

Describe

1. To characterize; to tell the facts, details, or particulars of
2. To trace the form or outline of

Define

1. a. To state the precise meaning of (a word or sense of a word, for example).
b. To describe the nature or basic qualities of; explain: e.g., define the properties of a new drug; a study that defines people according to their median incomes.
2. a. To delineate the outline or form of: e.g., gentle hills that were defined against the sky.
b. To specify distinctly: e.g., define the weapons to be used in limited warfare.

Discuss

1. To investigate by reasoning or argument
2. To present in detail for examination or consideration

Explain

1. To make plain or comprehensible.
2. a. To offer reasons for or a cause of; to justify
b. To offer reasons for the actions, beliefs, or remarks of.

Identify

To ascertain the origin, nature, or definitive characteristics of.