Doctoral Candidacy Examination (DCE), Written Component
(aka “Prelim Paper” or “Comps Paper”)

The examination for admission to doctoral candidacy at Notre Dame has both a written and an oral component. The written component of the candidacy examination, informally known as the prelim paper or comps paper, is a comprehensive research-review manuscript, and the oral component is the defense of the dissertation proposal. Successful completion of both components is required for formal advancement to doctoral candidacy, which must occur prior to students applying for internship (see “Major Mileposts & Deadlines”). These processes involve a sequence of events, so the time required to complete these requirements varies, depending, for example, on how quickly the review paper and dissertation proposal are approved. Thus, students are advised to discuss the time frame with their advisors, and to begin the process well in advance of the third-year May 1 deadline for submission of the examination paper topic.

Students initially should consult with their advisor regarding the paper topic. After selecting a topic, students submit a prospectus (approximately 3-5 pages, plus references) proposing the topic and how they plan to approach the review to a committee of three faculty members. The DCE committee (aka prelim committee or comps committee) includes the student’s advisor and two other faculty members; at least one member of the committee must be a member of the clinical area. The primary goal is to produce a manuscript worthy of submission to a major psychology review journal (e.g., Psychological Bulletin, Psychological Review, Clinical Psychology Review). Acceptance of the prospectus is established when the last committee member gives his/her approval, either by e-mail or by signing and dating the Prospectus Approval Form (see the last page of this document), whichever is earlier. Students are responsible for obtaining faculty signatures and submitting the form, along with FORM DW-A from the department’s Graduate Students Form Packet, to the Graduate Administrative Assistant.

To permit sufficient breadth for this requirement, students need to: a) delineate the topic with respect to other related areas of inquiry; b) review relevant theories; c) summarize both contemporary and classic studies in the area; d) critically evaluate important methodological issues, such as research designs, quantitative techniques, and sampling procedures; and e) provide an integrative discussion section. Although comprehensiveness of the review is one evaluation criterion, students may meet the spirit of this criterion with a somewhat more narrow presentation provided it is appropriate to their topic and they explicitly justify doing so in the paper. The paper must conform to current APA publication style throughout (including title page, abstract, formatting, etc.). Although there is no official minimum length for the review, students are invited to discuss the paper’s length with their committee before they begin writing if they prefer some degree of certainty on this point.

The DCE paper is a competency-based project, and is evaluated in keeping with disciplinary practices for evaluating scientific manuscripts submitted for publication. Once the paper topic is approved, students research and write the paper on their own (i.e., without written input from committee members, although discussion is permitted). The paper is due 3 months from the
date of the acceptance of the proposed topic (i.e., when the last committee member has approved the prospectus). Students should inform committee members what the criteria and deadlines are for each step of the evaluation process (see the following material).

When students have completed their comprehensive review and submitted the paper to their committee members, the faculty individually review and evaluate the paper as they would evaluate a manuscript submitted to a major psychology journal. Committee members each write a formal review of the work, and provide the student and other committee members with a copy of their review. (Please note: Committee members do not provide a formal recommendation regarding acceptability of the manuscript, as would normally be done at this stage in the editorial review process.) Committee members are expected to complete their reviews within 15 academic** days of receipt of the paper.

The student then revises the manuscript in response to the committee members’ feedback, and submits the revised product for final review by each committee member within 30 academic days** of receiving the last of the three initial reviews. Included with the students’ final submission is a cover letter, with a point-by-point discussion of how each reviewer comment was, or was not, addressed. For comments that did not result in revision, students should provide a rationale for not doing so. Again, students may consult with committee members during the revision stage, but further written feedback is not permitted, to ensure that the revision reflects students’ independent scholarship.

In the final stage of the process, each committee member provides a rating, and the average of the members’ ratings determine the final grade. When they distribute their revised paper, students also should distribute to the committee members the following 6-point grading scale:

6 - Excellent performance: highest pass  
5 - Good performance: high pass  
4 - Average performance: pass  
3.5 - Cut off point: minimal pass  
3 - Below average performance: high fail  
2 - Poor performance: fail  
1 - Very poor performance: low fail

Committee members each send their scores within 15 academic** days to the Graduate-program Administrative Assistant, but NOT to the other committee members, to maintain the independence of the reviews. When all scores have been received, the Graduate-program Administrative Assistant forwards the results to the student’s advisor. If a passing score is not achieved, the student may start over with the same or a different topic. University regulations require that students have a maximum of two opportunities to pass the candidacy examination. Not passing the review-paper requirement the first time constitutes one of those opportunities.

**Summary of Tasks and Timelines for the Written Portion of the DCE**

1. Students consult with advisor(s) on topic, scope, focus, and so on, as well as committee
composition.

2. Students submit a 3-5 page prospectus (topic proposal) in APA style to the committee.

3. Committee members review the prospectus and either approve the topic or request revisions. If any revisions are requested, the student revises the prospectus and re-submits the topic proposal to all committee members. This process is repeated until all committee members have approved the prospectus. The committee members then sign the Prospectus Approval Form, which the student then submits to the Graduate-program Administrative Assistant. Although there is no formal timeline for faculty members to review the paper topic, faculty members should strive to do so within 5 academic days** of receipt.

4. Students independently research and write the review paper, which they distribute within 90 days after the last committee member signs the Prospectus Approval Form.

5. Committee members individually review the manuscript within 15 academic days** of receipt, and provide individual reviews to the student and other committee members as they would for a major psychology journal.

6. Students have 30 academic days** after receiving the last set of reviewer comments to revise and resubmit the paper, in accord with reviewer feedback, with a cover letter that addresses how reviewer comments were addressed.

7. Committee members provide their final scores within 15 academic days** to the Graduate-program Administrative Assistant.

8. When all scores have been received, the Graduate-program Administrative Assistant* forwards the results to the student’s advisor, who informs the student of the outcome.

**Academic days refer to Monday through Friday during the academic semester, excluding University holidays (e.g., Fall and Spring Break, Christmas Break, etc.). The summer is treated as a semester, with University holidays (e.g., Fourth of July) during this term also excluded.

Substantive modifications approved by the clinical-area faculty: May 5, 2014.
Stylistic modifications made July 28, 2015.
Clinical-area Doctoral Candidacy Examination
(DCE: written portion, aka Comps / Prelim)
Prospectus Approval Form

Note: Submit this form to the Graduate Administrative Assistant to indicate your DCE Committee's approval of your review paper proposal (i.e., your DCE Prospectus). The first draft of your review is due 3 months after the last faculty member on your committee has indicated his/her approval either by e-mail or by signing this form, whichever is earlier.

I approve the prospectus submitted by ________________________________

(Student’s name)

Advisor’s name ________________________________ Date

Advisor’s name ________________________________ Date

Advisor’s name ________________________________ Date