

Senior Comprehensive Exam Question Bank [DRAFT]

Note : The Comprehensive Exam questions will be drawn from the Test Bank below, with the possibility of minor edits. The exam will be made up of one question from each of 12 topic areas of Psychology (Cognition, Abnormal...). Students will then have a chance to select 3 questions they would like to answer in an essay format.

I. Cognition

1. How did the behaviorist approach to psychological research in the first half of the 20th century differ from research approaches used by psychologists before the rise of behaviorism? What advantages does behaviorism have over analytical introspection as a research method? Give an example of a mental process or ability that would be difficult or impossible to study using introspection and explain why this is the case. Explain what, if any, advantages would come from using the behaviorist research approach. What are the major limitations of the behaviorist approach to psychological processes?
2. In the domain of problem solving, what are ill-defined and well-defined problems and how do the two types of problems differ. How would you describe the role of insights in problem solving? Are insights more likely to be helpful for well-defined or ill-defined problems? Explain why?
3. Describe the Wason card selection task (aka four-card problem) and the mistake that people typically make in the task. What is indicated about the role of real-world knowledge in judgment and reasoning when comparing abstract and concrete versions of conditional reasoning tasks that are similar to the four card problem?
4. What is the cocktail party effect and what does it demonstrate about attention? Explain why Broadbent's Early Selection Model of Attention cannot explain why people are likely to overhear their own name in an unattended conversation even when focusing on a different speaker. Explain why Treisman's Attenuation Model and the Late Selection Model of Attention can both account for this phenomenon and describe the explanation that each model would provide.
5. Describe the source of both top-down and bottom-up information and how they play a role in perceptual processes. Give an example of a situation where top-down information would not be useful, and a person would need to primarily rely on bottom-up information and explain why. Give an example of a situation where people must make use of top-down information in order to interpret bottom-up information – for this example explain how the absence of top-down influences on perception would impact the interpretation of bottom-up information.

6. Explain the importance of phonemes in language comprehension and production. How would the perception of phonemes differ when hearing speech from one's native language compared to hearing speech in an unfamiliar language with different phonemes? Explain the role of morphemes in language and how they differ from phonemes. What is the mental lexicon and how does it contribute to language production and comprehension?
7. Name and describe the two independent effects that create the serial position curve in memory recall test results. For each effect, describe an experimental manipulation that can eliminate the effect while preserving the other and explain why. Explain what the two effects indicate about the structure of the memory system.
8. Describe the major differences between short-term memory in the Three-store Model of Memory developed by Atkinson and Shiffrin and the Multicomponent Model of Working Memory developed by Baddeley and colleagues? List at least three components of working memory in Baddeley's model and describe the role that each component plays. How does the Embedded Process Model of Working Memory developed by Cowan differ from the Three-store Model of Memory and the Multicomponent Model of Working Memory?

II. Abnormal Psychology

1. Danny's Situation:

Since a gunman opened fire in his school 4 months ago, Danny, an 11th grader in high school has been refusing school and showing school phobia manifested in the form of an array of physical and emotional symptoms. He has constant thoughts about death/dying when it is in school. This might make him overly emotional so much so that he needs to see the school counselor, nurse, principal, and sometimes leave school to go home where he can play his favorite video games or go online where he wants. Dizziness, heart palpitations, dry mouth, excessive sweating, breathlessness, nausea, and full-blown panic attack are symptoms he expressed. Otherwise, he is usually very quiet even before the school shooting. However, he does not speak about his phobia, but he shows avoidance behavior like complaining about bodily concerns, or using other excuses to avoid going to or staying in school.

Using Danny's situation above as an example, explain if he may have a mental disorder or not by discussing:

- a. What one still needs to know about Danny's symptoms (50% of question)
- b. What makes one's behaviors a mental disorder (50% of question)

2. Read the case scenario below and explain Danny's behavior using a behavioral paradigm with a combination of Classical Conditioning (50% of question) and/or Operant Conditioning (50% of question) theories to explain the beginning and maintenance of Danny's school phobia symptoms.

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3. What is the difference between fear and phobia? What differentiates normal anxiety we all feel from the anxiety experienced by someone with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Use **one** of the theories listed to explain GAD (Freud/Psychodynamic, Rogers/Humanistic, Biological, or Ellis/Cognitive). Include in your response one advantage and one disadvantage of the theory you selected. Additionally, please identify a central feature of all anxiety disorders? In your response include the role of conditioning in anxiety.

