

University of Georgia - Department of Psychology
Cognitive Neuroscience Area
Graduate Program Document

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I. Program Purpose

The doctoral program in Cognitive Neuroscience (CN) teaches doctoral students to perform independent research that connects brain structure and function to mental processes. Faculty investigate basic and translational research questions using methods including functional neuroimaging, electroencephalography, computational modeling, and behavioral experimentation. Students complete the requirements for the Master of Science degree and then advance to doctoral training leading to the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Training follows an apprenticeship model. Students work closely with a Major Professor (MP) faculty advisor while developing increasing independence in research, writing, teaching, and professional development. Topics of study are flexible and determined through discussion with the student's Major Professor. While not required, a Teaching Assistantship is typically expected of graduate students.

This document supplements the Psychology Department Graduate Studies Policy Manual. In the event of conflict, Graduate School and departmental policies prevail. Students are responsible for knowing and meeting all Graduate School, departmental, and program requirements.

II. Mentorship and Advisory Committees

Major Professor

Graduate training proceeds through close mentorship. Students enter the program with a primary faculty advisor, their Major Professor, who must be an Assistant, Associate, or Full Professor and a member of the Graduate Faculty. The Major Professor supervises research training, thesis and dissertation development, and professional development. Although the Major Professor serves as the student's primary mentor, students are encouraged to seek additional mentorship and collaborative opportunities with other faculty whose expertise aligns with their research interests and professional goals.

These opportunities should be developed in consultation with the student's Major Professor.

If a student wishes to change Primary Mentor, the student should consult with the current Primary Mentor, the Cognitive Neuroscience program chair, and the Psychology Director of Graduate Studies.

Advisory Committees

Advisory committees guide course planning, evaluate research milestones, and conduct required examinations.

Committee membership is determined collaboratively by the student and the Major Professor and must be approved by the Department of Psychology Director of Graduate Studies and the Graduate School.

Master's Advisory Committee

- Minimum of three members, all of whom must have Graduate Faculty status; minimum of one faculty member from the Cognitive Neuroscience area (the Major Professor must be a CN affiliate)
- Named during the first year of study
- Approves the Master's Program of Study
- Approves the Master's Thesis Proposal
- Evaluates the Master's Thesis and conducts the Oral Defense

The committee must convene for the Master's Oral Defense.

Doctoral Advisory Committee

- Minimum of three members of the Graduate Faculty
- Approves the doctoral Program of Study
- Conducts the Written and Oral Comprehensive Examinations
- Approves the Written and Oral Dissertation Prospectus
- Evaluates the Dissertation and conducts the Final Oral Defense

Students meet with the doctoral committee prior to beginning comprehensive examinations to review coursework, research progress, and timeline.

III. Program of Study

A Program of Study specifies the coursework and research hours required for degree completion. The requirements are specified in the sections below. The Program is developed in consultation with the advisor and approved by the master's and doctoral advisory committees, the Department of Psychology Graduate Coordinator, and the Graduate School.

Students must maintain a 3.0 graduate grade point average. No course with a grade below B- may be included on the Program of Study.

IV. Proseminar

All students enroll in the weekly Proseminar (PSYC 9100; 1 credit each semester) each fall and spring semester throughout their graduate enrollment.

The Proseminar includes:

- Student research presentations
- Teaching development
- Exposure to external speakers
- Professional / career development programming

Students give research presentations during training:

- Second year (short presentation based on first-year research; ~10 minutes)
- Third year (extended research talk; ~25 minutes)
- Fourth or fifth year (job talk-length presentation; ~45 minutes)

Proseminar credits count toward degree requirements.

MASTER OF SCIENCE DEGREE

V. Master's Degree Requirements

Students are expected to complete a Master of Science degree as they progress toward their doctorate. Students can request to waive this requirement if they enter the program with a thesis-based Master's degree (see below under "Waiving the Master's Degree

Requirement"). Students should consult the Graduate School Policies page for up-to-date information about University requirements: <https://grad.uga.edu/graduate-policies/>

Credit Requirements

Minimum of 30 total hours:

Research (9 hours):

- 6 hours of Master's Research (PSYC 7000)
- 3 hours of Thesis Writing (PSYC 7300)

Coursework (21 hours):

- GradFirst class (GRSC 7001; read more about GradFirst here: <https://grad.uga.edu/gradfirst/about-gradfirst/>)
- Graduate Teaching Seminar (GRSC 7770; required by the Graduate School for teaching and research assistants)
- Two quantitative or research design courses (or approved equivalents)
- One course addressing biological psychology (e.g., 6130, 8000, 8300, 8550, or courses from other departments at the discretion of the primary mentor)
- Proseminar credits (PSYC 9100; usually 4 hours acquired in Years 1-2)
- Additional 6000–8000 level graduate courses

Course selections are made in consultation with the Major Professor.

