

**A Description of the
Senior Comprehensive Examination
for Philosophy Majors**

A. An Overview of the Examination

The purpose of the examination is to determine to what extent students have consolidated a competence in philosophy. This purpose cannot be achieved in any one course or group of courses, due in part to restriction in subject matter, and in part to differences among teachers and approaches. Rather, just as only the whole curriculum can hope to develop the competence, so the comprehensive examination should test for a whole ability, which, by the end of a student's undergraduate studies, will be more than merely the sum of the parts that helped to produce it. The examination is, therefore, neither a repetition of course examinations nor an opportunity to ferret out weaknesses. It is designed to allow students to show their strengths, but it also requires precise information and clear analysis

1. This year, the examination will be held from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday–Tuesday, February 1-2. The Exam will take place in Aquinas Hall 102, Aquinas Auditorium.
2. Students must enroll in PHIL 498 through “Cardinal Station,” in order to be eligible to sit for the examination.
3. On the days of the examination, students are excused from classes in philosophy.
4. Each of the two days of the examination will have a distinct form, as follows:

First day:	historical:	three out of five questions.
Second day:	systematic:	three out of five questions.
5. On each day the student has a choice among questions.
6. Questions are solicited from all faculty members teaching undergraduate courses, selected by the Coordinator, and approved by the Associate Dean. These faculty members also grade the examinations.

7. At the beginning of the first day of the examination, students will be assigned an identification number. No other identifying mark is permitted.
8. Each of the 6 questions is to be answered on a separate ruled sheet of paper provided during the exam.
9. If a student completes the exam with fewer than three questions answered on either day, the exam as a whole will be considered insufficient and will not be graded. The student will receive an automatic grade of F for the entire exam attempt.
10. Each essay is graded by two different graders.
11. Graders will assign a grade of H, P, F (honors, pass, or fail) to each essay they grade.
12. Students will receive six grades for each day, two for each of three questions. If more than 50% of individual grades on any given day are F, then the student fails that day. In other words, if a student earns four or more F grades (4/6) on a given day, the student fails that day. Students receive honors for the day if they do not score a final grade of FF on any essay and receive at least three Hs.
13. The final grade on the examination will be determined in the following way. Students will pass the exam if they receive a total (across both days) of at least 5 P grades, and do not receive more than one FF score on any single day. In other words, students will fail the exam if they receive a total of 8 or more F grades (combined across both days), or if they receive two or more FF scores on any single day. Students will be awarded honors if they receive a total of at least 5 H's across both days, and do not score an FF on any essay.
14. The Administrative Assistant will inform students by email of their overall grade as well as of their individual grades on the 6 questions they addressed in the exam.
15. The overall grade will be recorded as pass, fail, or honors on the student's transcript.
16. Students who fail the exam will have to retake it. If students fail the exam but pass one of the two days, they will only have to retake the day that they failed. In this case, when calculating the grade for the retake exam (in accordance with the rules set out in #12), the student will retain the grades from the day that he/she passed in the first round, and these grades will be combined with the grades from the re-take in order to determine the final grade for the exam as a whole.

17. The completed examination shall remain in the possession of the School of Philosophy. Upon request, and within a year of the examination date, any student may examine their answers. Students who fail a Day may request the examiners' specific comments to their answers for that Day.

18. At the beginning of the Fall semester, there will be a mandatory 2-hours Guidelines for Senior Comprehensive Exam Seminar for all students taking Comps in the Spring.

B. How to Approach the Work of Each Day

First Day: History of Philosophy

In each essay you are to write, you will be asked to compare and contrast at least two, but no more than three, figures in the history of philosophy on some issue, controversy, or difficulty. No two figures considered should be from the same period. For the purposes of the examination, the history of philosophy is divided into the following periods:

- (i) Ancient: prior to Augustine
- (ii) Medieval: from Augustine to Ockham
- (iii) Modern: from Descartes to Kant
- (iv) Contemporary: from Hegel to the present

To compare and contrast means to state similarities and differences. Is the similarity one of function within a system, or is it only a similarity of positions serving different functions and thus having different meanings within a larger whole? Are the terms and arguments the same, or different, and to what extent? What differences in presuppositions account for the differences in positions? What specific common issue is handled in different ways?

It is necessary to narrow down the scope of a general question and to focus the answer on one aspect of it so that what you write has some bite and precision, without losing philosophical relevance and interest. The questions set the limit within which you are to work during the time available; the answer will not be satisfactory if you work only on the level of the general question. *How* you delimit the question is up to you. Any generalization should follow from and grow out of a specific analysis.

