

MFA COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATIONS GUIDELINES

Revised Fall 2014

ABOUT THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

Temple University's MFA program in Film and Media Arts is unusual in requiring a comprehensive examination in addition to an MFA thesis. The program is committed to synthesizing theory and practice, allowing students to develop as makers, aesthetically and conceptually.

What is a comprehensive exam?

Comprehensive exams – or comps for short – are an examination of a student's knowledge of a field and body of scholarly knowledge. Moreover, it marks a significant transition of graduate students from consumers of theory to producers of theory. The idea is borrowed from studies MA/PhD programs, but here the format is distinctive. There are no lists of books or required fields. Instead, in consultation with their examination committee, the students comes up with four customized areas of inquiry – the questions – that embody their particular interests in film studies, media theory, or any other field of knowledge relevant to them and their work. The examination itself is then the writing of an essay to answer each of the THREE questions plus a DIRECTORS/ARTIST STATEMENT.

When do students take the Comprehensive Exams?

Students begin their comps in their second semester and complete the comps by the end of their third semester. Students must complete the Comps before they can officially begin the thesis project or apply for any department and university funding.

What areas do the comps questions cover?

Again, students are responsible for defining their own "fields." Collectively the four questions should reveal a breadth of subject matter or type of inquiry. The questions will relate to identifiable areas in the discipline, and usually subfields within those areas. Comp exams ask for expository prose in traditional academic style, formatting, and referencing. The goal is for makers to learn to communicate ideas in written, expository form in addition to their creative work.

What should the Director/Artist Statement cover

The goal of the Director/Artist Statement is the cohesively integrate your intellectual vision and creative approach in a one-page document that will anticipate your path forward. Director/Artist Statements are commonly required for grant, festival and job applications.

What makes a good comps question?

The questions and the answers students write will be distinctive and personalized, yet the question as much as the response demonstrates the student's intellectual and conceptual maturity. A few attributes define a strong comps question:

- **Connectedness to artistic work:** The comps questions are not directly about the student's work, but students may find that conceptual threads link questions back to their own work. This connection – and the serendipitous discovery it often entails – is what the comps process is about.
- **Spirit of inquiry:** Questions should not merely be post hoc justifications for or rehashings of the student's own artistic work. Researching and writing the exams should be a process of reflection, learning, and intellectual synthesis. To know all the answers before one starts defeats the purpose.
- **Groundedness:** Exam questions do not review scholarly literature in the manner that a dissertation or even an exam in a studies program might, but questions and responses should be aware of and how major contributions to the field have tackled the issues before.
- **Scope:** No one expects examination questions to solve the big questions about art, life and politics, or to revolutionize the field. However, the best questions deftly think about the big picture in the particulars of the area defined by the question.

What makes a good Director/Artist Statement?

A Director/Artist Statement offers a brief overview of your interests and approaches and helps others understand how your various creative and critical projects are connected. There are many models for a Director/Artist Statement and you should look at approaches on line and review your approach with your advisors.

Why comps?

The primary goal of the exam is to develop student's conceptual thinking and their intellectual identity as artists. Secondary goals follow, too. Those going into documentary or experimental media will have particular need to express in expository form the central concerns of their work in public presentations, grant applications and script development, as will those going into teaching and hybrid careers in the arts.

Selecting a committee

As with the thesis or with much of the graduate school experience, the committee the student chooses to work with will define much of the comprehensive exam process. Students should select faculty members whose interests fit theirs. (Though

that fit may involve challenging themselves to explore new areas). Bear in mind that a faculty member may already be over-committed or may feel that she or he is not an ideal fit for the committee.

Students in the past have sometimes included a relevant committee member outside of the Film and Media Arts department or from outside Temple. Students may include no more than one outside committee member, and both the Committee Chair and the Director of Graduate Studies will need to approve the inclusion. Outside members must have academic affiliation. The advantage of an outside member is that it allows students to tailor, but the disadvantage is that those from the outside are not familiar with the exam process here.

To ask a faculty member to serve on a committee, the student should if possible schedule a face-to-face meeting to discuss one's interests in the comps and to ask the faculty member to serve on the committee. This dialogue is a chance for each party to learn more about the other's interests and to be up front with their expectations.

Students will specify one committee member to be chair of the committee (mostly an administrative formality). She or he will then download the Formation of Comps Committee form from the FMA website and have all committee members sign it. The form goes to the Graduate Program director.

Schedule

- Students select a Comps Committee Chair and develop a first comps essay concurrently with registration in a core studies class in the spring of their first year.
- Students select addition committee members going into the summer of their first year and write their second essay over the summer.
- Students revise these essays and write their third essay in the fall of their second year concurrently with registration in Critical Methods.
- Essay drafts are submitted near the end of the fall semester at a date set by the department.
- The finalize package of completed essays and director/artist statement is submitted in early January with defense completed by early in the fourth semester at a date set by the department.

Defense

After the committee has read the essays and artist statement, they and the student will meet. Temple FMA's comps do not involve a formal defense but do typically have a face-to-face meeting for the faculty to respond to the student's work and to ask any questions. In rare cases, the questions will probe for fuller demonstration of mastery of knowledge, if such mastery is not evident from the responses. Usually, though, the conversation seeks to have the student reflect on the ideas and inquiries developed in the comps and to connect them back to her or his work.

With the student stepping out, the committee will then make a decision: Pass, Fail, or Pass with Specified Revisions.

If passed, the student will download and print out the Completion of Comps form from the FMA website, and the committee will sign it.

The document should be scanned and copies send to the Graduate Coordinator, Leah Dempsey <LeahDempsey@temple.edu>, and to the current Graduate Director of FMA. Copies should be emailed to committee members and Students must also keep a copy for their own records.

NOTE: In some cases, especially in the instance of absent faculty or of outside committee members, the committee may at the guidance of the committee chair forgo a full defense meeting and approve or discuss the student's examination individually. This should not be the norm, however.