

Cognitive PhD Program Preliminary Examination Requirements and Processes

Introduction

In accord with policies of UIC's Graduate College and the Department of Psychology, the Cognitive Program has established the following requirements and processes for completing the Preliminary Examination and recommending a student for formal Advancement to Candidacy for the doctoral degree. Oversight and monitoring of these requirements and processes rests with the Program Chair. It is also the Program Chair's responsibility to communicate with the candidate regarding the recommendations of the Program.

Process Components. There are four major components of the Cognitive Program Preliminary Examination Process leading to recommendation for Advancement to Doctoral Candidacy:

- (a) Developing a Preliminary Paper proposal;
- (b) Writing the Preliminary Paper;
- (c) Oral Defense of the Preliminary Paper;
- (d) Summative Review by program faculty of the student's academic credentials and accomplishments, including outcomes from committee review of the Preliminary Paper and its Oral Defense.

Committees. There are two major committees with separate roles in the overall process:

The Preliminary Examination Committee. This committee is composed of all faculty in the Cognitive Program. In the case that five program faculty (including two tenured) are not available, the Department Head and/or the Director of Graduate Studies can serve as ex officio members.

The Preliminary Paper Review Committee. This committee is composed of at least three and at most four faculty members. One member may be from outside the program, the Psychology Department, or the University if approved by the Program Chair (the outside member must bring relevant expertise to the committee). The student's advisor is expected to be a member of the committee unless unusual circumstances (e.g., sabbatical) prohibit committee membership. **The student, after consultation with the advisor, submits a tentative title along with recommendations for Paper Review Committee members to the Program Chair,** who will then invite the Paper Review Committee, simultaneously identifying the Committee Chair. As part of accepting the invitation, faculty will commit to providing timely feedback (defined as 2 weeks) as long as the proposal is distributed within the first 12 weeks of the Fall or Spring semesters. The program strongly recommends that all students attempt to complete the proposal process within the Fall and Spring semesters, so that timely

feedback can be received. If necessary, the 2 week time frame for feedback may be extended by agreement of the committee chair and the faculty member needing the additional time.

The Preliminary Paper

Purpose. The purpose of the Preliminary Paper component is for students to demonstrate their ability to write a paper that addresses a particular problem or issue by connecting theories and evidence. Demonstrations of this skill could include using theories to interpret empirical findings, such as by discussing possible theoretical constructs or cognitive mechanisms that may explain different patterns of results, using an analysis of empirical findings to revise existing theories or develop new theories, using existing theoretical constructs to derive novel empirical predictions, or identifying possible designs for future empirical studies that would allow one to test between alternative theoretical explanations. Summarizing a literature or a set of studies that were intended to test a specific hypothesis is insufficient. The product must represent an original contribution, making connections or drawing conclusions that have not been previously made. Further, the student needs to demonstrate the ability to articulate their reasoning when making points or drawing conclusions, for example by providing enough information about any particular study that is serving as evidence to justify the students' novel claims about it. Thus the student should not just assert conclusions but should lay out their reasoning of how they arrived at that conclusion.

Paper Proposal. The student should consult with his or her advisor and potential members of the Preliminary Paper Review Committee when preparing the paper proposal. The goal of the proposal is to provide the committee with a clear understanding of the intended product. It is expected that the student will have become familiar with the literature prior to initiating the proposal process in order to facilitate the identification of possible questions to address in the paper. The student's advisor and/or committee chair will review drafts of the proposal before it is submitted for approval. The proposal should contain a summary of the major elements of the final paper, including:

1. **PROBLEM:** a clearly stated problem, purpose, question, or issue that will be addressed,
2. **THEORY AND EVIDENCE:** a description of the cognitive constructs or theories or mechanisms that will be brought to bear on the question, and the bodies of evidence that will be considered,
3. **EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION:** a description of how the final paper could make an original contribution to the cognitive literature, and
4. **BIBLIOGRAPHY:** a bibliography/reading list of the literature the student expects to use. The exact reading list will likely undergo adjustments as the project develops. The proposed bibliography/reading list is intended to provide the committee with an understanding of the scope and quality of the sources that will be read and considered, even if not all are cited in the

final product.