4. Describe the symptoms that define unipolar depression and generalized anxiety. How are these two problems similar? How are they different from one another? Are they best treated by the same treatment protocol or different treatment protocols? Explain your answers.

5. Describe the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Include in your response the 3 groups that symptoms fall under, the 3 types of ADHD, and list at least 1 disorder that commonly co-occurs with ADHD? Also, describe 2 common forms of treatment for ADHD and the effectiveness/prognosis for each treatment you described.

6. What are the major clinical differences between patients with anorexia nervosa and patients with bulimia nervosa? What clinical features do these two forms of eating disorders have in common? In what ways is the clinical outcome of patients with anorexia nervosa different from the clinical outcome of patients with bulimia nervosa?

III. Media and Psychology [NO QUESTION SPRING 2025]

IV. Developmental

1. Based on the work of Diana Baumrind (1967) and later Maccoby and Martin (1983), the following four distinct parenting styles have been identified; and each is associated with a series of specific behavioral outcomes for children/adolescents: 1) Authoritarian; 2) Authoritative; 3) Indulgent/Permissive; and 4) Neglectful/Uninvolved.
 - a. Think back to your own upbringing and identify one parenting style from the list above that closely resembles the one used by one or both of your parents.
 - b. Explain why you selected that particular style and not the others by discussing the characteristics related to each of the four styles.
 - c. For the parenting style you selected, do you feel that your behavioral outcomes (e.g., academic performance, social skills, self-esteem, etc.) are consistent with those proposed by the theory? Why or why not?
2. Throughout your time as a psychology major you have been exposed to theories that attempt to explain various aspects of development throughout the lifespan. Imagine that a friend of yours is interested in becoming a developmental psychologist and asks you to describe one of the following developmental theories: 1) Cognitive; 2) Moral; 3) Psychosexual; 4) Psychosocial. Identify an author and the main components associated with ONE of these four theories cited above to share with your friend.
3. Please answer BOTH a. and b.
 - a. What is the “Nature vs. Nurture” debate in psychology? How might a developmental scientist seek to determine whether “nature” or “nurture” was a major contributing factor in a child’s development?
 - b. What is the definition of a “critical” or “sensitive” period in child development? Pick one area of development that you learned about in class (language, walking, identity, etc.) and describe the critical period associated with this particular skill or ability.
4. Please answer BOTH a. and b.
 - a. What are the three stages of prenatal development?
 - b. What are teratogens (give examples) and explain how can they impact child development during the prenatal stages?

4. Sarah is **three** years old. In recent months, her mother has been somewhat perplexed by several observations about her daughter, as described below. For each of the two incidents below, use a developmental theory to offer your best explanation for Sarah's behavior. For full points, you must describe the entire theory and specify the separate constructs that apply to the two incidents.

- a. Sarah and her brother are sitting directly opposite from one another at the breakfast table. Sarah believes her brother can see exactly what she can see from her seat and is confused when he says he can't see out of the window that is behind him.
- b. Sarah and her brother each receive 50 cents to buy ice cream. Her mother gives Sarah two quarters and her brother gets five dimes. Sarah throws a mini tantrum because she insists her brother has more money than she does.

V. Neuropsychology

1. Cognitive and affective processes are lateralized in the brain. Present evidence to support this proposition.
2. Looking back at the history of neuropsychology, trace the changing views about the relationship between the brain and mind/behavior.
3. Imagine that for one week you suffered from damage to a brain structure or brain region. Identify the brain structure or brain region and provide a detailed description of the difficulties you would experience as a consequence of this damage.
4. Discuss the support role of prefrontal cortex in cognitive and emotional processing.
5. Does damage to Broca's area cause Broca's aphasia? Justify your answer.
6. How do social environments influence human gene expression in the brain and physical health?
7. Distinguish between the James-Lange, Cannon-Bard, Schacter-Singer, and Ledoux theories of emotions.
8. Distinguish between a valence theory and a right hemisphere theory of emotion.

