

**Department of Counseling,  
Educational Psychology and Special Education  
Policies and Procedures for the Preliminary Examination**

This set of questions and answers presents the policies and procedures for the Counseling, Educational Psychology and Special Education (CEPSE) Preliminary Examination (or "Prelim") developed by the Student Progress Review Committee (SPRC).

The questions are organized under four major headings: Nature of the Preliminary Exam, Examinees for the Preliminary Examination, Administration of the Exam, and Evaluation of Preliminary-Exam Performance. Questions about issues that relate to several topics may appear under more than one heading.

**Nature of the Preliminary Examination**

**What is the general format of the exam?**

Students answer questions about a published research article. The article is program specific, and is different for each administration of the exam. A common set of questions is asked of all students. Answers are written as essays, in an in-class setting.

**What competencies are tested by the Preliminary Examination?**

The Preliminary Examination is designed to test the following competencies:

- Understanding of theoretical perspectives appropriate to the student's field of study
- Knowledge of research design and data-analysis procedures
- Ability to integrate knowledge of research methods and conceptual knowledge and apply them to a substantive issue in the field of study
- Ability to appropriately interpret and generalize research results relevant to the field of study
- Ability to assess and communicate the importance or significance of a study and its results and implications
- Proficiency in the skills of scholarly writing

**Are test questions drawn from a larger pool of questions?**

No. All examinees address a common set of questions. The questions have been used for preliminary exams administered to all MQM doctoral students at the beginning of their second year of the program starting with the Fall 1994 doctoral student cohort.

The same questions are asked of all students to assure that the exam is fair and comparable across years. While the SPRC does not believe that the Preliminary Examination questions cover all issues that students should be able to address, we believe that they tap a common core of scholarly issues, and should provide a means of assessing the competencies listed above, which we believe are appropriate for doctoral students.

**What is the nature of the questions?**

Students will be asked to carefully analyze and critique a piece of published research.

## Examinees for the Preliminary Examination

### **Who takes the Preliminary Examination?**

Students who enter the MQM doctoral program in Fall 1994 or thereafter are required to take the MQM Preliminary Examination. This includes students who may have completed a similar examination administered by a different program. The requirement of completion of the preliminary exam cannot be waived.

### **When in the course of the doctoral program does a student take the Preliminary Examination?**

The student takes the Preliminary Examination either:

- a. at the beginning of the second year of full-time study, just before or during the week of the first semester of the second year of coursework,
- or
- b. after successfully completing the first two courses in the methodology sequence (CEP 930 and 932) and proseminar (or equivalent), if the student is part-time, at the next regular administration of the preliminary examination.

One implication of this timeline is that students are **strongly** advised to enroll in the methodology sequence and proseminar (or equivalent) in their first year of study. Although students who have taken these courses cannot be *guaranteed* to do well on the Preliminary Examination, students who do not take them are at serious risk of not gaining the skills and competencies that will be tested on the Preliminary Examination.

Although there is no department-wide requirement that these courses be taken during the first year, the SPRC believes for the exam to function well (and as it was designed) the courses should be taken during the first year. Advisors should urge their students to enroll in these required courses in the first year.

### **Is every student required to take the Preliminary Examination as soon as he or she has reached this point in the program?**

Yes. The Preliminary Exam is designed to provide an early warning sign of student weaknesses, or of the possibility that a student may be unable to complete the doctorate. With early feedback, remediation of weaknesses is more likely to be possible.

### **What if the student has completed the required classes but is still not perceived to be prepared?**

All students are required to take the examination at the scheduled time in their course of study. If a student is not prepared, the examination will provide an opportunity to identify and assess areas of strength and weakness, and provides an opportunity for the student and advisor to design appropriate remediation for problems.

If a student does not take an exam at the specified time, the advisor and program faculty are notified. Not taking the examination constitutes a serious matter in itself.

### **When should students apply to take the exam?**

The preliminary examination is administered once a year, just before or during the first week of fall semester classes. Students should apply to take the exam by August 1, just prior to the exam administration (exam is typically administered during August or the beginning of September, see the program website for exact dates). Many advisors are not available during summer, so advisors and students may wish to discuss study plans or exam-taking strategies before late spring, even though students are expected to make further preparations during the summer. A copy of the application form is available from the program website. Students turn in a completed application as directed in the instructions by the stated deadline.

