



Adventist International Institute
of Advanced Studies

Graduate School and Seminary

Graduate School
Education Department

Comprehensives Preparation Document

The purpose of graduate education is not only to gain new knowledge. Much new knowledge is usually gained in the process of a Master's or Ph.D. program, but a more important purpose of graduate education is to develop advanced professional and academic skills such as the ability to think, reason, organize, and write. Facts are necessary raw materials for these processes, but they are a part of the process, not the real goal of graduate education.

Because graduate education focuses on processes and ideas, rather than just facts, the comprehensive exams are intended to measure analytical ability much more than content knowledge. As students gain knowledge in different content areas, they are tested over it before they move on to a new class. Now, with the course work at an end, the question is whether that knowledge can be applied in situations which call for integration, critical thinking, analysis, organization, and practical application. In other words, what can students actually do with all that knowledge they have been storing up throughout their master's program? This sort of testing happens in a lesser way during and at the end of each course, but is too frequently limited to the integration of content from only one course. The purpose of the comprehensive examination, then, is: to see if students can reason logically, organize ideas, and use a scholarly approach to problem-solving using the knowledge and skills they have mastered throughout their program of studies. The exam isn't focused so much on testing to see how many facts students can remember, although it is difficult to do effective scholarly work without knowing factual knowledge. The real focus is on using essential facts, principles, and theories effectively in real-life situations. The question is whether students can function as educated individuals in a new situation—have they internalized concepts and ideas, or merely facts, which do not transfer well to new situations?

Because the purpose of the institution in giving the comprehensive is to test levels of thinking, organization, synthesis, and integration, teachers grading comprehensives may focus on areas which the students sometimes regard as less important. Many graduate students misunderstand the purpose of the comprehensive, and seem to feel it is about piling up a long list of facts to impress the correctors. Let me assure you—unless you show some analytical ability and critical thinking of your own, your list of facts WILL NOT impress the correctors. This unfortunate difference in expectation of what the test is about can result in generally bright students doing less well than they expected on the comprehensive exams. The goal of this document is to help students understand what is expected of them, so that they will be able to do their best on the comprehensive examination, knowing full well what is expected of them. Following is a list of typical problems correctors find with student exam papers, recommendations for how to prepare for comprehensive exams, and an explanation of the grading rubric which correctors use to grade comprehensive exams.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies

Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite 4118, Philippines | Phone: 63 46 4144 300 | Email: scribe@aiias.edu

"Graduate Education with a Heart for Mission"

Typical Problems

Most problems with comprehensives boil down to one issue: The student did not answer the question. This happens in a variety of ways, and for a variety of reasons:

- 1. The student either did not read the question carefully, or did not understand it.**

Questions tend to be short, and sometimes there is not a lot of context surrounding the issue. When English is not a student's first language, this can cause problems. BE SURE you have a clear idea of what is expected on each question. This is something you may ask the person proctoring your exam. BE SURE you answer all the parts of the question. Sometimes the question is long and has several sections. DON'T SKIP any of the parts in your answer. This is very important.
2. The student addressed many other issues, but only briefly touched on the issue mentioned in the question.

This problem has two fundamental causes: 1) either the student truly didn't know the answer, and so was trying to avoid the issue, or 2) the student didn't organize the time and space, prioritizing the important issues. This is a serious fault.
3. The student spent copious amounts of space on spiritual issues, but only briefly mentioned academic issues.

This problem is similar to the one above, but is so common that it merits mentioning as a separate issue. All of us are interested in Christian education. We have serious spiritual goals for our students. But we need METHODS and TECHNIQUES of accomplishing those goals. Just repeating the same rhetoric that we all believe in and have discussed for years does not prove your ability to think, organize, or analyze. It rather suggests that you don't know any academic answers, so you simply repeat familiar Bible texts and Ellen White quotes. It is GOOD to mention spiritual issues as they relate to any question you may be asked. But please follow them up with reasoning, analysis, and academic treatment, and be sure not to spend all your time and space on simple concepts we already agree on.
4. The student spends most of the time talking about broad, familiar concepts, rather than focusing in on the real issue in depth.

This problem is a little like problems number 2 and 3, but stems from a different cause. The real problem here is an inability or unwillingness to analyze. Students simply try to put as many "right answers" down on the paper as possible, hoping the professor will find some there which are to his liking. In going for this sort of shotgun approach, the student doesn't have time to answer in depth about any one particular area, which is the purpose of the exam. Students want to leave all the options open for the professor, rather than taking a position and arguing for it logically and clearly. A position taken and well explained and supported will earn a much higher score than a paper which simply lists options and refuses to do the analysis. What we are looking for is your value added to the process. If we want direct recall, we can get a tape recorder!
5. The student jumps from one topic to another on the answer sheet, making leaps of faith which we can't follow with logic.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies

Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite 4118, Philippines | Phone: 63 46 4144 300 | Email: scribe@aaias.edu

"Graduate Education with a Heart for Mission"



Adventist International Institute
of Advanced Studies
Graduate School and Seminary

Organizing writing is important. You need to be clear about what points you intend to make, and what order you want to make them in. You need to explain connections between ideas, and make sure what you have said carefully covers the points you intended to make. Students are encouraged to make an outline and plan their responses, especially since the response space is limited, so as to include the most important points, and not leave anything out.

6. Student response is shallow, entirely personal opinion, which shows little evidence of having been in graduate classes.

Comprehensive questions are broad and general. There is no other way to sum up such a lot of education in such a short space. This does not mean your responses should be so broad or so general. You are expected to reflect on what you have learned in your classes and show evidence of that learning on the comprehensive exam. You might cite some educators' ideas in order to make your point (put their name down to give credit). You might make reference to theories of education you have studied; principles; ideas. The comprehensive should look like an expository essay, not a piece of creative writing. It must include personal opinion, but should be more than that.