Master's Thesis

The Master's Thesis is an independent empirical research project approved by the Master's Advisory Committee and conducted under the direction of the Major Professor.

Written Thesis

- Approved by the Major Professor before distribution to the Master's Advisory Committee
- Committee members are given two weeks to review
- At least two committee members must agree the document is ready for defense

Oral Defense

- Public presentation (generally around 30 minutes) followed by a private examination
- All committee members attend simultaneously
- Pass requires no more than one dissenting vote

Upon successful completion, students advance to doctoral candidacy and training.

Note: Students are expected to complete their Master's Thesis and other requirements by July 15th of their third year. (Students are strongly encouraged to defend their thesis prior to May 31st given that faculty schedules are highly variable during the summer months.) Students should discuss any concerns about meeting this deadline with their Major Professor.

Waiving the Master's Thesis Requirement

Students entering the CN graduate program with a master's degree in psychology (or a related field, such as neuroscience) from another institution may request an exemption from the requirement to complete the Master of Science Thesis in psychology at UGA before they advance toward their doctoral degree.

Requesting the Exemption

- The incoming student should submit the request for exemption to their Major Professor and the Cognitive Neuroscience Program Chair at the start of their first semester at UGA.
- Approval requires agreement from both the Major Professor and the Cognitive Neuroscience Program Chair.
- If questions arise regarding whether the master's degree earned elsewhere is equivalent to the Master of Science in Psychology at UGA, the Cognitive Neuroscience Program Chair may, at their discretion, convene an ad hoc committee to review the request.
- Review of the request should include confirmation that all expectations of a UGA-awarded master's degree are met by the student's prior work, including adequate coursework, written thesis, and oral defense of the thesis. Students who are lacking a minority of these factors (e.g., all components except an oral defense) may be given the opportunity to complete the remaining elements as a condition of waiving the master's degree requirement.

- If the exemption is approved, the Major Professor must communicate the approval to the Department of Psychology's Director of Graduate Studies and Graduate Program Administrator prior to the end of the incoming student's first semester at UGA.

Coursework Required Despite the Waiver

Students whose Master's Thesis requirement has been waived must still complete the following courses at UGA prior to the completion of their doctorate (unless specific exemptions have been approved by the Major Professor and Cognitive Neuroscience Program Chair):

- GradFirst class (GRSC 7001; read more about GradFirst here: <https://grad.uga.edu/gradfirst/about-gradfirst/>)
- Graduate Teaching Seminar (GRSC 7770; required by the Graduate School for teaching and research assistants)
- Two quantitative or research design courses (or approved equivalents)
- One course addressing biological psychology (see above)
- Proseminar credits (PSYC 9100; usually 4 hours acquired in Years 1-2)
- Two courses at the 6000–8000 level relevant to their research focus

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DEGREE

VI. Doctoral Degree Requirements

Doctoral requirements are in addition to the Master's degree requirements.

Awarding of the doctoral degree requires:

1. Completion of required coursework and research hours
2. Successful Written Comprehensive Examination
3. Successful Oral Comprehensive Examination
4. Approval of the Dissertation Prospectus by the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee.
5. Approval and Defense of the Dissertation by the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee

Credit Requirements

Minimum of 30 additional doctoral hours:

Research (12 hours):

- Doctoral Research (PSYC 9000)
- 3 hours of Dissertation Writing (PSYC 9300)

Coursework (18 hours):

- 8000–9000 level graduate courses
 - One advanced methods, quantitative, or laboratory course
 - Proseminar credits (required every semester)
 - Additional advanced electives
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VII. Written Comprehensive Examination

The Written Comprehensive Examination assesses scholarly depth and readiness for independent research. Students may discuss their overall goals in a global sense with their Major Professor, but the written comprehensive examination is completed by the student independently, without any assistance from the advisor, committee, or fellow students. Students select one of the following options in consultation with their Major Professor and Doctoral Advisory Committee:

Option 1: Structured Essay Examination

A closed-book examination completed over three days. Students will have up to 6 hours per day to respond to the essay questions assigned for a given day. Essay questions will be written by the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee, and will be based on the reading list provided by the committee members. Questions will be designed to assess breadth and depth of knowledge. Typically, the essay questions assigned on the first day will broadly cover core knowledge in Cognitive Neuroscience topics. The second day's questions will focus on methodological and statistical expertise in neuroscience, and the final day's questions will be focused on the student's specific subarea of conceptual and methodological expertise. All Doctoral Advisory Committee members will submit questions, and the major professor will organize the questions according to the themes for each test day.

