

GenAI Conversation Starters for PhD Comprehensive Examinations

Context

Scope: Generative AI (GenAI) is increasingly present in how graduate students prepare for, and complete, academic milestones. The PhD comprehensive examination (short form “comps”, also called a qualifying exam, or candidacy exam depending on the program) is distinct from thesis research and writing in that it is meant to assess a candidate's competency and capability to conduct PhD thesis research. This includes demonstration of the depth and breadth of knowledge, ability to synthesize relevant literature and articulation of the novelty of the proposed research, core debates, critical analysis, and the ability to reason and respond under time constraints.

Shared understanding: Comps formats vary widely across programs including closed-book, proctored sittings, take-home timed exams, portfolio or reading-list based models, and oral-only formats. Thus, the appropriate role for GenAI can differ sharply across programs and between the preparation phase and the exam sitting itself. The SGPS Guidance for the use of GenAI emphasize that any use of GenAI in an academic activity must follow [the Principles of AI use](#). It is therefore critical that graduate students and their supervisors and examination committees reach an explicit, shared understanding on the use of GenAI, if any, before exam preparation begins. This must also align with a program/department policy on the use of Gen AI in graduate studies or explicitly for comprehensive examinations, if exist.

Role of this document: You are ultimately responsible for any material created with the assistance of GenAI. This resource offers practical tips, conversational prompts, and additional resources to help graduate students and their supervisors/examination committees have a clear, constructive conversation about how GenAI should, or should not, be used in preparing for and completing PhD comprehensive examinations. The goal is to surface expectations early, before they become a source of ambiguity or conflict at a high-stakes milestone.

Before meeting with your supervisor or examination committee

- Reflect on your own values and approach to GenAI use in exam preparation - e.g., comfortable using it for self-testing and summarizing; prefer to avoid it almost entirely; open to it for narrow tasks only.
- Review basic materials on GenAI awareness (see “Additional Resources” below).
- Be familiar with what constitutes the responsible use of GenAI (see [SGPS Guidance](#) for the use of GenAI).
- Confirm the exact format of your comprehensive exam *before* the conversation - e.g., closed-book/proctored, take-home timed, reading-list/portfolio based, proposal, oral-only, or a combination.
- Determine if your program/department has a policy on the use of Gen AI in comprehensive examinations and review that policy
- Prepare questions (GenAI discussion items) in advance of the meeting.
- Consider specific exam phases separately, since expectations may not be the same for each – e.g., building/refining your reading list, summarizing or synthesizing literature, drafting practice questions and answers, self-testing, and preparing for the oral examination.

- Consider simulating a conversation with GenAI to explore your own views “out loud”:
 - Example prompt: “I am a PhD student in [your department] at [your university], preparing for my comprehensive examination. My university wants students to discuss GenAI use with their supervisor/committee before exam preparation begins. I want to explore my own views in a discussion format. You will play the role of my supervisor/committee member and respond with plausible answers and follow-up questions, making up reasonable details about the department and exam format. After each of my responses, give me feedback, then continue the simulation. Here are my program’s guidelines on comprehensive exams [link/upload].”

Be mindful that it is very challenging to guarantee privacy with the use of AI tools. Balance risk with reward in how much personal or research information you share, and use university-approved tools where available (Western will likely continue to have a preferred GenAI service to help with protecting privacy).

During the meeting: Conversation prompts

The following questions may help clarify expectations, identify alignment or gaps between a student's and a supervisor and/or committee's approach to GenAI, and avoid unexpected disagreements ahead of the exam. Ambiguity can have meaningful consequences for timing and progression. As these prompts are meant to generate conversation, consider proposing preliminary responses to your own questions, particularly ones you have considered in detail and/or have strong views on, e.g., “I was thinking ... might be a reasonable approach, what do you think?”.

Starting the Conversation: approach to GenAI

- **Format first:** Given the specific format of my comprehensive exam, where (if anywhere) do you see a role for GenAI?
- **Philosophy:** How would you describe your philosophy of GenAI use in graduate assessment, and does it differ from your view of GenAI in thesis research?
- **Preparation vs. writing vs oral:** Should the rules for GenAI use during exam preparation be different from the rules during the written and/or oral parts of the examination?
- **Professional goals:** How might my use (or non-use) of GenAI in comps preparation intersect with my professional goals and the competencies comps are meant to demonstrate?
- **Prohibited tools:** Are there specific GenAI tools you explicitly recommend or prohibit for exam preparation?
- **Alternatives:** What are the best non-GenAI alternatives for accomplishing this preparation task (e.g., peer study groups, past exam questions, writing centre support)?
- **Addressing mismatch:** If our approaches differ, what strategies can we use to align expectations before preparation begins?

Digging Deeper

- **Benefits in preparation:** What comps-preparation activities may reasonably benefit from GenAI - e.g., organizing a reading list, generating practice questions, bouncing off ideas, explaining an unfamiliar concept, checking the clarity of a draft answer?
- **Purpose of comps:** How could reliance on GenAI during preparation affect my ability to demonstrate competency and capability to conduct scholarly research?
- **During the writing:** Is GenAI use permitted, in any form, in the writing component of the examination?

- Examples - permitted for grammar/formatting only vs. fully prohibited vs. permitted with disclosure
- **Oral examination readiness:** If GenAI was used anywhere in my preparation, how will I be expected to explain and defend that use - and the resulting content - in the oral component?
- **Prohibited uses:** What comps-related activities should not involve GenAI under any circumstances?
 - Examples - drafting actual exam answers, generating the final reading list, articulating the originality of the proposed research, producing analysis meant to represent my own synthesis
- **Risks:** What risks does GenAI use pose specifically in comps preparation?
 - Examples - fabricated or hallucinated citations, superficial familiarity that does not hold up under committee questioning, data security, implicit bias in summarized material
- **Disclosure:** How, and to what level of detail, should I document or disclose GenAI use in my exam preparation and written artifact?
- **Integrity - where's the line:** Where does legitimate self-testing or study support end, and unauthorized assistance begin? Be as specific as possible in relation to exam format.
 - Example - using GenAI to quiz myself on a specific sub-topic vs. asking GenAI to draft an answer to a likely exam question
- **Verification:** What strategies should I use to verify any GenAI-assisted output before relying on it in preparation - particularly citations and claims I might repeat under oral questioning?
- **Context matters:** Comprehensive exams are not centrally regulated the way theses are at many institutions - norms are typically set at the program level. Consider, who else (e.g. graduate chair) should be part of this conversation to make sure expectations are consistent.

Additional Resources

- Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (2024, Oct). *Artificial Intelligence: [Considerations for Graduate Research](#)*. [Ontario Council on Graduate Studies](#). (Watch for future updates from this group.)
- School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto (2026, June 23). [Guidance on the Appropriate Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence for Graduate Academic Milestones](#)
- SGPS (2026, Feb 9). [Guidance for the use of Generative AI in Graduate Studies](#). Western University.

This guide adapts, often verbatim, from Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (2024, Oct), Artificial Intelligence: Considerations for Graduate Research. Comps-specific content and prompts have been newly developed for this version, informed additionally by the University of Toronto SGS guidance on generative AI and graduate academic milestones (see Additional Resources).