7. Student response sticks entirely to facts, showing little comprehension of the bigger issues involved.

Remember, graduate degrees are about thinking, not just about facts. The idea of the comprehensive is to test thinking, not just facts. If all you show us are facts, we have to conclude that you are not capable of thinking, a problem which could cause you to fail the exam. The ideal is a combination of issues, facts, and analysis, with a respect for the complexity of the situation, but a plan for how to make sense out of it. Don't oversimplify, but don't refuse to take a stand, either. The philosophy, research, and foundations classes aren't tested directly, but rather are implied in the way you handle the questions. Carefully consider ALL the subjects you have taken before you formulate an answer to a question. No question comes from one specific class—all of them expect you to refer to things you have learned in a variety of places.

8. Student response is overly simple, not representative of graduate work.

This problem tends to be worse with those who struggle with English ability. When it is difficult to make a sentence in English, it is difficult to say something important and academic. So students simply repeat tired catch-phrases, or quote familiar statements. This is not enough to merit the title of graduate work. Ideas must be discussed clearly, and student input must be included. Don't tell us that the sky is blue and the grass is green and expect a graduate degree for it just because you said it in English. There must be some substance to your ideas.

9. Student's English is so poor that teachers can't tell what meaning was intended.

This problem is not an easy one to deal with. AIIAS is an English-speaking graduate institution, and as such, we must operate in English. In order to communicate your ideas, you must be able to use English. Having occasional grammar mistakes is not a problem, neither is writing simple and short sentences. The biggest problem is when students try to use large words and complex sentence structures, thinking this will impress the professor.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies

Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite 4118, Philippines | Phone: 63 46 4144 300 | Email: scribe@aaias.edu

"Graduate Education with a Heart for Mission"

Believe me, it only confuses. Complex ideas can be expressed in very simple language, and this is actually to be encouraged. Try to be sure that you, at least, can understand the ideas you have written. You don't need to write native speaker Academese to impress professors. Simple explanations of big ideas are perfectly appropriate, as long as you keep in mind that substantive ideas are the goal here.

10. Student's handwriting is so bad that teachers can't tell what meaning was intended. Be warned. Someone has to read your paper. Try to write so that this is possible. For those who can compose at the computer, we recommend that you type your test. If this would greatly decrease the amount you are able to write, it is not recommended, however.
11. **Student memorized sample comprehensive answer and used it in place of a real answer.** Some students have the idea that the sample answer would be good for any question. It is not. First of all, it shows someone else's thinking and not your own, and second, it does not answer most questions you might be asked. It is very unlikely that you will get a question on the test which will use the same information as the sample answer you were given. What you should learn from the sample answer is how to answer a question in detail, and in an organized manner, showing your book learning and your ability to think for yourself and apply what you know in a practical situation.

How to Prepare for Comprehensive Exams

This is a bit like preparing for any final exam—if you have studied all along, you have much less to worry about. You will want to review your course work, but looking for big ideas and overarching principles—not trying to memorize details.

1. Review each course you have studied. Make a list of the 10 most important concepts you learned in that class.
2. Clear up any confusion you have about major points of importance in a field with your professor.
3. Look at your courses by larger areas—how does each course fit into the larger picture of what it means to be an Adventist educator? How do the courses work together? What is the unique contribution of each?
4. Consider the most important things you have learned during your degree program. What are you taking away from this experience that you didn't have before you came?
5. Consider different aspects of your learning at AIIAS. What are major philosophical issues? What is research about, and what are the major things to remember when doing research? What are major issues in curriculum? In teaching practice and classroom life? What are major administrative issues?
6. Review writing techniques. Can you organize your writing clearly? Go over old papers from your professors, and pay close attention to the kinds of comments they have made about your writing. What areas should you work on improving? Can you analyze well?

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies

Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite 4118, Philippines | Phone: 63 46 4144 300 | Email: scribe@aaias.edu

"Graduate Education with a Heart for Mission"



Adventist International Institute
of Advanced Studies
Graduate School and Seminary

The day of the test:

1. Get a good night's rest before the exam. It will be of much more value to you than those extra last-minute hours of cramming. You need to be well-rested and able to think clearly. This is more important than remembering one more list of facts.
2. Drink lots of water during the day, and get up to stretch periodically. Eat lightly so your body can focus on thinking.
3. Plan your time carefully. Read ALL the questions before you begin work, and be sure to clarify any doubts about what is expected with the exam proctor.
4. Divide your working time into equal amounts so that no question gets slighted. Outline the major points you want to address (the outline is a recommended part of what you turn in), and make sure you cover them in the time you have allotted yourself. If you haven't finished when your time is up, go on to the next question anyway. Come back if you have extra time at the end.
5. Allow some time at the end to re-read what you wrote, and a few emergency minutes just in case you haven't finished one section.
6. If working on a computer, be sure to spell-check your document, and possibly check out some of the grammar recommendations, but don't let it distract you when you are writing.
7. Do the hardest question first or second, while you are fresh. Leave the easiest parts for last. Sometimes, however, it is better to start with an easier question to get your confidence up.
8. If you get writer's block and can't advance, go to a different question and come back to the problem area later on.
9. Remember the things you have learned about how comprehensives are graded, and make sure that your answers adequately address the questions and meet the standards for excellence.
10. Remember that the comprehensive is not intended to be the factor which decides whether or not you graduate. It is one more step in the process. It is intended to help you make connections between different subjects you have studied, and to help you see the overall picture of what it means to be educated in your field.

How the Comprehensive is Graded

As mentioned before, the comprehensive exam is about thinking, analyzing, and synthesizing all the things you have learned in your graduate program. The following page contains the rubric your professors are encouraged to use when grading your exam.