# UNL Special Education Master's Exit Exam Instructions

Exit Exam Paper Overview

The exit exam is a requirement of the Graduate College at the University of Nebraska for all degree programs. All students pursuing the Option B Master's Degree program in Special Education (M.Ed.) must complete an exit exam. The purpose of the exit exam paper is for students to demonstrate that they can translate research to practice using the best available research evidence and apply that information to propose improvements in the education, services, and/or supports for students with delays, disabilities, and/or differences. The exit exam paper should be well organized and a maximum of 20 pages in length, including tables and figures but excluding the title page, AI statement, and references. The goal of the paper is for students to produce a well written research-to-practice paper. Therefore, the paper should be grounded in research and have a clear connection to practice. The key to a successful exit exam paper lies in the student's ability to translate research content into actionable guidance for practitioners. For example, a student could describe how to implement a research-based intervention using a fictional vignette based on their own experiences or present a modified research-based tool such as a fidelity checklist that practitioners could use with different students or in different settings.

Figure 1. *Exit Exam Attempts Flowchart*

Students will have **two** attempts to pass the exit exam. Attempts will be scored as Pass, Revise, or No Pass. If a student receives a Revise on their first attempt, they will have 1 week to edit, provide responses to reviewer feedback in the grading rubric (required), and resubmit. Revisions will be graded as Pass or No Pass. If a student receives a No Pass on their first attempt or first revision, they will be required to complete their second attempt in the next semester (not including summer). The second attempt will be graded following the same criteria as the first. (See Figure 1for a visual representation of this process). If a student receives a No Pass on both attempts, their program will be recommended for termination. Students should refer to the Exit Exam Grading Rubric to understand how the exit exam will be graded. (Additional information on the grading of the exit exam can be found in the Special Education Master's Degree Student Handbook.)
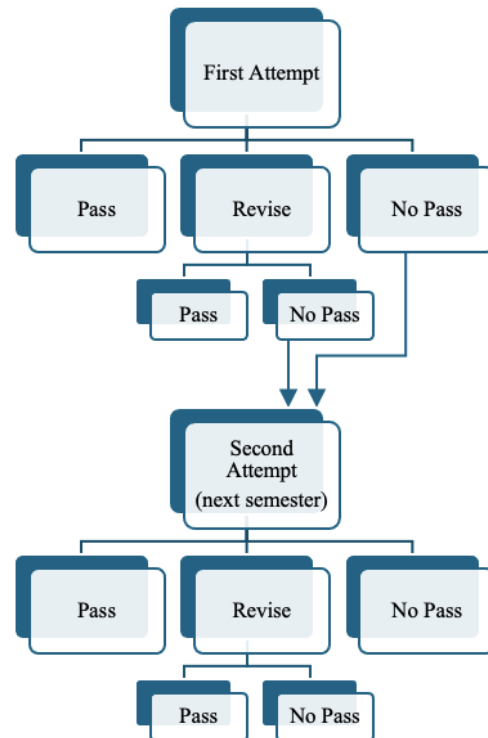
Required Content for Exit Exam Paper

1. **Have a specific research-to-practice focus.** The focus of the exit exam paper is on translating research into practice. Students should provide a direct link between offered practice recommendations and empirical research. Lengthy reviews of the literature, however, are not appropriate for the paper. The typical structure of the paper should begin with an introduction and a presentation of a problem of practice, intervention or policy, followed by a brief synthesis

These instructions were adapted from the Submission Guidelines for *TEACHING Exceptional Children* (Nov. 2023), https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/tcx

of relevant, recent empirical research. The bulk of the exit exam is devoted to the delineation of implementation guidelines for the practice/intervention/policy, supplemented with tables, figures, and examples. Each of these three components are required in the paper: 1) introduction and presentation of problem; 2) synthesis of relevant, recent research (see more details below); 3) implementation guidelines of research-based practice/intervention/policy. If older research is included it must be seminal studies.

NOTE: The expectation is NOT to conduct original research for this paper (e.g., action research, pilot studies, qualitative/quantitative studies, program evaluation).

The exit exam cannot be a published paper that presents descriptive, experimental, or applied research projects, general overviews, literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, book or media reviews, unsolicited editorials, position papers, program or product descriptions, term papers, theses or dissertations, personal experiences or stories, media portrayals, or poetry. The paper cannot present a topic or issue that does not address special education or individuals with exceptionalities at the preschool, elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level. The paper cannot contain content that has previously been published elsewhere or that is primarily designed to advertise a commercially available product.