Students will have the option of answering the questions either on paper, or on a computer that has internet access disabled. No access to internet-connected devices will be allowed during the examination period each day.

Option 2: Comprehensive Scholarly Manuscript

An independent systematic review article or meta-analysis suitable for submission to a reputable peer-reviewed journal. The manuscript must reflect the student's independent scholarship. Generally, manuscripts are 30+ pages in length, plus references, and reflect new ideas and integration of existing literature that advances the field in a meaningful way.

Option 3: Grant Proposal

A full research proposal modeled after a federal grant mechanism. The proposal must demonstrate theoretical grounding, methodological rigor, and feasibility. An Aims Page and at least six single spaced pages of a NIH style research plan and references are required. Currently approved mechanisms: F31, F99/K00, R21, R03, R36; additional mechanisms, such as post-doc funding mechanisms and foundation awards, can be considered and would require approval from the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee and the Cognitive Neuroscience program chair.

Evaluation

Each submission is evaluated as:

- Pass
- Conditional Pass (revision required; materials will be reviewed again by the committee)
- Fail

Students who receive a Conditional Pass have three months to address revisions and submit to their committee for further consideration. Students who fail their comprehensive exams may be permitted one additional attempt, as determined by the committee. A second failure results in dismissal from the program.

VIII. Oral Comprehensive Examination

After passing the written examination, the student completes an Oral Comprehensive Examination, which is structured in a question-and-answer format. This meeting will last approximately two hours and will be conducted by the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee. The first half of the exam will focus on questions related to the written comprehensive examination document. The second half of the exam will focus on questions derived from a reading list assembled by the Doctoral Advisory Committee. Students should read all articles on the reading list carefully and be prepared to answer questions based on their understanding of the work. Students will receive an initial set of questions 30 minutes before the oral exam. During this period, students will not have access to outside resources, but will be able to prepare notes for the discussion. Additional follow-up questions not on the original list may emerge as a result of the student's answers.

Students' performance during the Oral Exam will be evaluated as Pass or Fail, with the Major Professor and at least 1 other member voting to Pass. Two failures will result in dismissal from the program.

IX. Dissertation Prospectus

The Dissertation Prospectus is a formal proposal describing the planned dissertation research, including background, rationale, and methodology. The written prospectus should first be reviewed by the Major Professor, then distributed to the Doctoral Advisory Committee at least two weeks prior to the oral defense. After the defense, Doctoral Advisory Committee approval constitutes an agreement that the proposed project is appropriate for the doctoral dissertation to proceed.

Prospectus scope: The length and organization of the prospectus will vary depending on the nature, scope, and methodology of the proposed dissertation. Rather than meeting a fixed page requirement, the document should provide the committee with sufficient information to evaluate the significance, feasibility, and methodological rigor of the project. In consultation with the Major Professor, students should determine the level of detail appropriate for their project.

The prospectus should generally include:

- A statement of the problem, purpose, or central research question(s)
- Relevant theoretical, conceptual, and empirical background
- A clear description of the proposed methodology, including data sources, participants or materials, procedures, measures, and analytic approach, as applicable

- The anticipated scope and structure of the dissertation
- A discussion of the project's potential contributions
- A plan for completing the work, including a detailed timeline

At the prospectus defense, the committee evaluates the proposed research and may recommend revisions to its structure, design, or execution. Approval of the prospectus indicates that the committee agrees that the proposed plan is appropriate and sufficiently developed for the student to proceed. The prospectus serves as an approved research plan rather than an unalterable contract; projects often evolve as the research progresses. Substantial changes to the approved plan should be discussed with the student's Major Professor and, when appropriate, the full Doctoral Advisory Committee.

Students can choose between two dissertation options:

Traditional Dissertation: A traditional dissertation presents a unified work of original scholarship organized into chapters. It will generally include an Introduction/Background chapter that establishes the purpose, significance, and relevant literature; a Methods chapter describing the research design and analytic approach; a Results chapter presenting the findings; and a Discussion chapter addressing the study's implications, contributions, and limitations.