VI. Race and Racism

1. Discuss a definition of racism provided by an individual who is a psychologist, and compare it to a definition that has been offered by a person who is not in the field of psychology. In your estimation, which is the stronger of the two definitions.
2. Fifty years ago, James Jones, a social psychologist, published the book, *Prejudice and Racism (1972/1997)*. He identified *individual, cultural, and institutional* forms of racism. Discuss each manifestation of racism in terms of the **subjects** and **verbs** in the definitions Jones provided. Does the notion of power enter into Jones's definitions of the various forms?
3. Scholars across many disciplines have published formal definitions of racism. Select two definitions, identify the author's academic discipline, and summarize their essential propositions. Compare and contrast the *subjects* (actors) and *verbs* (modes of actions) that each definition specifies.
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5. Racism is known to impact three regions of cognitive activity. Identify and describe each of these domains. Provide an example of racist cognitions in each region.
6. Cite two course-specific issues for which you have changed your mind about from before you took the Race and Racism vs. after. If there are not two such issues, explain why not.
7. In your view, is Culture the best route for understanding the psychological functioning of Black people? If your answer is yes, why? If your answer is no, why not?

VII. Personality

1. Using the Five-Factor Theory framework (McCrae & Costa, 1999/2008), define "basic tendencies" (personality traits) and compare them to "characteristic adaptations." In your response, identify the primary subjects (actors) and verbs (modes of action) within each definition. In your estimation, which of these two conceptualizations better accounts for the rank-order stability of personality observed from adolescence to adulthood? Construct a formal argument for your position that includes a clear conclusion supported by at least two distinct premises that are concise and well-articulated.

2. Personality and human development theorists often categorize human lives through the lens of three primary social motives: Achievement, Power, and Intimacy. First, define each of these three motives, identifying the primary subject and the verb that characterizes the mode of action for each. Second, discuss the role culture plays in shaping the expression and development of these motives across the lifespan. Construct an argument for whether these motives are universal human needs or culturally learned adaptations. Your response must include a statement of your argument that identifies a conclusion and at least two premises that are clear, concise, and well-articulated.

3. Select two examples of research focused on narrative identity—one representing an idiographic approach and one representing a nomothetic approach. For each example, summarize the essential propositions regarding how narrative identity is defined as a dimension of personality. Compare and contrast the methodology and specific methods used in each, paying close attention to how the "individual" is treated as the subject of study in one, while a "group" or "population" is the subject in the other. Your response should conclude with an argument regarding which approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the "whole person," supported by at least two clear and well-articulated premises.

4. Discuss why Schultz and Lawrence (2017) argue that psychobiography functions as both a theory and a method. Develop an argument for how this approach expands the psychological understanding of a person's personality beyond what is captured by trait-based models. Make sure you craft a statement of your argument that identifies a conclusion and at least two premises that are clear, concise, and well-articulated.

VIII. Psychology of Gender [NO QUESTION SPRING 2026]

IX. Social Psychology

Note: The Social Psychology question will be selected from those below. Minor edits are possible.

1. Describe one specific research study that showed *social facilitation*. What was the procedure of the study, as the participant experienced it? Describe the key finding that illustrates social facilitation compared to the absence of social facilitation. Then describe one specific research study that illustrates *social loafing*, again detailing the procedure and key findings. Finally, explain the circumstances when we should expect social facilitation to occur and when we should expect social loafing to occur.

2. In this question, you will discuss two major theories that explain how individuals reach situational or dispositional attributions for other's behaviors.
 - A. Name and explain the three factors within Correspondent Inference Theory (Jones & Davis, 1965) that determine attributions. Provide one clear example of a behavior that would produce a situational attribution, according to this theory, and explain why.
 - B. Now name and explain the two processes that make up Gilbert and Malone's (1995) theory of attribution. Provide one clear example of a behavior and set of circumstances that would produce a personal attribution, according to this theory, and explain why.
3. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1985), states that persuasion can occur through either the central route or the peripheral route. Explain what circumstances make it more likely that the central or peripheral route to persuasion will be taken. Describe an example of a persuasive communication that would be persuasive following the peripheral route to persuasion, and name and explain the process that would be responsible for that persuasion. Then describe an example of a persuasive communication that would be persuasive following the central route to persuasion, and explain why. Finally, discuss the consequences of the route to persuasion for whether the resulting attitude is likely to predict future behaviors.
4. People often experience cognitive dissonance after making a difficult decision. Explain why difficult decisions can result in dissonance, whereas easy decisions do not. Provide an example of a choice between two equally appealing options, and then describe how a person might reduce the dissonance that occurs after they have made their decision. Next, name and explain one theoretical perspective that offers an alternative or update to Festinger's classical view of cognitive dissonance. Using the same example you used for the earlier part of this question, explain how this alternative or update would explain the observed attitude change. Finally, discuss what this alternative or update to dissonance suggests about when dissonance processes are most or least likely to occur.

