

The most common reasons that students fail the comprehensive exam are:

They don't answer the questions completely. This may seem obvious but is one of the main reasons students fail the exam. A question may have multiple parts. Make sure you address each one thoroughly. Sometimes, a student will omit part of the answer, or just give write a few sentences about one part. If you haven't completely answered all parts, you may fail.

They don't write at a graduate level. You should use spelling and grammar checkers, and carefully proofread your exam before you send it in. If we can't read it because there are so many errors, you will fail. You may not use the Writing Center for the exam, but you can use it for other papers. You should not have someone help you write or proofread your exam, but again, you can have others look over other writing that you have done and give suggestions. If you use the Writing Center on papers for your classes, you will be better prepared for the comps.

Lack of structure. Some students write a lot of short paragraphs, making the essay seem disjointed. It seems more like a bunch of statements than a coherent essay. All the elements may be there, but not in a readable format. Make an outline before you write, and use it to keep you organized—I do that with every paper I write. Also, please use subheadings to make sure that you have included all parts of the question in the answer. The readers will appreciate that. I have been in many comp reading meetings where faculty are discussing whether or not a certain section of the question was addressed. If you have subheadings, we can see that you addressed every part, and we can discuss something else.

Plagiarism. Intentional or not, if you have content in your paper that is not your words and is not in quotes, that alone can cause you to fail or be referred for academic misconduct charges. If you cut and paste content into your exam from another paper which you wrote, it will be picked up as plagiarism and you may still fail or be referred. Your best course of action is to write a totally new paper, use few quotes, and properly cite everything.

Overuse of quotes. We ask you to use quotes sparingly so we can see what you know. If your paper is just a collection of quotes, all we know is that you know how to quote, and you may fail the exam. Therefore, use few quotes, preferably short ones.

Too short. Pay attention to word minimums and adhere to them. If the paper is too short, it likely lacks the depth we would like to see and may cause you to fail. Remember that the word minimums apply to the text of the answer only, not the references and title pages.

Comprehensive Exam FAQs

*Can I use the same reference in both essays in Option 1, and multiple parts of Option 2?

Yes, if it is appropriate for both.

*Do I need an abstract or running head?

No.

*Can I use my text books for references?

Yes.

*Can I exceed the maximum word length?

Yes, but please don't go over by more than a page or so.

*Do I need section headings?

No, but they are strongly encouraged. If you do use them, they should conform to APA format.

*Can I have a friend proofread my paper, or can I take it to the Writing Center?

No. No one except you can contribute in any way to your exam.

*If I wrote a paper that is similar to one of the essays I wrote for a class, can I use parts of that essay in my exam?

No, but you can use the references. Your previous work will be picked up on the plagiarism detector as work already submitted, and that may cause you to be referred for misconduct charges (as we cannot always tell who wrote the previous work), or to fail the exam. Your exam should be a totally new paper.

*Can I get help from a professor if I am having difficulty with my exam?

No. Please contact the staff member who sent you the exam, and if they cannot answer your question, they will refer it to the appropriate faculty member.