2. **Introduction and presentation of problem**. In the introduction, students should provide a clear statement of the problem/area of need. The introduction should provide relevant background information and a strong rationale for the need of the proposed practice/intervention/policy and adequate evidence of all arguments/claims presented. All key terms should be clearly defined.

3. **Cite and synthesize current research.** Students must cite and synthesize relevant, current research that relates to their topic. The goal of this section of the paper is to synthesize information from *across* the references studies rather than provide individual summaries of the research studies. As a general rule, research should be peer-reviewed and reflect work published within the past decade. Older references to seminal research or that demonstrate an extensive research history can be included but should be used sparingly. Strong references come from peer-reviewed research journals. As such, the majority of references used within an exit exam should not come from textbooks, websites, organizations, and/or research-to-practice journals.

4. **Implementation guidelines of research-based practice/intervention/policy.** Students must identify a specific practice, intervention, or policy that addresses the identified problem and will provide guidelines for how to implement that practice/intervention/policy. These guidelines should be presented in a way that can be easily understood and used by practitioners. This must also have a clear connection to the cited and synthesized research. Students must also clearly articulate the practitioners who might use this intervention (e.g., itinerant teachers of the deaf, early childhood special educators).

5. **Reflect a direct focus on students with exceptionalities.** The target audience is special educators and other professionals who work directly with students with exceptionalities. As such, exit exams should focus on the unique needs of students with *identified* or at-risk for disabilities. The population should be clearly defined, including verification/identification criteria and subpopulations. If the paper is focused on a subpopulation of a disability category, that subpopulation should also be defined (e.g., Individuals with Cortical Visual Impairment [CVI] who fall within the broader population of students with Visual Impairment [VI]).

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6. **Include graphic elements to facilitate content understanding and application.** Tables and/or figures should be developed and included in the paper to summarize and/or visually represent information described in the paper. Examples could include checklists, sample materials, definitions, etc. Tables and figures should be referred to in the narrative (e.g., "see Table 2 for a list of common terms used") and can be embedded directly in the narrative or placed after the references.

7. **Reflect original work.** Students can propose a modification of a previously published practice/intervention/policy. However, the proposed practice/intervention/policy should reflect original ideas and writing (e.g., modifying a fidelity checklist or adapting an intervention for a new population). Students should not include tables and figures that have been published elsewhere. If students adapt any tables or figures, they must cite the original source. If they wish to use material for which they do not own the copyright, they must obtain written permission from the copyright holder (e.g., A student wants to use a copyrighted image.) This approval should be included as an appendix. See notes in APA formatting and style below about using quotes sparingly and paraphrasing text to put it in the student's own words.

8. **Include a conclusion.** Students should end their paper with a clear conclusion that restates the topic/focus of the paper and the proposed practice/intervention/policy. The conclusion should briefly summarize or highlight the research that supports their recommendation(s). It should also identify possible limitations or challenges of their proposed practice/intervention/policy. Students could also propose next research steps to evaluate the proposed practice/intervention/policy.

9. **Include an abstract.** Students should include an abstract of no more than 250 words that provides a brief overview of the paper, including the topic/focus, a clear statement of the problem/area of need, the proposed practice/intervention/policy, and the research supporting their recommendation.

10. **AI Statement.** Students are discouraged from using AI to assist in *writing* their exit exam paper. Regardless, all students must include a statement about the use of AI in their paper. (Please review the article [Using AI ethically in writing assignments](#).) **Failure to include an AI Statement at the beginning of your paper will result in a No Pass.** The AI statement should be on its own page between the title page and abstract entitled with a centered, bolded heading and include the following:

    - If you did NOT use AI to complete your exit exam paper, include the following statement: *I attest that I did not use AI to help me complete any part of this paper.*
    - If you DID use AI to help complete your exit exam paper in any way, report the following in your AI statement:
        - the name(s) of the AI platform(s) you used (e.g., ChatGPT, CoPilot, Claude)
        - the prompt(s) you used to ask your AI platform(s) for support
        - a brief reflection of your overall sense of how AI helped or hindered your writing as you completed this paper.

American Psychological Association Formatting and Style Guidelines – 7th Edition

All exit exam papers should be prepared in accordance with the format and style guidelines specified in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (http://www.apastyle.org/manual/).