### **Do students need to bring a computer to the exam?**

Yes, the responses to the preliminary examination are to be typed using a word processing program on a laptop computer. It is assumed that students will use their personal laptop computer for this purpose. Either MAC or IBM software is acceptable. It is expected that you will use the computer only for the purposes of typing your response to the preliminary examination; you are not permitted to access any other programs on your computer during the exam unless directed by the SPRC representative for the purposes of submitting the response file. The department reserves the right to inspect the computer you are using prior to and during the exam and before accepting a copy to your responses. In addition, you must agree to allow CEP faculty to use an online anti-plagiarism tool when grading your response to the preliminary exam.

If a student does not have access to a laptop and/or word processing software, the student is expected to make arrangements to have a computer and software available during the examination. There are a limited number of department laptops that may be available on a loaner basis, but this alternative is not guaranteed to be available, so students should begin making arrangements as soon as possible to ensure they have the appropriate technology available for the exam. If you need assistance in making these arrangements, please contact the SPRC representative.

### **What is the student agreeing to when signing the application?**

The application summarizes examination procedures and requires the student to agree to a statement of academic honesty and ethical principles and practices. These principles and practices are aligned with the Michigan State University student code of conduct. Students should carefully review the content of the application and this policy before signing the application indicating their agreement that they understand the policies and guidelines and agree to abide by them. This step is done to ensure the security and integrity of the examination process. It is expected that students and faculty will abide by the procedures this document, as indicated by signatures. Please contact the SPRC representative if you have any questions or need additional clarification *before* signing the application.

### **How many times may the student try the Preliminary Examination?**

Students are allowed to attempt the Preliminary Examination twice. We expect that only a small number of students will receive a No Pass performance rating and be expected to repeat the exam. Therefore, two No Pass performances are a clear indication of serious academic deficiency. Because serious remediation is required before a second attempt, a second poor performance indicates significant deficiencies that may not be remediable. Any requests for further retakes must be justified by an appeal to the SPRC. See also "What happens if a student gets a No Pass?" in the section entitled "Evaluation of Preliminary-Examination Performance" below.

## Administration of the Exam

### **When is the Preliminary Examination administered?**

The Preliminary Examination is administered annually the week before the beginning of fall semester. Students are notified of the exam date during the preceding academic year. Students must turn in their examination application before the deadline. Applications to take the exam are not accepted after the deadline.

### **Is the exam "in class" or "take-home"?**

Students are given the examination in the morning and have the entire day to read, reflect on, and write about the article. The exam is given in an in-class format for several reasons. First, the exam is intended to tap each student's own abilities to think critically and independently. Students are not expected to have extensive depth and breadth of knowledge of existing research. Second, having a limited time frame ensures a high level of test security, since students complete the examination during one day, under supervised conditions. Because the exam takes all day, students are encouraged to take lunch and breaks as needed. However, there is not a set time that breaks are scheduled and decisions about taking breaks is left to the individual students.

### **What should students bring to the examination?**

As described above, students are expected to use a word processing program on their laptop computers to type their exam responses, so students should have a laptop with the appropriate software. The department reserves the right to inspect computers prior to and during the exam and before accepting copies of student responses.

Food and drink may be brought to the examination. However, the food and drink will need to be left at the front of the room (or outside of the room, if the room has this restriction), and students should plan to eat and/or drink outside of the room.

Students may bring an English language dictionary to the examination if desired. The dictionary must be hardcopy, no electronic dictionaries are allowed.

### **What is NOT allowed?**

Students are not allowed to use any notes or books during the examination (except for an English language dictionary; see above for details). Personal items (e.g., bags, backpacks) should not be brought to the exam. If laptops computers are brought in carrying cases, these should be left at the front of the room and accessed only after the examination is submitted. When a student takes a break during the exam, it is expected that students will not consult any notes, books, or any other source for the purposes of completing the examination.

Information stored or available on networked servers (such as the AFS space) should not be accessed during the examination time. The use of software programs other than a word processing program is strictly prohibited, and students should not open any files from any source during the examination other than the new blank file that will contain their responses to the exam unless directed by the SPRC representative.