Students should use these four headings in their proposals. Proposals are limited to no more than 3000 words, not including references (approximately 10 double-spaced pages).

Proposal Acceptance. After committee invitations have been accepted and the student's committee chair believes the proposal is ready for official consideration, **the committee chair will distribute copies of the proposal to each committee member and to the Program Chair for review.** The committee reviews the paper proposal and provides written feedback to the committee chair. The purpose of the feedback is to point out strengths and weaknesses of the proposal and the overall acceptability of the project. The committee chair provides a synthesis of the collective comments to all members of the committee who then indicate to the committee chair their disposition regarding status of the proposal. Three outcomes are possible: (1) accept as is; (2) accept pending minor revisions; and (3) postpone acceptance pending major revisions. During the Fall and Spring terms, committee members must give feedback within the two-week window or the committee chair will move forward without it and acceptance of the proposal will be assumed.

If the paper proposal is accepted as is by all members of the committee, then available feedback is provided to the student and the Program Chair is informed by the committee chair of the collective agreement by committee members to allow the student to proceed with the paper writing process. At this point the Program Chair oversees the completion of two forms: the Preliminary Examination Committee form, a formal University document, which is submitted to the Graduate College, and the Preliminary Paper Agreement contract form, an internal Department document which is filed with the Department's Director of Graduate Studies and the Department's Graduate Program Coordinator. Both of these forms require information from the student and both are signed by the Program Chair. Once these forms are submitted, the student and committee members are officially notified by the Program Chair that the period for completing the written paper has begun. This is done via email and includes the date on which the completed prelim paper is to be submitted to the members of the Prelim Reading Committee.

If the paper proposal is accepted pending minor revisions, then the student must submit a revised proposal to the committee chair within a time limit to be set by the committee, usually two weeks. The proposal is considered accepted when the committee chair has verified that all requested revisions have been made, has distributed copies of the revised proposal to all committee members, and has notified the Program Chair that there is collective agreement by committee members that the student should be allowed to proceed with the paper writing process. At that point, processes initiated by the Program Chair and described in the above paragraph are set in motion.

If acceptance of the proposal is postponed pending major revisions, then the student must submit a revised proposal to the entire committee and the Program Chair within a time limit set by the committee. The committee members review the revised proposal and a new vote is taken. At this point, the committee members vote either "acceptable" or "unacceptable." The proposal is considered accepted if all members of the committee indicate that the revision is acceptable. Actions taken by the committee chair and Program Chair then follow the steps outlined in the paragraphs above.

If there continues to be disagreement as to acceptability of the proposal, the committee chair shall exercise discretion about whether to discuss the nature of the disagreements with the Program Chair who may then attempt to seek an appropriate resolution that will permit acceptance of the proposal. In the event that the proposal is ultimately rejected, the Paper Review Committee is disbanded. Subsequently, the student must choose a new topic, a new committee is formed, and a new proposal is processed in accord with the procedures described above. Members of the original committee may serve on the new committee. If the second (new) proposal is also rejected, the Paper Review Committee will report to the Program Chair that the student was unable to produce an acceptable proposal in the second attempt, which constitutes a de facto recommendation that the student has failed the paper writing and review component of the Preliminary Examination process.

Paper Completion. The student has 10 weeks to write the final preliminary paper which should be in APA format. The suggested length is between 10,000-12,000 words not counting references, tables, or figures. (This is approximately 35-40 pages.) The paper may be no longer than 12,000 words. The writing period begins on the day that the student is notified by the Program Chair that the written proposal is approved. During that time, the student should not seek the advice of any faculty member or student regarding the *organization or writing* of the final paper. He or she should not elicit comments from anyone on the *text* of the report. However, the student is free to discuss concepts and ideas relevant to the *content* of the project with any person as part of his/her normal, daily activities.