5. This is a three-part question related to heuristics and priming and their effects on judgment.

A. Name and explain one heuristic that people use to make decisions. Provide a specific example of your heuristic, and provide a clear explanation for an incorrect judgment that it can produce. Explain why we use heuristics if they lead to incorrect judgments?

B. Now, explain what priming is and create an example illustrating how priming can influence a person's interpretation of something or their behavior.

C. Finally, discuss one thing that makes the process that occurs for priming effects different from the process that occurs when people use heuristics. Make sure to relate this to controlled as opposed to automatic processes.

X. Research Design and Analysis

1. You have been chosen to serve on a research team exploring students' sense of belonging and its impact on chronic absenteeism in DC public schools. First explain how you would operationalize belonging and absenteeism. In doing so, describe what type of measures are most appropriate for these variables. Next, explain how you would determine that the measures you propose are reliable, and what that means. Then explain how you would determine that the measures you propose are valid, and what that means.

2. Researchers Fancourt, Burton, and Williamon wanted to find out whether different types of music would impact participants' performance on a mock-surgery game, "Operation." Many real-life surgeons listen to music while operating, so the authors were interested in whether this may actually help performance, and whether that differed by sex of the participant. The psychologists asked male and female participants to play the mock-surgery game, "Operation," in which they needed to remove three different organs from a "patient" using tweezers. The experimenters played either rock music, classical music, or operating-room sounds. They found that the type of music made a difference on the performance of male participants, who were slower to complete the task (in seconds) while listening to rock music compared with classical music. The performance of female participants did not differ based on the type of music they listened to. Answer the following questions a-d

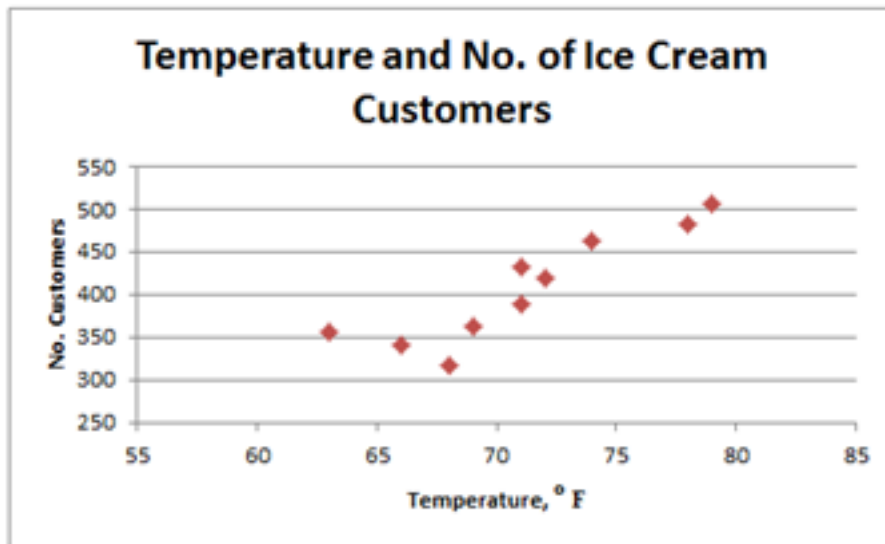
- a. Name the independent variable in this study and the dependent variable.
- b. What were the experimental conditions in this study?
- c. What type of claim were the researchers trying to make? Explain why this is the appropriate claim?
- d. What may be the implications for the results of this study based on the researcher's findings?

3. What is the benefit of random sampling in psychological research? In your answer, explain which type of validity it enhances. When you do not have random sampling what other types of sampling techniques are you left with to derive your sample, and how might that limit your study's research conclusions? What is the benefit of random assignment in psychological research? In your answer, explain which type of validity it enhances. When you do not have random assignment how might that limit your study's research conclusions? Lastly, explain how psychological researchers navigate balancing internal and external validity in their studies.
4. A researcher wants to make a causal claim in their research. Of the four main types of validity, name and explain the type of validity with which they should be most concerned. In making a causal claim, explain how they should navigate the three criteria for making such a claim.

One important decision is whether to use a within-participants design or a between-participants design. Please explain the difference between these two experimental designs. Now explain the benefits and drawbacks of each of within and between-participants designs.