### **When are the questions given to students?**

The questions are included in this document, and are available online at the program website. A hardcopy of the questions will be provided to each student on the day of the exam.

### **When is the article for the exam available?**

The article will be given to students on the day of the examination. Students arrive in the morning and are given the article and a copy of the questions. Students have the entire day to read the article, make notes on it, and respond to the questions. Students are not allowed to interact about the article during the examination. Articles used in *past* administrations are available for students to view on the program website.

### **What if a student needs special accommodations?**

Students may bring lunches and snack foods which can be used outside of the computer lab. Any student requiring special accommodations must submit a request to the SPRC representative in writing by the time of application. Earlier submission of a request is encouraged to help ensure adequate time for arranging accommodations. The request should include a description of accommodations documented in RCPD *Verified Individualized Services and Accommodations (VISA)* form. A hardcopy of the VISA must be submitted before arrangements for accommodations can be made.

### **Who chooses the articles?**

The program faculty are responsible for selecting the article for the students in their program to analyze in the Preliminary Examination. The SPRC has developed guidelines for article selection, see page 8.

## **Evaluation of Preliminary Examination Performance**

### **How is Preliminary Examination performance evaluated?**

Preliminary Examinations are evaluated at the Program level. Two outcomes are possible:

- a. **Pass**. The student receives a letter from the Department indicating satisfactory performance and providing feedback as suggested by the exam scores.
- b. **No Pass**. The student, his or her advisor, and the program's unit director receive copies of a letter from the Department indicating his or her status is "in jeopardy," including feedback on the exam, and identifying areas of weakness suggested by exam performance. Both the advisor and other program faculty must be involved in decisions regarding remediation. Two avenues seem likely:
  1. The student remediates with close monitoring, followed by a retake of the exam.
  2. The student may be dropped from the program. This latter would only occur if other serious negative evidence about progress in the doctoral program exists.

### **What happens if a student gets a No Pass?**

The student has the right to one retake that would take place the following fall. The student and his or her advisor must develop a remediation plan. The student must carry out the plan and report on any remediation efforts in his or her next annual review.

### **Who scores the exam?**

Complete exams are scored by teams of two program faculty. The scorers are blind to the identity of each examinee, and are assigned by the SPRC representative. A set of scoring guidelines and performance criteria has been prepared by the SPRC to assist faculty in achieving consistent evaluation of student performance across scorers. The guidelines are described on page 9.

Additionally, faculty assigned to score the exams for each program meet prior to scoring the exams. These meetings provide a forum for discussion of the substantive problem examined in the particular article that students will have examined, the methodologies used, and ideas about interpretations of the research. This should help increase consistency in judgments across raters both between and within programs, since faculty may score exams of students from several programs, including programs other than their own.

### **What is the nature of the feedback provided?**

Faculty scorers provide feedback about the specific questions asked on the exam, as well as more general feedback about students' writing skills and skills in analysis and communication. Students receive both numerical scores and written feedback about their exam performance. To the extent that it is possible to suggest specific avenues of remediation or further study, faculty provide those in writing as well.

### **How are overall Prelim scores obtained?**

Scorers evaluate the Prelim performance of each examinee on each of the three domains. Each scorer assigns three "domain scores" to each exam. These domain scores are then averaged across domains and scorers to produce a overall score (of Pass or No Pass) according to the following scoring rules.

Domain scores are assigned numerical values

*Excellent = 5, Very good = 4, Adequate = 3, Marginal = 2, and Unsatisfactory = 1.*

These are combined to reach one of two overall scoring decisions: Pass or No Pass. A Pass score is awarded to students whose combined averages are 3 or higher. Students with overall means of less than 3.0 will receive a No Pass. Again, see the scoring guidelines on page 9 for further information.

In some cases discrepancies may arise in the overall scores or the domain scores assigned by the two different faculty scorers. In cases where overall score decisions differ, discrepancies are resolved by discussion or through the use of an additional rater.

### **What if I have additional questions?**

For additional information see your advisor or the member of the SPRC who represents your program area.

