

MA-TESL Comprehensive Exam: Information Sheet

The MA TESL Comprehensive examination is intended to test students in the fundamental areas of TESL and Applied Linguistics that represent the core of the MA experience. Although the basic material for the comprehensive exam is covered in the courses designated below, the challenge of the exam is for a student to synthesize elements from a broad overview of the field into answers that show a deep and firm foundation of knowledge and potential for application. The requirements for the comprehensive may, therefore, be different from those encountered in individual courses. Ideal answers are coherent and accurate syntheses that cover the basic principles and practices by which the professional expertise of the graduate students may be judged.

The exam itself is to be written within the four-hour and 15 minute test period. There are five sections of two questions each in the test: ESL Foundations and Methods, ESL Curriculum and Administration, Sociolinguistics, Second Language Acquisition, and Grammar. Students must answer both questions in three of the five sections. Candidates for the MA TESL degree must answer the ESL Foundations and Methods section. MA students will choose two additional sections from the other four sections: ESL Curriculum and Program Administration, Sociolinguistics, Second Language Acquisition, and Grammar. Students in the Ph.D. program, taking the test for screening purposes, can answer questions in any three sections. It is expected that the examination be well written and synthesize relevant knowledge in a coherent and insightful manner. Each section of the MA exam presupposes the following course work:

ESL Foundations and Methods:	ENG 548, 558, and/or 559
ESL Curriculum and Administration:	ENG 578, 548
Sociolinguistics:	ENG 518
Second Language Acquisition:	ENG 658 (with some issues introduced in ENG 548)
Grammar:	ENG 528 (with some issues introduced in ENG 504)

The exam is given twice each year. Generally the exam is scheduled near the beginning of the Spring semester (in early January) and near the beginning of the Fall semester (between mid August and late August). The exact dates change each year. Students can consult the English Department Office staff for the particular date of a specific examination.

Students should sign up to take the exam one or two months prior to the administration of the exam. Students can declare their intention to take the exam by signing up in the Composition Office. The sign-up sheet gives faculty an idea of the number of exams and proctors needed. Students may delete their names from the list at any time before the exam.

The exam is a “closed-book” exam. Students may not use any reference materials while answering test questions. Students may write the examination by hand or on a computer with word processing software. The grading criteria are exactly the same for both formats. The only supplies that students need to bring to the exam are pens or pencils; the paper, jump drives, and a laser printer are supplied.

For students writing the exam by computer, note the following: The computer platform, Macintosh or PC, will vary depending upon the computer lab that is available; the English Department Office staff can be consulted for the particular platform that will be available for a specific examination. Students should plan to arrive at least 15 minutes early, especially to be certain that they are comfortable with the computer software settings. Students who choose to write the exam by computer may also write answers or parts of answers (e.g., grammar answers) by hand (paper will be supplied). At the end of the exam, students hand in both their jump drives and printed versions of their answers. Students are encouraged to print out each answer after they have finished it. Although rare, it is possible that power failures or computer failures could interrupt the exam. If such a technological failure were to occur, students would be fully compensated for lost time but would need to continue writing, by hand if necessary, so that the exam would be finished on the same day.

Two main readers from among the faculty will be assigned to grade all of the exams in a given section. Based on the student's answers to the two section questions, each reader will assign a score to each answer, ranging in value from 0 to 3:

0	=	Fail
.5	=	Poor Minus
1.0	=	Poor
1.5	=	Pass Minus
2.0	=	Pass
2.5	=	High Pass
3.0	=	High Pass with Distinction

(See the Benchmarks for M.A. Comprehensive Scoring at the end of this document.)

If there is a difference of more than 1 point between the scores of the readers on a given question, a third reader will score the student's answer; the average of the three readers' scores will then be the student's grade. In other words, the student's grade on each section will be the average of the two (or three) readers' scores.

After each section has been scored and a grade has been derived for each section, these three section grades will be averaged (summed and divided by 3). A student must average a "pass minus" to pass the exam; that is, a student's average grade must be equal to or above a 1.5. There are three additional requirements. An average grade in any section cannot be 0; if it is, the student must retake that section. If a student's average grade is less than 1.5 due to poor performance on only one section (i.e., two of the three section scores were 1.5 or better), the student is required to retake only one section. However, that section cannot be one which already received a score of 1.5 or better. Two section grades of less than 1.5 also constitute failure and require the retaking of the entire exam.

A student who does not pass the exam or who hopes to improve his/her grade may retake any or all of the parts of the exam once, during a scheduled administration.

No student will be granted an MA-TESL without passing this comprehensive exam.

Benchmarks for M.A. Comprehensive Scoring

3 (High Pass) A response graded 3 is comprehensive, detailed, and well organized. All parts of the question are addressed. The answer is not only accurate and shows a thorough understanding of material, but it also shows substantial depth and insight. The response includes discussion of several specific studies and findings, where appropriate, and notes counter arguments, where appropriate. The answer is well developed and coherent, and it offers logical analysis or synthesis of information as required by the question. The writing is clear, fluent, and effective.

2 (Pass) A response graded 2 is adequate and well organized. All parts of the question that are posed directly are addressed; the answer shows a firm understanding of the relevant material as evidenced by the use of correct, specific, and up-to-date references to theorists and researchers in the field. Compared to a "high pass," the "2" response is somewhat narrow in scope of discussion, range of studies/findings discussed, or coherent synthesis of ideas. Overall, a "pass" is accurate in terms of presentation of all material, generally well developed, and clearly organized.

1 (Poor) A response graded 1 shows some knowledge of the field, but is problematic for any of a number of reasons: the answer includes some correct and relevant material, but it also includes incorrect and/or irrelevant information; one or more parts of the question are not addressed; it is so short that it presents insufficient information or only vague generalizations; it is not well organized and circumvents the question rather than answering it directly; and/or references are inaccurate, very few, or both.

0 (Fail) A response graded 0 demonstrates no knowledge of the area in question. It has more than one of the following problems: The answer does not address the question at all; the major parts of the question are not addressed; the question is answered in such brief and vague terms that there is not enough information to determine whether or not the writer actually understands the area; it presents little correct information; it presents substantial incorrect information; references are inaccurate, irrelevant, or absent; it is not well organized. (Note: Any question left entirely blank will receive a 0.)