5. Explain the how researchers use moderators and mediators in psychological research. Give two examples of research where a moderator and a mediator should be utilized to enhance the study's outcomes. How do moderators relate to establishing external validity, and how do mediators relate to internal validity?
6. Consider the four scales of measurement in social and behavioral research. Name all four scales of measurement and explain the key differences between each scale. Pick one construct and operationalize it in four different ways utilizing each scale of measurement. Scales of measurement have implications for what you can do with the resulting data. As you know, different scales of measurement can allow and limit researchers regarding the type of data they can collect. Based on the construct you picked above, explain how your data may be enhanced or limited if you choose one scale of measurement over another.

7. Estimate the Pearson's r for the relationship portrayed here and tell us what the value of r that you have selected means for the direction and magnitude of the relationship. Write two sentences interpret the meaning of that relationship. If you were an ice cream vendor, what does this tell you about where in the country you should place your franchise?



XI. Statistics I

Note: The Statistics I question will be selected from those below. The specific numbers in the question will be changed, and minor edits are possible.

1. Describe a situation in which a paired-sample (or dependent-sample) t -test would be used. Your answer should include 1) an example of an experimental study for which a paired-sample t -test would be best suited; 2) null and alternative hypotheses of the study; and 3) a brief description of how you would perform the statistical test.
2. Describe the logic behind the null hypothesis significance testing. Use the context of comparing two group means (e.g., anxiety scores from treatment and control groups). You must clearly explain on what grounds you would reject the null hypothesis or fail to reject it. Your answer may include some---but not necessarily all---of the following concepts: sample/population mean, null/alternative hypothesis, test statistic, significance level (or alpha level), critical value, rejection region, p -value, chance, Type I/II error, and statistical significance.

3. Describe the different goals of descriptive and inferential statistics. In doing so, include an example that involves a certain variable's "mean." Your answer must also include the following concepts: population, sample, parameter, statistic, hypothesis testing (or confidence interval), and any others if you deem them appropriate.
4. Consider the process of conducting a hypothesis test about a population parameter. Using the following table, which shows the cross-classification of your test decision and the true state of the null hypothesis. Answer the following question:

		Truth	
		H_0 True	H_0 False
Test Decision	Reject H_0		
	Not Reject H_0		

Explain the concepts of type-I error rate, type-II error rate, and power in statistically precise terms as they relate to the four cells of the table. In doing so, you may want to define the case corresponding to each cell and its probability.

5. Are children who have been home-schooled less socially intelligent than those who have gone to public school? To try to answer this question, twenty home-schooled 6th graders and twenty 6th graders who have exclusively attended public schools are randomly selected, and each child is given a social IQ test. The mean for the public school student sample was 8.7, with $s = 1.2$, and the mean for the home schooled sample was 5.5, with $s = 1.1$. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in the social IQ scores of the home-schooled children and the public school students.

Answer all six of the questions (a) – (e) listed below. Please note it is not enough to answer the following questions by merely listing facts. You should present a cogent argument based on your critical analysis of the questions posed, using appropriate psychological terminology.

- (a) What is the independent variable of this study? And what are the levels of the independent?
- (b) Describe how the researchers measured the dependent variable.
- (c) Create a bar graph illustrating the results of the study. Correctly label each axis.
- (d) Can the researchers conclude that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the independent and dependent variables? If so, why? If not, why not?
- (e) Explain what statistical significance means in the context of the study.

6. A psychologist wants to test whether there is any difference in puzzle-solving abilities between boys and girls. Samples of boys and girls were chosen at random among fourth graders at a public school, and time spent on solving a certain puzzle was measured for each of the participants. The question of interest is whether we can conclude, at the .05 level of significance, that the mean puzzle-solving times for boys, denoted by μ_1 , is *greater* than the mean puzzle-solving times for girls, denoted by μ_2 .

Answer all five of the questions (a) – (e) listed below.

- (a) Identify the independent variable of the study *and* the attributes (or levels) of the independent variable.
- (b) Identify the dependent variable and describe its meaning in this study (i.e., what it represents or how it is defined).
- (c) Using the symbols for two population means (i.e., μ_1 and μ_2), state the null and alternative hypotheses H_0 and H_1 , respectively.
- (d) Suppose that a null hypothesis significant test is performed to answer the question of the study. Explain in words the procedure of conducting the test (i.e., what to compute and how to make a decision).
- (e) Explain what “statistical significance” means in the context of the study.