A traditional dissertation may include one study of a size sufficient to fully address the research question or multiple related studies, provided that the studies collectively address an integrated set of research aims. Unlike a staple dissertation (see below), its chapters are not written as independent manuscripts. The overall organization and scope may vary according to the project's methodology and should be determined in consultation with the student's Major Professor and Doctoral Advisory Committee.

Staple Dissertation: With approval from the Doctoral Advisory Committee, students may complete a manuscript-based ("staple") dissertation. A staple dissertation consists of 3 thematically related manuscripts. The staple dissertation does not typically include works that were used as part of other departmental milestones (e.g., written comprehensive exam), though exceptions are possible with agreement of Doctoral Advisory Committee. The student must be the sole first author on all three manuscripts, and the work must be completed while enrolled as a graduate student at UGA.

The staple dissertation should also include an integrative introduction and a concluding discussion that synthesizes the manuscripts, articulates their overarching contributions, and situates the work within the broader literature. All manuscripts should be of a quality ready for submission, and **at least two** of the manuscripts should be published or submitted for publication at the time of the dissertation defense.

X. Dissertation and Final Defense

The Dissertation is written under the direction of the Major Professor and approved by the Doctoral Advisory Committee before defense.

- Committee members are given at least two weeks to review.
- The Final Oral Defense consists of a public presentation followed by a private examination by the Doctoral Advisory Committee.
- Pass requires no more than one dissenting vote from the Doctoral Advisory Committee.

It is the responsibility of the student to ensure the dissertation document is approved by the Graduate School as meeting formatting requirements and submission deadlines.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DURING MASTER'S AND DOCTORAL TRAINING

XI. Professional Conduct and Academic Integrity

Students are expected to:

- Adhere to the University Academic Honesty Policy
- Demonstrate professional behavior in research, teaching, and service
- Meet program milestones in a timely manner
- Maintain clear communication with advisors and committee members

Failure to meet academic or professional standards may result in probation or dismissal consistent with Graduate School policy.

Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

During their first year in the program, students should meet with their advisor to discuss when and how the use of artificial intelligence (AI) is appropriate.

- Major Professors and students are encouraged to document agreed-upon parameters for AI use in writing.
- AI should not be used to generate content for examinations, theses, or dissertations, which must reflect the student's own thinking, ideas, and scholarly work. For other activities, students should consult with their advisor to establish clear expectations.

- Any use of AI in written work must be disclosed transparently. Because strong independent writing skills are essential to graduate training, students are encouraged to develop these skills without relying on AI. Students are also encouraged to remain informed about evolving journal policies, including requirements for disclosure and restrictions on AI use.

XII. Annual Evaluations

Each spring, students and their Major Professors will complete an annual evaluation of the student's progress in the program. Students and mentors will independently assess the student's performance in research, coursework and professional engagement, progress toward degree milestones, and service to the program, department, profession, or community. They will then meet to discuss their ratings, address meaningful discrepancies, and develop a specific set of goals and an action plan for the coming year. The evaluation should encourage candid and realistic reflection not only on whether the student is meeting program expectations, but also on whether the student's developing record of scholarship, teaching, professional experience, and service will make them competitive for the career path they intend to pursue. Expectations should be calibrated to the student's year in the program, professional goals, and agreed-upon timeline for degree completion.

Sample Five-Year Timeline

The timeline below illustrates a typical progression through the CN graduate program. Individual students' timelines may vary depending on prior training, research progress, career goals, funding, and other factors.

Year 1

- Develop and begin a first-year research project with your Major Professor.
- Complete required coursework, including GradFirst and GRSC 7770.
- Get involved in projects, data collection, and professional development activities.
- Consider presenting research at regional or national conferences, as appropriate.

Year 2

- Present first-year research project in the Cognitive Neuroscience Proseminar.
- Complete remaining required thesis coursework.

- Complete and defend the master's thesis.
- Continue developing an independent program of research.
- Present research at regional or national conferences, as appropriate.
- Submit manuscripts for publication.

Year 3

- Complete the Master's Thesis and any remaining post-MS coursework.
- Continue research (e.g., conference presentations, manuscript submissions).
- Begin work on the written comprehensive examination.

Year 4

- Take additional classes (as needed to complete credits or as interests align)
- Complete the written and oral comprehensive examinations.
- Develop and defend the dissertation prospectus.
- Continue disseminating research through presentations and publications.

Year 5

- Complete dissertation research and writing.
- Defend the dissertation.
- Submit dissertation manuscripts for publication, as appropriate.
- Apply for positions (e.g., postdoctoral fellowship, academia, industry).