## **CEPSE Preliminary Exam Questions**

### **A. Theoretical Perspective (about 3 pages)**

1. Critique the author's conceptual framework.
2. Comment on the need for this study and its importance.
3. How effectively does the author tie the study to relevant theory and prior research?
4. Evaluate the clarity and appropriateness of the research questions or hypotheses.

### **B. Research Design and Analysis (about 4 pages)**

5. Critique the appropriateness and adequacy of the study's design in relation to the research questions or hypotheses.
6. Critique the adequacy of the study's sampling methods (e.g., choice of participants) and their implications for generalizability.
7. Critique the adequacy of the study's procedures and materials (e.g., interventions, interview protocols, data collection procedures).
8. Critique the appropriateness and quality (e.g., reliability, validity) of the measures used.
9. Critique the adequacy of the study's data analyses. For example: Have important statistical assumptions been met? Are the analyses appropriate for the study's design? Are the analyses appropriate for the data collected?

### **C. Interpretation and Implications of Results (about 3 pages)**

10. Critique the author's discussion of the methodological and/or conceptual limitations of the results.
11. How consistent and comprehensive are the author's conclusions with the reported results?
12. How well did the author relate the results to the study's theoretical base?
13. In your view, what is the significance of the study, and what are its primary implications for theory, future research, and practice?

## **CEPSE Preliminary Examination Article Selection Guidelines**

This document presents guidelines for faculty in CEPSE doctoral programs to follow when selecting an article for the Preliminary Examination or "Prelim." Each doctoral program will select one article to be addressed by all examinees from their program.

1. The selected article should represent an empirically-based inquiry into a substantive area of knowledge in the students' major area of study.
2. The article should be relatively brief (preferably one that requires no more than 1 hour of actual reading time) and should be representative of the type of research article students are exposed to during their first year of coursework. However, the selected article should not have been the focus of prior class/seminar/proseminar discussion.
3. If at all possible, the selected article should have appeared in a "mainstream" journal in the students' discipline.
4. The methodology employed and described in the selected article should be basic enough to be accessible to beginning second-year students. Studies describing complex designs or analyses (e.g., structural equations, factor analysis) would be inappropriate.
5. The article should provide an introduction/rationale to the research questions under investigation that is accessible to students who may not have highly specialized prior knowledge about the particular topic.
6. The selected article does not need to be an exemplary piece of research. Rather, the article should be selected on the basis of its potential to stimulate critical student responses to each of the four domains assessed by the Prelim questions.
7. Once used in a preliminary exam, an article must not be reused for a subsequent preliminary exam.



## **Scoring Guidelines and General Performance Criteria for CEPSE Preliminary Exam Raters**

Students taking the Preliminary Examination read a research article related to their area of study and then respond to a series of questions reflecting different domains of knowledge and critical thinking. These domains are (1) theoretical perspective, (2) research design and analysis, and (3) interpretation of and implications of results.

The students writing this Prelim have completed only their first year of doctoral work and are just beginning to develop the knowledge base and critical thinking skills necessary to function as competent professionals. The Prelim is not intended to be a test of knowledge of an experienced scholar or, for that matter, of an advanced doctoral student. Rather, it is an exercise designed to reveal first-year doctoral students' progress toward developing an understanding of the tools, language, and logic of scholarship, along with the critical thinking and writing skills that are requisite to becoming competent, experienced scholars. Thus, when we ask our students to read and critically appraise a research article from their field of study, we do so with the idea firmly in mind that these are beginning doctoral students who are "en route," not finished candidates who have arrived.

The basic objective of the Prelim is to evaluate how well students can use and integrate their knowledge about research methodology within the substantive context of their own area of study. When viewed in this way, the Prelim can be seen as a diagnostic assessment, designed to reflect students' potential for developing and refining their abilities to understand, appraise, and use research, to think analytically, and to clearly express their knowledge in writing. The Prelim experience is designed to be an early source of feedback to both students and faculty regarding a student's current status and potential needs for further development.

Each domain is evaluated according to one of five ratings: Excellent, Very Good, Adequate, Marginal, or Unsatisfactory. The three domains and their respective questions are found on page 3. (Please note that students have been advised that they may address relevant issues in addition to those raised by the required Prelim questions in each domain.)