APA Style (7th Edition) and Professional Writing

Hallmarks of APA style are objectivity, precision, and clarity. For the exit exam, these principles are applied when students:

1. **Use formal, academic language.** The tone of the exit exam should reflect formal, academic language, and focus on a target audience of special education personnel. To make the content accessible to a large audience, students should avoid relying on jargon to communicate information. Technical terms, if used, need to be clearly defined with examples provided. Similarly, the excessive use of long, complex sentences inhibits readability. Short, direct sentences facilitate readability and complement the presentation of longer, more complex content. Further, explanation, the use of examples and non-examples, tables and figures, employment of a fictional vignette to serve as an exemplar, etc. facilitate reader understanding of the material. Colloquial language, contractions, expressions, and idioms, however, are not appropriate for this paper—particularly, as an informal tone can be interpreted as condescending or patronizing.

2. **Present data-based information; not emotionally charged position statements.** The exit exam is not a persuasive essay or thought piece. Although the student may feel strongly about the topic of their paper, readers are more likely to "hear" the message if it is presented in neutral terms with appropriate data/citations to support the claim or recommendation.

3. **Consider perspective**. First, it is myth that first-person perspective is prohibited under APA guidelines. For this paper, first person point of view (I, we) can be used effectively (e.g., "We recommend a three-step process for…"). However, use of the editorial or royal "we" is not permitted (e.g., "We, as a field, need to do a better job of…"; APA, 2010). Second-person perspective (you, your) can be effective for helping readers connect the content to their own settings and experiences, but more frequently than not, the repeated use of "you" throughout an exit exam creates an authoritarian tone to the exit exam, which can be off-putting for readers. Third-person perspective tends to be the most common point of view used for this paper. From the neutral position of observer, readers can think about how a teacher, colleague, or their future self may apply the recommendations provided.

4. **Maintain a consistent voice and avoid overuse of quotes**. Ensure a consistent voice and tone are presented across sections. The excessive use of direct quotes should not be used as it impedes readability, creates an uneven voice, and demonstrates authors' inability to translate the content into a cohesive narrative. As such, direct quotes should be used sparingly, if at all. Students should instead paraphrase what was said rather than quoting directly, as paraphrasing shows that the student understands what was said and can translate it using their own "voice" and style of writing.

5. **Employ "economy of expression" (see p. 67, APA, 2010**). Reduce wordiness, redundancy, excessive use of metaphors, and overuse of passive voice to create precise, clear communication.

6. **Avoid bias in language**. When writing about individuals with exceptionalities, use people first language. People first language refers to both the placement of the person prior to the disability (e.g., "student with a learning disability" rather than "LD student") and avoidance of sensational or demeaning language (e.g., "suffers from ADHD," "is wheelchair-bound"). Avoid the use of gendered pronouns (he, she, his, hers, he/she, etc.) by making the sentence plural or dropping the pronoun (e.g., "a teacher can call on students" rather than "a teacher can call on her students").

APA Format (7th Edition)

Within the APA publication manual, explicit guidelines for formatting an exit exam are provided and students should refer to them when writing their paper. To avoid common errors in formatting, students should:

1. **Adhere to basic APA formatting conventions.** This paper should adhere to APA formatting conventions. This includes, but is not limited to, double spacing, 12-point Times New Roman font, one-inch margins, and correctly formatted headings (see below), running heads, page numbers, tables, figures, in-text citations, and reference pages.

2. **Include APA elements/section.** The paper should include the following APA sections: title page, abstract, introduction, body (with subheadings as appropriate, see next point), conclusion, references, and appendices (when appropriate).

3. **Create a concise title.** Titles should contain no more than 12 words and include key terminology. As a general rule, avoid the use of rhetorical questions or cutesy titles. The goal is to create a direct link between research and practice. (Hint: Consider how the title would look as a Tweet.)

4. **Include APA level headings and subheadings**. Headers and sub-headers should be used to organize the content of the paper and to guide the reader. These headings should use APA 7th edition formatting guidelines.

5. **Proofread paper carefully.** Students should proofread their paper carefully to identify and fix any errors (e.g., grammatical, spelling, transitions, etc.). Use of the UNL Writing Center is permitted and is highly recommended. Advisors are not permitted to read and/or provide specific feedback on papers.

Please see the following for an example of a research to practice article with vignettes. (Additional examples of research-to-practice articles can be found in *Teaching of Exceptional Children.)*

Davenport, C. A. & Weir, J. (2022). Early intervention to preschool transition for children who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing: A TEAM approach. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 55*(2), 114-121.