Second Day: Systematic

You will be asked to discuss one and only one issue, controversy, or difficulty in any given essay. Once again it will be necessary to focus your answer on a specific aspect of the topic; and again it will be up to you to determine how you do so. For example, you have chosen the question “what is the relation between time and knowledge?” and you write *not* on “the transcendental nature of knowledge” (a theme much too broad to be discussed in the time allotted), and *not* on “truth and history according to Hegel” (this day’s questions are concerned with problems, not with historical exposition). Rather, you might write about the possibility of attaining certain knowledge of the past, or about the temporal structure of a judgment, or about the truth of future contingents. In formulating your answer, you should consider and address possible counter arguments to your position.

While you are not simply to repeat the position of a given philosopher on the specific issue, controversy, or difficulty you have chosen for your essay, you certainly may and probably will draw on your knowledge of the history of philosophy in order to formulate the pro’s and con’s of the *issue*. It is fine to refer to the particular philosopher or philosophical tradition that you are drawing on. The difference between historical and systematic essays is not the presence or absence of references to particular philosophers or traditions, but that systematic essays present and defend a philosophical position on a particular issue, adopting that position as one’s own.

The key difference between answers to historical and systematic questions is that answers to systematic questions should present a particular philosophical position, adopting it as one’s own and defending it as true, rather than simply explaining and analyzing the view of a particular thinker.

In this part of the examination your sense of philosophical questions and processes of analysis, criticism, and defense is much more important than your assertion of unanalyzed and unargued positions.

Revised April 28, 2026

Detailed Rubric for Senior Comps

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Learning Goals	Level		
	Honors (Above Expectations)	Pass (Meet Expectations)	Fail (Below Expectations)
Day 1 (Historical)	<p>Essays worth honors will do the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Satisfy conditions for a passing grade. 2) Identify not just significant, but key similarities and differences. 3) Where necessary, effectively delimit the similarities and differences by noting relevant similarities within broader points of difference, or differences within broader points of similarity. 4) Provide an accurate summary of the central advantages and limitations of the respective views. 	<p>Essays earning a passing score will do the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Correctly identify at least two (but no more than three) philosophers, belonging to distinct historical periods. 2) Identify and accurately explain at least one significant similarity between these philosophers. 3) Identify and accurately explain at least one significant difference between these philosophers. 4) Explain these similarities and differences in a way that makes clear their philosophical significance. 5) Avoid suggesting any manifestly false interpretations of the philosophers. 	<p>Essays will Fail if they do not meet the expectations to Pass.</p> <p>Most commonly, students will earn a failing grade because their answer did one of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Identified only trivial differences between the philosophers. 2) Identified only trivial similarities between the philosophers. 3) Provided either no or a largely inaccurate discussion of the philosophical significance of these similarities and differences. <p>Students will also fail the exam if their writing/ grammar / style be very unclear or ambiguous.</p>

<p>Day 2 (Systematic)</p>	<p>Essays worth honors will do the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Satisfy conditions for a passing grade. 2) Narrow down the topic in a way that is philosophically insightful and that explains how it is relevant to other philosophically significant issues. 3) Articulate a philosophically sophisticated thesis. 4) Develop a compelling and philosophically nuanced argument for the thesis. 5) Consider some of the most compelling or powerful objections to the thesis. 6) Provide a powerful and compelling response to each considered objection. 	<p>Essays earning a passing score will do the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Where relevant, narrow down and focus on one aspect of the question in a philosophically relevant way. 2) Articulate a clear and philosophically substantial thesis. 3) Develop a dialectically meaningful argument for the thesis. 4) Where needed, draw philosophically sound distinctions and define key terms. 5) Consider at least one plausible objection to the thesis. 6) Provide an at least somewhat plausible response to each considered objection. 	<p>Essays will Fail if they do not meet the expectations to Pass.</p> <p>Most commonly, students will earn a failing grade because their answer did one of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Developed an unclear or ambiguous thesis. 2) Made an argument for the thesis that would only seem plausible to those already inclined to accept the conclusion. 3) Failed to consider plausible objections to the thesis. 4) Failed to focus on an aspect of the question and so bit off more than can be reasonably addressed in the allocated space. <p>Students will also fail the exam if their writing/ grammar / style be very unclear or ambiguous</p>
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