### **Rating Categories**

General performance criteria for each rating category are as follows:

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Criteria</u>
Excellent	(5)	Responses are well-developed, thorough, accurate, and knowledgeable regarding the components of the domain. Student reflects depth and specificity in the understanding conveyed. There are no errors in response.
Very good	(4)	Responses are fairly well-developed, fairly thorough, accurate, and knowledgeable regarding the components of the domain. Student reflects moderate depth and specificity in the understanding conveyed.
Adequate	(3)	Responses demonstrate accurate, but more general, understanding about the components of the domain. Responses are defensible, and indicate an adequate level of mastery for this level of study.

- Marginal** (2) Responses reflect a fairly global understanding of the components related to this domain, but significant errors or omissions are noted. Evidence suggests that the writer could benefit from further study or remediation.
- Unsatisfactory** (1) Responses do not demonstrate a basic understanding of the components of this domain. The responses are generally inaccurate or incomplete, and convey an inadequate mastery of essential concepts.

### Scoring Procedures

Each Prelim is evaluated by two scorers from the student's program. Using the performance criteria provided, each rater should assign a rating from 1 to 5 for each of the domains. Please use one of the five scores, do not give fractional scores for any domains.

- 5 = Excellent**  
**4 = Very Good**  
**3 = Adequate**  
**2 = Marginal**  
**1 = Unsatisfactory**

The ratings of the two scorers are combined to reach one of two overall scoring decisions: Pass or No Pass. You can get an idea of how final scoring decisions are made by considering the highest score possible if all two scorers were to give the same rating across all three domains. (This is unlikely, but illustrative.) These scores are:

- 2 scorers x 3 domains x scores of 5 = 30 points, average: 5  
 2 scorers x 3 domains x scores of 4 = 24 points, average: 4  
 2 scorers x 3 domains x scores of 3 = 18 points, average: 3  
 2 scorers x 3 domains x scores of 2 = 12 points, average: 2  
 2 scorers x 3 domains x scores of 1 = 6 points, average: 1

Thus, the final cutoffs are as follows:

<u>Scoring Decision</u>		<u>Score Range</u>	<u>Range of Averaged Scores</u>
Pass	=	18-30	3.0 - 5.0
No Pass	=	6-17	1.0 - 2.83

### Feedback To Students

Your written feedback to students is one of the most important parts of the student's Prelim experience. Comment as explicitly as you can about what you perceive as strengths and weaknesses. It will be especially helpful for those with lower scores to know both where they fell short and why.

### The Scorers

Two scorers from the student's program read each student's examination response. No attempt is made to assign, or to avoid assigning, the student's advisor as a scorer of his or her exam.

## Scoring Criteria

Before Prelim scoring commences, a set of explicit, written scoring criteria are developed which aid faculty in using the five-point scale to assign scores on each domain in the test.

## Guidelines for Providing Feedback on CEPSE Preliminary Examination Answers

This document presents guidelines for faculty in CEPSE doctoral programs to follow when providing written feedback on student responses to the CEPSE Preliminary Examination or "Prelim."

Beyond arriving at final judgments regarding students' Prelim exam answers (i.e., Pass and No Pass), faculty raters of these exams must provide written feedback to students concerning the quality of their answers. It is imperative that students receiving a No Pass from a rater receive such feedback so that they might better understand how their responses were deficient and how they should prepare for a retake of the Preliminary Exam. However, feedback should also be prepared for students receiving passing scores.

In providing feedback to students, raters should attend to the following guidelines:

1. Make sure that the evaluative comments are closely tied to the specific Prelim question(s) for which the student's answer was considered deficient.
2. Wherever possible, identify important omissions or misrepresentations that contributed to a less favorable evaluation.
3. Avoid global or non-specific feedback (e.g., "student's response was weak") and, instead, indicate how the response could have been strengthened (e.g., "student's response to question 6 did not note the serious limitations of the sampling method used in this study").
4. Comment on the quality of the student's writing, especially if poor writing contributed to a less favorable evaluation. If possible, suggest ways that the writing can be improved.
5. Keep in mind that the Prelim serves both assessment and developmental purposes. By providing specific, thoughtful feedback to our doctoral students you are contributing to their professional development.

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