When the final paper is submitted, the committee members will give their evaluations of the paper to the committee chair within 2 weeks (unless the final paper is submitted less than 2 weeks before the end of the spring semester or during the summer, in which case feedback may be delayed). If the paper represents the second attempt, or a revision of a first attempt, or if no more than 1 committee member considers the first attempt paper unacceptable, then the committee chair will provide written feedback to the student regarding possible areas of weakness that will be discussed in the oral. Prior to the orals, committee members at their discretion may provide additional feedback. The student is encouraged to discuss the feedback with committee members or adviser (if the adviser is not on the committee). The student schedules the oral defense so that

it occurs within 2 weeks of the receipt of the written feedback (unless the final paper is completed in summer when the scheduling of the orals may be delayed).

If the submitted paper is the first attempt and 2 or more committee members consider the paper unacceptable, then the student fails the paper-writing component of the Preliminary Examination. The Paper Review Committee then recommends either: (a) that the student should be allowed to revise the paper and re-submit it to the Paper Review Committee within a specified time period usually not to exceed four weeks, in which case the process described in the previous paragraph is set in motion vis-a-vis the second version; (b) that the student fails the paper-writing component of the Preliminary Examination, but should be allowed a second full attempt, in which case the new proposal may be on the same or on a different topic, and the members of the Paper Review Committee may serve on the new committee; or (c) that the student should not be allowed a second paper writing attempt. This recommendation is forwarded to the Program Chair. The Program Faculty either affirms the recommendation of the Paper Review Committee or decides on some alternative. If the Paper Review Committee recommends that the student should be allowed to revise the paper or should be allowed a second paper writing attempt, the committee will provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the first attempt. If the Paper Review Committee recommends that the student not be allowed a second paper writing attempt, and if the Program Faculty affirms this recommendation, the student fails the Preliminary Examination.

Oral Defense. The oral defense will be centered on the specialty area and has several purposes: to ensure that the student can orally present and discuss his or her views on the chosen topic; to allow committee members to query the student about aspects of the paper about which they have questions; and to ensure that the student can relate the specialty topic to related areas of Cognitive Psychology. The oral defense meeting should take 1-2 hours.

At the oral defense meeting, the student describes his or her results and conclusions in a brief oral presentation (10-15 minutes maximum) and then the committee members discuss the final examination paper with the student. The committee then meets without the student, discusses the quality of the paper and oral defense, as well as any suggested feedback to the student. It votes "pass" or "fail". If no more than 1 committee member votes "fail", the Paper Review Committee Chair submits the signed (Internal) Preliminary Paper Review Report form to the Program Chair. The latter form is an internal Department document that includes the vote of each member of the Paper Review Committee, their signatures, and collective comments about the quality of the paper and oral defense and an appraisal of whether the student should be recommended for advancement to candidacy.

If 2 or more committee members vote "fail" on a second attempt then the student cannot be advanced to candidacy. If 2 or more committee members vote "fail" for

the oral defense of an initial attempt at the Preliminary Examination process, the Paper Review Committee then recommends either (a) that the student fails the paper writing and oral defense components of the Preliminary Examination process, but should be allowed a second attempt, in which case the new proposal may be on the same or on a different topic, and the members of the Paper Review Committee may serve on the new committee; or (b) that the student fails but should not be allowed a second attempt. This recommendation is forwarded to the Program Chair. The Program Faculty either affirms the recommendation of the Paper Review Committee or decides on some alternative. If the Paper Review Committee recommends that the student not be allowed a second attempt, and if the Program Faculty affirms this, the student fails the Preliminary Examination.

Final Review and Recommendation of Advancement to Candidacy

Following receipt of the recommendation from the Paper Review Committee, the Program Chair will call a meeting of the Preliminary Examination Committee (i.e., all Program Faculty) to discuss the candidate's cumulative record of performance in the program, and vote on endorsement for advancement to candidacy. Evidence to be considered will include course performance, research quality, productivity and originality, other professional interactions with faculty relating to scholarly activity, and feedback from the Preliminary Paper Writing and Oral Defense process. This meeting will normally occur within two weeks of receipt of the recommendation. A positive majority vote by the Program Faculty will be followed by completion and submission of the Graduate College form indicating successful passing of the Preliminary Examination process. In case of a negative majority vote, the form will indicate that the student failed the Preliminary Examination process.