XII. Statistics II

- 1. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a statistical test whose result is based on the analysis of different sources of variability in data. In its simplest form, one-way between-participants ANOVA compares between-group variance to within-group variance in data, in order to test whether there exist statistically significant differences among three or more group means. State the logic behind ANOVA by describing how analyzing between-group differences relative to within-group differences in data can lead to a statistical conclusion. Your answer may use an example of an experimental study to which one-way between-participants ANOVA would be applied.
- 2. Describe the logic behind the null hypothesis significance testing. Use the context of establishing a linear association between two continuous variables in a regression analysis (e.g., predicting response time from task difficulty in a choice task). You must clearly explain on what grounds you would reject the null hypothesis or fail to reject it. Your answer may include some---but not necessarily all---of the following concepts: sample/population regression coefficient (or correlation coefficient), null/alternative hypothesis, test statistic, significance level (or alpha level), critical value, rejection region, p-value, chance, Type I/II error, and statistical significance.

3. Linear regression analysis involves the following three sources of variability in the dependent variable: SSE (sum of squares error), SSR (sum of squares regression) and SST (sum of squares total). Interpret each of these quantities and their algebraic relationship. Your answer must also include the definition and interpretation of “R squared” (or the coefficient of determination) in terms of these sums of squares.

4. A psychologist is interested in people's views on various crimes. She has produced videotaped re-enactments of two different, non-violent crimes---jewelry theft and perjury---and has asked viewers to give the length of the prison sentence (in months) the perpetrator should get as punishment. The psychologist is looking at differences in the perceived seriousness of the crimes and also at whether there is an influence of the viewer's self-reported political position as conservative or liberal.

The psychologist randomly selected an equal number of conservatives and liberals to be viewers. She divided each group into two subgroups of equal size. She had each subgroup watch the re-enactment of a particular crime. After collecting the participants' prison sentence judgments, she computed the mean judgment for each of the four groups. Shown below is the table of results:

	Conservative	Liberal
Jewelry Theft	27	18
Perjury	24	26

Answer all six of the questions (a) – (f) listed below.

- a. Identify the independent variable(s) of the study *and* the attributes (or levels) of the independent variable(s).
- b. Identify the dependent variable and describe its meaning in this study (i.e., what it represents or how it is defined).
- c. Create a line graph illustrating the results of the study. Correctly label each axis and line.
- d. Explain in words what an “interaction effect” means in this particular study.
- e. Suppose that a statistical test is performed at the significance level of .05 to see whether there is an interaction, and a p -value of .007 is obtained. What is the result of the test and how you know it?
- f. Independent of your answer to (e), explain what “statistical significance” would mean in testing for an interaction in this study.

5. A superintendent of a public school district has decided to test whether the educational backgrounds of students' parents in her district are different from those of general American adults (> age 25). She has the following information on the American adult population as a whole, obtained from a recent U.S. Current Population Survey:

Highest degree earned	Less than high school	High school	College	Higher than college
Percent of population	12%	25%	55%	8%

The superintendent also obtained data for a random sample of 200 parents. These data are summarized in the first row of numbers in the table below. These numbers are the observed counts in the sample of 200 for each of the degree categories. The second row of numbers in the table gives the expected counts under the assumption that the null hypothesis being tested is true. The bottom row gives the values that are necessary in the process of computing the suitable test statistic. Answer all of the questions below:

	Less than high school	High school	College	Higher than college	Total
Observed Counts (O)	25	35	127	13	200
Expected Counts (E)		50.00			
$\frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$		4.500		0.563	

- Given the above data, the superintendent wants to perform a statistical test to see if the distribution of highest degrees earned by the district's parents is the same as the distribution of highest degrees earned by American adults as a whole. What kind of a statistical test is suitable?
- State the null and alternative hypotheses, respectively.
- Fill in the six missing values of the table. Round your responses for the expected counts (second-to-last row) to at least two decimal places. Round your responses for the last row to at least three decimal places. Write the numbers in your answer sheet (from left to right and top to bottom).
- To obtain the p -value of the test, we need to compute a value of $\Pr(\chi^2 > [\] ; df = [\])$ using a statistical calculator. What are the two values we need to enter?
- Suppose that the value of $\Pr(\chi^2 > [\] ; df = [\])$ from the calculator in the above is **.052**. We want to use the **.10** level of significance to perform the test. Copy the following to your answer sheet and make it a correct statement: Based on this test, we conclude that the data provide / do not provide (choose one) convincing evidence that (fill here).